

# The Art of Refusal: Notes on the Poetics of *No*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay proposes an approximation to the different ways in which the visual arts have dealt with versions of the word NO since Marcel Duchamp created his NON in 1959. This form of explicit negation has been explored in different formats and with myriad meanings by artists such as Boris Lurie, Santiago Sierra, Bahia Shehab and Maurizio Cattelan. I examine how their works emphasize political dimensions of refusal, questioning realities and notions that are prevalent in art as well as in other spheres. Their contributions also create new links that develop in several directions—associating people, ideas, art and history.

**Keywords:** refusal, negation, engagement, political art, Marcel Duchamp, Boris Lurie, Santiago Sierra, Bahia Shehab, Maurizio Cattelan.

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It is not easy to say *No*, we are told. It is something that many adults need to re-learn even though *No* is one of the very first words we acquire when learning to speak. Many children and most teenagers seem to have no problem saying it, at least to their parents. Later in life, uttering it becomes a challenge for some people. As with so many challenges nowadays, this one has been commodified, turned into something that can be mastered with a well-oriented technique — which, of course, can only be properly grasped if you buy the right book. A few bear the title of *The Art of Saying No*; readers approach them for purposes of “individual empowerment”.

While being able to say *No* is the subject of many self-help books, *The Art of No* has received less attention. *No* is a short yet powerful word which is literally at the centre of a number of major artworks, from poems and songs to paintings and sculptures. Though there are distinct implications of its use in different mediums, sometimes verging on a divorce from language — becoming but line, shadow, pattern, etc. — its diversified appearances retain a common emphasis on a compelling need to refuse a given reality.

Since the late 1950s, several artists have attempted to make *No* unfamiliar, special to us again, with effects

that are not confined to the linguistic realm. As Michael R. Leaman suggests, “When language appears in painting or art, we can be sure that the reason for this is beyond the merely aesthetic [. . .] that words here have a special meaning — one beyond normal language and communication” (Leaman, 2010: 10). The explicit inclusion of words in visual art has been most evident in two periods: before the invention of the printing press, and in Postmodernism (Hunt, 2010: 17). In the specific case of art based on *No*, the aesthetics call attention to the social intricacies of refusal. Rather than the reassertion of individualism that fuels the self-help industry, such artistic manifestations tend to stress the political dimensions of negation. However, when considering the art of *No* it is worth recalling the difficulty of denial; that negation is a challenge that can bind many people together, empowering them as a collective based on refusal. These works conceived as negations, exalting *No* (and words with similar meanings) foster a strong *positive* sense of community. They challenge taken-for-granted realities and conceptions in art and in other realms of our lives. At the same time, these works create new ties that grow in different directions, linking people, ideas, art, and history.

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### WE ARE NOT OF THAT WORLD

In 1963, the popular Spanish singer and composer Raimon (born in 1940 as Ramón Pelegrero Sanchis) wrote a song under the title *Diguem no* [Let us say no]. It soon became something of an anthem for those who opposed the Franco dictatorship in Spain. This was also so for those who did not speak Catalan (the language of the lyrics) because even if they could not understand the rest of the message, every listener could grasp what the recurring *no* meant.

A couple of things stand out in Raimon’s simple yet powerful tune. One is that it stresses refusal not only as a form of antagonism and rejection but also — and perhaps more importantly — as an element of communion. Raimon starts the song, seizing on the closeness of his listeners, with the words: “*Ara que som*

*junts*” [“Now that we are together”]. He goes on to raise his voice against arbitrary power, violence, poverty, and the imprisonment of people for political reasons. To avoid the regime’s censorship, Raimon avoided specifying the identities of victims or perpetrators, an ambiguity that reinforces his song’s relevance to for many contexts of oppression.

To all of that, Raimon says “no”; and in public performance, he has the audience join in his chant repeating *No*. As in prayer, or in a choir, saying something in unison with other people dilutes individuality, creating a special relationship that shapes a group. A shared refusal, a unified *No*, intensifies that togetherness. At the same time, it is a declaration of collective antagonism: when we say *No* to something together, the otherness thereby created accentuates our own sense of commonality. This, of course, can all go horribly wrong when that “other” generated by the refusal is another group or individual constructed as an enemy or a threat. Yet this is clearly not the case with Raimon’s song, which fosters fraternal feelings.

