

# Witnesses of the City



# Notes on Witnesses of the City

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One of the central working themes of the IVAM is the study and analysis of urban life during the last century. An urban life that is obviously very closely bound to aspects like architecture and town planning, but whose scope stretches much further to include a whole series of social factors, shared experiences and personal interactions that help to shape different cities according to cultural differences at each stage in their history. A good example of this is the exhibition *Lost in the City* (currently in the IVAM) comprising a set of pieces illustrating aspects that are fundamental for understanding the routine character of life in any major city, but that are frequently forgotten.

Now, with this project, *Witnesses of the City*, we want to further expand our knowledge of the realities that make up everyday life in the city. This project was conceived to include a whole series of activist groups and collectives who have been working in the Community of Valencia over recent decades; without them we would not be able to understand the city's urban structure and power relations, or the personal networks that shape the towns and cities in our immediate surroundings.

*Witnesses of the City* is a sincere gesture of recognition to all those people who have enabled day-to-day life to be better for thousands of local residents, but it is also a wish to explore and raise awareness of their contributions towards constructing an extensive and public-spirited account of urban reality over the last few decades..

# Witnesses of the City

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“To remember one must imagine.”

Georges Didi-Huberman

The visibility of a particular situation is the main common denominator between different groups and collectives, which made certain circumstances and events connected with them the motivation for their struggle. The claims shown in this exhibition are a major part of what has been happening in the Valencia area (undefined even in its title: from Region of Valencia to Community of Valencia and including the fleeting dream of Country of Valencia or on the ruins of a mythological Kingdom of Valencia) from the early 1970s through to the present day. The show's ambition comes up against an easily understandable series of limitations, turning the project into more of a possibility for debate and research than into a complete and finished outcome. This text sets out to specifically convey that this documentary exhibition does not trace an encyclopaedic account of what has happened here and since that time; instead it aims to unpick and understand the confrontational and deeply opposed relationship between the seat of power and certain groups in the community.

A number of concepts have been chosen for this and their description is based on the use or interpretation that has been made of them by some thinkers and theoreticians who have provided concrete examples to illustrate them, or that have been analysed abstractly and are being appropriated here for clear and highly synthetic reasons. To review these terms, taken from a very precise context, this essay addresses ethical issues in order to understand some of the most significant

episodes in the recent past, where the democratic system was stubborn and rigid; where some politicians misinterpreted their functions, in terms of public servants, overestimating their skills and unable to repress vanity in their civil service bodies; at the precise moment when that same democracy began to allow criticism and the denouncing of unacceptable situations; when citizens recovered their awareness of common concepts and community, collaborative and even (begging your pardon) communist processes (Rogelio L. Cuenca *dixit*).

Likewise, all this was happening at a time when ideologies were a rallying cry and not a long-winded description of concepts tangled up with the compass points as an excuse for not saying the inevitable: that if we forget the origin of certain social movements, we are destined to repeat the events that brought them out into the open. That is, to express it even more clearly: that this exhibition has a marked ideological aspect, that it sides with the *weak* and that it aspires to achieve that they, at least ethically speaking and in documentary format, emerge victorious from struggles in which common sense shines, if not like a mythical El Dorado, at least flickering with the passion of an inextinguishable flame. Or, in other words, so that this time, justice is done, although it may be no more –or less– than poetic justice.

The chance to produce this show in a symbolic place like the IVAM, an institution held in such high regard in its early days and questioned at some points in its recent history, at other times a paradigmatic example of cultural and artistic imposture, involves an added responsibility. To the factor of cautiously yet resolutely displaying this series of actions, or the most representative of them, by social collectives, can be added the particular factor of hosting them in the Community of Valencia's museum institution, with the status of *national museum*, at least in the event that we were aware of belonging to contemporaneity and to a shared identity.

This, in turn, opens up a dual pathway. The act of institutionalizing cultural and social struggles would seem to indicate that they have ceased to exist, that they are treated

as events and as an inevitable part of a more or less distant past. However much art no longer exhibits itself only with the strategies historically assigned to it, and social movements are no longer completely ignorant of the communicative abilities of “diffuse aesthetics”, doing it in an art institution commits what is shown to part of art history, even though this is a *certain* art history and it does it in a socio-local way. This dual pathway leads out into a single fact: the determination to give these citizens’ movements the historical importance of having fended off authoritarian decisions and having done so by compromising their personal prospects and making their collective struggles visible.

