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THERE, THERE

Kate Sutton on Protocinema's "A Few In Many Places"

By Kate Sutton



Young bike riders carry Michelle Lopez's 2020 *Keep Their Heads Ringin'* sound installation, Philadelphia Museum of Art, August 29, 2020.

COINED BY THE ENVIRONMENTALIST David Foreman in 1990, *rewilding* describes a preservation strategy that allows ecosystems to strike a new equilibrium after long periods of abuse and reckless overextraction. While certainly contentious in conservation circles, the promise of a clean slate at a moment when all other options seem exhausted has gained traction in the popular imagination (just think of

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Volunteers boxing produce at **Summaeverything Community Center, Los Angeles, July 2020**, an initiative by the artist Lauren Halsey. From left: Lauren Halsey, Anthony Creeden, Summer Humes, Josie Macias, Angel Xotlanihua, Pedro Martinez, and Chris Gibbs. Photo: Allen Chen/SLH Studio.

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Garzón, Ameli M. Klein, and Sabina Oroshi) turns to the conservationist term for its “implication that humans have a responsibility to other human or non-human species to restore self-regulating and self-sustaining ecological communities.” It proposes a radical reorganization of the art world, one that prioritizes accountability over innovation. Its projects range from Adrian Balseca’s *PLANTASIA OIL Co.*, 2021, which converted oil-industry waste into a thriving indoor garden, to a guidebook to the artist studios of Venice, offered as a homegrown alternative to the big-budget exhibitions shipped in with every Biennale.

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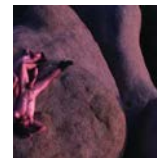
JANUS DOE



THE POLITICS OF CARE

Collective Rewilding’s treatise was published as part of “A Few in Many Places,” a multisite exhibition staged this summer by the semi-itinerant institution Protocinema. In times of stress, the species that survive are those that can adapt. Protocinema, which celebrates its tenth anniversary this month, was conceived by the New York– and Istanbul-based curator Mari Spirito with flexibility at its core: It’s “context-specific,” untethered from the parameters of site. Over the past decade, Protocinema and its collaborators have repurposed a derelict wine factory in Tbilisi with pulsating video installations by Angelica Mesiti, suspended a low-earth-orbit satellite by Trevor Paglen in a dilapidated auto-repair shop off Istanbul’s Dolapdere Caddesi, staged an s/m-tinged dinner party by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, and erected Hale Tenger’s fenced-in guard cabin in a basement two blocks from New York’s Jane Hotel. They have brought Hasan Özgür Top to Lima, Lara Ögel to Paris, and Köken Ergun to the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow while showing such varied artists as Allora & Calzadilla, Marwa Arsanios, Rossella Biscotti, Latifa Echakhch, Mario García Torres, Dan Graham, Mike Nelson, Ahmet Ögüt, and Adrian Paci in Istanbul and New York.

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Collective Rewilding proposes a radical reorganization of the art world, one that prioritizes accountability over innovation.

“A Few in Many Places” was rooted in the social networks Protocinema forged along the way. Spirito had originally contemplated a summit to convene colleagues and collaborators, but that plan was made untenable by the Covid outbreak. As the pandemic progressed, Spirito was forced to reckon with a question: How do we act together, alone? Her answer embodied many of the tenets espoused by Collective Rewilding. “A Few in Many Places” operated as a deconstructed exhibition, staged wherever the artists happened to be geographically, with nothing shipped or flown in, using as sustainable a model (and materials) as possible. For the inaugural 2020 edition, Abbas Akhavan took over the nocturnal hours of a storefront art space in Montreal, Burak Delier settled into a bakery in Istanbul, and Özgür Top invaded a bar in the Kreuzberg neighborhood of Berlin. In the port of Beirut, Stéphanie Saadé riddled a metal warehouse door with bullet holes (the work was later obliterated in last year’s blast), while Michelle Lopez designed a sound piece audible in public areas where one would hear the Liberty Bell if it tolled.

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While the exhibition concept explicitly emphasized the physical encounter (though only at a “safe” scale), the works were brought together through discursive platforms, including the Protocinema website and *ProtoZine*, a

journal appearing both online and in print at the various sites. For the latter, Spirito and her team commissioned writers in other cities to reflect on the work from a distance, less a concession to pandemic-related limitations than an acknowledgment of the speculative nature of all art criticism.