Even in appearance, at a very superficial linguistic level — that of spelling — *No* may look like the root of the first-person plural pronoun *we* in Romance languages. In Latin we see *nos, nobis* and in the Romance languages it spawned we see *nosaltres* in Catalan, *nosotros* in Spanish, *noi* in Italian, and *nós* in Galician and Portuguese. There is something of the *No* in these pronouns that refers to a group in which the speaker is included. However, there is no etymological link because the word *No* is not related to the Latin origin of the current Romance forms for *us* and *we*. This false etymology linking the adverb of negation and the pronoun may go far poetically but not linguistically. Yet most art is closer to poetry than to linguistics.

Raimon ends his song stating that “*Nosaltres no som d’eixe món*” [“We are not of that world”]. That is, the singer and his implicit audience distance themselves from the world the live in. Which world is it that he refuses both for himself and for those singing along with him as they chant *No*? “That world” is one that traps them and which must be rejected because it

is corrupt and unjust. Its unfairness was evident to the generation coming of age in the early 1960s with a renewed sense of social justice and, in Spain's case, a growing political awareness that made them question the moral and historical underpinnings of Franco's dictatorship. The political context in Raimon's native country has changed a great deal since then but the song's message is still relevant today at a world level. It is a message that does not merely assert a negation of reality but also raises the question of the alternatives.

Confronting the world with a *No* implies recognising its present nature, thus creating a chance to transform it. Slavoj Žižek claims that "Philosophy begins the moment we do not simply accept what exists as given . . . but [when we] raise the question of how is what we encounter as actual also possible. What characterises philosophy is this 'step back' from actuality into possibility" (Žižek, 1993:2). In other words: the most original and powerful thought comes into being when we make an effort to see what there is — the structures in which we exist, the world we are in — not as something natural, necessary, or inescapable but as the result of historical choices which could have been different, and that can still be changed. This "step back" is not confined to philosophy. I would add that certain works of art are fecund "theoretical objects" (as Mieke Bal calls them, following Hubert Damisch) that may prove very productive because they let us deepen the conception of the actual as one possibility among many. When we fully engage with these artworks, considering their richness of their production, circulation, and reception, "a compelling collective thought process emerges" (Bal, 2010: 7).

Art, in this case what I call *the art of refusal*, of which the different works centred on the *No* are a prime example, can generate a new look at the world, opening a void in reality to make room for new possibilities to exist or at least be imagined. Very recently, philosopher Santiago Zabala warned that, in his view, "An aesthetic force is needed to shake us out of our tendency to ignore the 'social paradoxes' generated by the political, financial, and technological frames

that contain us" (Zabala, 2017: 5). Art (including literature) and philosophy are forces with the potential to create dissent from established forms of thinking and acting. They put critical distance between us and the commonplaces that keep things the way they are, the frames that constrict our lives and prevent the kind of change that favours the many and not the few. "No, we are not of that world", sang Raimon. The emergence of new worlds requires many strong *Noes* to the old one — *Noes* that unite people and send them in new directions. A few contemporary artists have been exploring the aesthetic and political force of this most direct negation. Their approaches have a history that is over half a century old.

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#### FROM MAURICE BLANCHOT'S LE REFUS TO MARCEL DUCHAMP'S *NON*

Barely four years before Raimon started to sing his *No*, the French writer and public intellectual Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003) published a text titled "*Le refus*" ("Refusal"). This brief essay, which appeared in October 1958, in the second issue of the short-lived magazine *Le 14 Juillet* — a name with obvious revolutionary resonances — is as much a manifesto as a poetics of refusal.

At that moment, France was in a state of great political turmoil, mainly because of the tensions arising from its colonial hold over Algeria. Blanchot's reason for writing "*Le refus*" was to express his opposition to the return to power of General Charles de Gaulle, who a few months before had headed the government. In Blanchot's words, "*porté, cettefois, non par la Résistance, mais par les mercenaires*" ["brought, this time, not by The Resistance but by the mercenaries"], who were fighting against those seeking Algeria's independence (Blanchot, 1971: 131, no. 1). Yet, Blanchot does not mention General de Gaulle by name in the original version of his text, which transcends its initial function as political commentary. Nowadays, as well as back then, it can also be read as a broader embrace of what the author calls "*la force du refus*" (Blanchot, 1971:130) ["the power of refusal"].