Over and above these two directions is the will to reaffirm institutional critique, in its third state or generation, as theorists like Brian Holmes, Simon Sheikh and Marcelo Expósito have scrupulously defined, by making it at least in the form of *testimonial*. The current political situation in the autonomous context is not comparable with what was happening a few years ago; the absence of an absolute majority in the governing party forces a series of shared actions that predispose another kind of scenario for the relationship between those who govern and the citizens. When certain protest actions enter the institutionalised space of the museum, art is undoubtedly already in another place; so are the protests. However, this exhibition taken on by the IVAM is not an isolated gesture, at least it does not want to be, neither does it aspire to occupy the space that rightfully belongs to citizens’ collectives, especially if they are or have been critical of autonomous cultural policy, of which this *Institut* should always be an example. We should remember too, that if these actions of cultural critique reach the IVAM late, it is because throughout its twenty-seven years of history they were never taken into account, never welcomed and never encouraged. The project of rebuilding a story for the IVAM, which is the same as saying for a significant part of contemporary culture in the Community of Valencia, left behind the successful and self-

centred vision of its early years and completely disappeared amongst incomprehensible displays of social, cultural and political apathy. A historic moment that seems more difficult to understand the more time goes by and the further away it becomes. The story that the IVAM needs to construct can only be generated collectively and for a broad community that includes both a generalist public and a more specialist and critical audience; the creation of a shared project has to be a project and must be shared. This exhibition and this text both seek to be part of the journey undertaken by many, bringing us to this moment and for which we should, undoubtedly, be thankful to them.

## Witness

Giorgio Agamben argues his theory on the witness, of whom he says, “Primo Levi is a perfect example of the witness”, referring to the etymology of the concept: “In Latin there are two words for witness. The first word, *testis*, from which our word “testimony” derives, etymologically signifies a person who, in a trial or lawsuit between two rival parties, is in the position of a third party (*terstis*). The second word, *superstes*, designates a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it.”<sup>1</sup> It is on this second word that we also base ourselves, to call on a set of committed citizens by means of actions carried out together, who understand a collective as a force in motion, who managed to overturn (with more or less success) a reality that showed itself to be immovable, obstinate, indisputable, set in stone, and that at first could only be accepted, as certain dogmas are accepted. The stamina to endure a constant cut and thrust with opposing political decisions, and the imagination to think of a situation that is

1. AGAMBEN, Giorgio: *Lo que queda de Auschwitz. El archivo y el testigo. Homo Sacer III*. Valencia, Editorial Pre-Textos, 2005 (2nd corrected edition).

different from the one provided by reality, marked these events and these people for ever.

Making a comparison between different circumstances, the one expressed by Agamben and the one expressed in this context are not comparable. It is difficult to compare the systematic annihilation of mostly Jewish people in concentration camps with anything else that does not share a series of elements with identical stature and importance. We would not dare to compare events, instead we have decided to employ the same meaning based on their etymology. In his book *Images in spite of all*, Georges Didi-Huberman uses Agamben's text as a starting point to attest the testimonial nature of a series of four photographic images taken in Auschwitz concentration camp by a member of the *Sonderkommando*. For the French thinker, these images become authentic witnesses of what happened there, they are "the eye of history for their tenacious function of making visible".<sup>2</sup> Unlike other lines of visual research on the 2nd World War Holocaust, such as the documentary films by Claude Lanzmann, where archive material is not taken into account to show what happened and yet used to tell the story, here, an image theorist like Didi-Huberman bestows testimonial validity on photographic images, even though it is known that, like these, they were manipulated at some stage. That is, that the testimonial proof, the physical document, the presence resulting from an absence, is *still* taken into account as a basis for research and theoretical reasoning.

