

A shared story

I met Pedro Déniz in the summer of 1998, precisely at a time when I myself was about to cross a new bridge in life, since I was going to move from the Canary Islands to northern Spain. I met him at the exhibition room Sala Antifago, in Agaete, on the occasion of his second show after his years of stay in Morocco. At that show he presented his project titled *La Puente* (The Bridge). Franck González, a mutual friend who had a very close relationship with young artists in the Canary Islands, briefly introduced us to each other.

Pedro Déniz's *La Puente* is a project in progress. It is a turning point in the artist's oeuvre and career, since it opens an entire space related to the possibilities of art as a territory of possible communication. Around the metaphor of life as a journey, many levels of perception converge in *La Puente*. In order to title his project, Pedro Déniz borrowed a term from Old Spanish naval terminology. In that context, *la puente* (the vessel's bridge) was a feminine word. Together with the mainmast, the vessel's bridge provides the best visibility of the horizon. The first step to set up this project was to launch a mail art open call asking other artists to send to Pedro Déniz an artwork that could be contained in a bottle. The bottles in the project contained two things: artists' works and a letter written by Pedro Déniz himself explaining his project. Subsequently, the bottles were thrown into the Atlantic Ocean currents. The artistic action was performed on a boat, off the coast of the island of El Hierro, at the very same location where the former zero meridian was located for centuries, on Orchilla Point, before the British Empire moved it to Greenwich –where it became an universal time reference– following the loss of Spanish military and political hegemony. The bottles have been travelling in the currents of the Atlantic Ocean for years. Some have been found, one by one, here and there, around the islands and mainland of the Caribbean, and there is a greater chance that more bottles will be found in the future. Little by little, the finding of the bottles has drawn a particular map of the project. This map is not only made of locations themselves, but also of the relationships developed after the findings. In the present show, the project *La Puente* is settled in a specific room where a set of photographs, maps, original letters and all kind of documents is displayed, together with a very interesting and revealing documentary video showing the journey made by the artist to meet the people who had progressively found the bottles thrown into the Atlantic in 1998 from the other seashore. The project is dedicated to the artist's father, who passed away one month before the throwing of the bottles. In a similar vein, the current show is dedicated to the artist's mother.

In the autumn of 2000 I met María del Carmen Vila, Visual Arts Coordinator at the Council of the island of Gran Canaria. I met her on the occasion of the preparations and organisation of the co-ordination and production team in charge of the First Contemporary Art International Meeting that took place in Osorio (Teror, Gran Canaria) in May 2001. The meeting was titled *Naturaleza, Utopías y Realidades* (Nature, Utopias and Realities), but it was finally known by its acronym NUR. It was María del Carmen Vila herself who wisely suggested that visual art artists with great working ability and versatility worked on the event as production co-ordinators, since that would further facilitate –as indeed it did– the production of the event that was going to be held in the nature. Together with the co-ordination teams, the volunteers, the invited artists and Orlando Ruano, Pedro Déniz was one of the artists who worked steadily to

bring that adventure to a successful conclusion. The contribution to the general co-ordination of Isabel Saavedra Robaina and María del Carmen Rodríguez's projects in Osorio was fundamental, and today María del Carmen Rodríguez coordinates Pedro Déniz's show. That context of community work, common effort, and positive and constructive attitudes allowed us to easily overcome the difficulties of a project of that kind and complexity. Back then, I started to discover artist Pedro Déniz's deep human values, such as generosity, solidarity and commitment.

At the beginning of 2002, while planning the exhibition programme for the art space Espacio C – an international multidisciplinary contemporary art space located in an industrial unit in Camargo municipality, in Cantabria– I proposed Pedro Déniz to take part in the project *Imagen y Poder* (Image and Power). Similarly to the other projects being held at that space, in the show I proposed the artists' works be produced according to a suggested framework of action. The project gave us the opportunity to organise a new meeting between Pedro Déniz and Moroccan artist Mounir Fatmi. The Cypriot artist Nikos Charalambidis and the Cantabrian young artist Juan López completed the project. Together, Pedro Déniz and Mounir Fatmi carried out a performance the day of the opening. Their proposal was titled *Power Line – Imagen y Poder* (Power Line – Image and Power) and it recalled the years the artists spent together in Tanger, where they shared a studio as well as their work. At that time, at the start of the twenty-first century, after September 11, 2001, and following the subsequent declaration of war against Iraq, the artists' performance exposed the contradictions in the perception of Muslim and Christian cultures. For this project, Pedro Déniz made the following works: *Imagen y Poder*, *That's all folks*, *Preposiciones* (Prepositions), *7 de Octubre* (7 October) and *Power Line*, which are shown at the present exhibition.

