

EXHIBITION REVIEW

US OR CHAOS

BPS22

Charleroi, Belgium

September 22, 2018–January 6, 2019

US OR CHAOS is a group exhibition held at BPS22 (previously called the Solvay Provincial Building, abbreviated as BPS22) in Charleroi, Belgium—a museum committed to showing international artwork that examines pressing social issues. This exhibit's title comes from a statement a Spanish riot police officer gave to Democracia, a Madrid-based artist collective. The collective's artworks are featured in the museum, among the works of twelve other contemporary artists. The exhibition focuses on two themes. It demonstrates the violence at the root of domestic and international politics. It also speaks of the paradox of modern democracy, which is in part responsible for that tension.

Democracy is a political regime that provides the most far-reaching political freedoms in the history of humanity. At the same time, all democratic regimes are also states, and states are fundamentally an expression of organized violence. *US OR CHAOS* points a finger squarely at the tension between the democratic nature of modern states, and the statist nature of modern democracies.

"It's either us or chaos" was the statement voiced by an anonymous riot policeman who participated in violently restraining protestors on the streets of Madrid in May of 2011. Citizens objected to Spain's high unemployment rates and political corruption, calling for urgent change.¹ The violation of their democratic rights was the reason for the uprising on May 15, 2011, culminating in the democratic event of a public demonstration. The result was a violent attempt at suppression, whereby riot police "imposed order" through beatings and threats, undermining a basic tenet of the "civilized West"—equal rights to free speech. Similar events repeated in Catalonia in 2017, as riot police shot rubber bullets at voters casting ballots during an attempt to hold an independence referendum.²

The police officer's assertion that citizens have to choose between the truncheon or chaos is a fundamentally authoritarian sentiment. It implies that police violence against demonstrators is a self-inflicted circumstance, absolving the state and its agents of responsibility. Max Weber saw the modern state primarily through the prism of the violence it monopolizes in the pursuit of its legal order.³ The Weberian statehood principle, as seen in the application of force to secure purported order, is in conflict with the democratic principle, as seen in freedom of action and expression. The artists in *US OR CHAOS* explicitly point to this paradox. They examine how state violence is realized through different mechanisms, from direct action by police forces, to violence as a result of the state's neglect of human life and security.

The multimedia exhibition's various elements constitute this narrative. The visitor is first introduced to projects by Kendell Geers, Democracia, and Andrei Molodkin. We are first confronted by a graphic text by Geers, titled *Virus (Revolution) 10* (2007),



Detail of *Working Class* (2016) from the series *We Protect You from Yourself 2013–18* by Democracia; © 2018 a/political; courtesy the artist and a/political; photograph by Gleb Kosorukov

which reads "THERE / VOLUT / IONI / SNOT / OVER." Formally, the artwork resembles an encrypted protest poster—an anarchic testament—declaring that change is possible.

Immediately after, we encounter a larger-than-life Carrara marble sculpture depicting a riot policeman holding an upward-facing machine gun, with a finger pressed to his lips in an authoritarian gesture of silence. The sculpture, *Working Class* (2016), stands as a guardian, a Cerberus, of the exhibition. Its alarming presence and command for silence threatens. The figure sends the self-contradictory message that liberty requires censorship and force. The sculpture belongs to a series of artworks by Democracia titled *We Protect You from Yourself 2013–18*, where the trope of the policeman recurs both as a salvation and a threat. The paradoxical identity of the policeman is symbolic of the defective relationship between democratic freedom and the state's monopoly of violence.



NO (2009) by Santiago Sierra; © 2018 a/political; courtesy the artist and a/political; photograph by Anthony Martin

Moreover, the policeman is not only a symbol of the state, but also its refined by-product.

Beside *Working Class* stands Molodkin's installation, *Transformer No.M208 (Eternity has the Smell of Oil)* (2014–18), composed of acrylic tubes supported by metal frames. The tubes are arranged to form three cages—each of which is measured to replicate prison cells in the current Russian court of law. Half the tubes emit a white light fuelled by activated argon gas, and the other half are filled with crude oil extracted from Iraq. As we navigate the space, we inadvertently become its prisoners. Molodkin attempts to illustrate the state's imposed borders that obstruct subjects' autonomy. The oil profits help restrict and imprison, as they are the proceeds that prop up the state.

Positioned on the other side of the bars are photographic portraits of Spanish riot police, taken by Democracia and titled *18 Retratos* (2014–18), also as part of the series *We Protect You from Yourselves*. Momentarily, we feel like prisoners patrolled by a row of men appointed as guardians of our civil liberties. Despite the invitation to study their unique features, their uniforms and

bare expressions strip them of their individuality. As a result, the policemen read as an obedient army, ready to employ force on a moment's notice. This project resulted in Democracia's prosecution under Spanish data protection laws, because the collective was not granted permission to photograph the subjects. Paperwork outlining the legal case is presented alongside the series, standing as a statement concerning creative freedom versus police anonymity. The paperwork consists of fourteen legal documents, mounted adjacent to the police portraits.

These projects are not about the small print—some overtly manifest the paradoxes of the democracy principle and the statehood principle. A departure from this message is demonstrated in the exhibition's second space, showing artworks like Franko B's *Sleeping Beauty* (2016). The artist confronts his audience with an innocent casualty of political unrest in a gesture of commemorating an anonymous victim. *Sleeping Beauty* borrows its formal qualities from funerary sculptures typical of the Italian Baroque. Made from Carrara marble, the relief slab depicts the corpse of a small child. Its contorted body is a hand-carved replica after a photograph of

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an unknown drowned child, presumed from Syria, who was found washed ashore off the coast of Libya in August 2015. The child's death was one among approximately one hundred and fifty. It was caused by the shipwreck of a boat filled with Palestinian and Syrian refugees. The original image was taken by the artist Khaled Barakeh, who shared it on social media in August 2015. Shortly after, Barakeh's photograph was taken down for content violation. Franko B's message is clear: state violence need not take the form of kinetic force as police action, but can also be a product of neglect or inability on the part of the state. The artist speaks of Syria's failure as a state, and the European Union's unwillingness to address the issue more forcefully by providing refugees with greater safety.

