

# ART:I:CURATE

## JOURNAL

### SYLVIE MACÍAS DÍAZ: 'THE CRATE IS LIKE A LEGO'

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Sylvie Macías Díaz, 2015 ©IBMD

Sylvie Macías Díaz is a visual artist who lives and works in Belgium. Her current work involves photography, drawing, painting and installation.

In her approach established by all recycling constructed, Sylvie Macías Díaz built organic architectures, ecological house, écosophiques built with the crates of market and the poetry of the material of which lives in the tracks that they accumulated and the memories which they convey. In contrario at the idea of Zen architecture, she assigns to her constructions plans or objects which by their functions of the most conformist bourgeois the system mainly evoke the excessive consumption capitalist and any biological and environmental idea. A reflection on the ecology but also on our current financial crisis: the relocation, the precariously, the housing crisis and the new poor. D'Other hand, she loves unveil, denounce what our consumer society offer us as being societal stereotypes compliant and domestic happiness. She disassembled and watch in a cynical way what what hides the mechanisms of the social order which works functioning as a huge symbolic machine tending to ratify the male domination on which it is based.



Femme d'intérieur (interior women) #1, 2010

art:i:curate artist Sylvie Macías Díaz talks to Myrto Katsimicha about the idea of playfulness and the concept of 'house' and body in her work.

**MK:** Your work spans across a range of different media – photography, drawing, painting and installation – all of which seem to be linked through your interest in the concept of the domestic. How do you relate to 'home'?

**SMD:** Overall, my work questions the cultural, economic, social and political context.

All these concerns are embedded in clearly perceivable areas but also in less visible and subtler areas such as the mechanisms used to establish order in society. In general, everything is always connected to the house because the first house is our physical body. Our physical body needs to be protected, which is why there is what we refer to as the habitat. Architecture is also a body, our body, an extension of ourselves. It is complementary and essential to our survival. It is ours and we need to accommodate it somewhere so there is what we have come to call: the living spaces, the spaces of everyday life in which the concept of the interior has always played an important role in the context of bourgeois aesthetics. The concept of 'good taste', in which women still play a decorative role. I like to expose and denounce that which our consumer society offers us in terms of societal stereotypes, of conformity and domestic happiness.

To this end, I can use different techniques but I never slavishly adhere to any scholarly recipe, it is always very simple. I like having the freedom of saying things in an

immediate manner.

The techniques are tools and I like to apply them in an entirely wild and raw manner so as to express a particular view, a reflection, an emotion in a direct and radical manner.

**MK:** Like a 'bricoleur' you often use found materials and adapt them to create new constructions. How do you collect these materials? Is the previous use of these materials of any importance for you?

**SMD:** I start with the sculpture by picking up objects that people throw away; what is left by the side of the street interests me. I start by making abstract structures and then, after a process of experimentation and research, I insert the crate. This is how the crate finds its place in my work. For the most part, I pick them up at the fruit and vegetable merchant. The crate interests me because it has a containing function; in this way, it is a shelter in itself, an architecture. And it also brings us our food. Interesting! I think, in this respect, of the work of Le Corbusier and his 'Modulor' module, which is his housing unit. So just as for him, for me, the crate becomes my module and a housing unit. I like to pick up items such as abandoned crates, which in their abandoned state carry in them the memory of accumulated traces of life, and when they are no longer of use these boxes are then burned. Besides, I still wonder about this, have we not, for the longest time, been talking about recycling? Do these crates not represent the tree or the forest?

For me, to collect and build with crates or any other object is a way of cleaning the world. The crate is an organic element, living. It is made of wood, it is nature, it is the tree. The crate is like a cell, a living organism, which is why it interests me. It changes colour and, just like man, it ages.

At present, my research, my constructions, my questioning and my approach are very much related to the current economic crisis. And this is precisely where for me today the crate acquires its full meaning: a crate-module which, apart from its primary function, also brings us our food; to me it is very relevant because it responds perfectly to the current political context with precarious employment and the new working poor! I hope to raise questions, because we need a new way of living, both with ourselves and with others, in other words, a new way of thinking, to think of the other, to look at the future.