For Blanchot, refusal is a kind of power that unites people and, perhaps counter-intuitively this produces a new affirmation. *“Les hommes qui refusent et qui sont liés par la force du refus, savent qu’ils ne sont pas encore ensemble. Le temps de l’affirmation commune leur a précisément été enlevé. Ce qui leur reste, c’est l’irréductible refus, l’amitié de ce Non certain, inébranlable, rigoureux, qui les tient unis et solidaires”* (Blanchot, 1971:130) [“Those who refuse and who are bound by the force of refusal know that they are not yet together. The time of common affirmation is precisely what has been taken away from them. What they are left with is the irreducible refusal, the friendship of this sure, unshakable, rigorous *No* that unites them and shapes their solidarity”]. Blanchot goes on to claim that refusal is a moral obligation, one whose direction is clearer in some cases than in others. He implies that on some occasions it is obvious that one must reject the *status quo*. It was crystal-clear that the German occupation should be rejected by any decent citizen but the need to refuse what was represented by the allegedly alternative order of Marshall Pétain in Vichy France (names which the author refuses to mention) was perhaps not so clearly seen at the time. Similarly, rejecting De Gaulle in 1958 was an uncertain option, as the General offered a pragmatic way out of a difficult political situation. Thus, Blanchot writes, *“Ce que nous refusons n’est pas sans valeur ni sans importance. C’est bien à cause de cela que le refus est nécessaire. Il y a une raison que nous n’accepterons plus, il y a une apparence de sagesse qui nous fait horreur... refuser n’est jamais facile”* (Blanchot, 1971:130-1) [What we refuse is not without value or importance. This is precisely why refusal is necessary. There is a kind of reasoning that we will no longer accept, there is an appearance of wisdom that horrifies us . . . refusal is never easy].

Today, six decades later, we face many other realities that are plainly unacceptable — for instance, gender violence. Yet somehow others broadly accept ‘lesser’ or ‘inevitable’ evils. Inequality furnishes one such case. Tax reform that may put more money in citizens’ pockets at the expense of future social welfare is another. So too is the present defective functioning

and direction of institutions such as The European Union, which needs to change and improve in so many ways, and do a much better job of meeting people’s needs and aspirations. Therefore, refusal often involves rejecting seemingly “acceptable” options that on closer examination are not. Alas, this is not the most comfortable or the easiest thing to do. Therefore, according to Blanchot, *“Nous devons apprendre à refuser et à maintenir intact, par la rigueur de la pensée et la modestie de l’expression, le pouvoir de refus que désormais chacune de nos affirmations devrait vérifier”* (Blanchot, 1971: 131) [“We must learn how to refuse and to maintain intact this power of refusal, by rigorous thinking and modesty of expression that each one of our affirmations must evidence from now on”]. I shall come back to the issue of refusal’s “modesty of expression”, a sort of sobriety that *No* – a short, direct word – naturally lends itself to.

Blanchot’s proposal begs questions about the nature of refusal. For him, refusal is power — yet it is not clear what kind of power it is and what it should be used for. It is not passive power, for it can unite people through activism. Yet activism often requires hard work but little is said about its nature. It sets the foundations of affirmation, which could be seen as the root of a new yet elusive hope. Perhaps the very vagueness of Blanchot’s “power of refusal” explains its remarkable artistic scope over the last few decades. The word *No* (probably the most direct expression of refusal in The West) has been used to spark expectation of social change not only in literature (and I would include song lyrics such as Raimon’s in this category) but also in the visual arts.

However, it is important to re-examine the apparent straightforwardness of *No*. At first sight, a *No* is completely univocal in its meaning: it is the shortest, most direct way to reject something — even if it encompasses the whole world, which a *No* elevated by art can attempt to do. Yet what we expect from art these days is not clear, definite responses. If we take artworks as hard-and-fast solutions, we may have failed to grasp art’s elusive yet greatest power — its ability to spawn uncertainties and questions, to unsettle our world.