Teresa Margolles reinforces this message with her installation *Plancha* (2014), located in a sectioned-off space in the museum. Margolles's artwork is multisensory—*Plancha* features ten glowing hotplates set in the middle of a dimmed room's floor. Above each hotplate, a spout releases a single drop of water in isolated intervals. As each drop touches the hotplate, it audibly evaporates into a visible cloud that

dissolves into the air. It is likely that the distinct smell permeating the space is caused by the fluid, in which bloodied fabric was soaked. The fluid is stored in a pipe above the hotplate installation, and is invisible to the viewers. Margolles took the fabric used to clean a murder site at the Mexican border, soaking it in the water that drips onto the hotplates. The viewer of the installation participates by breathing in a murdered person's body, unaware unless they inquire. *Plancha* brings us in direct contact with the death of one of many victims of drug trafficking and prostitution in Mexico—yet another consequence of state failure.

The artists show the state's inability to protect despite promising its citizens safety, jointly undermining democratic freedoms and order. Nevertheless, *US OR CHAOS* does not intend to lament a collapse of humanity, as Geers's homecoming message—"the revolution is not over"—is revisited by Santiago Sierra and the artist collective David Brognon and Stéphanie Rollin as parts of the remaining exhibition.

Sierra's *NO* (2009) is an eponymous structure over two-and-a-half meters high, and half a ton in weight, that originally

Sleeping Beauty (2016) by Franko B; © 2018 a/political; courtesy the artist and a/political; photograph by Gleb Kosorukov





Virus (Revolution) 10 (2007) by Kendell Geers; © 2018 a/political; courtesy the artist and a/political

traveled to cultural, industrial, and working-class sites across the globe. The artwork is made of black marine plywood and consists of two characters—the letters N and O. They are mounted on a metal base, leaning backward. *NO* emphasizes a straightforward, powerful stance. Rejection is typically perceived negatively. In the context of this particular exhibition, *NO* changes meaning, being transformed from a message of rejection to one of empowerment. In *US OR CHAOS*, Sierra's project features a universal symbol of resistance, calling on its viewers to end passivity. In an interview, Sierra states, "The government is an imposition, it is not optional. I have not asked to be governed and I comply to the extent that I fear the apparatus of the state."⁴ Here, the artist links his work explicitly with the Weberian understanding of the state—an institution that uses violence for control, whose democratic values are subverted by its own constitution.

Sierra's sentiment ties in with the *Résilients* (2017), an installation by Brognon and Rollin. The steel structure was built in collaboration with the ex-employees of a construction and manufacturing firm in Charleroi. The firm, Caterpillar, closed in 2017, causing the loss of over two thousand jobs. *Résilients* is a colossal skeletal frame that resembles the entrance to Caterpillar's defunct factory. It urges viewers to enter a turnstile gate that temporarily traps them with an inbuilt hurdle. When one reaches the structure's limits, one is forced to exit. This strips the participant of the choice to continue interacting with the work, and to leave the armature on their own volition. *Résilients* references the necessity for humans in an industry, in the same way the artwork needs to be "activated" by the viewer's actions. Industry is depicted as an unyielding system that has the power to decide when a person becomes redundant—forcing them out of its hold.

The artwork's connection to Charleroi, the site of the exhibition, addresses the relevance of holding *US OR CHAOS* at BPS22. Charleroi is located fifty kilometers south of Brussels, which is the de facto capital of the European Union. Within close proximity to one of the most powerful global organizations, the exhibition's location could be ironizing, or a declaration akin to Sierra's *NO*. It could also stand as an epitaph to a revolutionary gesture.

Charleroi was one of the first areas in Europe to fully industrialize in the nineteenth century. After economic power began shifting to Belgium's northern Flemish part in the mid-twentieth century, Charleroi struggled to thrive economically.⁵ Industries like Caterpillar were crucial to the community's livelihood, their closure impacting thousands of families. An ongoing rise in unemployment has left Charleroi visibly depressed. This compels *US OR CHAOS* to read like a proselytizing intervention, in lieu of the revolutionary figure standing in a village's main square, imploring its people to rise against their corrupt leaders. The exhibition is a monument to this revolutionary gesture because the visionary trope needs an agitated audience to spring revolt. The exhibition's core theme repeats, as we face the seemingly insurmountable apparatus that silenced the audience. Speaking to this, the projects in the exhibition offer hope for resistance through knowledge.

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NOTES 1. "Spanish Riot Police Clash in Madrid with Anti-Austerity Protesters," *Guardian*, August 5, 2011, www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/05/spanish-police-clash-austerity-protesters. 2. Hannah Strange, James Badcock, and Halen Nianias, "Catalan Referendum: Riot Police 'Fire Rubber Bullets' at Crowd as They Block Voters at Besieged Polling Stations—Latest News," *Telegraph*, October 1, 2017, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/10/01/catalan-referendum-spanish-riot-police-force-way-polling-station. 3. "A state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory." Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 78. 4. Becky Haghanah-Shirwan and George Chetwode, *US OR CHAOS* Press Release, 2019, www.bps22.be/_dbfiles/lacentrale_files/3000/3073/US-OR-CHAOS-GDV-web-EN.pdf. 5. Leo Cendrowicz "How economics explains Belgium's rifts," *Brussels Times*, November 17, 2017, www.brusselstimes.com/opinion/9585/how-economics-explains-belgium-s-rifts.