I don't have the talent of the handyman because the handyman knows many tricks of the trade and I personally don't know any. I don't glue anything, so it's very simple.



N.MoCA.L #1 - The New Museum of Contemporary Art of Liege, 2007 ©W.Dory

**MK:** Your assemblages are constructed upon different layers of lived memory from accumulated material. How do you perceive the role of memory in contemporary art?

**SMD:** Contemporary art is the art of today and it is vital, it is the sign of the times. It is like a thermometer; it shows us what the weather is like. If there are artists, exhibition spaces and museums then that means that the weather's still fine. The work of art is like a part of time, it reflects its time. It is made up of sensory, physical, perceptible and imperceptible elements. It is a discourse between the artist and that which constitutes him in his time. And then there is the contact between the work and the viewer that involves other elements of vision, of perceptions and stories and they escape us completely. Contact with the work of art is only possible thanks to the existence of certain places such as exhibition spaces or the museum. This can give the work permanence inasmuch as this is possible. A museum is a place in which are collected, preserved and displayed objects and stories in the interest of education, culture and transmission; it has to be at the service of society and its development, it has to be open to the public and acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of study, education, and especially to make possible and foster the transmission of a permanent questioning and awareness. The museum is a form of resistance because it allows the mind to take its place and express itself; unfortunately, this is becoming increasingly difficult and is tied to the respect, in the first place for oneself, and then for others. The sharing of ideas, that is what living together is and in a democracy it is essential! That is why I created the work 'N.MoCA.L', The new Museum of Contemporary Art of Liège. In Belgium but mainly in the south, there is an absolute lack of museums and of funding for artistic creation. The museum is a very important place for democracy; it stands for freedom of expression. The 'MAMAC, for example (the Museum of Modern Art and Contemporary Art of the city of Liège) was at some point virtually the only museum in Wallonia and it ended up closing its doors a few

years ago. A new museum was built in its place that was to house exhibits, yet to this day, they have unfortunately all rather focused on food. I built the Museum in 2006, long before I found out that the place was closing. I created it because I felt that the artistic creation in the south of the country was in danger, so the 'N. MoCA.L' was conceived as a symbolic gesture. For me it was a necessity to realise this new museum with market crates in order to shake up the political authorities by making them aware of the potential and opportunities that this place could offer as a contemporary platform if it was provided with actual financial means. Abandoned by the public service, it was important to preserve the Museum, a veritable jewel, not only because of its remarkable architecture (1905) but also because it preserved part of the history of art. Indeed, it housed a magnificent collection of amazing paintings and drawings from the late 19th and 20th century, here are some examples: The Wizard of Hiva Oa by Gauguin, The Blue House by Chagall as well as for example such famous paintings as The Sollers family, Picasso's version of a Luncheon on the Grass, a monumental Wall Drawing by Sol Lewitt and so on. You see, it really had some marvellous pieces. The Museum always functioned the way it did because it had almost no subsidies. Prior to its closure in 2012, it was even put up for sale and what is even more curious is that my fictional Museum, I showed it in Germany in 2007 in a shop window of an urban centre well before being aware of its closure or sale. Taking the fictional one step further, I gave this Museum an English name so as to make it an international museum. In this way, the 'N.MoCA.L', The New Museum of Contemporary Art of Liège became an international contemporary space and the guardian of its memory. Here again, the plans that I have drawn have nothing to do with reality, because I add quite some hustle and bustle to it and there is a very great public interest in art, as evidenced by the presence of collectors, a museum director, educational activities, etc. To talk about it in this interview and at your platform in London makes it possible to extend the discourse of my fiction since the 'N.MoCA.L' becomes real for some time before everything disintegrates and I am grateful to you for it.



