

# ARTPULSE

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**ENACTING POPULISM: PHASE I**

AIR - Antwerp

Curated by Matteo Lucchetti

By Catherine Somzé

“Your freedom is in danger, participate!” -shouts a girl through a loudspeaker one early afternoon this last Spring on the main square of Antwerp. She wears a white tee shirt onto which a red hand is printed – the palm facing up as if reaching out. “Are you unsatisfied with the current political situation?” -she asks a casual passerby- “Then, join us!” Beside curious onlookers who stop to watch the happening, a group of people wearing the same uniforms are busy dividing the square into different sections with the help of coloured tape to separate natives from foreigners. Others take turns to speak out populist slogans, or to mysteriously invite people to hold a water-level so as to construct a structure that remains invisible to the eye.

This is not an ordinary demonstration, nor a common political party rally. It is *Build Your Leader*, a performance organized by Bordeaux-based Italian artist Luigi Coppola in the frame of “Enacting Populism,” an on-going project initiated by independent Italian curator Matteo Lucchetti, the first phase of which took place earlier this year at Air, an artists’ residence in Antwerp. “Enacting Populism” is now in its second phase, taking place in Paris at the Kadist Foundation where it will end February 2012 with a survey exhibition of the whole project. What is the relation existing between art practices and populist aesthetics? This is the question asked by Lucchetti, to Coppola and to two other visual artists from Colombia and Italy respectively, Francisco Camacho and Danilo Correale.

All three artists tackle populism, as an aesthetic phenomenon, as they deconstruct different aspects of its grammar. While Coppola’s *Build Your Leader* mainly focuses on the importance of the figure of the leader in populism to unveil its xenophobic underbelly when it comes to immigration policy and questions of national identity, Correale’s project, *Re-designing Fear*, uses existing distribution lines to virally spread scratch-off lottery tickets revealing populist ideas. And Camacho’s project, still in progress, translates the violent anti-Islamic symbol of a barred mosque into a harmonious musical score, to be performed by the philharmonic orchestra of Antwerp. *Build Your Leader* reveals populism’s literary backbone by focusing on its main characters, the leader and the enemy; *Re-designing Fear* speaks to the hope of a better future that underlies both phenomena of lottery and populism; and Camacho’s translation of visuals into music points at the original violence of the visuals by neutralizing it in the musical score.

Underlying these various projects is a fundamental concern for the power of forms and signs, be they ‘art’ or other systems of representation, to create identities. “Forms are empty signifiers, available for anyone to use in their own interest,” says Coppola, “and Populism is a perfect example, as it is best defined as a rhetorical style [i.e. a form], the backbone of which only depends on a few universal tropes: the idea of change, the figure of the enemy, and that of the leader.” Coppola would like people to become



Luigi Coppola, *Build Your Leader*, 2011, (still video). Project for “Enacting Populism.” Courtesy of the artist.



Danilo Correale, *Re-designing Fear*, 2011. *People's Party Spectacular Belgium Edition for "Enacting Populism"*. Scratch Off lottery ticket, viral distribution. Courtesy of the artist.

aware of how art and other systems of representation have been used to give visibility to entities that have no shape such as “the nation,” “the state,” and “democracy.” “Signs are tools,” says Coppola, “and I would like to empower people with them.”

In a sense, this statement can be said about the work of many visual artists working today who envisage art as a form of political activism. Like Yael Bartana’s *Cookbook for Political Imagination*, a manual of political instructions and recipes which accompanies the exhibition “...and Europe will be Stunned,” in the 54th Venice Biennale; or like Dutch artist Jonas Staal who often responds to local political news with ad-hoc actions in public space which mimics common forms of public expression such as spontaneous memorials. They’re working in a way that highlights the process of making meaning in order to reveal the importance of representation in contemporary life and politics. You might call them ‘communication tool engineers,’ or sign ‘transitioners’ as Parisian collective Société Réaliste named an ongoing project initiated in 2006, which takes historical revolutions as starting points to create seasonal trends for designing political transitions.

At the core of the practice of many of these artists, is the use of appropriation as a critical strategy, or ‘culture jamming’ as American cultural critic Mark Dery coined in his influential 1993 eponymous pamphlet. “They use devices that already exist and infiltrate them,” says curator Matteo Lucchetti. Appropriation as a typical modern artistic strategy, makes use of irony as a form of deconstruction. It can be traced back to the early 20th century and Duchamp’s ready-

made; German Dadaists’ and Russian Constructivists’ photomontages; the 1960s with the ‘détournements’ of the Situationist International; and more recently the so-called ‘subvertisements’ and ‘identity corrections’ of collectives such as the Guerilla Girls and the Yes Men respectively. The brand of appropriation art developed by the artists participating in “Enacting Populism,” however puts special emphasis on the forms themselves, and the process by which they become endowed with meaning. “(Populism) is not about left or right,” says Found Land, the designers of the project’s own visual identity, “it’s about playing the game and winning, through effective communication devices.”

As many other art forms today, the aim of the artists of “Enacting Populism” is to test the boundaries of art and activism by playing with signs of visual identity (be they political speeches, national symbols, statistical graphs or colour charts) so as to highlight the way in which they create the things they represent. It’s not so much about subverting signs as it is about showing them for what they are: powerful communication tools that can bring one’s own vision into existence and which, in their turn, can be appropriated by the viewer. ■

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