



This is the strategy

BY TOBIAS OSTRANDER



INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

Installation view of **IVÁN ARGOTE's** (back) *Levitare*, 2022, three-channel video installation: 23 min 48 sec; and (front) *A Place to Stay*, 2022, velvet and foam, dimensions variable, at "Air de jeux," Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2022. Photo by Bertrand Prévost/Centre Pompidou. Courtesy the artist; Fondazione In Between Art Film; and Perrotin, Paris/New York/Seoul/Tokyo/Shanghai/Hong Kong/Dubai.



Over the past decade, Paris-based multidisciplinary artist Iván Argote has gained notable attention for his large-scale public monument projects and for the playfulness he brings to historical interrogations. During last year's nomination for the Centre Pompidou's prestigious Prix Marcel Duchamp, Argote exhibited *Air de Jeux* (2020), a three-channel video installation projected in a room filled with soft obelisks that visitors could sit on. The projections showed separate yet interrelated narratives of three contested public monuments: the Egyptian obelisk at the Piazza del Popolo in Rome; the statue of Christopher Columbus at Plaza Colón in Madrid; and a bronze sculpture honoring the French general Joseph Gallieni at the Place Vauban in Paris. Argote selected these for their physical manifestations and representations of colonial power and exploitation. Each chapter of the video simulates their removal, combining the documentation of public performances with texts outlining Argote's reflections on the usage of urban spaces, his journey as a Colombian immigrant to Europe, and the complex and competing narratives of how the country of his birth was shaped by colonialism.

Argote's work coincides with a tense sociopolitical era in which both sanctioned and unsanctioned removals of public sculptures connected to colonization have spread since the Minneapolis police killing of the African American man George Floyd on May 25, 2020. Among the demands protestors have issued, many relate to broader movements of cultural and social decolonization and the reevaluation of contested national narratives that have too often ignored marginalized and oppressed peoples. It is here that Argote's investigations are particularly acute, as are their strong ties to our charged discourse.

His early work was inspired by Dadaist and Situationist urban gestures, epitomized by the formation of the Movimiento Etceterista collective that engaged in ludic gestures on public transport and in the streets of Bogotá, and later through individual actions in the New York and Paris subways, plazas, and fountains. What has developed over time is an understanding of Argote's practice—informed by his own personal history and unique temperament—as one that eschews a directly antagonistic, binary, or revisionist approach. But neither does it deny these positions. Argote's tonal resonance is achieved through an emphasis on a particular generosity, as well as a set of creative proposals that seek to attract diverse viewers and encourage them to participate in conversations that have deeply political implications.

Monuments feature in Argote's video titled *La Estrategia* (2012), in which a group of actors attempt to recreate the experiences of Colombian revolutionary groups of the 1970s and 1980s, based on the stories and rumors of their clandestine activities. As was the case with some of the actors, Argote's own parents were involved in these groups, and during the process the actors lived and worked together, filming invented actions that aimed to simulate (in a contemporary context) what might have happened in the recent past. Their actions include interfering with local public monuments, placing a mirrored box over the bust of a colonial hero who "discovered" the Amazon, and covering local statues of Queen Isabella of Spain and Christopher Columbus with striped serapes. Operating in our frenzied climate of cancellation and destruction of works deemed "problematic," Argote's strategic approaches to contested public monuments allows space for more nuanced, unorthodox, and pragmatic political imaginaries to emerge.



IVÁN ARGOTE, *Levitare*, 2022, still from three-channel video installation: 23 min 48 sec. Courtesy the artist; Fondazione In Between Art Film; and Perrotin, Paris/New York/Seoul/Tokyo/Shanghai/Hong Kong/Dubai.

You often represent experiences of touch and physical interaction in your work. For example, the benches in *Air de Jeux* are soft, tactile. Shot during the pandemic, the video *Can we shake hands?* (2020) invites strangers on the street to align their shadows with yours so that everyone's hands appear to be touching. Similarly, *Altruism* (2011) shows you licking a dirty subway handrail that has been touched by thousands of people, a status you invert or embrace as an act of public solidarity. Can you describe your interest in touch and tenderness as they relate strategically to challenging questions around public space?



IVÁN ARGOTE, *Altruism*, 2011, still from video: 1 min 20 sec. Copyright and courtesy the artist.

