

GESTURES

OF

SANTIAGO

SIERRA



EVICIONS COUNTER. Helga de Alvear Gallery. Madrid, Spain. May 2019. Photograph by Joaquín Cortés.

RESISTANCE



Interviewed by Harry Burke

“Conflict, division, and instability, then, do not ruin the democratic public sphere; they are conditions of its existence.” These words by Rosalyn Deutsche are cited by the art critic Claire Bishop in her 2004 article, *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*. They describe the paradox at the heart of her thesis: **democracy thrives through encounters with the undesirable, the antagonistic.**

4 OBJECTS MEASURING 600 x 60 x 60 CM.
CONSTRUCTED TO BE HELD HORIZONTALLY TO THE WALL.
National Gallery Singapore, Singapore, March 2019.
Photograph courtesy National Gallery Singapore.

As Bishop argues, few artists confront this problem more acutely than Santiago Sierra, who was born in 1966 in Madrid, where he still lives and works today. Since the 1990s, his artworks have visualized inequitable relations between people and structures. Many, like *133 Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond*, in which he paid illegal street vendors \$60 to bleach their hair during the opening of the 2001 Venice Biennale, have garnered notable controversy. They are criticized for their complicity with subjugation, and because they seem to argue that exploitation can be justified by the shocking frankness of an economic transaction, or even its placement within an art historical lineage. Yet they are celebrated for exposing the foundational tensions of capitalist relations, and for the questions they ask about the ethics of viewing art.

In recent works, Sierra has broadened his techniques. While he is famous for his incorporation of bodies, he is also drawn to the ways in which social injustices, such as the current eviction crisis in Spain, are abstracted and literalized by numbers. *Cube of Carrion Measuring 100 x 100 x 100 cm* (2015) memorializes forty-three students who disappeared in Mexico in 2014, and sees his work shift further towards poetic metaphor. Still, his provocations remain irresolvable. Bishop concludes: “Without antagonism there is only the imposed consensus of authoritarian order — a total suppression of debate and discussion, which is inimical to democracy.”

***Evictions Counter* (2019) presents the number of evictions, updated in real time, carried out since Spain’s 2008 financial crisis. Why call attention to this problem in this way?**

Here, we have a huge humanitarian catastrophe that is ignored by established powers due to its enormous economic benefit. In Spain there is a law that does not exist elsewhere in Europe, the cruelty of which is extreme: if a private individual buys a home through a bank mortgage and, at a certain point, fails to pay for it, she must return the house and finish paying the mortgage. This is an insanity that leads many people directly to suicide. You cannot simply return the house; you must finish paying for it. It is the banker’s paradise and the citizen’s hell. Add this to the abusive clauses and crazy rental prices and you get dizzying numbers of people evicted because they can’t pay the rent. The evictions are carried out by the police, with a prohibition upon filming or photographing the facts. The numbers — manufactured by the state — which are counted by this counter are vertiginous. In Spain there is an eviction every 2 minutes. The sadism of it all leaves me stunned.

The housing crisis was caused by homes going empty for economic reasons. *Evictions Counter* (2019) is presented in an otherwise bare room. In what ways is the irony of this presentation — which seems to comment upon contemporary art’s long-standing attachment to minimalist installations — important for the piece?

I like to use numbers because they are incontestable. In this piece, the number is the protagonist; the work is a figure that increases and increases, like in an artwork by On Kawara. I have assimilated minimalism into my practice and I don’t reflect on these formal concerns, I simply use it.

***25,000,000* (2017), a performance staged at Mystetskyi Arsenal, Kiev, likewise demonstrates the social significance of numbers, rendering them unavoidable. In the work, the equivalent to 1 million USD was counted by three Ukrainian women in their local currency of hryvnia, taking them 12 hours.**

Often, the way to start a war is simply to bribe the right politicians, and this is what has been done in Ukraine in recent years. In Kiev, everyone understood what the work was about instantly. It was uncomfortable for the authorities because the project was staged during the Yalta summit of that year. Throughout the corridors there were prominent European and American politicians. We placed televisions in different rooms so that the live performance could be followed while everything was going on.

