

o  
3

*Anna Cordes, Martin Krämer  
Liehn and Marek Zajac*

A  
G  
T  
A  
T  
D  
R  
K  
A

# *free fresco*

Nº 3

fantazja



Anna Cordes, Martin Krämer  
Liehn and Marek Zajęc. 2008.  
*Free Fresco.* (=Agitatorka  
№ 3-fantazja). Warszawa,  
Pologne: Instytut Wydawniczy –  
kip, 48 p.

ISBN 83-88353-29-2  
tirage: 2200

Materialising  
social empowerment in  
joint mosaics and frescos:  
some approaches, develop-  
ments and failures, 1998-2008

by Martin

Anna<sup>f30</sup>  
has worked in  
European Ethnology,  
Marek<sup>f29</sup> and Martin<sup>f2+f32</sup> are  
painters from Warsaw,

A snail is going around in  
Europe and abroad, it's world-  
wide movement is being talked  
about here as "free fresco acad-  
emy". Since Seattle '99 it has  
freshly left its fresco footprint  
on 78 social hotspots in Europe  
from Estonia to Andalusía, from  
Kiev to Edinburgh, in Cuba and  
within the depths of Siberia.

the editors are grateful to  
Damien Moran from Dublin  
for valuable comments on  
language and content and to  
all 627 participants constituting  
Free Fresco Academy over the  
last decade.<sup>f2</sup>

Almost every kid knows what a  
snail trail and a fresco is. But to  
others it needs to be explained.  
Both result from delicate and  
slow movement, the faster  
one moves on fresh slime, the  
other on light paint. In their  
aftermath, we can observe a  
transparent subtle sign evol-  
ving from the drying of its wet  
making – the quicker one on  
fresh garden earth after a  
summer rain, the slower one of  
the Italian fresco vero on walls  
and ceilings, freshly plastered  
with hydratic lime. The thrill  
of both is that they are almost  
completely unsellable. They are  
resistant to capitalisation. Both  
represent no commodity other

production cost: 6,- €  
any contribution, critique and  
suggestion of yours is highly  
welcome, please direct them to:  
Fundacja Książka i Prasa - kip  
ul. Twarda 60  
PL-00-143 Warszawa/Pologne  
tel./fax: +48 – 22 – 625 36 26  
kip@medianet.pl  
international bank account № :  
IBAN 44\_1500\_1777\_1219\_  
1033\_3847\_0000  
at Polski Kredyt Bank S.A.,  
V. Oddz. w Warszawie;  
please remember  
to mention the title of this book  
and provide an address for  
return mail.<sup>f3</sup>



than dead and delocalised and therefore living they are of no strategic use within the global voracity of capitalism. Both are remnants of a world done up with by traders and their cops. Yet with a certain characteristic pace and insistence, snail trail and fresco movements actually re-entered our lives to intrigue us from toe to teeth over the last decade. Sometimes we were under a veritable thrill of doing and linking up with them, as if they were precursors of another world, quite different than the one they came from, actually. As the saying goes, we had only just learnt to hear it subtly breathing. Do we really start to be able to see it now? To substantiate such possible discovery, we can hardly proceed slowly enough.

Free fresco academy became a registered association just past midnight at the end of the 1990s. Frankly, this happened solely because we were caught in action by the Polish police. In the slightly tired eyes of the law, we appeared as a gang of women and men continuing a studio party in the fresh air. Trespassing through the public space of the night, we had applied wet, white lime plaster on walls to paint light-handed sketches "al-fresco" into the soft masses. Under the subtle lantern light, each brushstroke shone in our eyes with an afterglow of glistening reflection

before being absorbed deeply into the fresh lime surface. Apprehending such subtle sensual thrills, our ad-hoc collective composed dancing dolphins and people freed from their clothes, ridiculing commercial codes. The officers were not amused and started taking down our passport details for further persecution. It was in these silent moments of creation suspended that a woman from a rather conservative rural Polish background cried out: "Folks, we have been registered. We are an arts collective now!"

### News from Nowhere?

This had just happened, when news from Seattle hit our minds and dreams: our colleagues have shut down the negotiations of the World Trade Organisation! Does this mean that we can start to prepare for life to become different altogether, maybe a patch-work of joint rhythms and multiple forms? We did not know yet but we wanted to continue. Some started to evolve a sound artisan practice for sustaining collective creativity. It all took very long, preparing took a long time and doing it even more. It seemed as if we strove to slow down our light-handed spontaneity of the night we got registered to outlast capitalism. In the following years, such aca-



democratic activity on the fringe of the tolerable surprisingly turned into a stable intervention. Some of our fresco-mosaics took 4 years to prepare and several months to realise involving up to two hundred activists at a time. For some of us, the wandering commune became a way of life. Curiously enough, much of our continuity was based on a notorious discontinuity. Once initial activists turned to other priorities in life, they cared to encourage their friends. Some even went as far as to make the friends of their friends join at the following venture. As a rule, no internet interface could compare to the mobilising force of friendships for fresco ventures. No agitation poster, though we printed and distributed them by the thousands; no free postcard, though we circulated over a hundred thousand, ever provoked as much interest as the friends of our friends would contribute on a regular basis.

The process was alive as long as a kernel collective was eager to start all over again with new faces and new approaches on new (and old) sites. A Mediterranean cat is said to have 7 lives. Our commune apparently disposed of some 77. Not bad for a start. We got used to the feeling that we could do anything anywhere. We moved on the rising tide of personal trust like a water-flea on a glowing summer evening.

Getting the fresco workshop going

To paint a bit of real lime fresco can be a matter of five successive layers, painted in a few enlightened minutes each. No linear econometrist can account for their "moments of grace", as André Gide called them. A responsible fresco painter in the works at Domus Aurea, almost 2000 years ago, is reported to have needed to dress and spoil his best clothes and all his wits for managing to do 2 hours of pure fresco painting work a day – the emperor Nero had to wait in the meantime. Horribly enough, such fresco work heavily relied on slave labour.

Equally, the fresco paintings by Diego Rivera became famous for they are the work of an extensive collective. The revolutionary rascal Rivera happened to monopolise the visually creative brush-work just for himself. All his devotedly serving comrades, who did not happen to have the face of Frida Carlo, lapsed into oblivion.

From ancient Egypt to late colonial Mexican society, the extent of hierarchy and underpaid devoutness involved in fresco enterprises were hardly comprehensible from a point of view enlightened by modern capitalist social relations. So, fresco technique thus vanished from European walls. The nerds













of Bourgeois Classicism outsourced every possibility of visual expression apart from their austere cult of canonised sterility. Outsourced, the artisanship of frescoing processes died an unspectacular everyday death on the market-places, turning our lives into bargaining for survival. In 1860, at his Florentine residence, the designated king of Italy, living modestly at the mercy of French and Piemont capitalists, could do little more than devastate the fresco work of generations with conformist wall-paper and amateurishly cheap glue.

So, free fresco academy consciously revived a luxury of time and muse. Such pleasures had been thoroughly evicted from our possibilities by those controlling our lives, works and dreams, superseding our acute sense of loss with commodities. Surprisingly for all activists involved, our wandering commune enjoyed a reserve of free time and fresh senses acutely unprecedented in material history. We would not pin it down to Guinness book of records parameters (though we clearly set some, take e.g. the biggest combined fresco and mosaic in known history on a ceiling) but rather go for a more passionate horizon. In fact, we set out to do what nobody had had the courage and resources to do before: take hierarchy and the social division of tasks out of

giant fresco painting. With us, everybody is entitled to paint. Every painter is welcome to participate in down-to-earth and up-on-the-scaffolding tasks alike.