According to Verena Krieger, ambiguity is an essential — even “normative” — aspect in the aesthetics of most art today but its political potential is just as important. Semantic openness, embraced or heightened by the lack of interpretative guidelines from the artists, shuns propaganda. In fact, contrary to first impressions, the simple *No* proves to be highly ambiguous. Its apparent simplicity is misleading. Most of the works of art centred on *No* cannot be taken as implying a straightforward refusal.

As we have known from at least the 1960s, traditionally our systems of thought have been constructed on dualities: man/woman, white/coloured, centre/periphery, and so on. The first of each pair is understood to be superior to the second. These binaries, of course, reduce the infinite complexity of the world to a very poor, simplistic framework. It may seem that the *Noes* endorse one of the most primal of those dichotomies (yes/no), and, with a bold move, overthrow the hierarchy to claim *No* is the greater of the two. Yet rich artistic proposals tend to avoid such simplistic reversals. How these *Noes* are stated, in ways that are basically ambiguous, avoids falling into yet another one of those binary couplings: *yes/no*, or, in this case *no/yes*, as the first item is bestowed with greater powers. Many ambiguous *Noes* worked on by artists in the last half century foster new types of associations. Each of them puts forth a refusal of a set of conditions that limits freedom but also, and perhaps more importantly, these *Noes* offer an opening to something else. In many cases, that something else is an invitation to reaffirm community bonds.

I shall come back to this issue later. First, it is worth taking a brief look at the history of the isolated, extant *No*, beginning with Marcel Duchamp whose contribution underpins many of today’s art practices. As is well known, he strongly opposed the established tradition of Fine Arts, and pioneered a whole new way of understanding Art. This became apparent when he exhibited — or rather, tried to exhibit — his ready-made *Fountain*. This piece, initially created in a factory as a men’s urinal, was famously rejected by the Society of Independent Artists, when Duchamp

submitted it for its inaugural show in New York in 1917 under the pseudonym “R. Mutt”. The work, with its implicit rejection of tradition, and rejection by the artist’s colleagues, opened a new period in the history of art — one in which we still live. And although it ushered in a change in paradigm, to some extent, *Fountain* can be seen as an exemplary iteration of that “modesty of expression” that Blanchot demanded.

In August 1959, only a few months after Blanchot had published *Le refus*, Duchamp again took something from ordinary life and presented it as a work of art. This time it was the word *No* — which we use almost unconsciously. Duchamp’s work *Non* was used to illustrate the cover of a book of poems by Pierre-André Benoit titled *Première Lumière* [First Light]. This etching presents three letters that are both fragile and powerful. The word is tenuous, with the thin, hand-inscribed lines forming the separated letters. Yet it is also very commanding: the upper-case letters stretch across the central rectangle from top to bottom, arranged together to offer their authoritative, primal message of negation. For Arturo Schwarz, “The one-syllable word ‘NON’ epitomises Duchamp’s philosophy of life, which is a clear refusal of all academic strictures, all calls for moral or aesthetic conformity” (Schwarz, 1997:820). Yet his message is more than just a personal statement. There is something distinctly Biblical in the title of the piece: “In the Beginning was the Word”, and this time the word is *No*. While the art of refusal lends itself to political readings of today’s world, one can also suggest links to other themes with a communal dimension. From this standpoint, the *No* would signal a primal negation as the basis for the social. Roberto Esposito has pointed out in his suggestive writings on the origin of community, developed from the word’s etymology (rooted in the Latin term *munus*, meaning “gift”, but also “debt” or “obligation”), that “the public thing [*res publica*] is inseparable from no-thing [*niente*]. It is precisely the no-thing of the thing that is our common ground [*fondo*]” (Esposito, 2010:8). In this work by Duchamp, Creation is re-founded in a constructive fashion but in this case through negation — albeit a fruitful one, as the art he has spawned shows. The primacy of this

thinly-inscribed word, this tenuous ray of black light, illuminates the path for bolder *Noes* that have sprung up here and there ever since Duchamp etched *NON*.