Magasin de distribution (Grand Bazar), 2015

LE  
**GRAND BAZAR**

DE LA PLACE SAINT-LAMBERT

SOCIÉTÉ ANONYME

**LIÈGE-VERVIERS**

1953



*Exercice 1952-1953*

**RAPPORTS  
DU CONSEIL D'ADMINISTRATION  
ET DU COLLÈGE DES COMMISSAIRES  
DU 9 JUIN 1953**



Villa Pedreña, 1999 ©D.Hustinx

**MK:** In your architectural models made with crates you collected wooden crates from markets and recycled them. In a way, you confronted the modernist architectural aesthetics by creating a site of freedom for the potential user. There is a certain utopia in your buildings. Is the domestic a site of on-going repression or a space of rising emancipation in contemporary art?

**SMD:** Playfulness, the unexpected, the sudden shift are integral parts of my work. 'The crate is like a Lego'; the crate, just like the toy, is the essential element in my work, it represents an area of freedom because it generates the unpredictable, you do not know where you are going and it is in a playful manner that I make reference to the architect Le Corbusier and experiment with the crate-module. Indeed, I divert its usual meaning and it formally becomes an 'apartment'. I revisit modern architecture with a certain sense of humour, indeed, do we not speak of a chicken coop, which is strictly speaking also a crate, to evoke the modernist city? My constructions like les trois tours (The Tree Towers), la villa Pilotis (The Stilted Villa), la villa Pedreña (The Pedreña Villa), le Magasin de distribution (Grand Bazar) (The Distribution Store) evoke an aesthetic of sparseness, of refinement, of fragility that puts into question the cultural, political and economic capitalist societies that wallow in overconsumption while others starve. Because it is clear that we must reinvent new existential territories. Of course, my proposals are utopian and I'm not a politician because I'm not trying to convince anyone at all and I'm also not trying to develop theories, it is always very simple, it is an inner perception because I feel concerned. There is nothing innocent to my programmes and their various functions, these are questions without answers expressed in a language that is my own, and I hope it is poetic as well since I ultimately aim to attain more generous and collective goals.



La Villa Pilotis, 1999 ©D.Hustinx

**MK:** In your work, you propose the use of different materials and use the domestic as a platform to play with the double of the interior and the exterior. Where is the link between these two?

**SMD:** My work is not just theory-based. It can be viewed in a very simple manner and that's ok.

It is the freedom of the viewer that is paramount for me.

One can, however, also direct one's gaze beyond the obvious. It is especially the play, the play of looking and the play of thought that interests me because you can actually contemplate the work in a much more precise manner and raise very pertinent questions. When we dissect it we realize that there may be other concepts that destabilize all too conventional opinions. I think both the breaking and shifting point are very important in my work. For example: after having built models based on the physical manipulation of the modules, I make plans to accompany the constructions and contrary to my first idea of architecture which is ecological and ecosophic, these plans interrupt and unravel my first idea since my drawings represent capitalism in all its strength; take for example the construction of the Villa Pedreña which is supposed to be a biological construct for man, and yet on the model itself I place a car, and not just any car but a Jaguar, a British sports car model, a car made in the tradition of the brand with all the prestige of the British style, in other words, a luxury car reserved for a certain social class. The same goes for the plans that accompany the installation of The Villa Pilotis that presents itself at first glance as a green building while on the plans we can see many yachts as well as a whole real estate development programme being explained by the investors themselves. You can see the shift, the prestige of the project and then wham! the harshness of reality. Investment, profitability, power games, etc.