Genuine spontaneity needs extensive preparation

We found out that the precious minutes of free-flying visual creativity are best to be prepared for with an average of 20 hours for every square metre before the actual fresco painting begins. Mosaics roughly need about another 10 times more than that. To provide an orientation for the workforce needed, a collective of 20 Fresco activists could sensibly do 16 square metres of fresco or respectively 1,6 m<sup>2</sup> of mosaics a day (16, 000 square centimetres to enter a more appropriate scale). Ceiling surfaces curiously turned out always to take double time and double material. You might have noted, that we have assumed a 16 hour working day in this approximate calculation for practical use. Although many projects started with a careful work and leisure balance, virtually all of them tended to end up this way if there remained an ambition to finish something for people happy to live with later on. Anyway, painting tended to be on the agenda on Monday-Tuesday and Thursday-Friday morn-



ings only, with light and spirits most favourable. Still, it took some people to get up about 2 to 4 hours before the dawns of painting days. Ideally, the finishing layer of lime should be ready to paint on after finishing breakfast with the first sunrays of a painting day. Do not get confused by the all time top engagement of 4 painting days a week with Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday off. As for fresco painting, this keeps you perfectly busy right into the most remote fibres of your sleep. Any little seminar or excursion tends to reverse the fragile balance and reduce painting days to 3, 2 or - still a major effort to prepare - one in a week. You might be surprised indeed with such a reduction because there still tends to be hardly a free minute to dispose of among the vast preparation work.

Mosaics are less demanding for the planning of subsequent work intervals. Instead they are perfect for breaking up pre-conceived patterns and blockades into basic compository steps. Mosaics are the most democratic means of visual expression we managed to evolve. With mosaic elements a 3 year old as well as a 50 year old who has previously hardly ever had the occasion or the courage to take up a brush (beware a mosaic stone) can conjure up gardens of delight and signifi-

cation on her or his first day of diving into the new scale. Scale is also a tricky issue. By reducing the average sizes of your mosaic elements by just one third you happen to multiply the necessary amount of work by 9, if you cut 10 times smaller, you end up with 100 times more work. Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Marx would be eager to put it precisely:  $\Delta(w) = \Delta(1/s^2)$  [w being workload, s standing for tile size,  $\Delta$  indicates the relative difference between options].

But there is rarely much genuine mosaic brilliance to a clumsy cluster of big pieces. Hence, the challenge is not as in fresco painting to finally begin, the real challenge is to finally put an end to a work. On our biggest mosaic project, a circle extending beyond the surface of 300 square metres, in the end, despite desperate efforts we did not manage to grout our work of two months achieved with 400 hands. On isolated places of the circle where we actually did start to grout, we would not be able to advance any close to a satisfactory state of final polishing. We were caught in a nerve-wrecking race against fatigue which we could not win, even with the still impressive resources mobilised by our collective. Slowly and comically sadly, this understanding settled on the remaining brigade as the winter descended on the



surroundings of our unheated dining hall.

Still all these efforts would have been quite hollow for most participants if they had not been accompanied, structured and sustained by political and social experiments in and around the site of intervention. To settle in visible and lasting forms, they often took much more effort and care than those workshops, which were perceived directly as visually rewarding. Towards the end of an intervention it sometimes dawned on us, that in painting and mosaicing 16-hour shifts, we were actually choosing an easy and nice-to-look-at way out. Often, our local colleagues had succeeded in introducing us to complex social and political agendas connected with our site of joint intervention. Responding thoroughly to these tasks needed much more careful, patient and passionate commitment than any disconnected visual realisation. Thrillingly though for all involved, a sense of visual perfection in wall-painting can be reached with just some more inspired night shifts. To be honest, this kind of thrill is not really within voluntarist reach for political activism under the current world rule of capital. Whoever strives for perfection of a political intervention under current circumstances might be one of a quite dangerous lot of people, who are probably suffering

from extensive fetishism either towards a neo-liberal Green Party or for orthodox liturgy, combinations included.

Just parachuting pleasant designs is boring

Yet, there is a separate more vital problem about nice visual works disconnected with the political and social conflicts of their sites. Honestly, they are rather made up to please everybody, regardless of their material situation, personal tensions and real struggles. They are often rather streamlined to allow parachuting, meeting least resistance when hitting foreign ground. They go down as smoothly as sugared water, leaving you hungry and ending up with bad teeth, unfit to bite. Mural painting aiming at such a commodity character is well advised to take to spraying or acrylic colours. Then there is no need to spoil for yourself some nice months abroad with frescos or mosaics when all you want to leave behind is a piece of imported sweetness or ready-made political sloganism. To be honest, speaking about visual results, our collective did not always succeed in producing better stuff in spite of the technically demanding workshops opened up on its host sites. At least, we always tried out how to get beyond mural kitsch production. And so we devoted a lot of resources to



entangling visual, political and social interventions intimately, to make one respond to the other. We disciplined our joy of doing in order to listen rather than declare, ask further rather than delivering the answers, co-invent rather than astonish. The farthest we got with this attempt, was the public controversy in the communist workers' town of Padul near Grenada in Southern Spain. We actually had Social democrats agitating against our conversion process over radio and TV. Prominent local fascist families of the region issued the message that the fresco activists should be shot for their leftist interventions in town affairs in front of the very wall they dared to start their work on. Polarisation went so glamorously far, because we had a uniquely lucky stroke in co-involving local and regional activists on our side. Our comrades were of various ages. They came from most varied backgrounds: rural/urban, university/manual professions, street-activists, campaigning for the rights of Granada's sex-workers and others working without pay in very traditional families. Additionally, we succeeded in involving some non-Catholics, who proved highly literate in various fields of women's liberation. Our images turned out to be a collective reaction to the individual needs and wishes all of us had voiced on starting to

work. The most visible sign of this successful conversion was that a father and his daughter from Grenada thought it the only appropriate reaction to our work to start to live with us in Padul. We learnt incredibly from the two of them. We will never heat local olive oil in a saucepan any more, degenerating its nutritional values with our Northerner' bad habits. We would switch off the precious stream of Andalusian water as soon as we had done our jobs now. We would spend the breakfast in the cool mornings under the Sierra Nevada sitting closely together around a table, covering our legs with the table cloth to allow the oven on the floor under the table to heat our limbs for the tasks ahead. Later, we received a letter from Andalusia to Poland where our comrades described how they won an astonishing success in the public eye against the neoliberal European Union constitution by making use of action elements we had brought to the region and developed with them to maturity. If all frescos had failed visually and provoked only this one conversion in a little Spanish town, there would be no reason for regret for time and energy spent.

But let us keep to the basics and not be distracted by the rare highlights from understanding: it is actually possible everywhere.



Thorough preparation of such kinds of entangled intervention includes a genuine understanding of the social and physical setting of the place. There is no way around patient observation: watching the sun and electric lights change the setting, watching the users of the space and how they assemble meaning and finally engage with them to visualise dreams out of the needs of their political context. Consequently such fresco and mosaics are counter-productive to all turnover necessities of Capitalist communication. They are adverse to volatile internet interfaces. They are not replaceable or tradable like classical commodity paintings on linen.

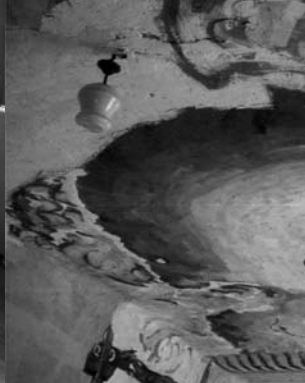
Once a fresco has dried out, it remains the privilege of barbarians and museologists to carry it away in pieces, i.e. as rubble (compare the story on f45). A fresco and a mosaic live and die with the social convergence, constituting context and meaning around them. This makes it vital to discuss political intentions among activists and future users. The vitality and inclusiveness of such discussions decides how the result of all efforts will be taken up and eventually multiplied by people using the space on a day-to-day basis.