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### BORIS LURIE'S *NO!ART* AND SANTIAGO SIERRA'S *NO GLOBAL TOUR*

In 1959, when he created the illustration for the cover of *Première Lumière*, Duchamp had lived in New York on and off for over four decades. In that same year, in the same city, a group of artists followed the ray cast by that first light and were united in refusal. *NO!art* was a marginal movement active in the early 1960s New York art scene, just as the city was “stealing the idea of modern art”, as Serge Guilbaut famously put it. The group has been called “a politically-committed version of Pop Art” (Kraus, 2017: 7). Its main proponent was the refugee Boris Lurie, who was born in 1924 in Leningrad and was raised in Riga, Latvia, in a Jewish family. The female members of his family were killed in the woods of Rumbula, along with 25,000 other Jews, mostly women and children, in two days in Autumn 1941. Against all the odds, Lurie and his father both survived several concentration camps. It was there where Lurie got the basics of his art education (Kraus, 2017: 7). In the late 1940s, Lurie moved to New York, where he started exploring the impact of The Holocaust through his art. This was hardly a popular choice in a society that wanted to forget about the war and move on. In the late 1950s, after a spell in Paris, Lurie worked in NYC again with his friends and colleagues Sam Goodman and Stanley Fisher. With the support of gallery owner Gertrude Stein, they created *NO!art*, which denounced the dangers of a society in which they saw the rise of new, lower profile forms of Fascism. As with other aesthetic manifestations of refusal, *NO!art* encompasses both a rejection of social forms of oppression (consumerism, racism, sexism, populism, the cult of personality, anti-intellectualism, etc.) and the art practices that either condone or ignore them.

Lurie expressed his refusal by embracing *No* and, for several years, used it over and over again, in many

formats, usually in works based on paint and collage. Lurie's *Noes* connect the easily accepted with the most extreme example of modernity gone awry — Fascism. His works of negation remind us of the need to reject realities that are tolerable and even desirable for many of us. For Lurie, they harbour or conceal realities that he and his friends in the *No* movement saw as verging on a new incarnation of Fascism. Lurie's *Noes* are a refusal of forms of life that both spawn and conceal what some thinkers have called “slow violence” and others call “mature Fascism” or, as in Antonio Méndez Rubio's (2015) memorable Spanish acronym, FBI or *Fascismo de Baja Intensidad* or [low-intensity Fascism].

The *No* becomes Lurie's main motif and theme in a series of works on canvas and other less noble materials such as cardboard. All this strikes the viewer with the force of raw refusal. Lurie's *oeuvre* is energised by his personal history and his deliberate rejection of a society that seems to flourish on the same principles that led to the catastrophe of World War II and The Holocaust. Among Lurie's early 1960s works are leather suitcases covered with paper and fabric collages, yellow stars of David, multi-colored oil paint, and stencil inscriptions, among which some *Noes* are particularly conspicuous. They are pieces ready for travel, a moving memento of the journeys that he and so many others had to endure. The line between war refugees and other immigrants is blurred, as in his work *NO, Love You (Immigrant's NO!suitcase #1)*, from 1963, which gathers the negation, the yellow star used to identify Jews under Nazi rule, a newspaper clipping showing massacred bodies, and a swastika. As in most of Lurie's work, there is a call to distance ourselves from a world that we do not want as our own, as Raimon would sing that very same year. Yet this is a distance that allows for perspective, providing the clarity of vision that will lead to a succinct, radical response (*No*). It is as much a way of dealing with a traumatic past as a signpost placed there to guide us to the future. It is thus a tool for survival.

Lurie's suitcases were moving (in both senses of the word). Santiago Sierra's *NO GLOBAL TOUR* takes refusal from Lurie's personal dimension (which was a bor-

derline secret, as he barely showed his art from 1970 onwards) to a very public dimension. Sierra displayed a large portable sculpture of the word *NO* at different sites, each with its own political connotations. Sierra (b. Madrid, 1966) is best known for his incisive work on the ways economics affects human relationships at all levels. In keeping with this concern, his art addresses issues such as media bias, civic conformism, and the absurdity and exploitative nature of many forms of labour. Not surprisingly, his art has already been linked to that of Lurie (Kugelmann, 2016: 115).