In short, I present existential territories but, at the same time, I dehumanize them. I can also present the opposite and compose functional, pragmatic, socially planned programmes but redeem them through the poetry of implementation. This is the case, among others, in the work 'N.MoCA.L' The new Museum of Contemporary Art of Liège or the work Magasin de distribution (Grand Bazar) which is a unique

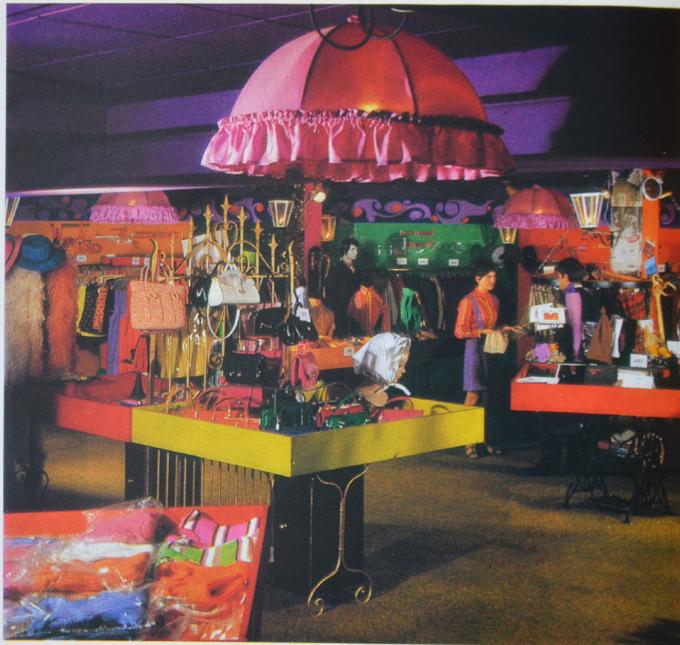


**MK:** Your drawings and collages often reference the woman's position in Western society. Do you think that the visibility of the space exposes the abilities of the bodies beyond that space?

**SMD:** I reveal and dismantle in a metaphorical manner that which is hidden by the mechanisms of social order that function as a huge symbolic machine that tends to ratify the male domination upon which it is based.

For if we look more closely, the structure of space is one of the instruments of social order. The exterior is reserved for men and the interior, the house, is reserved for women. Today this is still apparent in advertisements and cartoons; most of the time, women are placed in the domestic space, unlike men who are rarely associated with the house and often depicted in exotic places, in places primarily intended for men, such as bars and clubs, sports, etc.

Colours and materials have their significance as well, for example; the so-called 'female' spaces are composed of cutesy colours, trinkets, lace and ribbons and evoke fragility and frivolity. Men, on the other hand, are more often associated with leather and dark colours that express an image of virile strength and toughness. Fortunately, the status of women has changed dramatically, increasing women's access to education and salaried employment, and in this way, to the public sphere; it also implies the shift away from household tasks, economic independence, and the transformation of family structures (a consequence of the rising divorce rates). Nevertheless, we are still far from equal, for example in the labour market, women are still paid less than men, and they are given lower positions with similar degrees and are above all proportionally more affected by unemployment and the precariousness of employment and more willingly relegated to part-time positions - which, among others, effectively and almost infallibly excludes them from power games and career prospects.



A l'heure londonienne.

- Un coin des Piccadilly Boutiques.
- Une vitrine de nouveauté « made in Britain ».
- Deux annonces de nouveauté, pour les jeunes et les moins jeunes.



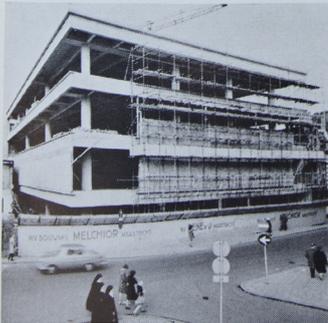
nouveau projet que nous avons esquissé au cours de notre assemblée générale de juin 1960. En fait, nous envisagions l'établissement d'un siège de vente dans la région industrielle du Brabant hollandais, et notre choix s'était porté sur la ville d'Eindhoven, en raison du développement considérable qu'elle connaît et des perspectives d'avenir qu'elle représente. C'est à Eindhoven, en effet, qui est actuellement la cinquième ville en importance de la Hollande, qu'on enregistre la plus forte progression économique et démographique du pays. Nous avons annoncé, il y a un an, que les premiers contrats étaient signés; nous avons poursuivi les études entreprises et conclu les accords définitifs. Nous espérons que les travaux débute-

ront cette année, l'emplacement en plein centre de la ville, face à la gare, est de tout premier ordre, et le magasin, qui aura une surface au sol de 2 000 m<sup>2</sup> environ, comprendra un sous-sol, un rez-de-chaussée et quatre étages, le quatrième étant réservé aux bureaux et services.