In 2002 a meeting devoted to artistic actions and performances titled *Performando* (Performing) took place on the island of Gran Canaria. Together with other Canary Islands and Spanish artists, Pedro Déniz took part in it as an invited artist. There he carried out two performances. The first was performed at the backyard of the museum Casa Museo Pérez Galdós, and the second at the closing party held at the historic concert hall Cuasquías. In those performances the artist showed his capacity for action as well as the importance of performance in his overall contribution as a conceptual, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary artist, a contribution where installations, objects and language itself –the written and verbalised word– are of crucial importance. In his first artistic intervention titled *El papel de la memoria* (The Role and the Paper of Memory) he built a wall of 'bricks' made out of compacted newspapers –the press compressed. He called his bricks *P(r)ensamientos*. In that performance, the bricklayer artist disappeared behind the wall he had just built, and reappeared after a long silence, revolting, shouting and breaking the wall made out of his *P(r)ensamientos*. Then the artist distributed the bricks amongst the public. A sound atmosphere and a blackboard on which the artist freely wrote down concepts that interacted with the public completed the performance. The second performance took place on the closing festival of actions of the event, at the above-mentioned historic concert hall Cuasquías. The performance was titled *Callao* (Pebble). In it, the artist was wearing a white overalls and his head was immobilised by a protective plastic device similar to those worn by dogs when their ears are cropped. The artist walked around the public shouting the word 'callao' and distributing small stones, *callaos* (pebbles) on which he had written down texts and concepts. The request for silence –censorship– made by the art worker came together with the possibility of picking one pebble, and that maybe in order to throw the artist's concepts into the air.

In 2003, Brussels art space Camouflage –run by Angolan artist and activist Fernando Alvim– invited Camargo art space Espacio C to show a selection of works from its collection. The

works were shown together with installations and videos by artists Tania Bruguera, Juan López, Mounir Fatmi, Guillermo Gómez Peña, Juan Ybarra, Tracey Rose, Azat Sargsyan, Barthélémy Toguo, Luis Sosa and Pedro Déniz, who apart from that also carried out a performance. In the then recent and widespread paranoid atmosphere created by international terrorism at that time, after having visited the show art rooms as a common spectator, Pedro Déniz stopped in front of his work titled *7 de octubre* –an artwork made of flashing lights that was settled in a dark space, reminiscent of the only night image of the *allied* bombing of Baghdad broadcasted by Western media. Pedro Déniz undressed and got dressed again, creating a masculine image of Muslim background that was suggested by his Arabic-style trousers and slippers. His image was rounded off by a military garment and a shawl covering his face. In the silence of the art space, the artist moved from one room to another until he finally sat down on an armchair and started to unwind the cables that covered his face and a part of his body. In an atmosphere of psychological strain, simulating the detonation of an explosive device, the artist turned on –‘detonated’– a switch that put into action a device that, in reality, was made of coloured Christmas lights. That was the very same distant image shown in his work titled *7 de octubre*, which recalled the image repeatedly broadcasted by the media. Before the astonished silence of the audience, the artist had just presented his performance titled *The Japy New Year*. A selection of images from that performance, a group of pictures taken from the art space *Camouflage* and a large group of bottles containing Molotov cocktails composed the artist’s following project, *Implosión* (Implosion), which was displayed at the art gallery Saro León in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria in 2003.

In 2003, with some other artists from the Canary Islands, Pedro Déniz took part in *Espacios Mestizos* (*Mixed Race Spaces*), the Second Contemporary Art International Meeting in Osorio. He participated in that project both as an artist and a production co-ordinator. The truth is that the artist has always shown –and he still does– an amazing working capacity that goes hand in hand with high quality, and that is always an assurance when working with him. Due to his attitude, generosity and experience, Pedro Déniz is one of those artists who make things easier and always have an alternative proposal in case of unforeseen eventualities. On the occasion of that international event he presented his work *Triunfos, Senderos del pensamiento* (Triumphs, Paths of Thought). The work consisted of a large-size sculpture made of COR-TEN steel, painted red, and similar in its form to a commemorative triumphal arch, the interior of which was bottle-shaped. Once again, as was the case in his reference project *La Puente*, and as is usual in his entire artistic production, the bottle appears and constitutes a symbol –an icon– of communication. On that occasion the artist invited spectators to cross under the artwork, to be the messages contained in that bottle-shaped triumphal arch. This sculpture makes sense when spectators pass under it, when they become, for one moment, possible messages, since there are as many messages as people passing under. On the top of that triumphal arch painted blood red, the following initials can be read: A. T. C. G. This acronym is a reference to the basic principles of DNA (adenine, thymine, cytosine and guanine), highlighting the idea that we are not different from each other despite skin colour, gender, nationality or race. Pedro Déniz completed his participation in that international event carrying out a simultaneous performance together with Moroccan artist Mounir Fatmi –another of the many performances both artists carried out together during their common stay in Tanger. This time Pedro Déniz was on a table that was settled on a red carpet. The carpet connected both artists’ spaces of action. Slowly, Pedro Déniz pulled the petals off the ‘thought flowers’ placed at his side, putting the petals on a dish. After that, the artist began to eat them –the ‘thoughts’– while he carefully controlled the time of the performance. Then he violently threw the pot to the carpet. But some of the ‘thought flowers’ were relieved and given to the public.