Burak Delier, *Maya*, 2020, HD video (color, sound, 18 minutes 21 seconds), yeast, bread, performance. Installation view, Ek Biç Ye İç, Istanbul.

This year, Spirito recruited Bangkok-based curator Abhijan Toto to help scale the project up while maintaining its accent on a responsible use of resources. A balance of the hyperlocal with the global, “A Few in Many Places” unfolded over the summer in Bangkok, Guatemala City, Istanbul, New York, Seoul, and Santurce, Puerto Rico. Eschewing the single-artist-single-intervention gesture, the second edition asked what it looks like to organize. In Santurce, artist Jorge González mobilized his pedagogical platform, Escuela de Oficios, to revive the Mayan tradition of gathering in *bateyes*, or ceremonial plazas. Transforming his studio into a kind of altar, he hosted a series of workshops and public programs with an emphasis on Indigenous practices of communing. In Seoul, the collective Welcome to Ogasawara occupied sites around the city’s Euljiro shopping district to question how people are bound by the arbitrary designations of borders and citizenship. Questions of this nature resounded at Bangkok’s Monitor Lizard House, where the artist Komtouch “Dew” Napattaloong turned his camera to the city’s often unseen communities of refugees and asylum seekers, including those at a center not far from the exhibition venue. A group exhibition in Istanbul looked at the ways our bodies limit and determine our relationship with the world, while in New York, Arab Image Foundation’s Vartan Avakian, Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh, and Kristine Khouri partnered with Lila Nazemian to explore the ripple effects when those relationships are broken, voluntarily or not. Taking up residence in one of the former general’s houses on Governors Island, their exhibition

expanded over the course of its three-month run to include contributions from workshop participants. The three-artist show in Guatemala City combined aspects of all the other outposts, with Esvin Alarcón Lam's project touching on Indigenous forms of gathering, Antonio Pichillá critiquing the contested "welcome" offered to perceived outsiders, and Camile Juárez's *Light Caravan*, 2021, proposing a collective act of care among women that doubled as a memorial to forty-one girls who tragically perished in an orphanage fire.

Does it work? While each individual location operated autonomously (to the point that each had its own dedicated website to track programming and responses), to what extent were the respective audiences aware that what they were seeing belonged to a larger exhibition? Moreover, does it matter? That is something Spirito and Toto are still contemplating. One change was to the structure of *ProtoZine*, which was detached from the model of auxiliary texts about each artwork and now acted as its own kind of exhibition space featuring broader essays, like the one from *Collective Rewilding*, accompanied by direct dialogues among participants from the various sites.

"A Few in Many Places" aside, Protocinema's strategies have proven particularly nimble in times of crisis. This month, the venture will return to a more traditional format with "Once upon a Time Inconceivable," a tenth-anniversary exhibition featuring contributions from Akhavan, Hera Büyüktaşçıyan, Banu Cennetoğlu, Ceal Floyer, García Torres, Gülşah Mursaloğlu, Zeyno Pekünlü, Paul Pfeiffer, and Amie Siegel. Sited in Istanbul's Beykoz Kundura, an Ottoman-era factory turned cultural hub, the show will be accompanied by its own *ProtoZine* and, eventually, a book with texts by Spirito and Laura Raicovich, who has established herself as one of the most dedicated voices for change within museum infrastructures.

A recurring provocation within rewilding is the question of *which* wild. The idea of returning to one true "native" state is a fallacy: Our ecologies (and economies) are diverse and never remain in stasis for long. Instead, Protocinema's aim is to strike a new balance that takes into account the specific context and conditions of the surrounding environment. With its hybrid of digital presence and physical encounter, its togetherness apart, "A Few in Many Places" spurned the pessimism of the pandemic to reimagine what an exhibition is and what we want it to be.

Kate Sutton is coeditor of international reviews for Artforum.

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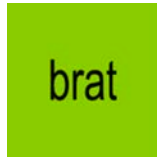
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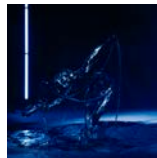
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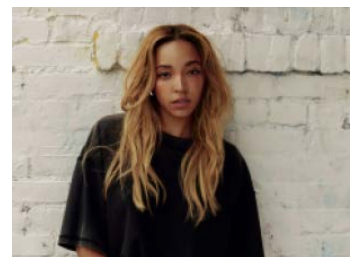
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