

## Voice of the Border

Group exhibition

Artists: **Saâdane Afif, Lina Ben Rejeb, Jason Dodge, Pascal Hachem, Hassan Khan, Farah Khelil, Youssef Rakha & Stéphanie Saadé**

Curated by **Fatma Cheffi**

*When they got home it was dark but the shadow of Dieste's book hanging from the clothesline was clearer, steadier, more reasonable, thought Amalfitano, than anything they'd seen on the outskirts of Santa Teresa or in the city itself, images with no handhold, images freighted with all the orphan hood in the world, fragments, fragments. Roberto Bolaño, "The Part About Amalfitano", 2666*

*Voice of the Border* is Santa Teresa's most popular radio station featured in *2666*, a posthumous novel written by Chilean author Roberto Bolaño.

The exhibition uses the name of a fictional town's radio as an occasion to gather works that explore the cross-pollination of two forms of expression: art and literature and to a larger extent, text and image. It attempts to examine the ways literature permeates contemporary art, text performs image, and vice versa.

The common thread traversing all the works is a general feeling of estrangement that is embodied by Oscar Amalfitano, the main character of *2666*'s second chapter, and also the juncture where I first encountered *The Unhappy Readymade* of Marcel Duchamp.

In 1919, Duchamp sent a letter from Buenos Aires to his newly married sister Suzanne and her husband Jean Crotti in Paris. The letter instructed the couple to hang a geometry book out on their balcony, so that the principles it contained would be then submitted to the whims of the weather. Later, he explains the experiment as follows: the wind had to "go through the book, choose its own problems, turn and tear out the pages. [...] It amused me to bring the idea of happy and unhappy into ready-mades, and then the rain, the wind, the pages flying, it was an amusing idea."<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Amalfitano – an exiled and widowed professor of philosophy – reactivates Duchamp's ready-made as a climax gesture of detachment from Santa Teresa.

Amalfitano is ultimately unhappy. He never seems to contend with his environment and he fears for his wandering daughter Rosa. His sense of anxiety culminates in his decision to suspend a book he does not remember buying on the clothesline of his backyard. The book, titled *Testamento Geometrico*, is purportedly written by the Galician poet and philosopher *Rafael dieste*. Very little is disclosed about its content. Its message is deliberately concealed, turning the book into a mere abstract object fluttering in the air in the same way as *The Unhappy Readymade*.

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Following the Duchamp-inspired experiment, Amalfitano slowly slides into madness and indulges in long monologues. He listens to Voice of the Border broadcasting the latest news of Santa Teresa where female homicides are running rampant and ponders on the testament's presence every day, almost like a marker of sanity within the dystopian surroundings.

There is much about *2666*'s second chapter — and more generally about Bolaño's writing — that recalls Duchamp's concerns with art and the readymade's legacy. Referring to Shaj Mathew's compelling analysis of avant-garde fiction<sup>2</sup>, one is tempted to describe the chapter in question as a readymade. Bolaño frequently operates by collage-like technique, interspersing Amalfitano's story with long quotations about Duchamp, and with geometric drawings and listed columns of scientists and philosophers.

Bolaño's writing demands much of the reader and recalls many of the formal and thematic topoi inherent to the conceptual tradition, such as metaphors, variations, puns, *mise en abyme*, and hybridization, along with questions of authorship, alienation, self-reference, mystery and logic versus madness.

Translator and writer Valerie Miles describe Bolaño's writing as “a multidimensional universe turning like a grand kaleidoscope of symbols and metaphors and themes and meanings with secret passageways, wormholes back and forth in time and place, occult intentions and shadowed suggestions, placed and replaced in different orders or alongside different texts. Like Melville's *Moby Dick*, the metaphors and themes are untethered in the end, unanchored by a single authorial interpretation. The signs and signifiers are occult, mysterious, secret because they belong individually, and each reader brings a different experience to the interpretive act.”<sup>3</sup>

Many visual artists have been inspired by Bolaño, and just as their work implies an active viewer, the Chilean author's writings demand an active reader himself; talking about the different ways he understands a book on the history of Chile.

Similarly, the artworks in *Voice of the Border* open up multiple new stories and challenge our imagination. Besides their internal narratives, they act as backdrops that resist a single discourse and touch on borders and invisible spaces, which offer the viewer the “possibility of a literature that would go beyond printing and paper”.<sup>4</sup>

With this exhibition we hope to expand on Bolaño's second chapter and to explore the poetic engagement of artists with objects in the light of our uncertain and shifting present condition.

Old works and newly commissioned pieces influenced by Bolaño will offer the visitor an immersive journey including a natural rose and its imitation, a night sky embedded in a woven fabric, a print left in open air reactivating a childhood sky, the aural presence of a writer reflecting on writing, old plain covers resembling 17<sup>th</sup> century vanitas, commissioned lyrics inspired by an artist's work and the photograph of a mysterious glass object, to name only a few.

A study space within the gallery will be dedicated to documentation concerning Bolaño and Duchamp's ready-mades.

#### Notes

1. Roberto Bolaño, "The Part about Amalfitano", 2666.
2. Shaj Mathew, "Welcome to Literature's Duchamp Moment", in *New Republic*.
3. Valerie Miles, "A Journey Forward to the Origin", *Archivo Bolaño* exhibition catalogue
4. Dominique Gonzalez-Forester interviewed by Jessica Morgan

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