Reaching out for agreement

on the visual side of our intervention needs to get down to paper and colour models. In the Castilian highlands, this is the way we were luckily deterred from painting military scenery to convey the scope of the local Social Revolution in 1936. Activists from the Amayuelas Eco-village project vetoed to get gunmen off their fresco walls because of a more refined social knowledge they had acquired over decades working in their village politically. They would be among the last to oppose armed liberation in current Mexico. But at the same time, they knew better than we that guns could not possibly convey the complexity of subversion to post-fascist consumer capitalism they built up locally since the overthrow of the Franco regime. Understanding that, we agreed with their reserves and looked towards more subtle and more socially literate expressions for polarisation, change and emancipation. This provoked us researching further into working women's collectives of the region and the last revolutionary education missions to the adjacent countryside in the 1930s.

No model revolution grasps the thrill of the site where it is to happen

Once a convincing model version has reached consensus,



we then try to provoke further discussions and adaptation to local needs by testing out the graphic composition in a raw sketch on the site in real. So in most cases, we composed more or less suggestive casein bound lines on the raw walls and ceilings before applying the last layers of plaster. Checking out imagery under real conditions is a process of constant surprise and questioning. When our surface layers fall off, as did some mosaics in Ravenna after some 1500 years, they will reveal something quite as interesting as the finished surface: the casein-based a secco guidelines in the making. Working such lines allows to refine the composition considerably, and in particular under real light and varying size conditions. And there are so many more elements, you simply forget to simulate in a model. No matter whether Cartesian parachuting implores us to ignore them or not, they are there to co-exist with our works for decades (maybe more): a piano for animating dancing sessions in Estonia (2002), a flower composition for a dead fellow-punk in the Renaissance squat of Milano Villa Torchiera (2001), a birds nest in Romania (2002), sparks of an electrician working behind the window in the façade of a metal collective around Brunkensen/FRG (1990), the hide-out of a Bangladeshi homeless person in the ex-SNIA factory squat at Rome (2005).

## Searching for real use

The first drawing sketched on the wall is also the pioneering step towards the all-inclusiveness of our result: no abstraction from real usage from now on! Comments start to come in abundantly from that point on, starting with cautiously worried questions foreboding more serious irritation, e.g. "but you will work this over a bit more, won't you?" "It won't stay like that, will it?" Work it over is too mild an expectation for what happens next. Actually we cover it all up entirely with plaster or mosaics, hopefully forever. Only once, in Spain 2001, we left some windows to the rough and unrefined past of our painting idea. Until the late middle ages all preconceived fresco in Europe was done on such sketches which had already disappeared when painting was only being started. Nevertheless and interestingly enough, such a trial painting helps enormously even if it is preserved just in manual and visual memory by those who worked on it. Only when China helped out European fresco barbarians and introduced paper to the process, the Italian "cartone" could emerge. Leonardo da Vinci's ardent followers would then draw out their sellable geniality on the cartone and let assistants go over their lines with a sharp instrument to print them mechanically into the wet



lime surface of the last plastering. Cartone became sellable and thus a fetish, the master's hand was on it. This further step made fresco designs themselves much more complicated and their overall vision much less contingent for memorising visually. Worst of all, it induced to judge trial sketches on the material context of the wall to be superfluous, i.e. not paying off any more on a shifting market. Thus, among others, planning tended to omit those fabulously slight inclinations and bumps in the wall which are actually immensely important for the later flow of light over the picture through the span of a day, a year, and so on. Fresco vendors, therefore, tended to press subaltern workers to plaster surfaces as universally boring and smooth as possible. Some frescos really became as unconnected to architectural space and idealistically ornamental as the cartone which had made them sellable. A cartone could be elaborated by priced hands of known artists at work-shops far away from the site. Paper stuff and minimisation of living labour is the fluid for a society transforming its visualising faculties to make them sell.

Free fresco academy is not exactly a show-case for selling. So from the year 2000 onwards, we exchanged paper for... hold fast to your seat, for

plastic, believe it or not. Indeed, to bridge the gap between the pre-renaissance first sketch on the wall (we will never give up) and the final fresco or mosaic surfaces, we probably made our only technical invention worth explaining in detail. We took to cartone of transparent material. Yes, plastic, sorry freaks. In Siberia, local Communist comrades went simply merry with this blasphemy of ours: "Everything is so earthly and ecologically sound with you, only when it gets to questions of composition, you are immediately ready to go along with the latest Soviet greenhouse technology." Besides the indisputable thrill of ecotopian blasphemy, there is at least 5 good reasons for it. Polyethylene cartone allows us to take up the original pre-renaissance drawing and transmit it to the fresh final surface with a constant view on the source and later on the target surface. We see from where we draw through marker lines on plastic and we see where we draw to with a butter knife on lime under plastic. This allows us to refine the design 2 times more and draw with exactly such mechanical pressure needed to provoke the desired reaction within the more or less elastic wet limestone. Furthermore, the plastic protection of the highly sensitive lime body permits condensing raw bits in the last plastering with the palm of your hand rubbing over or even



modelling out bits. Like in safer sex, direct body contact would be too rough and furthermore: any touch leaves a fingerprint of carbon dioxide and spurs calcification which is not snail-like and thus not good for fresco progress. On the contrary, with a polyethylene cover you can postpone drawing for some crucial minutes or even hours because not only does it protect the sensitive surface from losing moisture but also from reacting with the carbon dioxide of the air, which is gentler than fingerprints but still not really gentle enough for the minutes before fresco painting starts. Renaissance paper cartone, which we basically threw out of our workshop in autumn 2000, effects the contrary. It extracts moisture from the most crucial spots, the ones where a graphic line has been placed, soaking the paper mass with precious local drops we need otherwise: for forming our 5 successive layers of calcification with painted pigment fluids wet-in-wet. This is without doubt a most unforgivable faux-pas in the race for the most precious minutes, those of a body of hydratic lime when composition is settled and marked and the texture and chemistry is ready for the most intense fixation under crystals of future limestone.

You might have noticed that the atmosphere has become slightly dogmatic, nervous and

rather intolerant. Smoking bystanders are politely asked not to pollute the fragile lime body with further waves of unnecessary carbon dioxide. Now we are close to making sense out of hours, days, months of preparation or else our efforts will once more be going down the drain with the banal imperialist occupation of an empty space. We have seen that just too often to be ready to bear it once more. Friendships can be probed by fresco. To be precise, most of them cracked in precisely these minutes. Everything is possible, so the slightest loss in multi-perspectivity is fatal for the outcome. One of our most passionate activists regularly disappeared to take a shower to be able to cope with the stress of everything being finally prepared and nothing final yet achieved.

About the painting itself, little can be said and literally nothing can be ruled out. You can violate every technical advice, but you should do it consciously and you should know that the white side of your doing, the fully carbonated lime, will only turn out days, months really, after you have finished painting.

If slowly enough, everything goes

You can paint with all sorts of brushes. But you have to know





from physical sensation that the capacity of our walls for absorbing pigment liquids is enormous and hardly any brush can be slow enough and its hairs long and soft enough to satisfy this potential fully. You have to know what damage is done to the transparent depth of a calcificating brush trace if you go over it even only once, only slightly before initial mineralisation protects the sign under carbonising transparency. This takes about 10 minutes. One of our most spirited painters in a decade, an artist from Estonia worked with such intensity that she always overworked the lime surface and days later her colours would fade out under white carbonising crystals covering the scars she had inflicted on the surface with her most intense and subtle painting. Quite interestingly, nobody painting alongside her would ever feel inclined to comment on this proceeding. There was a tacit understanding that she was perfectly aware of the consequences of her individual method so it was evidently the right way for her to do it. Again according to more general experience, it is of little use to try to combine more than 5 consecutive layers on one spot (with at least 4x10 minutes of pauses in the intervals). But again, if you know the limits, go for it to transcend them! No hiking guide through the Alps risks to strictly dictate a binding

word about the whole of them. So why lose any more words on what fresco painting means. In the end, there is only one universal rule: don't fall down the scaffolding! Considering, what states of trance we have happened to catapult ourselves into while painting, it is indeed a great achievement of banal instruction and some consistency in security measures that nobody ever fell from our scaffoldings while painting. There were other serious accidents: the group-dynamic fell from the scaffolding and the subtleness of our design fell from the scaffolding. This is really bad, honestly, for some it hurts enormously, even years afterwards. But at least you have not broken your neck or limbs from the fallout.