In the same way, could we bestow on this accumulated series of graphic, propagandist, demagogic, savvy, ironic, direct, even elegant and resolutely aesthetic material the function of an "eye of history for its tenacious function of making visible"? Visibility occurs in direct action, in fact, but

2. DIDI-HUBERMAN, Georges: *Imágenes pese a todo. Memoria visual del Holocausto*. Barcelona, Paidós Ibérica, 2004.



it persists in the material that serves at each moment and in each circumstance to support, name and give voice to these same actions. A wide variety of elements and interests intervene in this process, but they naturally adapt to each other, producing a compendium of linked pieces of information and historical events.

The next question would be to ask oneself if in fact these collectives can or cannot be considered survivors of a precise historical situation, both if the materials used to demand visibility can be understood as eye witnesses, examples that raised awareness in other collectives, in sensitised people who were affected by a particular decision or event, or who became aware from that moment. There seems to be no doubt that this is the case, looking at certain events in perspective. The impressionist time line that runs through the room is both a window and a mirror. It enables us to review some specific facts put into context, mixed, as a symptom of the succession of events and happenings, of marks or losses in time. But it is also our reflection in them. Any time line, if it affects a contemporary period, includes us in it, even though it may be based on our direct non-presence. As a window it can be transparent, translucent, or be compared to a screen that shows what we created earlier. As a mirror, it can faithfully outline our surroundings, but it might also give us back our own reflection deformed, grotesque or blurred. Each person's involvement in this line also traces a personal scenario, although it is linked with everyone else's.

It is inevitable that we should think of ourselves at historical moments, like on 11 September 2001 or on 3 July 2006, when the most serious underground train accident ever to occur up to then in Europe took place in the Valencia metro station of Jesús, and remember where we were and what we were doing. In any accident there are always direct victims and survivors, but could we not also call survivors the relatives and friends whose lives came to a halt that day before starting up again – broken, fractured, reconstituted, always

different to the one they had before – from then onwards? And even more, might they not also be considered survivors of a political attitude that was negligent, condescending, pseudo-compassionate, arrogant, which denied them the basic right to express themselves and fight for what can be reliably understood as an error in the system?

The system is made up of all of us, but the political and economic powers that be take it away in such a selfish and absurd way, to make any success, however small, their own, that when such terrible events happen all we can do is direct an enquiring gaze and tough questions at them. Plus, in this case, any kind of responsibility was sidestepped, exponentially widening the gulf between political authority and citizens. Another reason to consider yourself a survivor: confronting the unflinching walls of administrative silence, of legislative loopholes, of judicial interpretation. A judicial exegesis that opens up the margins of over-interpretation of the concept, and includes in its scope most of the men and women behind the collectives represented here. Witnesses, protagonists and survivors of situations that were destined to be reproduced naturally by the powers that be and ended up being stories of struggle and resistance that now mark the history of an exact time and place.

## Respect

With a concise and unerring style, Byung-Chul Han analyses in his book *In the Swarm*, today's society based on the loss of respect and how this affects the relationship with the public. In the opening chapter "Without respect", Han reminds us that "respect" means, literally, 'looking back'. It is a new way of looking" and this "presupposes a distanced gaze, a *pathos of distance*". Today's society, however, has destroyed distances, therefore respect has disappeared. It is "distance" that "distinguishes *respectare* from *spectare*"; that is, distance

enables respect, without which everything becomes spectacle. And with it, the thinker concludes, “respect constitutes the fundamental part for the public. Where respect disappears, the public declines”.<sup>3</sup>

The context in which Han analyses this loss of respect is typical in today’s communication society, where the boundaries between the private and the public have vanished, with social media as the platform for virtual presence. But politics has also lost credibility by the removal of distance, and respect becomes spectacle. This operation has occurred in a dual sense: from an excess of zeal in politics to show itself as distanced, an atrophy of distance; and by an excess of spectacle, that is, from having done away with distances altogether depending on circumstances and interests. The most significant aspect of this dialectic is that both scenarios, being antagonistic, have appeared in numerous cases in a complementary way and in unison.