A spirit of collective rejection infuses Sierra's *NO, GLOBAL TOUR*, a project he started in 2009. Sierra first had a large sculpture of the word *NO* built in wood in Arial typeface. It weighed half a ton, and measured about 2 meters high by 4 meters wide. One could say that these dimensions create a tension between the "modesty of expression" which Blanchot demanded for refusal and the *hubris* of size. Two other *Noes* of the same size were later built, one of them in Canada, the other in Carrara marble, which is quite a bit heavier. In its different materialisations, the piece was shown in various locations around the world, mostly in Europe and America. It was placed in a variety of contexts, including residential neighborhoods rich and poor, industrial areas, commercial hotspots, and places of political significance. For instance, it was taken to Brussels, where it was placed near NATO headquarters and the European Union's buildings. In New York City, the sculpture was taken to sites such as Wall Street, the UN headquarters, and The Rockefeller Center. Other locations were less memorable. Inevitably, each context suggested a different meaning for '*NO*'. Some of the locations themselves competed with the work for spectators' attention along with all the other stimuli found in urban settings. As of October 2017, Sierra's *NO* was travelling around Ireland.

The movements of the piece were documented in a sort of 'road movie', one that goes against most of the conventions of the genre. Sierra's film is in black and white, with no music or dialogue. Not a single word is heard during the two-hour long film. The lead character, of course, is the '*NO*' sculpture. What viewers see

on the screen during the film is the team working to make the sculpture, the frictions and the flows in its transportation, the sharp contrast in locations (from industrial landscapes to wealthy urban districts) and the reactions of the people who come across it, ranging from indifference to (more often than not) curiosity and taking a snap of it with a cell phone.

Aside from this work, Sierra has presented other pieces that had the word *NO* at its core: for instance, *NO projected above the Pope*, an action piece in collaboration with the German artist Julius von Bismarck, which took place during the mass that the pontiff celebrated at the World Youth Day in Madrid (2011); or a big tarpaulin featuring the two letters in white over a black background conspicuously hung in a commercial area in Linköping, Sweden, in 2012.

Sierra does not spell out what his *Noes* reject. The title of the longest-standing work (*No, Global Tour*) points to a refusal that is global, in the geographical sense, as it travels around the globe, but also in the sense of totality: his is an absolute, global *NO*, seemingly a negation of everything. It even negates itself as a sculpture. That is because to begin with, sculptures are not supposed to move. Sierra's despair and anger over the state of things seems to be such that he advocates starting with a clean slate. There is, without a doubt, a nihilistic drive in this work. Yet there is also a clear wish to communicate at the most basic level in a way that is easily understood. The *NO* is a message whose clear meaning is a very primal refusal but it is also one that is open for the spectator to complete. That is to say, it requires some work to engage with it beyond taking a selfie. "What are you saying *NO* to?" the viewer may ask. With its blunt semantic openness, the work's response suggests a question in the same direction: what do *you* refuse?

Beyond his work on *No*, Sierra has remained very active in his creative engagement with refusal. His *Black Cone. Monument to Civil Disobedience* (2012) commemorates the protests of the Icelanders against the measures that their government planned to take following the 2008 crash of the country's financial system. Sierra's

piece is a six-foot-high monolith placed in front of the Icelandic parliament. The rock is apparently cracked open by a metallic black cone. The fracture of the monolith was the result of a performance that Sierra carried out using several wedges. The cone, which is reminiscent of the *capiroto* or pointed hat that the Inquisition used to stigmatise its victims (and which was depicted by Goya in several works), was placed later. One could say that it stands for ill-treated victims' ability to make cracks in a system that is not as solid as it seems.