But now that we have pushed the hype so far, let us at least pretend to take the Mickey out of fresco painting and out of mosaic composition themselves. Truly speaking, there has never been a satisfactory process addressing various layers of creativity if we did not engage with music, scenic theatre, cooking, watching and living within the community which had designated its space worthy for a Fresco intervention. Acrylic community painters can finish a surface we do in a month in just one or two days. Therefore, they often cultivate a slightly snobbish leisure of



observing the working community around their focus of intervention for weeks before doing any work themselves. Such aristocratic and aloof rest is hard to realise for mosaic and fresco activists.

Too industrious an approach?

The magnitude of practical tasks gets you down to hammering off old layers of plaster quite soon if you want to get anything done within the foreseeable month. Preparation also means watering intensely and repeatedly to get the physical environment right for wet lime painting. In subtropical and Mediterranean sites, this task borders a tough race against time when evaporation outstrips the availability of water or the physical limits of what our bodies can possibly carry towards and splash on a wall. So, building up a proper fresco from raw walls needs mainly lots and lots of water but eventually also two to five layers of plastering, wet in wet, with rising quantities and qualities of watery hydrated lime and slowly decreasing average diameters of sand. In the last layer, sand can be replaced by marble powder. For years we wondered that the marble powder from one certain mill is so robust, that even when mixed with lime one to one it will hardly crack. When praising their mill, we learnt

that the manufacturer was terribly cross with the quality of his powder coming out of holes of 50 micrometers in diameter, for marble crystal needles much longer than 50 micrometers would constantly pour through the holes and devalue the technical target. We agreed that their violation of technical standards had saved hundreds of square metres from cracking under a Mediterranean sun.

The proportions, rhythms and care invested for watering and plastering determine everything that is really important for the fresco outcome: the time window for painting, the sharpness of calcification which is incremental for later lucidity as well as the three-dimensional landscape to host the traces of our brush-work.

What has taken days if not weeks to prepare can be over within hours of final painting. Perceiving the first signs of the wall getting dry and the lime basis brighter and hard again is quite akin to the shock of Sojus cosmonauts hitting ground after having walked in outer space. It's not rocket technology, but snail like movements have made the peaks of social creativity and pigment absorption coincide. In these hours without gravitation, brushes finally arrive at a phase of moving slower than any thoughts that follow. This way the colour



pigments get ideally absorbed into the depth of the carbonising lime surface. Such moments of combining patient and pressured action can result in a transparency and sensuality unattainable by any other medium of visual creation. In their course of carbonification, hydrate lime turns out to be a more responsive medium for painting than even the most precious aquarelle papers. All the while, fresco surfaces are monetarily cheaper than covering a wall with the cheapest kind of paper available. What they need cannot be attained with money: that is, a comprehensive cycle of observation, work and engaged care.

Composing warm pigments against cool shades, contours against backgrounds and inner dynamics against surfaces is the idle luxury of a well-entertained fresco garden. In the course of working day shift after day shift you can virtually feel the seasons change in your garden and in your senses: from the first bold strokes of spring to solid summer heat and an overripe harvest. These three stages of a fresco project are intimately known to wandering artisans. Alas, the most delicate transformation akin to winter reaches them only by hearsay.

Within the weeks and months after having worked the last autumn day shift, the final

carbonisation and dehydration of the lime makes our surfaces brighten up as if from their inside. Somehow ironically, the full sensuality of a fresco painting is thus perceptible only to the everyday users of a space, not to their wandering makers. Half a year after we tidied up the workshop and left the place in search for a new spring, we hear the winter dwellers marvelling how the works left over to the atmosphere and its changes of wet and dry get brighter every month. Indeed, there seem to be sedentary pleasures on earth that nomads can only read about in nice letters. How rewarding it is that some still sit down to compose one in the winter quiet following a fresco-induced summer.

But what is the dead material of a finished painting, really, in comparison to the living results a social conversion process could bring about?

Taking rather a mouthful  
...of cake measured in square metres

The cause of the wandering commune seemed to get around with the ease of a movement within a movement, overcoming borders, getting around visa restrictions, food, space and money shortages, political fractions, social divisions and the dynamic of some chaotic



organisational rituals we had taken to reproduce without realising how far they tore us apart. There were many things which brought us together in the most varied places: the general thrill of evolving artisanship, common group synergies and ambitious political projects put forward by some individuals. We worked on new forms to express anti-capitalist commitment with Roma communities in Romania and Spain. We staged a painting stalk theatre on Budapest streets and in sympathetic Andalusian public institutions, acting against the European Union and its corporate hijackers, while getting our bills covered by whom else other than the culprits in Brussels themselves. When our Estonian hosts asked us how big a cake we wanted for our farewell party we were not ashamed to answer that our metier inclines us to measure in square metres. We were restlessly curious to live and work in countries and conditions different from everything we already knew, thriving within the changing hospitalities of the movement in different spaces and places. But in the end, everything depended on friendships.

Friendships initiated any event, sustained mobilisation. When friendships came to an end, mobilisation ended as well. Or maybe it just changed aim and

visibility? Anyway, it proves curiously difficult to tell when the pain of a friendship ending tends to blot out all sensitivity for processes of interactive long-term change. On such an informal tissue of support, you can realise things money could never buy. You can win against all odds and you can lose out due to incomprehensible fits of personal ambition. For outsiders, friendships seem inconsistent and unjust. We do not want to shed mysticism on our making of collective arts. Even the most subtle motions of friendship are made by material people in the end and in a material world. The rising tide we encountered for a period of seven years was of a tangible material making as well. Aesthetic improvements to the world are not resistant against rain and frost. They fail to cover bills. There will be no material revolution if we do not learn to combine social material interests alongside!

Reflections written down after painting the ceiling of Stegna

by Marek

How big a picture are we able to paint? How much power are we able to generate? How far can our determination carry us?



Run-up to our Anti-EU street parade in Budapest

f21











f25

... both can last for centuries

f25





f27



No alcohol on the scaffolding: XXX



f28

A day shift in 86 m<sup>2</sup>



These were some of our questions on starting work at Stegna [on the far north-eastern Polish seaside]. For 2 months we fought with adverse conditions, passivity and ourselves in the end. It was a period marked by rising feelings of weariness and yet at the same time an elevating tide of will to bring the endeavour to a meaningful conclusion. More than 200 volunteers turned up and got involved, that's more than 200 pairs of arms who helped to make the whole idea a success.

With each new day their individual capacities for creativity merged with the wondrous collective spectacle of it all. Starting with the complicated process of building the material basis of the giant fresco, that is, some 3 00 square metres. What we were formerly used to recognising as art was not only elevated by size but equally by colours and space. As regards the working-time span, the act of painting was but a fraction of the entire preparatory investment. But we are not really interested in quantitative issues, though noticed that they rarely fail to make an impression. The kernel of the endeavour was the creative process itself. Once again, it became clear that amateur artists, socialising on equal terms with those who make a living

of it, are capable of the same intensity and power in order to create something unique and outstanding.

What did painting really mean to people like Michelangelo, Giotto, Masaccio, Piero della Francesca and a lot of others. Simply imagine that for them the scale of a piece of art and of painting in general was clearly outlined by what they painted in fresco technique. Fresco painting was seen both as the highest accomplishment of an artist's live work as well as the most suitable school for learning to do most sensitive brushwork.

