

A N O T H E R
C A N C E L L E D
P R O J E C T B Y
N Ú R I A G Ü E L L

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Too Much Melanin. GIBCA. Sweden, 2013. Credit Levi Orta

Three hours elapse between two emails, and the project is cancelled. One email addresses elements of a production that is already underway, and three hours later a message winds up the project. There's no turning back, no room for negotiation. There's no internal process hinting at a possible cancellation. In an instant, it all explodes. In truth, it had begun to explode from the very moment the project was set in motion.

But let's rewind a bit. The project Núria Güell had created for the Göteborg Biennial drew a great deal of media attention in Sweden. It consisted in having an immigrant — someone who dwelt on the margins of the law and was in the process of seeking asylum — play hide-and-seek with the visiting public. On one side, someone who in fact had to hide in real life; on the other, visitors who would be invited to have some fun playing a game. The project provoked many reactions and a lot of discussion. The (quite real) person whose role it would be to hide was willing to talk openly about the meaning of staging this situation within art, and also about his life. Since it came with a contract, the job of playing hide-and-seek would help him earn a residence permit and thus provide an avenue towards a positive response to his application for asylum. But in the artwork, the visitors were at once the controllers he had to evade and the people he had to confront with inequality. *We don't all enjoy equal rights. I have to hide, and my family does too. You are playing, and doing so in an artistic context; my life is at stake and here I am, playing with you and appealing directly to you.* There would be a tinge of antagonism, as well as a blatant demonstration of the existence of a power structure. Some individuals have more rights than others, depending on their place of birth, and when viewed from a position of comfort, injustice sometimes arouses a sense of unease — all the more so in a society like Sweden, in which humanitarian and political aid are built into its modern definition of national identity, as a purported element of its DNA.

Edi Muka, the director of the city's Röda Sten art centre, was commissioned to organise the Göteborg Biennial at the time that Núria Güell was creating her project. Later, Muka became part of the "dream team" that Magdalena Malm put together at Statens konstråd, the Swedish government agency that is entrusted with promoting public art. Over a period of more than seventy years, the agency has been responsible for bringing art to society in the form of sculptures and collections in public spaces. That the whole country is dotted with small sculptures, and that art has a real presence in every neighbourhood, is largely due to Statens konstråd. Magdalena Malm had assumed the post of director of the agency on the heels of her excellent results at MAP (Mobile Art Projects), where she produced works in the public space under a concept of time and performativity distinct from the classical ideal according to which "art in the public space" is a synonym for a "sculpture in the round." Apart from signing up the soon-to-be former director of Röda Sten, she also brought on

board Lisa Rosendahl, a curator who was coming off a stint directing IASPIS in Stockholm after previously serving at the helm of BAC in Visby.

Statens konstråd's first major project under Malm was coordinating the Creative Time Summit in Stockholm in conjunction with the New York-based arts organisation Creative Time. Mobilising several institutions, the Summit had a core programme of presentations and keynote speeches, and managed to sell out in record time. For the Summit, Statens konstråd wanted to produce a work by Núria Güell. Everyone involved — Magdalena Malm as well as the curators — agreed on that point.

Güell outlined two possible projects: one that would address the global economy and another, more specific, that would tackle what is the most sensitive issue in Sweden at the moment, namely the problem posed by destitute Romanian immigrants begging on the streets. Their presence has come as a total shock, because the existence of poor people among the Swedes is unthinkable. Although Núria Güell would have preferred to work conceptually with the economy, the agency opted for the project involving Romanian gypsies. From the first meeting they were aware that the project would attract media attention and create tension and debate. But, hey, that's a good thing, isn't it? The curators admired Güell's work and her conceptual grounding as an artist. They also endorsed the desire to have contemporary art serve as a forum for possible social and political discussion. That is the mandate the agency has set itself. At the time the meeting was held, an alliance of right-wing parties was in power. SD (Sweden Democrats), a far-right party with roots in the national-socialist movements of the 1930s, was skyrocketing both in the polls and in media focus.

The project that Güell envisioned, entitled *Support Swedish Culture*, essentially involved hiring four EU migrants, ethnic Roma people from Romania who had been "begging" in the streets, to "raise funds" on behalf of Swedish culture. Playing with power and with language, it promised to drop several foreseeable bombs. "Begging" amounts to being at the mercy of the goodwill of others, while "fundraising" plays an active part in today's economic system and does so from an entrepreneurial position that reflects an assimilation of neoliberal premises and their implementation in global policies. "Begging" means being on the ground, inactive, waiting for other people, decent hard-working folk, to make a gesture, while those involved in "fundraising" speak on an equal basis with those they are engaging with, asking them to share in a given goal. The money requested was intended to fund Swedish culture. But what exactly is "Swedish culture"? Who is entitled to make use of that concept? Can Romanian gypsies beg for money on behalf of Swedish culture? Who would they be trying to fool? There are no such ambiguities when the extreme right talks about Swedish culture; they talk about "we, the people



Too Much Melanin.
GIBCA. Sweden, 2013.
Credit Attila Urban



and culture of Sweden.” But, gypsies raising money for Swedish culture! Race, class, identity, economic system, legal framework, and power structure — everything would be turned on its head.