The red carpet is associated to the carpet of power, since only the selected members of the aristocracy, the royalty, the church and the upper bourgeoisie, together with film stars and mass media stars can walk on it. But this carpet is also stained with blood; it is a carpet that shames us due to our double standards of morality, which hide and conceal all our contradictions. The artist himself refers to that carpet as “the dignitaries’ carpet”, which is a curious term since ‘dignitaries’ are defined as the owners of dignity. But this is also the carpet the artist offers to the people who have been deprived of their dignity. The artist has chosen this element, which entails an undoubted symbolic and aesthetic effectiveness, and has laid different versions of this visual and political device with various purposes: to build bridges, to welcome the most underprivileged by opening new and dignified communication routes, and to invite spectators to transit his projects as spaces also devoted to conscience. Laid on the streets of the city, on the beaches and coast all over the world, on the ground of forests, on a graveyard of *patera* boats, on the floor of an abandoned church, and on the floors of museums and art centres, Pedro Déniz’s red carpets have become a crucial element identifying his work, a symbolic space of considerable repercussions, similar to his bottles and the rest of his formal and symbolic territory. This element and icon plays a fundamental role within the conceptual structure of his oeuvre, which is one of profound social and political importance, originating in the artist’s indignation faced with the tragic and vulnerable situation of migrants and of the most underprivileged, those who risk their life –and many times lose it in the attempt– following the respectable wish to live in a better world. A journey that should allow them to head towards a utopian horizon, to arrive to a place free of war, genocide, hunger, poverty, disease and deprivation of the most essential rights and freedoms. In the face of that, the Western world –until recently known as the ‘first world’ according to the classist and postcolonial term by which it called itself– does not tackle the issue with the courage it deserves, but hides under a carpet made out of demagoguery and selfishness. This is the very same depredatory selfishness that made the Western world rich, enormously rich, after having colonised, dominated and sacked the home countries and territories of those migrants. In the face of this reality, artist Pedro Déniz lays his red carpets to welcome them, *Welcome*, and to restore the dignity they deserve, their sacked dignity.

In an attempt of further developing and expanding the symbolic possibilities of the material and colour of the red carpet, the artist uses it together with similar materials in many of his object proposals –such as the cover of this catalogue– transforming them into places where a whole range of conceptual proposals are displayed using images and texts.

With little time to rest, right after the intense experience of *Espacios Mestizos* we were already fully involved in the organisation of the project *Naturaleza y Coexistencia* (Nature and Co-existence), the First Contemporary Art International Meeting that took place in Esles de Cayón, in Cantabria. This was a similar experience to the previous one in Osorio, but on a minor scale and adapted to the geography and characteristics of that beautiful Cantabrian town and location. On the occasion of that new project Pedro Déniz presented the first work in a series titled *Trincheras del Pensamiento* (Trenches for Thought), a fantastic art intervention that would start a fundamental series of interventions such as the one he showed in Mexico in 2007 or the one shown later at the Tenth Havana Biennial in 2009. A very interesting version of that work in terms of design and symbology is shown in the current retrospective show held at the museum Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno’s building located at the street Calle Los Balcones, 9. His first *trench for thought* was set up in a nature site where the meadows were surrounded by centuries-old oaks. The work invited the public to climb the stairs placed on both its sides and to look inside it in order to discover and observe the ‘flowers of thought’. In the framework of the performances that took place during the opening of the project, together with Cantabrian artist Silvia Antolín Guerra, Pedro Déniz developed a moving performance titled *Sin paraíso* (Without Paradise) –a reference to the tragedy of migration.