Today the scale of art in the 'société du spectacle' is measured by the market value of short-living icons. Putting some colour on canvas has become industrially cheap and ubiquitous. Go to the nearest supermarket, buy a bucket of paint or spray and you can daub it on the nearest wall. But let's be honest, it's only when we genuinely prepare a project long-term, care for its material fundamentals, aim for excellence in every step of the long, sensitive process of manufacturing collectively, that we succeed in really solving visual problems together. The ancient method of the fresco with its long circles of hosting moisture and freshness of lime [as well as the slow evolution



of a mosaic composition] allows participants to open up to new spheres of sensitivity, and not only break the generally dominant understanding of what aesthetics are about. Forget about letting an artist's passion run wild. Leave aside any notions of permitting their hands to strictly enforce their own solitary agendas. Amazingly enough, however, under the thrill of a convincing common and joint idea every participant proved actually able to direct her and his explosive creativity to fit in with the demanding common goal. Individuality became a means of production for collective creativity.

Sometimes there is talk of art as something elect, that artists are an elected lot and only a few others in their elitist squadron are able to understand them. Well, the Stegna critical mass, a wholly unelected bunch, thankfully overthrew these notions of an untouchable melee of over-posh artisans! And in the trail of this merry-go-round the archaeologist finds a work of - let's be frank - stupendous quality. And on the way there, we proved what forces lie in genuinely joint work: it becomes a means of exchange, a language crossing all boundaries set up by nations and cultures.

Impressions from painting and living together

by Anna

That's why one is here, to see the other laugh, to co-create the joint happiness of the human kind.

Two and a half months afterwards, I write down my memories from the festival in Stegna, the place where the caravan of counter-culture was at work from June to November 2004. I feel that I would like to contribute my ideas and my energy to a shared project. I do not want to be reserved. And this is already the basic experience Stegna meant for me.

About the second or third day after I came to Stegna, I heard in our morning meeting that the project is for everyone to contribute and define. It will become just what we make of it. Actually, this was mainly meant to be the case for our working on the fresco and mosaic. However, I asked myself why I had just been upset about the dirty floor in the washing room, instead of changing something myself, e.g. taking personal responsibility for wiping and cleaning it.

Somehow, I had expected that there are others who care about everything and I will eventually be told what I should do myself. In most incidents, to become



really self-responsible is so contradictory to our daily experience that we are really forgetting about such possibilities. From early on, we are trained to cope with situations and to pass the responsibility for our action or non-action to others. Stegna was a lesson for me in autonomous organisation an urge to develop a culture of participating actively. This culture does not only put emphasis on what we do but also on how we do it. It makes possible for us to experience how we change ourselves through our agency. And above all, that: cooperative models are possible for us!

Nobody in Stegna asked distrustfully: "Can you really do that?" I actually never heard: "You cannot do that!" On my first day, when I entered the room where we worked on the ceiling, I was just asked: "Do you want to join work here or over there?" Any activity was open for me and I was free to ask questions when I did not know how to do something. And I was free to learn it. I felt that people had simply confidence in my abilities instead of confronting me with the kind of expectation that I could not do something or that I was not up to the job. Indeed, I would not have to prove that I was fit enough for anything; neither did I have to assert myself. Rarely do I meet conditions

which sustain such an atmosphere. Enhancing free and emancipating agency means not to take interest in making each other smaller by competition and hierarchies. Common agency has to be sustained by acceptance and support.

Such empowerment is not free of conflicts; nor was it in Stegna. Intentions clashed when painting together. There are different methods of working and painting. To cope with such juxtaposition you have to take the others but also yourself seriously in the first place. Try to remind yourself about the necessity to be respectful. Really, respecting what others do includes respecting what you are doing yourself. Every now and again, you need to get prominently re-awoken and become more careful to perceive each other and not take space from each other but rather to create a big shared common space instead.

Therefore, it was a fabulous experience for me to paint a part of the ceiling in a group with another four women. All the time, I felt that we were actually very attentive in view of our respective borders. None would aim at drawing more high-profile at the others' expense. We mutually affirmed and encouraged each other and were happy about what the



other one painted. Yet, this did not prevent us from creating a compositional unity. I recall a thrillingly relaxed and intense feeling: on the one hand you are fully responsible, but on the other hand, because everybody felt like that, you could rely on the fact that there will be always one woman painting another piece of sky, inventing something necessary for an empty space in-between.

One day, when I came into the hall, a young woman stopped me, radiating all over her face to tell me that she had just painted a piece of fresco. She said that she could hardly believe it and that now she could always come here and see what she had contributed and that everyone could see it.

No question, our possibilities in space and time at Stegna were exceptional. And without doubt other stops by the caravan of counter-culture will be exceptional in another sense. What the caravan can take with it is the knowledge about a certain technique to express and the possibility of realising something seemingly utopian. Free fresco academy created the conditions for experiencing both technical and utopian knowledge. How can we take this into everyday life or reproduce it in everyday circumstances? Where are the creative potentials for it or how could we

open them up?

In everyday life, we are too often trapped in that specific fear capitalism generates in us in surplus quantities. Already at school, we learn to be muffled and indeed many really lose something as important as free speech. How can we resist? To my mind the free fresco academy and its caravan of counter-culture was one of the very pleasant scenes amongst an abundance of many possible answers.

I do consider it important to go on asking ourselves what our dream is. Though, let's not start with discussing our plan or considering what is most possible for us to achieve. Let us muse about this instead: what do we actually want to make possible?

A political economy to the wandering fresco commune?

by Martin

In three aspects the "free fresco academy" could combine more or less successfully with broader material tendencies in late capitalism. Knowing an awkward wind behind our sails for some years, we could allow for some manoeuvres, which looked breathtakingly experimental for those involved with them. They looked like allowed us to acquire agency





on a scale we had not been able to envisage before. But has our agency been assertive enough to oppose co-optation to the cultural merry-go-round which is so much in the interest of our class enemy? Let us check three aspects which surprised us.

1. In the wake of the Seattle incursion in 1999, crossing borders to converge became an important factor in destabilising the hegemony of the establishment. We offered to enlarge the short hypes of event hopping towards a more promising rhythm of leisure activity, which you could ironically call festival hopping. Indeed, a lot of people, especially from Eastern Europe, took advantage of the infrastructure we provided, getting easily engaged in causes and activities they had not thought within their possibilities, for example in their countries of origin, before. That certainly appears to be a solid plus.

2. Neo-liberalist rule tends to outsource funds for implementing community and culture policies. The new holders of old power liquidate public institutions with long-standing experience in cultural support and control. On the way and not by chance, they get rid of modest historic democratic concessions those institutions had to concede in years of conflict. In their habitual ignorance of ba-

roque beauty, they call this trick lean production. They actually reckon we will buy their fooling us more light-heartedly because our future dependency on their flexibility will appear to us lean and slim. Instead of cultural affairs administrators, they have created dubious agencies with nothing but monetary technical interests and competence. Even the administration of our hijacked EU-grant was sold out to a private predator agency, making money out of not caring about us. This tendency has provoked a crucial gap between representative project funding and social control. While keeping up old facades, the newly designed neo-liberal streamline instruments of simulating control of our quality and loyalty suffer from severe structural discontinuities. Indeed, for quite some time, we have operated on creating more respectable NGO-facades and detouring their grant acquisition power to networks and activities politically antagonist to their sponsors. Making and sustaining such subversive channels can involve high personal costs and certain legal risks. Fake sophistication has to be kept dynamic and highly competent to keep up with the increasingly arbitrary and despotic technical standards implemented by neo-liberalist social engineers. To fake efficiency, they deal out exemplary punishment. To compensate for their increasing



sense of fading social control, they control your technical parameters with a degree of obstinacy akin to clinical lunacy about control and almightiness. However, repressive instruments against individuals cannot make up entirely for the loss of former stabilising benefits for institutions sold off and done away with. The ruling system operates on cracks. We tried to get into them, enlarge them if possible. This could be a plus, if there were not the phenomenon of self-censorship reproducing individually the regime of control they seem to be losing on social grounds.