As Sierra is one of just a handful of contemporary Spanish artists of global stature, institutions in Spain have hailed him as a paragon of the nation's creativity. Yet, Sierra declines to serve any government or to advance the interests of any nation. In 2010, the Spanish Government (then led by the Centre-Left Socialist Party) tried to award him the National Prize for Visual Arts. In a move unprecedented in the history of the award, he refused the accolade — and the thirty thousand Euros that went with it. Sierra's letter of refusal to the Ministry of Culture declared that the prize puts the awardee's prestige to work for the benefit of the administration. The missive's last paragraph read: "El estado no somos todos. El estado son ustedes y sus amigos. Por lo tanto, no me cuenten entre ellos, pues yo soy un artista serio" [We are not all the State. The State is you and your friends. Therefore, do not count me among them for I am a serious artist] and it went on to conclude: "No señores, No, Global Tour" (No, Ladies and Gentlemen, No, Global Tour). Sierra then 'elevated' his letter of refusal to the status of showpiece, putting a framed copy of it for sale at the 2011 Turin Art Fair for the same amount as the prize.

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#### BAHIA SHEHAB'S *A THOUSAND TIMES NO* AND MAURIZIO CATTELAN'S *L.O.V.E.*

An artist is therefore sometimes intentionally explicit about his or her refusal. That is the case with Bahia Shehab and her work *A Thousand Times No*. In 2009, this Egyptian-Lebanese artist (born in 1977) was invited to contribute a piece for an exhibition in Germany

commemorating the one-hundredth anniversary of the first show of Islamic art in Europe. Shehab gathered a thousand different visual representations of the Lam-Alif, which represents the word "no" in Arabic. They were written, printed, stitched, molded, engraved and cast over the last fourteen centuries on a variety of sources, from vases and tombstones to books and walls from many different places around the globe.

Shehab's work started as a negation of a world that in her own view rejects her as a Muslim woman. In a text accompanying the project, and which was later published in an impressive book, she stated:

"When you want to deny all of the stereotypes that are imposed on you and that try to define your role in the world. When you want to reject almost every aspect of your reality. [...] When you want to negate all the accusations that go hand in hand with your identity. When you want to refuse to be an imitator or follower of The West, yet you also refuse the regressive interpretation of your heritage. 'A thousand Noes' are not enough." (Shehab, 2010: 6)

Her stance of rejection and at the same time of self-affirmation is made very clear through these words. I would add that her work reminds us of an eclipsed history. The *Noes* Shehab collected are in a way an archeology of a linguistic, cultural and religious community that stretched from Spain to India and China, and whose memory has been ignored in many of those places where it is now in the minority. This legacy has been negated too often, refused by the dominant narratives. Yet it points, among other things, to the existence of a Muslim tradition in Europe, which too many in the continent blithely discard as if it were something completely alien to their history when there is much that Europeans owe to the lengthy exchanges between Christianity and Islam.

Shehab created a large Plexiglas curtain with one square bead for each Arabic-language *No* that she gathered. She also compiled them in a book, placing the *Noes* chronologically, stating the places where she found them, their media, and their original patrons.

Shehab's beautiful object is the materialisation of a research project on typographical history; a door that can be opened to reveal a rich past. However, as often happens, the present came knocking. Shortly after she showed her piece in Germany, the turmoil of The Arab Spring reached Egypt, bringing a tsunami of hope for social and political change in its wake. The government reacted violently and the artist decided to use a number of the *Noes* she had collected to protest against this turn of events. She spray-painted some of them in public spaces throughout Cairo, with different messages of refusal that condemned despotic political developments. The stencilled graffiti included: "No to military rule"; "No to a new pharaoh"; "No to violence"; "No to burning books"; "No to the stripping of veiled women", among others. Each one of Shehab's messages was a response to specific abuses by the authorities. The ancient inscriptions that she had gathered for the exhibition in Germany were revived when and where they were most needed and contributed to the collective refusal of impunity.

Shehab's *Noes* are a gift to the community to which she belongs. In 2016 she was awarded the UNESCO-Sharjah Prize for Arab Culture in recognition of her work calling "for all sectors of society to come together and unite around a simple request to bring justice to all", in the words of the official jury report. At the end of the foreword, the artist writes "Accept this book as ammunition for refusal in the face of all powers that try to impose on you that which you cannot accept" (Shehab, 2010: 7). The volume's own imposing format, with its compact quarto size and over a thousand pages in hard cover, are reminiscent of a brick or some other object ready to be thrown in protest.