I grew up in a family of activists and as a child I was often in the middle of political meetings and conversations about logistics and strategies. My parents were committed to direct political action, and I believe that thinking and planning cannot be separated from bodily experience. For me, it is necessary to discuss issues as they relate to space, to site, in specific contexts, to the objects and symbols that matter and that represent the things we want to transform, criticize, and/or honor. When I approach critically the tremendous humiliation and disrespect that is constantly displayed in our public squares, buildings, and monuments, I cannot avoid having a physical reaction to these places and objects. I choose to engage these different spaces with affection and humor, using infiltration and even strategies incorporating elements of fiction to avoid censorship from the authorities. I try to imagine what a vision of "radical tenderness" could be, or a radically tender "policy," for example. With the interventions and works I do, I like to think of them as proposals for alternative uses of public spaces, asking questions such as: "Can we have a more tender society?"

To interrogate contemporary political contexts you often position your investigations within a close future or recent past. In *Air de Jeux* your narrative texts gently describe your actions as representing possibilities for a moment yet to come; in *La Estrategia* you simulate an imagined past. Several recent projects evoke future uses for both removed monuments and posthuman public spaces. What do these temporal displacements within your practice aim to achieve or facilitate?

Ever since I began pursuing small interventions and performances in the street, on buses, or on the subway, I have used a degree of fiction to transform the relationships we have with others and with a place: a subway elevator becomes a scene of a birthday party; a public bus becomes a family trip. In *La Estrategia*, I filled the empty spaces of my parents' stories about their revolutionary experiences with fantasies about interventions in public spaces. The pretext of making a feature film helped me to infiltrate these areas and to avoid police intervention. Fiction has always been a strategy, either conceptually or logistically, in my works. It is a tool that on the one hand allows me to introduce questions about a real time and space while also functioning as a way to help me engage the viewer with complex political and historical issues. I like it when the degree of fiction is subtle, when it's almost imperceptible. It's at this point that things start to become more real. Many of the issues that my works discuss are hegemonic narratives that have always been semi-fictional stories developed within History, with a capital "H."

There is often a sense of humor implied in both your videos and sculptural works. Many of your actions even have a tone of jest and invoke a sense of mischief or fun in their execution. Is this a characteristic of your personality or tied to how you have always approached political situations?

I believe in joy. I think we deserve to try to have joyful moments in a world that is hard and aggressive. The way I conceptualize my artworks is also from a place of enthusiasm, trying to articulate situations through which I hope we can transform and build things together. I believe we need to protest and propose, to react and involve ourselves in issues that concern us collectively. And I think that within this challenge there is space for pleasure, for love, and for laughter. I may also have learned this at home. My parents, whose lives were often threatened and who insisted on being combative, were equally committed to seeing life with a joyful eye.



IVÁN ARGOTE, *Can we shake hands?*, 2020, still from video: 35 min 11 sec. Copyright and courtesy the artist.



IVÁN ARGOTE, *La Estrategia*, 2012, still from video: 33 min 33 sec. Copyright and courtesy the artist.

You have used mirrors in multiple, playful ways within your interventions with monuments—from covering public artworks with mirrored boxes to creating free-standing sculptures out of reflective material. These engagements at times appear to visually negate the sculpture by making it disappear into its surrounding environment, while at other times the material reflects the viewer directly. Do you see mirrors as adding or subtracting content in these various projects?

The first intervention I made as an artist on a public monument was in 2011 when I covered the statue of Francisco de Orellana in Bogotá with four mirrors, thereby making him disappear. This monument is the only one dedicated to the Amazonian region in the city, and it honors this conquistador who today still figures in history books as “the discoverer of the Amazon.” I found that violent, along with the fact that this is an almost anonymous or forgotten monument in the city, as so many others are. It was beautiful to see his image devoured by the reflections of the trees surrounding him. And as an “Etceterist” I loved the idea of designating what deserves to be honored as everything that is not on top of the pedestal. What I find interesting in this and other projects is the idea of creating illusions that become a step towards transformation. I envisioned a moment when someone, taking his or her lunch break in Madrid’s city center, might witness the Columbus statue being towed away on a truck and getting lost in the afternoon traffic. Maybe this provides a window through which we can contemplate another possible world.

Pigeons have played a central role in several recent works. What attracts you to these urban creatures, both physically and symbolically? Lions and horses have also entered your visual lexicon, perhaps for contrasting reasons to that of your use of pigeons. Can you describe your interest in these animals as well?