Based on this concept, the question would be to analyse why certain political decisions were taken in the knowledge that, if taken, they failed to respect certain citizens’ groups, the very territory they should be protecting, its contemporary culture and, in short, issues that are so obvious that they became invisible. In other words, why that “distanced” yet decisive gaze that Han refers to on the subject of respect, ended by being simply distanced. Politics’ fondness for propaganda annihilates respect and turns everything into a spectacle whose purpose is always the here and now. A spectacle is so much more effective the more present it is and within the line of history.

For Han, the loss of distance and respect acquires another series of particularities in the present moment. For him, today’s community lives “in the swarm”. Unlike the concept of mass, a characteristic of the late 19th century and most of the 20th century, the current one (“the digital swarm”)

3. HAN, Byung-Chul: *En el enjambre*. Barcelona, Herder Editorial, 2014, p.13.

is an interconnected community, resulting from a new crisis, in a critical transition, for which another radical transformation seems to be responsible: the digital revolution.” The difference between them is clear: “The digital swarm is inherently no mass because no *soul* and no *spirit* lives within it. The soul gathers and unites. The digital swarm consists of isolated individuals.” On the same idea, Han goes on to say that “the digital swarm, in contrast to the mass, is not coherent in itself. It is not manifested in a *voice*. That is why it is perceived as *noise*.”<sup>4</sup>

These statements are patent in today’s society, in fact they define it, but they are a long way from coinciding in the way *city witness* collectives act when one takes an in-depth look at their practices of action and reflection. In fact they are bound by a common soul, like historic masses, but they are not mass, they are minorities; at the same time they are part of the digital revolution, they participate in the digital swarm, very actively in fact, but they define themselves as an “us”. That is, they question their condition of isolated individuals, because a common motive keeps them united. In summary, they are also resistant to the currents of the times, the liquid trends of the now, largely dependent on power, trying to turn them invisible.

The issue that gives meaning to Byung-Chul Han’s theory in relation to the resistant struggle of the collectives, is that it tackles general questions to analyse today’s society, in a precise way, but tending towards a generality; whereas groups resist being part of generalist plans that leave them on the sidelines, or whose purposes ignore their interests, heritage, way of life or ideology. In fact, as Han defines it, “*homo digitalis* is anyone except *no-one* (...) he is *someone penetrating*, who expounds and requests attention. (...) And that is also his happiness. He cannot be *anonymous* because he is a *nobody*. (...) he frequently presents himself anonymously, but he is not by any means a *nobody*, but rather

4. *Ibid.* pp.26–27.

*someone anonymous.*"<sup>5</sup> The work–action of these collectives is announced and exhibited in a common space, also with a community–based motive of struggle and resistance. Their purposes include vindicating a series of issues that affect them, allowing them to feel respected and treated as equals. The search for respect is an initial state in any demand, and leads to the next issue of being recognised.

## Recognition

In his essay *The Course of Recognition*, Paul Ricoeur centres his working hypothesis on “changing the use of the verb ‘recognise’ from the active to the passive voice”. That is, from “recognising something, objects, people, oneself, another, each other” to “being recognised, asking to be recognised”.<sup>6</sup> He charts this course based on three philosophical moments he considers to be decisive for analysing a concept that, in his opinion, “there must undoubtedly be some reason why no work of good philosophical reputation has not been published under the title of *Recognition*”<sup>7</sup>, a trend that he reverses. Ricoeur’s scepticism is anchored in different moments of the history of philosophy precisely to switch the active voice over to the passive voice. These three moments–concepts can be found in Descartes (recognising is the ability to distinguish between true and false), Kant (recognising is identifying and this, in turn, is inseparable from relating) and Hegel (recognising is being recognised).

To be recognised by others, one must first recognise oneself. This concept is wholly related to respect: earning respect, treating with respect, not losing respect. Byung–Chul Han links them based on identity: “Respect is bound

5. *Ibid.* p.28.