3. Dropping out of designated career paths has been elemental to anti-capitalist resistance in the 1960s. It became the driving force in the political economy of the commune movement over the following decades. Partly, this was the result of a certain discrepancy between the strategic overproduction of highly-qualified personal and the fluctuating human purchase needs of Capitalist production. People simply felt that capitalist economy does not need them after their professional training. So, in return they themselves tended to get amazingly trained in not needing capitalist relations any more. Refusing to function as a potentially superfluous alienated human resource could in some respects become a threat

to the system itself, especially so as refusal took to collective support strategies. The political commune movement, networks of counter-information and co-operatives socialising basic needs have all evolved on being both a choice to resist and an option for subsistence. They have enabled people to continue to function professionally outside the capitalist labour system for decades. In some cases they indeed succeeded in diverting viable social productivity away from the process of Capitalist value extraction. The social benefits of such seemingly alternative production and reproduction are still palatable in the sophistication of certain structures of resistance years afterwards. With free fresco academy we tried to combine individual career frustration and collective skills across various environments e.g. working class, women employees, academic proletariat, seasonal migrant workers and so on. Up to now the possible benefits of non-commodity production and reproduction have been seriously overshadowed only months after each promising new start. There is a thorough psychological destabilisation at work in people dropping out nowadays. Dropping out of a standard-c.v.-path is rather not understandable any more as a collective act of refusal but rather as a very personal failure with serious, possibly existen-



tial consequences. Yet, everybody drops out for some time under the regime of neo-liberal economy. There is little oppositional originality nowadays in not working for money. The stress you can make for yourself to become a functional part of the machine again can be worse to your back-bone than a rude boss in the 1960s. Neo-Liberalism is constantly offering us false promises of career continuity in exchange for our genuine career loyalty.

So, after some months of dropping out, people tend to get rather uneasy about their personal suitability to participate in the focus of an unfair exchange being staged for us to work against us, i.e. the labour market. Making people nervous renders them humble enough to comply with the rules set against them and reintegrates them for another straw fire of streamlined career aspirations. There is no reliable career continuity at work in late capitalism any more. Nevertheless, we tend to perceive the consequences of this erosion as a very personal failure. It is actually difficult to say whether people are right to panic. But it is rather easy to notice that people are indeed panicking systematically over their professional biographies during the last years. Why is it so difficult to break the cycle nowadays?

Drop out and fresco!

Why are there clearly more hippies on advertising boards than in squats around Europe? O.K., appropriating our enemy's make-believe resource investment into our careers and the potential prospect to divert these is still a luring and to some extent a real possibility. But the margin which can be won in such gambling with our limited life-span is decreasing along with the general decline of neo-liberalist social services. It all seems to go down the drain towards arbitrarily selecting and disengaging with the rest. One day, obeying to their education needs at the mercy of dubious sponsorship might turn out quite useless for any social agenda. Prominently, it has always been pathetically useless to learn the profession of killing in the ruling armies to prepare yourself for revolutionary change.

So, what can we do to break the life-wasting cycle of false hopes and costly biographical compromises with Capitalist rule? We do not know. We have stirred up some noise and settled some colours. We are not altogether satisfied, but we reckon we could pass on some experience still. We claim no geniality or luck on our side. Every collective that keeps its senses open for the signs of change in the current social, political and



cultural stagnation and works consistently to take heed of these observations will be able to make a similarly original contribution to our common cause. We have moved some 60 tons of sand and we were able to build something like an artificial island in an artificially heated basin. From the cold most of us got after leaving that greenhouse we can say that the possible material advantages for collectives associating outside have to be very carefully prepared and planned for. Friendships, however important, are maybe not sufficient to build a counter-society. Free fresco academy has been hit on its back-bone as regards this point. But we have not yet broken our neck, have we?

The wandering commune responded to individual material needs collectively. This formula released enormous shared creativity at times. Meanwhile however, we failed to set the dynamics of material needs to synchronise with our collective build-up. When we encouraged people to grab and take for the benefit of unlimited creativity, everybody turned out to be damned un-selfish and boring like a Christian congregation of repenting sinners. However, when the shared vision and its material benefits were acutely vulnerable, individualist needs turned out to be the most capricious and potentially

destructive force involved. Free association was both the formula for evolving breathtaking political and artistic creativity as well as for its repetitive destruction. Indeed, there were curious backlashes. And we tended to repeat them with fatal regularity. This might indicate that they were not so much the fruit of individual caprice as we tend to think in a given situation but rather a complex and most likely a response to objective conditions.

In the run-up against the G8 in Scotland 2005, we took to glazing some 3000 tiles by ourselves for the first time. We were truly amazed at the colours and the variety of forms, drawings and political messages emerging. We marvelled equally at the efforts it took to make all that. However, in the end, our dream to assemble all individual achievements in a joint mosaic composition failed utterly. Ironically, the most interesting tiles disappeared into private collections. Collective wealth got privatised and the convergence finished with a virtual bankruptcy for the mutual aid we had expected. Had we just been too naïve, expecting exactly the opposite to happen?

There is no isolated way-out within late capitalist consumer societies. When escape capsules fail to be socialised, they frustrate not only their bystanders



but all the precious self-centred intentions which assisted in their creation. Collectivising individual needs we succeeded in intensifying individuality to the borderlines of sociability. Having got that far, we came to believe that we had made a step forward together. Alas, only to discover a little later that material needs of a most individualist making were capable of blowing up our mere fabric of consensus and non-hierarchical decision-making.

We made it possible to live and work together without material pressure. In our working collective, everything was made available without the need for individuals to pay money: free time, food, clothes and shoes fit for building works, all sorts of colours, textures, techniques and materials, public transport tickets, shelter. We wanted these resources to be distributed according to material needs (not merit or ideal) following guidelines set out by consensus decisions, affirmatively including all those involved in joint action at a given stage.

Group pressure needs no boss to boss around

We sometimes worked unbelievably long working days over months, with hardly anybody stepping out. In effect, the only working intensity baseline

was individual example. To our amazement this could well be an instrument too powerful for some to resist. Theoretically, you could be a part of the party and virtually abstain from toil as long as you chose to do so. But hardly anybody did so for more than a prolonged weekend, a night off in an internet café or at the peak of inventiveness a mere fancy excursion. In theory, you could consume more of our common goods and work less if you pleased or just the other way round. At a certain point we could not really believe what we had done. We had managed to create a social micro-situation free from formal material pressure. That does not mean, however, that we managed to free ourselves from the deep traces and marks inflicted on us by a society of unfair exchange all around.

It is a precious and powerful experience to be subject only to your own free will. There are even more satisfactions in getting virtually drunk on free will once you submerge in visual creation. But even when most carefully collectivised, free will cannot stem the tide of underlying material relations.

Wherever we worked successfully, there was a carefully elaborated and to a certain extent consciously socialised political economy working behind our provocatively casual



appearance.

Building up networks which enabled us to concentrate our purchasing power, and using it collectively, meant we could evolve a method of priority planning and resource allocation on a considerable social scale. Large-scale interventions as in Stegna (Poland), Carrara (Italy) or Amayuelas (Spain) took years and characteristically repetitive build-ups to succeed. There were enormously discouraging moments, when default rescue strategies after collective failures turned out to be nothing but individual lapses. It took years and a series of extreme, sometimes genuinely alienating experiences to come to terms with the fact that there is nothing more precious and more volatile in late Capitalist consumer societies than a creative collective. Once you have secured its material basis, its members have already moved on to new priorities. No matter how much you learn to love collectives, when it comes to paying its overdue bills, cleaning up its mess, caring for its funding two years ahead you are most likely to find yourself among a curious few. Socialised to make a personal advantage out of sacrificing themselves to their ostensive disadvantage, these semi-professional helpers are both the agents and undertakers of every collective failure. They are dangerously

unreasonable.