I’ve been exploring the politics of public space and the iconography of power for many years. In these environments we often see pigeons, horses, and lions mixed together in strange combinations. One of my first works related to monuments is called *Horses* (2011) and it is a series of photographs of equestrian statues where I have erased the riders, who were mostly kings or military figures, thereby letting the horses rest. For another film, *Blind Kittens* (2014), I made a 3D animation with lions that deconstructed these symbols of imperial power by making them act like kittens. And, yes, for a long time I have worked with pigeons—this urban, marginal species that accompanies us and behaves like us. There is something about the relation we have with these animals that talks about the narrative of domination by which we humans have built up our imaginary supremacy as a species, the way that we address and represent other species reflects our eagerness to appear as more powerful and important.



IVAN ARGOTE, *Horse (Paris, Pont Neuf)*, 2011, c-print, 70 x 50 cm. Copyright and courtesy the artist.

IVÁN ARGOTE, *Wild Flowers: A Chest*, 2021, bronze, plants, and soil, 60 × 159 × 111 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist and Perrotin, Paris/New York/Seoul/Tokyo/Shanghai/Hong Kong/Dubai.



Flowers, vines, and grass play important roles within several recent sculptural projects, such as *Wild Flowers* (2021), and they appear to offer a counterpoint to the male-dominated, linear notions of time and history associated with monuments. Horizontal views and an embrace of landscape have also been evidenced recently, as in your land-art project *A Point of View* (2019) created at Salton Sea in Los Angeles. *La Estrategia* includes a scene in which an actor describes climbing a mountain with a mysterious comrade, and when they reach the summit the man points to the vast vista and states: "This is the strategy." How have you engaged landscape as a political strategy, symbol, or foil?

That scene comes from an anecdote told by my uncle Ader that I always found strong and poetic. He was supposed to attend a meeting to receive strategic information from a revolutionary comrade. I imagined the expectations he had, to simply be asked to follow a man into the jungle. I then imagined his shock at the moment when they stop at the top of the mountain and the comrade says: "That's the strategy." The strategy was the way up, the effort, the topography and irregularities of the mountain, the weather, the sweat, the view of the mountain range—the landscape before their eyes would reveal the path to revolution. I guess these strategies are always there.

In my case they are connected more directly to the street, to our behaviors, how a particular context offers us all the details, all the forces needed, how we just need to pick a place from where we can generate leverage in order to move something. I feel that's how I also started to work with vegetation, by just watching my surroundings. I didn't grow up in the mountains like my dad. I grew up in the projects in the outskirts of Bogotá, in an area where raw materials are visible everywhere: concrete towers, brick houses, steel fences, dust and earth on the streets. In the 1990s, this zone in Bogotá was still in development so there were also plenty of empty green fields that were waiting to be built on, mostly social housing. I spent my childhood having adventures among the projects, the favelas, and those green fields, areas where concrete mixed with raw weeds. In the construction of semi-fictional scenarios I started including more and more vegetation, like in the installation *Descanso* (2022) where a statue of Christopher Columbus lies on the ground and gets invaded by tropical weeds. This becomes a way of picturing a posthuman world where all this imagery of domination gets digested by roots, leaves, and flowers. I feel there is important work and research to do in this area, since these narratives of domination also express themselves within vegetal and agricultural manifestations. I am currently working on future installations and films that deal with this.

IVÁN ARGOTE, *Descanso*, 2022, flowers, stone, and bricks, 400 × 180 cm. Copyright and courtesy the artist.



Iván Argote was born in Bogotá in 1983 and lives in Paris. Through his sculptures, installations, films and interventions, he questions our relation with others, with power structures and belief systems. He develops strategies based on tenderness, affect, and humor to generate critical approaches to dominant historical narratives. His works are part of public collections such as Guggenheim, Centre Pompidou, CNAP, MACBA, Harvard Art Museums, Kadist among others, and have been shown in multiple institutions worldwide.

Tobias Ostrander is a curator based in Mexico City. He currently serves as the Estrellita B. Brodsky Curator at Large, Latin America for Tate Modern. He was a curatorial advisor for the 2022 Aichi Triennial in Aichi Prefecture, Japan and the 2022 Platform Curator for The Armory Show in New York. His recent curatorial projects include "Taka Fernández: Paisaje Polidimensional" at Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros in Mexico City and "Cisco Jiménez: ANATÓMICA" at the Museo Amparo, Puebla.