6. RICOEUR, Paul: *Caminos del reconocimiento*. Madrid, Editorial Trotta, 2005, p.29.

7. *Ibid.*, p.15.

to *name*. Anonymity and respect are mutually exclusive. Anonymous communication, which is promoted by digital media, massively destroys respect. (...) The name is the basis of recognition, which always takes place *nominally*. The nominal nature is linked with practices like responsibility, trust and promise.”<sup>8</sup> Some political art practices have used the preliminary spaces between identity and anonymity, without the need for personal recognition, in pursuit of recognition for the project or the action. The web portal e-valencia.org, an art project by Daniel G. Andújar, acted in this way encouraging debates to take place in the public sphere that traditional media were not yet prepared to offer, and even less in those crude terms. The portal was not a journalistic medium but an art project, and under this umbrella it was able to remain critical and allow users to post comments anonymously. The *nominal* disappeared and became a space of freedom, where debates were characterised by the lack of respect and of distance between users. In this context recognition was not sought and therefore was not given. It was the virtual, almost pirate presence, of the project that seriously upset the credibility of the Community of Valencia’s cultural policy for a while.

If the first state (“making oneself known”) enables recognition of oneself, then the last, which would complete an ideal recognition, is to be recognised by everyone. It is important to bear this in mind, because not recognising the other presents a major contradiction in terms, especially if they are defending specific causes and with a sense of the shared –as do the majority of the collectives shown here– and the one not recognising them is the political power responsible for watching over the interests of all citizens. And a huge doubt in respect of the public function of politics at times when, using tools that democracy puts at the service of people, the democratic system itself seems to turn against them.

8. HAN, Byung-Chul: *En el enjambre*. Barcelona, Herder Editorial, 2014, p.15.

## Power

The demands of citizens have travelled a long way from the assumption of power as something immovable and unquestionable, like the sort that suppresses freedoms, to the empowerment of certain strategies and spaces of control emptied or taken directly for other ends. This drift is a significant part of social history over the last few decades. In his class on 7 January 1976, Michel Foucault asked himself: “What is power? Or rather (...) what are, in its mechanisms, its effects, its relations, those different devices of power that are exercised, at varying levels of society, in such varying spheres and degrees.” (...) “Can the analysis of power or powers be deduced, in some way or other, from the economy?”<sup>9</sup>

This rhetorical questions must be read as a statement. There is no power that cannot be deduced from the economy, as political power stopped having full autonomy to decide for itself the priorities of its political government, understood as reflection of the polis and its inhabitants. Likewise, a long time ago it ceased to take a real interest in global issues, which would take care of balance and an economy – etymologically speaking – that would work for the common good and therefore reduce differences. What Foucault aspires to, however, is to find a definition of power and a set of characteristics, unrelated if possible to the economy and linked with the act of the exercise of power; his argument is that power has rules of its own, the purpose of which is to maintain power. On the one hand, “power is neither given, nor exchanged, nor recovered, but rather exercised... it only exists in the action” (...) neither is it “the maintenance and extension of economic relations, but rather, primarily, a relation of strength in itself” (...) “power is essentially that which represses.” And “secondly (...) if power is in itself the putting into play and the deployment of a relation of strength (...) should it not be analysed firstly and foremost,

9. FOUCAULT, Michel: *Hay que defender la sociedad*. Madrid, Akal, 2003, p.22.

in terms of combat, confrontation or war?”<sup>10</sup> Foucault ended up reversing the classic proposal made by Clausewitz in the 19th century, which said that war is the continuation of politics by other means, and replacing it with this new classic: “politics is the continuation of war by other means.”<sup>11</sup>

Once we accept this thesis, it is evident that the demands made by collectives have had to confront political power accepting the maxim that power is exercised for the main purpose of perpetuating oneself. This means that the actions of these collectives have systematically come up against a brick wall that not only rejected their demands but also hid a host of economic interests connected to the holder of power. Faced with the classic type of direct claims made by collectives such as demonstrations, rallies and, in general, actions intended to raise awareness of a specific common struggle, other groups setting out an alternative to the classic idea of institution and the system organise themselves on the margins, empowering themselves with attitudes linked to power but exercised despite it, without taking it into account and with the intention of building a parallel life, as the official one is either of no interest to them or it belittles them excessively. The final part of the exhibition reflects on some of these groups that reacted to the current situation with agility and imagination, collaborating together with university or popular institutions, occupying building sites, generating spaces for producing ideas and projects, setting up a nomadic, lightweight machinery, but one that had a profound impact.