Unfortunately, this is dangerous not only to capital. It would be a high art not to translate their self-denying expertise into informal hierarchies and strategic blockades against full collectivisation. Renouncing all formal hierarchies, we did not manage to liberate ourselves from informal and moralising remnants. Empowering people to participate in our successes evolved visibly in the course of artistic and social convergences over 7 years. As for its reoccurring break-downs, free fresco academy has curiously failed to democratise them. After a tremendous political and visual conversion in Padul (Andalusia) in December 2004, we had two meetings to some up lessons learnt and think about follow-up action. One took place in Padul together with our Spanish comrades of the region. It looked overwhelmingly positive. The focus was on collective achievements and how they could be made possible on a wider scale in the future. A second meeting was organised for all Polish and German participants in Warsaw after their returning north. This turned out to be something close to a disaster. Now that people were thrown back into their individual limits again, the collective focus was on the formerly tacit expectations what to get out of the project for oneself, at least materially. With



the agenda thus set, the group dynamic was destructive to say the least. Written reflections were exchanged beforehand, but not everyone participated in this. Some took the essays for discussion in their mail as a suitable reason to boycott our meeting altogether. Others dropped out of the room one by one. The objective possibility to democratise our tough landing and at least find a formula to compensate for individual material shortcomings virtually vanished within minutes.

### Tossing the sand pith

Keeping the accounts straight, no matter to what extent individuals have been able to privatise collective benefits on their own behalf, all of us felt curiously spat out after we had parted. Funnily, there seems to be a hidden link which does not lack a certain sense of carnival humour. When coming apart, many hands were pulling on our collective child as in the ancient tale about the competing mothers at the court of Solomon. To be honest, in our case nobody ever came out empty-handed. Our material provisions were just too favourable to allow for such an extent of failure. And equally, the bourgeois notions of individual artistic authorship proved just too far from our realities to allow for any Solomon-

ic notion of "real motherhood". But interestingly enough, some who got considerable personal shares for themselves, were the most ardent to bemoan our joint bereavement. The child is dead! Who dared to tear it to her or his side?

Anyway, the most able hedonists among us pulled out of free fresco academy feeling ourselves utterly pissed off. Among the various material losses involved, the genuinely deplorable one turned out to be how former friendships deteriorate within such dynamics. For colleagues who got caught up in the kernel collective, after 7 years there remained hardly any friendship within a reasonable distance unaffected by Fresco matters. There were few who had not eventually been drawn into the jolly conversions of the wandering commune... and suffered noticeably once getting back out on whatever centrifugal terms seemed appropriate. Like vampires in the name of a better future, we scanned every human contact available for its potential implication in our bonfire of festival realisations. In the end, we were surprised to find ourselves quite alone, with little more than seemingly burnt-out relations around us. That is a thrilling experience, when your senses are still raw after all those joyous orgies of collective action. Is there a reason to pity ourselves? No. We



will ask instead, what has been lost and why did we lose it?

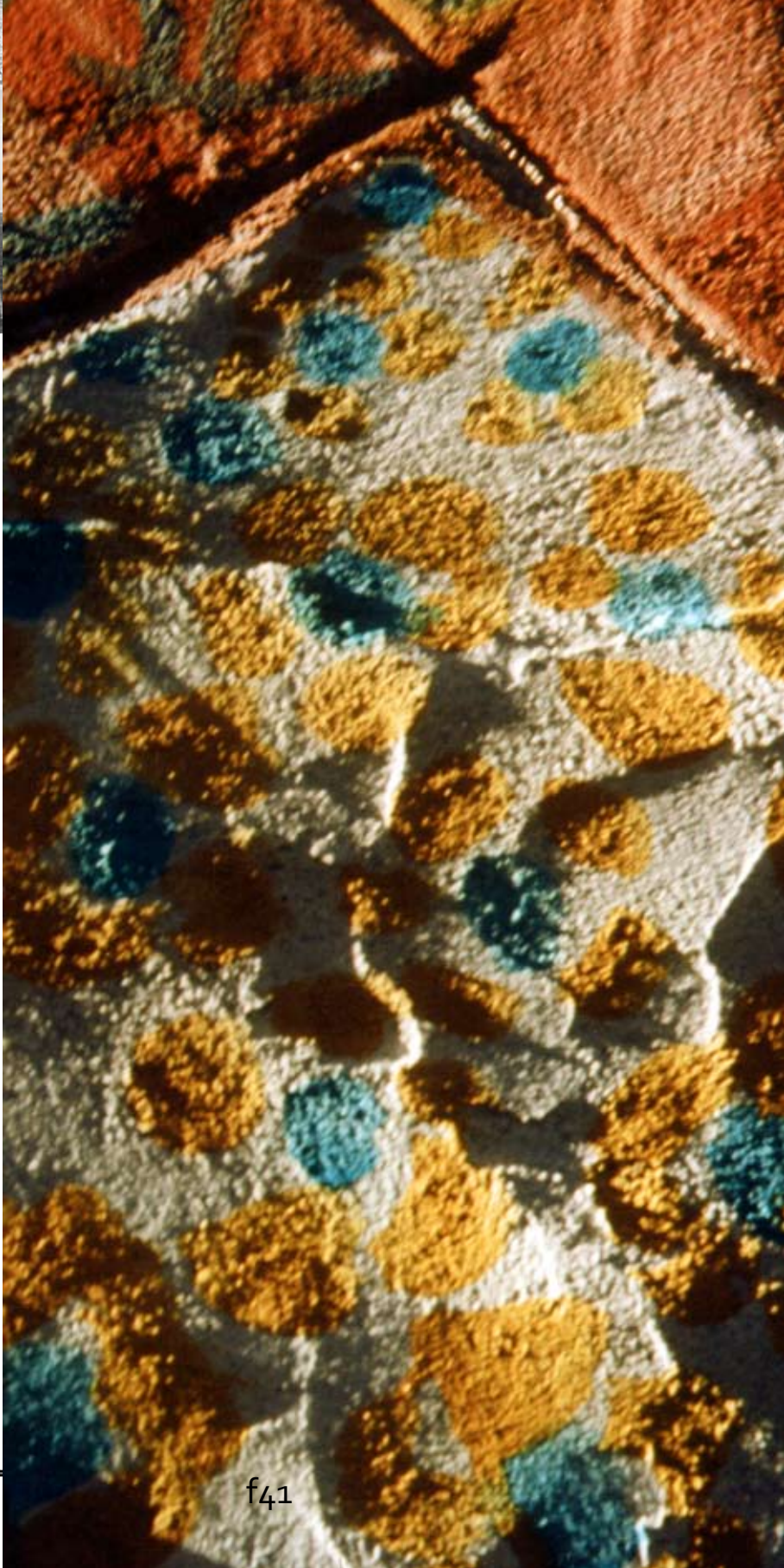
From the outset, we have denounced idealism and its lack of consciousness for the material processes interesting us. The vital abilities mobilised by class hedonism are at the source of our most precious creativity. In the faked academic context of the wandering commune, our aim has been to enhance just them in the field of visual creation. We dreamt about igniting them to such a degree that they would tend to melt, lose their consumerist, capitalistically domesticated form and amalgamate into the critical mass of a revolutionary collective ready to strike. To be honest, amalgamation rarely lasted over a summer.

The friendships which once made the Academy possible, will never be restored to what they were at the beginning of our decade. The fresco snail has devoured the very communion which brought it to life. It has passed leaving a micro-trail of devastation: leaves bit into two, grass flattened and even the slimy trail in its wake is not always entirely a pleasure to live with when your means to move on are depleted. So this raises one of the most sensitive topics involved: money.