In *7 forms measuring 600 x 60 x 60cm, constructed to be held horizontal to a wall* (2001–19), unemployed laborers are paid minimum wage to hold a minimalist object horizontally, at shoulder-height, to the wall. It was most recently shown during this year’s impressive *Minimalism* survey at the National Gallery Singapore. Since this remunerative performance was conceptualized, your work has been canonized. I imagine you could locate fans who would volunteer to participate for free. Why does it remain important that your artworks involve workers who get paid?



"Survival within the capitalist system forces us to perform absurd and even humiliating tasks that we would otherwise never accept."

It's normal to pay the worker. The worker is paid, that is his essence. That's why he turns up. But many of my works also denounce salaried work. Survival within the capitalist system forces us to perform absurd and even humiliating tasks that we would otherwise never accept.

In *333 M*, produced for the 2018 Wiesbaden Biennale in Germany, you divided the public space of a local park, the Reisinger-Anlagen, with a 333-meter-long line of Type RAID 7 RH fencing. The same field fortification has been deployed in war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan since the 1990s. What was the idea behind this work?

Well, the impressive thing is that my unprepared team set up this structure in eight minutes. Professional soldiers need only three minutes. These structures are selling like hotcakes in all kinds of conflicts. The wall is a fashionable architectural element — it reveals a civilization that considers human beings as like animals in a farm. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, walls have not ceased to be built all over the planet. No one escapes. They prohibit both entry and exit.

Does the work risk being viewed as a celebration of the technologies of warfare?

This is like saying that Picasso's *Guernica* celebrates the bombing of the Spanish people by fascism. Absurd.

***Cube of Carrion Measuring 100 x 100 x 100 cm (2015)* is a beautiful proposition: the sculpture attracts the attention of birds, as well as humans. What is the story behind this work?**