Eindhoven : maquette du futur bâtiment

Mais cette multiplication de nos points de vente en Hollande nous a amenés à réaliser un agrandissement de notre entrepôt central de Maastricht. Les travaux actuellement en cours porteront sa superficie de 4.000 à 8 000 m<sup>2</sup>. Au surplus, il sera entièrement mécanisé, à l'exemple de notre entrepôt central d'Ans.

Heerlen : état des travaux et vue générale de la future percée





L'alimentation  
à Seraing



Les nouveaux rayons  
de ménage à Verviers

**MK:** According to Derrida's theory about the 'play of structure', "the movement of play is permitted by a lack or absence of a centre or origin." Your installations are characterised by a clear geometric yet fragile structure which transforms itself through the poetic imagination of the viewer. Where is the viewer to be positioned within your sites?

**SMD:** I'm not trying to develop theories, to convince or sell a concept or a beautiful object.

I am an artist and my perception occurs through my inner eye.

I try to be true to myself, to my vision, to my tools and my own visual language and after that the game can continue with rhetoric, linguistics, semiotics, philosophy, etc. To open the field of possibilities, that is what interests me. The gaze and the analysis is not the same for everyone. Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction is primarily a structure that makes possible new organizations, it is a rebuilding, it is the possibility of a new world.

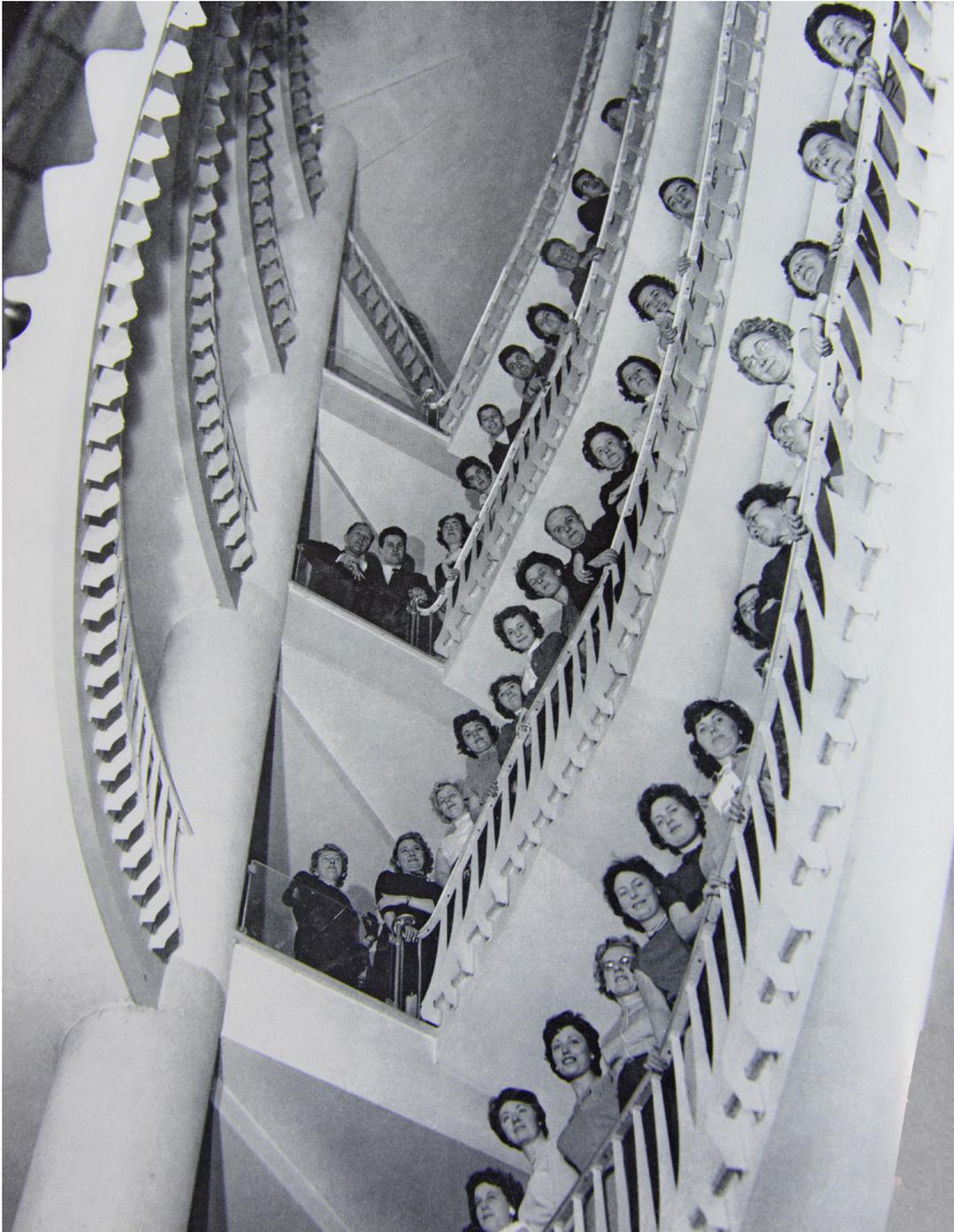
In my work, I like the idea that a new world may exist. The idea of 'anti-architecture' is very present because my work is also a reflection on the architecture of the ego. Every construction is like an Ark of Noah, for me, it is a way to cleanse the world because I feel concerned. 'The game of the object' is my writing, it is my language.