Only some months later we met again in a shared journey from Paris to Bamako, Mali. We travelled to Bamako in order to take part, together with Canary Islands artists Pérez & Joel, at the artistic event *Reencuentros de la Photographie Africaine*, known as Bamako Contemporary African Photography Biennial. We showed our work in Bamako, at one of the spaces of the gallery Chab Touré, the first and the only gallery that specialises in African photography in the continent. I must mention the wonderful experience of working with Chab Touré and, above all, of staying in such a lively neighbourhood in Bamako. Children and neighbours accompanied us every day and helped us with everything we needed. A photography workshop had been organised in the neighbourhood some days prior to our arrival. It was addressed to neighbours and the selected photos had been framed and displayed on the façades of the houses. That was a matter of pride for the neighbourhood and the photos were there to be enjoyed by the national and international public attending the Biennial. On this occasion Pedro Déniz presented a photographic installation belonging to his open series titled *Welcome*. In the installation the red carpets came out of the ocean portrayed in the photos and became real, as a physical continuation of the photos, on the floor of the exhibition room. To show his proposal in that country was particularly moving for the artist, since Mali is one of the most important countries of origin of the migrants who risk the almost impossible journey to Europe, a journey often cut short in the middle of the ocean. The artist seized the opportunity arising from his stay in Bamako to record two fundamental videos of his series *Welcome*. Those videos are also shown in the current show being held today at the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno (CAAM).

In 2004 a selection of works borrowed from the collection of Espacio C in Camargo was presented at the exhibition room La Granja, in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, and at the art centre Centro de Arte La Regenta, in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, both belonging to the Canary Islands government. Pedro Déniz carried out a series of performances on both opening days. In the art centre Centro de Arte La Regenta he carried out his performance titled *Mayday, la indiferencia* (Mayday, indifference). 'Mayday' is a French term coming from maritime emergency code; it is a distress signal, similar to the Saxon code signal SOS. When spectators gained access to one of the corridor rooms placed on both sides of the first floor at La Regenta they found a long red carpet. On both sides of the carpet there were transistor radios switched on. The transistor radios were simultaneously emitting sounds, tuned into different radio frequencies and stations. That created a chaotic and disturbing atmosphere charged with tension and insecurity. Under the laid carpet there was a bulk; the presence of a person could be suspected. At its end, the carpet spread out on a vertical screen where a small curtain covering a memorial plaque could be observed. The performance was put into action and the body started to advance slowly, to move anxiously, creating a claustrophobic tension while progressively nearing the end of the performance. Towards the end, the body stopped and started tapping the carpet and convulsing; it was as if the carpet could be tear at any time, as it was indeed the case a few moments later, when the artist's hand came out of the carpet, and then his arm, his head, his shoulders, until all his body was progressively freed. Then the artist appeared bare-chested and kneeling; he bent down slowly with his arms against his body. Subsequently his torso stood straight and he unfolded his arms. The artist repeats that movement in other videos and actions; like a formal and symbolic synthesis, that movement recalls a fusion of liturgies coming from Muslim and Christian cultures. In the performance, when the movement finally came to an end, the curtain was opened. It revealed a memorial plaque that looked like both a death notice and a warning message similar to those written on cigarette packets about health damage. The notice said: "Indifference could seriously damage your health and the health of those around you".

By the end of 2005, with the imminence of a possible definitive closing down of Espacio C in Camargo in 2006, the artist played a very active part and started to mobilise artists and people

close to Espacio C. On that occasion he asked us to allow the artists and people linked to Espacio C to organise an event to ask openly for the continuation of the art space. This way he took the lead in coordinating a working team composed of a significant number of artists and friends of Espacio C. The opening of that project took place on 10 March 2006. It was titled *La verbena de los sentidos* (The outdoor dance of the senses). That night a major multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary project was presented. More than a hundred artists, poets, writers, musicians and everyone else wishing to express their view took part in it. Pedro Déniz did not only play a fundamental role in the conception and co-ordination of the project, but also took an active part in its design and museography. He did so in co-operation with other artists closely linked to the project. The artist also carried out a performance of great symbolical strength on the day of the opening. Wearing mountain boots, shorts and braces on his bare chest, and having an eye mask over his eyes preventing him from seeing, he got close to a piñata in the form of the letter 'C' –a direct reference to the name of the art space. Blindly, little by little he started to try to hit the piñata with a baseball bat. After numerous attempts he managed to begin to break that 'C' made out of cardboard. At a certain point the final fracture took place and many bread rolls in the form of letter 'C' fell to the ground. Then many trays with different sauces appeared on the scene carried by friends from the Canary Islands. So the public had the chance to taste the sauces pouring them over those ephemeral 'Cs' made of flour, salt and leavening, travelling through the senses.