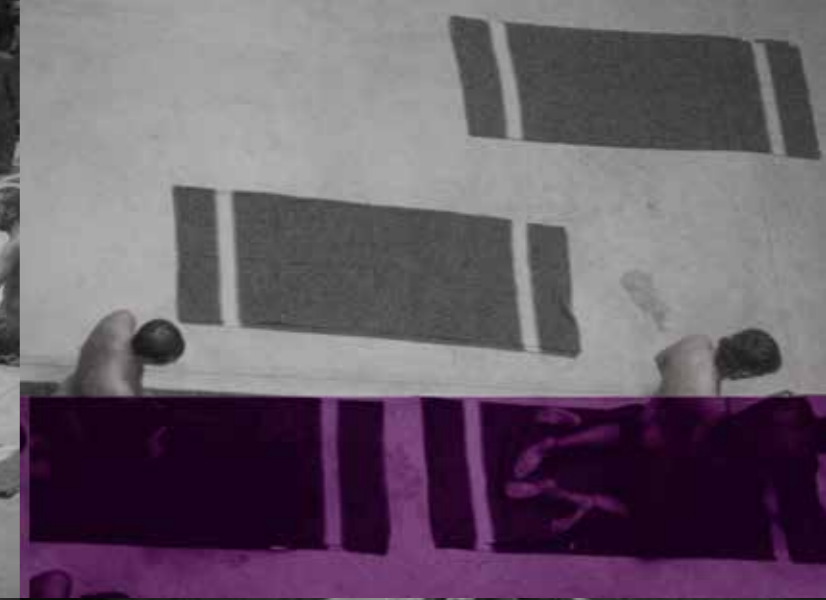
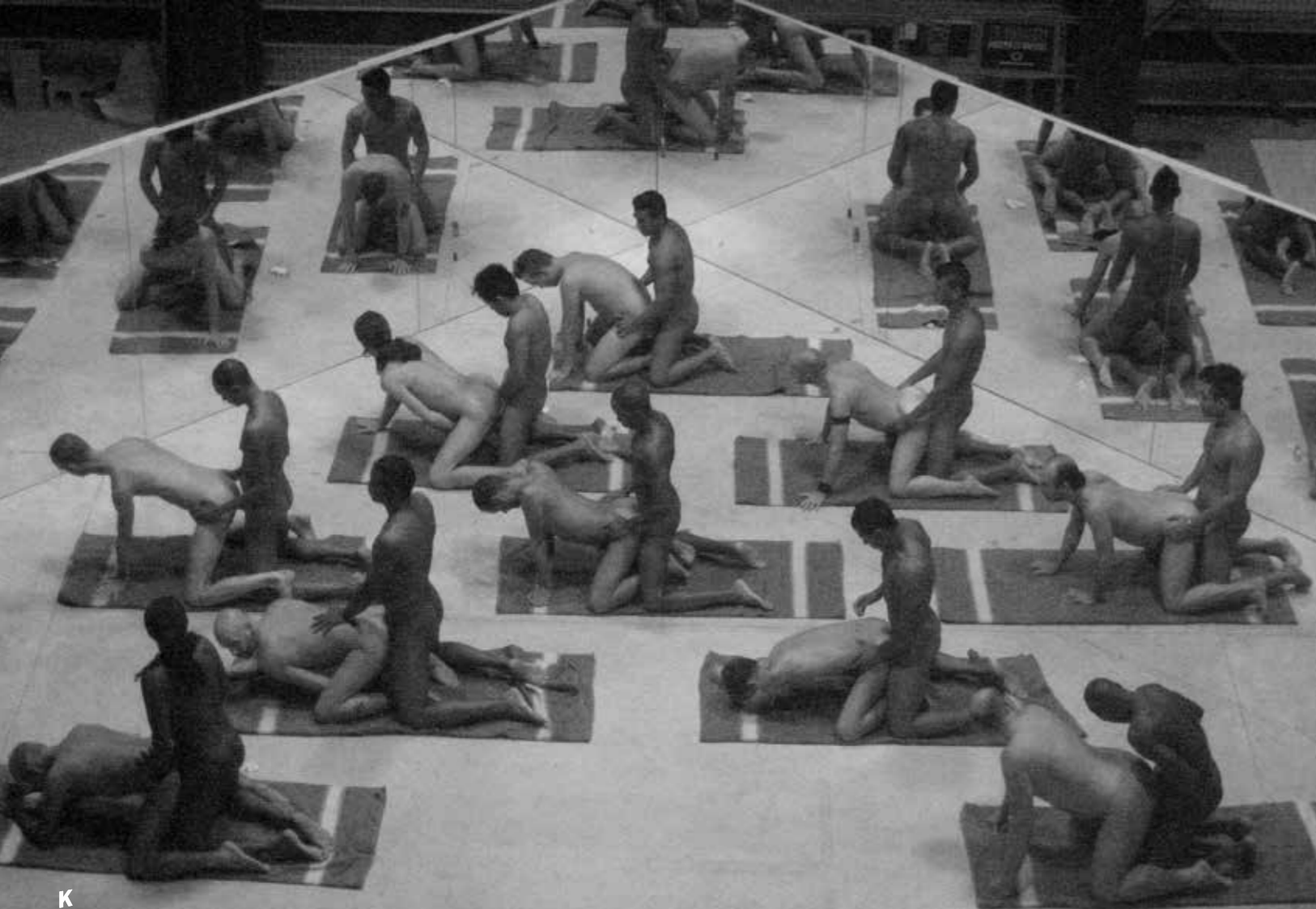
It took place one year after the massacre of students in Ayotzinapa, in which forty-three Zapatista teachers-in-training lost their lives. I did it in a very similar place, geographically and conceptually, to Ayotzinapa. It was a tribute to the victims of those vultures.

Most of your documentation is black-and-white. Why?

Color distracts me. It has many implications that I don't want to stop to consider. I like the twentieth-century news aspect of my works: like *Guernica*, which always seemed to me to be a giant newsprint. I'm also reminded of old art magazines with their colorless illustrations. The gesture is an anachronism that perhaps points to my reticence towards the era I'm living in. It's a gesture of resistance.



25,000,000 € (2017)



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333 M.
Wiesbaden Biennale. Reisinger Anlagen,
Wiesbaden, Germany. August 2018.



EL NINOT (In collaboration with Eugenio merino). ARCO International Contemporary Art Fair.
Madrid, Spain. February 2019. Photograph by Sabela Llerena.

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is simply to bribe the right
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