I create my own vocabulary with the crate, with cardboard, etc., and after the reading of the viewer it is actually no longer mine, and the range of possibilities is opened.

**MK:** You currently live and work in Brussels. Could you describe the contemporary art scene there?

**SMD:** To talk about Belgium is always very complicated. Belgium is several countries in one. Belgium has three communities, and thus three languages and different political and cultural contexts. Fortunately there is the 'belgitude, Magritte & Ensor', an intelligent self-mockery on the part of the population. Brussels is the centre of artistic creation, the heart of the country, and its location makes the city a very important spot for the Belgian and foreign art scene, it is also the place that brings together the three communities and for artists it is best to work with the communities and the many workspaces in the country such as: contemporary art centres, well-established galleries, new emerging Belgian galleries but also new foreign galleries who settle in the capital. There is an audience and there are collectors. There are even collectors who open their homes to share their collections. I am thinking of the collector Alain Servais who has an amazing collection. There are also spaces run by non-profit associations, where nothing is for sale, sometimes in the context of a private house that can be visited like a gallery without appointment; here I think of the contemporary art centre 'Maison Particulière'.

There is also the annual art fair Art Brussels which has become an international and not-to-be-missed event for the art scene. There are also classical and more contemporary museums such as BOZAR or WIELS, which is led by Dirk Snauwaert, who has managed to give it new life; WIELS has become a very important centre for contemporary art and is also supported by the two communities: the Flemish Community and the Walloon community. It is a contemporary place that presents today's artistic creation with the large-scale appeal of a platform with international renown. In addition, there is talk of a new museum of contemporary art in the buildings occupied by Citroën in the Canal Zone. But Brussels is also part of an economic reality and the cultural field is very concerned about the budget cuts. However, we should remain positive because, as with any large economic and financial crisis, art is suggested as a potential alternative investment, and becomes, in this way, a safe haven/ a crate!



Magasin de distribution (Grand Bazar). Catalog Archives, 2015