The *No* is the central piece of *the political*, lies at its heart, and is its clearest, most succinct expression. Of *the political*, not of *politics*, at least in the terms in which Chantal Mouffe distinguishes them: for her, *the political* is "the dimension of antagonism ... constitutive of human societies". She distinguishes this from politics which, she argues, comprises the ways "through which an order is created, organising

human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political" (Mouffe, 2005:9). Conflict is, therefore, inherent in social life. Politics cannot eliminate it; however, politics often *suppresses* conflict, sweeping it under the carpet, so to speak, yet it constantly re-emerges, sometimes in the form of art. The art of refusal is that special portion of political art that puts the "dimension of antagonism" in the limelight, revealing the unavoidable conflictivity of our social existence. That said, not all political art is the art of refusal: Socialist Realism, for instance, is clearly political art but seldom aligns with the art of refusal.

A certain degree of dissent is therefore something that is cause for celebration insofar as it contributes to the vitality of democratic communities. The embodiment of that stance has begun to find its way to symbolically relevant spaces, as was the case with Sierra's *Monument to civil disobedience*. Other works of monumental refusal have appeared recently under more ambiguous terms. At the very centre of *Piazza Affari*, the square in Milan where the stock exchange has its headquarters, there is a large statue made of Carrara marble, the same material that Michelangelo and Bernini favoured. However, no one would mistake this public sculpture for a work by these masters, as it represents a hand with only its middle finger up, thus producing a gesture usually considered offensive and even obscene. Upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that the other fingers are not flexed. They appear to be cut, or time-eaten. If it were not for the severed fingers, the statue could be seen as showing the infamous Fascist salute. That would be particularly apposite given that the Milan stock exchange is housed in *Palazzo Mezzanotte*, a 1932 building that is a hallmark of Italian Fascist architecture (Mezzanotte is the last name of the architect who designed the building, but it also means *midnight*, a word whose ominous connotations fit a Fascist palace like a glove).

The sculpture bears the title of *L.O.V.E.*, which stands for *Libertà, Odio, Vendetta, Eternità* [Freedom, Hate, Vengeance, Eternity]. It was created in 2010 by the Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan (b. Padua, 1960). Because of its location in the *Piazza Affari*, in front of the

stock exchange, many assume that the eleven-meter tall sculpture refers to the economic crisis affecting Europe – the South in particular – from 2008 onwards. Yet one can make at least two other readings of Cattelan’s work. It can be seen as symbolising the reaction of the “common people” against the finance sector, its abuses, and how it was showered with public funds during the Euro crisis. Yet the sculpture faces away from the stock exchange, not towards it. Thus it could also represent the dealers who work there, the interests they represent, and what they may mean to say to the citizens crossing the square: *Fuck you*.

Initially, the statue was supposed to stay in *Piazza Affari* for just a couple of weeks. Cattelan decided to donate it to the city providing that it graced the square for the next forty years — another instance of an artistic *munus* of refusal with the potential for fostering a sense of community. Nancy Spector has pointed out that the work is the culmination of Cattelan’s “concept of a civic monument that refuses to commemorate or coalesce around culturally sanctioned ideologies” (Spector, 2011:59). After much controversy, the local government decided to keep it there. Cattelan’s monumental piece can hardly be ignored. The sculpture celebrates a gesture of stark yet

ambiguous refusal. It invites walking round it in either appreciation or rejection. Its imposing presence is a reminder of the continuing relevance of immediacy; of the substantial difference between ‘the real thing’ and an image on a screen; of the physicality required to reclaim public space from the relentlessly insatiable markets; of our relationship with the places we inhabit. Given its semantic openness, each passerby is challenged to make sense of the monument. It is a frozen movement but one that gets people to gather round, question things, and act.

In October 2012, to celebrate the donation, *Piazza Affari* was turned into a ballroom with a band (Orchestra Manolo) playing for hours, with impromptu dancers. The entire city of Milan was invited with free admission. There was plenty of street food, and people danced until midnight around Cattelan’s marble *L.O.V.E.* Dancing to the music of refusal, social links are performed and perhaps re-imagined. At midnight, once the music had ended in front of the *Palazzo Mezzanotte*, the dancers could carry on chatting. A work of art brought them together in harmonic refusal. It was then up to them to continue the conversation and to keep moving on the basis of an incipient affirmation.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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