In 2006 we travelled to Dakar Biennial, in Senegal, together with Canary Islands artists Grego Matos, Dácil Granados, Beatriz Lecuona, Óscar Hernández and Gregorio Viera. We went to Dakar Biennial to present our project titled *Meeting Point*, a proposal of a meeting point for exchange. The project was made by the above-mentioned Canary Islands artists and consisted in a series of photos, videos, computer graphics and Internet content. The project considered both Dakar and the Canary Islands as meeting points for contemporary art and culture in the African continent and the Canary Islands. At the Biennial Pedro Déniz presented his video titled *Ajuy*, which was filmed in the ravines of Ajuy hamlet, located in the municipality of Pájara, on the west coast of the island of Fuerteventura. With his camera, taking a subjective shot, the artist filmed the slopes of the ravines where the inhabitants of the hamlet had progressively sculpted on the stone forms related to love and life. Over time many of those forms have become abstractions, creating subtle wall hangings expressing the feelings of that people. In the video, with the sounds of the wind in the background, a subjective shot is used to film those artistic interventions while a selection of texts similar to subtitles progress and describe human beings as being the inhabitants of a symbolical universe. The video ends with a series of images of the Atlantic Ocean, the shared space between the Canary Islands and the African west coast.

The next working experience we shared was the project *Tránsitos, los territorios de la realidad* (Transits, the Territories of Reality). Mexican artist César Martínez curated the project and Canary Islands artists José Luis Luzardo and Domingo Díaz also took part in it. The project was shown at the art gallery Galería Metropolitana in Mexico City towards the end of 2007 and early part of 2008. In the framework of this project Pedro Déniz presented his second *trench of thought*. On this occasion the trench had the form of a circle; it was a kind of cylindrical trench designed to be placed in an interior space.

Prior to undertaking the retrospective project being shown today at the centre for contemporary culture San Martín Centro de Cultura Contemporánea, our most recent collaboration took place in 2009. I am referring to Pedro Déniz's participation in the Tenth Havana Biennial titled *Integration and Resistance in the Global Era*. Nobody can fail to see that a proposal such as *Trincheras del pensamiento* was going to adapt and fit very well into the framework of action of the Biennial. And that was indeed the case, since the Biennial's

curatorial team supported Pedro Déniz's project from the very beginning. The Canary Islands artists Paco Guillén, Pipo Hernández and Rafael Hierro also participated in the Biennial. Artist Pedro Déniz needed that the Havana Biennial provided him with a truck full of sand or soil to fill the hundreds of sacks that were going to be used to build his new trench. Before our arrival to the Havana, a mountain of soil had already been placed very close to the place allocated to the artist at the Biennial complex. Apart from that, it was crucial to be able to count on a group of assistants helping the artist to fill and carry the sacks of soil, as well as to build the trench under his instructions. At this point I wish to reiterate our appreciation to the Cuban artist Kacho for the generous human help he offered to us. Kacho's action consisted in taking to the Biennial a group of volunteers made up of young men and women from all around the country who came to the fortresses of El Morro and La Cabaña for the occasion. The volunteers camped there for several weeks for the purpose of helping in the production of the Biennial. That enthusiastic group of young men and women were part of the team called Martha Machado, a tribute artist Kacho payed to his mother. I must confess that since I observed Pedro Déniz working with those young people the very first day of work, I was sure that he would not only be delighted with their proximity and warmth, but that he also would end up being emotionally attached to them, as indeed it happened. Some days later he decided to leave the family house where he was staying in Havana until his installation was completed. Then he moved to the camp with the team of volunteers, and stayed with them in the huts as an equal amongst them.

At this point I think that my account cannot accommodate any more chapters of our shared story of coexistence and mutual understanding –chapters such as the projects and collaborations made with Mexican artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña for his photography portfolios as well as in the co-ordination of his shows of performances, produced by the tireless art gallery Saro León.

I will be always extremely grateful to Pedro Déniz for all the experiences we have shared, for his passion and great sense of solidarity in art and culture fields, for merging art and life into a single indisociable unity, and for his commitment to the most underprivileged. I am confident and I hope that in the years to come we will write a second chapter of this story that now comes to its end with words charged with emotion.

Finally I should like to express my sincere thanks to the Council of the island of Gran Canaria, to the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, and to its Director, Omar-Pascual Castillo, for having commissioned this project from me, to María del Carmen Rodríguez, Co-ordinator of this show, and, of course, to the fantastic team of technicians and other professionals working at the CAAM, many of them former colleagues I appreciate deeply.

*Orlando Britto Jinorio
Santander, July 2014*