Over the years we got some-

how literate in Robin Hood practices for financing our collective visions. For anyone with some experience in festival costs, there is a clear line in our material traces: there was a nice half-decade when the inflow of grants roughly increased ten-fold every year. We would actually never get tired of making this transparent, deliberately damaging our voluntary spirit. Quite funnily, the Academy could not receive a single cent officially. Its registration process was never taken to evolve beyond the pitiable efforts of those two night-time jobbers at the Polish police forces. As an ardent pupil of our ancient master in the Woods, we were not too keen on showing our real face to the class enemy, rather keeping him busy with fake and mock institutions covering our transactions. Under a certain perspective, some of us were actually quite relieved when our undertakings failed to materialise the next subsequent jump in scale after having accumulated to the nice sum of a quarter of a million Euro. Nonetheless, at two times, we were damned closed to this. Probably, we would not have the quiet atmosphere to write this book if we had continued in such a progression akin to lunacy and the standard accumulation of capital. After all, Robin Hood remains a better guide for revolutionary artists, than Alice in Wonderland, does he not?





f41









And anyway, the highway (wo) men's loot has been spent and done with.

Actually, we have created fabulous wealth, not only economically, artistically or socially speaking. Every single fresco and mosaic intervention has been executed as a rarely qualified restoration work, creating extensive long-term benefits apart from being just nice to look at for some. Many of our projects have been agreed upon by the formal holders of premises purely because of the added value available from our 60,000 voluntary hours and numerous unpaid highly-qualified skills implied in the process.

Where did those Academy efforts, equivalent to 30 professional years of a single worker, go to? Roughly speaking, half of them materialised into 1500 square metres of frescos in three continents. Another third or so of the working hours mobilised turned into mosaics and the remainder sustained political and social experiments and subsequently helped to build a network of well-experienced contacts.

*-Contacts for what?*

*-For revolutionary fresco interventions in the future.*

*-How does this work, combining the fastest kind of change and the slowest?*

*-We try to invent new combinations every time we start on a*

building site. But we are not the first ones to experiment with such mixtures. Take two arbitrary stories out of the 6000 years of fresco painting on earth to grasp that we a modest part of a long line.

A fresco story from French Revolution in Spain and its commercial aftermath

It was probably Francisco Goya who painted the first revolutionary frescos which were not sponsored and monitored by church doctrinaires any more. Within months his Casa del Recluso filled up from the entrance door to its second floor with fabulously painted folk songs about the dying feudal order of the old world. capitalism for its part, went simply mad with them: something new which would not sell - living labour you cannot steal. This proved too much to merchant tolerance. However irresistible they might have been to look at - Goya's frescos were broken into rather individual pieces. These pathetic fragments of lime stone were then awkwardly glued to canvas under the auspices of a Belgian investor. Having bought the hand of a wage labourer, he let them be painted over thickly with supposedly market-proof oil-paint. Yet, the investment downsizing fresco to rubble would not pay off. Nobody would want to buy the



mess, as long as Goya's name did not acquire market value in itself. So, this is actually the first and also one of the last flirtations on record to have taken place between the up-to-date fresco and outdated capitalism. The vulture remnants of this collision are now on display for curiosity in the Madrid Prado Museum. A daily stream of visitors duly marvel why on earth "Goya's little dog" got so much space to itself. Alas, there had been a whole house to it and the painted stories and songs it is a part of were intrinsically linked to a complex space of free association. These frescos were not made to be hung in a museum, they were the integral part of a rebel meeting place for the friends and political comrades of Goya to socialise in.

#### A fresco story from the Eastern Carpathian mountains

When the first rays of pan-European enlightenment hit the outer range of the Carpathian mountains in the 16th century, people of those acutely remote valleys met in unprecedented critical masses. In the region of modern-day north-eastern Romania's Bukovina district, they suddenly experienced that they had enormous needs to communicate and formulate what added up to an entirely new vision of the world. Their literacy, at the mercy of ortho-

dox clergy, proved indeed quite insufficient for the new task, and only a few simplistic slogans in Cyrillic letters remained on the walls of their making. But simple slogans and logos would by no means convey their commitment adequately for a new world to envision. So they took to collective giant frescos. Within months, they managed to paint out entire cosmologies of seeing the surface of the earth differently from what the former rulers had made it look like for centuries. The orthodox church was eager to disguise this new movement of people, ideas and faculties as something like a remake of old-time medieval mass-pilgrimage. But the thrill of people participating in the gatherings around the Bulkovian giant frescos clearly evolved a new, transformative dimension. Collectively creating and discussing immensely complex imagery about the world and how it can be formed by socialised labour on an entirely new scale, they did away with what had been the isolationist and de-mobilising spell of medieval icons.

For us, there remains little cause to feel miles ahead. Indeed, there has been impressive labour to demystify the religious business of icons. But instruments of power tend to re-enter through the back door. Honestly, do we see anything more substantial than icons on



our television and computer screens day after day? Vision reduced to worship? Is there any alternative? To grasp giant frescos, you must not be fixed on the place in which social control normally prefers to ensure you stay put. Instead, you have to walk and work your own way across other people's stares to realise your legitimate share in the movement of light. Enlightenment and Enlightenment are visibly entangled. There are inner and outer surfaces to be explored, turning out to have a whole body of lime to them, there are niches, abysses and couloirs. Even if you have not yet learnt to perceive the social dynamics to use a place settling to its painted environment, quite amazingly, the light by itself is changing constantly throughout the day. With your patience of observation tuning in to the patience of frescoing itself, you can observe, e.g. the direct sunlight falling in to wander over the wall and highlight detail after detail with a dynamic that sometimes seems to make the whole building revolt in the burning caprices of a fabulous afternoon glow. As for the landscape of the Bukovina and its visual socialisation 5 centuries ago, there are entire complexes of frescos to grasp in context to each other and others just a day's walk up further in the mountains. Once you are on the trail, all this seems utterly anti-iconographic, actu-

ally anti-religious to the merest detail and rather close to the mobilisation brought to light by cinema: once exploring the new media, grasping its possibilities in space and time actively, people taking part are empowered to turn into what they have learnt to make and see as a collective: a rioting mob, an erotic orgy, interacting to acquire new faculties on the run. How come that some of us had a sensation of physical closeness to a revolutionary process repeatedly on the fresco scaffolding, but never really before a computer screen or any other collection of orthodox icons reproduced flatly?

Just imagine that all these frescoed spaces from the in- and outside of Egyptian pyramids onwards are based on limestone plaster, i.e. crushed immensities of dinosaur snailshells! Snails are so much more interesting than academies, actually. Already the first Consulta, the inquiry for direct democracy initiated by the Mexican Zapatista movement, built a shell-like house for its birth-process. According to rumours from the Lacadonian jungle this truly revolutionary snail of direct democracy encompassed an eco-kitchen, a library, different spaces for different levels of a free association of free individuals. And all this arranged in a snail-like form – a prototype for subsequent..

...fresco intervention in conversion centres in Seattle 1999, Praha 2000, Genova 2001 or Rostok 2007.

In most parts of our movement, including the freed territories of Chiapas, murals are still done in plastic paint and thus lost to the public within a tiny decade of years. Wandering around collectively, we took a decade of luxury to learn how to embed our paintings in fresh lime to possibly last for centuries and engage in a most beautiful process of utterly slow decay.

But not all the parallels between fresco and snail life are really pleasant. Like its much abler sister preying on our garden salad, free fresco academy tends to hibernate in dry periods and comes out of the obscurity only after long rainy days when there is some real chance of splashing under rainbows. When in motion, it has a whole house as its luggage. Much less elegant than temporary Zapatista jungle architecture, the free fresco academy dumps its travel cargo into recycled banana boxes to get moving

... so here we go again.

Next stop seems to be Venezuela.



---

This controversial collage on a wandering fresco commune has been compiled as part of a series documenting our debate for *radical democracy* in social action possibly making collective revolutionary production a reality of our future.



The publication is a non-commercial and copyleft production. When you have read it, please pass it on to your favourite public library!