## Inheritance

In its first definitions, inheritance is the “right to inherit”. Inheritance is closely tied to tradition, but tradition is also something more and something less than what is referred to by an inheritance. Theorist Esther Cohen analyses the term in

10. *Ibid.* pp.23–24.

11. *Idem.*



direct relation to Jacques Derrida's work *Circumfession*. In this text, Derrida addresses the physical mark as inheritance, as part of a tradition handed down. Rebellious against it, distancing it, "being unfaithful to it", is part of the resistance that implies the reconstruction of the self.

This struggle against inheritance is defined by Cohen like this: "The only thing left is to resist, in all possible ways, knowing that it is not for us to choose our tradition, that we have been and will continue to be objects of this aggression called inheriting, but that the only way of fully *inhabiting* it is to rebel against it, fighting its influence. Inheritance, for a start, always obliges us to give it an answer, to respond for that which we inherit." And later: "Selecting, filtering, interpreting and transforming, being able to say 'yes': that is the counterpart of that complex process that we call inheriting." (...) "Resisting, for Derrida, is the same possibility of giving shape and structure to inheritance itself, not leaving it intact, unharmed, on the contrary, accepting or rejecting it by relaunching it as something completely other." 12

Once again, a precise particularity, a concrete example, leads us to raising the voice of a collective process; this is how language operates too. Inheritance in this context refers equally to a social, heritage, cultural tradition... as well as to resistance against it continuing in the same way, shape and form... let those who inherit decide, that is, a decision by the citizens who coexist in that reality. Several of the collectives represented here have fought against being treated as subordinates in their own walks of life. Inheritance for them is not so much what is inherited but the way in which they decide to use it, "spend it" or invest it. Direct confrontation with certain political decisions addressed the struggle in those terms. How can we accept that inheritance turns into a pillaging of itself? Where could this kind of attitude be understood, except in the throes of the boundless greed of

12. COHEN, Esther: "Heredar", in *Acta poética* 23, 2002.

external agents or, at least, those unconnected to that context of inheritance?

The inheritance in play here is, once again, a collective act. Sometimes, it was exchanged, in spite of resistance and direct clashes between police, residents and squatters in the farmhouses and housing in La Punta, with promises of future wealth in the shape of the creation of a Logistics Activities Zone for the port of Valencia. History is constantly repeating itself. The link with power, its “deduction” from the economy, has been patently obvious in each and every one of the examples connected with defending the territory. The PAI (land grabs) that suddenly invaded towns, provinces, autonomous communities, the entire country. Almost systematically, “Abusos Urbanísticos No” (no to planning abuse), as a truly unifying body across the Community of Valencia in the land struggle, has managed to halt many urban planning projects, frequently turning to Europe as a last resource. The extension of Avenida Blasco Ibáñez in Valencia through the neighbourhood of El Cabanyal. The stubborn fight of “Per l’Horta” to protect agricultural land around the city of Valencia. The defence of historic urban landscape in the case of “Salvem El Botànic, Recuperem Ciutat” (save the botanical gardens, recover the city). The struggle of Xúquer Viu to keep environmental and economic wealth intact by having a clean, protected river...

If inheriting is resisting and fighting against its influence, this type of struggle for an inheritance passed down to us and ours by right seems to be the only way of re-establishing our presence in the world. In view of this, it seems obvious to accept that the inheritance against which we should fight is that of the bad practices of power, not the environment that both this power and all of us inhabit and which, as our inheritance, we should preserve for others to explore and inhabit.

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This publication was made on the occasion of the *Witnesses of the City* show at the Library - Centre de documentació IVAM from October 6th, 2016 to February 26th, 2017, included in the exhibition *Lost in the City*. Our thanks to all who have made it possible with their cooperation.

EXHIBITION

Curator:  
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Coordination:  
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PUBLICATION

Production:  
Institut Valencià d'Art Modern,  
Valencia 2016

Typography:  
Ferma, by Antonio Bastelleros  
(formo.org)

Design:  
Manuel Granell

Technical coordination and layout:  
Maria Casanova

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Valencia 2016

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Valencia 2016

Printed by: LalmprintaCG

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