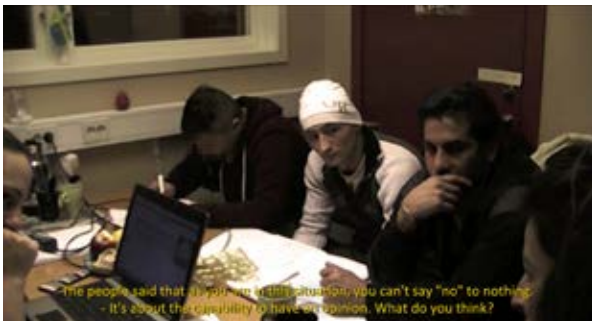
The production work, led by Edi Muka, was faultless. Various partners were sought: some conversant with the legal system and others who had contacts with EU migrants. Four individuals who were well-qualified for the job were approached; apart from paying them a good salary, it was decided that they should be given classes in Swedish so that they would be better able to handle one-to-one conversations. Everything got underway.

Inevitably, there were setbacks. When one of Stockholm’s major cultural institutions was sounded out to see whether it would join the project as a recipient of the funds that would be collected, it declined to participate, reportedly on ethical grounds. To begin with, they weren’t sure that people living in such precarious conditions were not in fact being exploited; secondly, they suggested that, if the purpose were to help, then it would be better to invest the money directly in Romania, the country of origin of the hired participants, so as to improve living conditions there. This latter reason put one of Sweden’s cultural institutions on the same wavelength as the rising far right.

So the situation involved four individuals with a job contract, an NGO that was highly active in supporting migrant people, a state agency dedicated to art, and an artist working on a project that was intended to wage battle against a number of elements. To begin with, it would act disruptively within a society paralysed by the arrival of hordes of destitute people. The system was unable

to react, no state structure was capable of grasping the situation, and it was left up to individuals or non-governmental organisations to take up the slack. The project also focused on day-to-day life on the street and the process of invisibilisation in which poverty continues to exist even though one no longer sees it. It would rail against the imposition of an ideologically-laden vocabulary that organises — and normalises — a system based on class and ethnicity. It would question the construction of a national cultural identity and ask to whom that identity belongs and who is entitled to act on its behalf.

Just at that moment, national elections were called. Until then, Magdalena Malm, though working at Statens konstråd under a right-wing government, had maintained a critical outlook on social issues. The outcome of the elections forced a change in government — and then something happened. The new minority government was made up of the Social Democrats and the Green Party. Ideologically speaking they were closer — at least theoretically — to Núria Güell's proposal, but the agency's role started to get complicated. It was working on a project of critique precisely at a time when the government was purportedly closer to its position. It was no longer so easy to release that critical broadside from within the institution, given that creating tension and debate was perhaps not what the new government "needed" right at that moment.



Support Swedish Culture. Video frame. Sweden, 2014.
Credit Núria Güell



The elections posed another serious problem: the extreme right, with a platform based exclusively on the expulsion of immigrants from the country, finished in third place — and they held the key to a parliament where the governing coalition lacked an absolute majority. Politically speaking, the project conceived by Núria Güell raised twofold concerns: it would attack a system that was now politically weak but that was oriented towards positions that could be regarded as ideologically akin, and it could also have been turned into a populist weapon by the extreme right. The programme of the Social Democrats increased the allocation set aside for the purpose of bringing contemporary art to districts on the outskirts of cities, which meant that Statens konstråd stood to play a major role in managing substantial funding.

Núria Güell's project continued under development until a totally unexpected factor emerged: transparency. Given that Statens konstråd is a state organisation, all of its projects are open to public scrutiny. This means that citizens, even if they're not aware of it, can access information about the process of work being developed by the curators there. A news agency that specialised in tracking public documentation to see whether it could drum up and sell some item of news discovered that Statens konstråd was working on something having to do with Romanian immigrants. They called around and made inquiries and got the scoop they were looking for, perfect for radio and TV news. Then nervousness set in, a great deal of nervousness. Just three hours passed between an email engaging with the process of work and an email cancelling the project. Magdalena Malm stated on a TV program that they weren't prepared to provide answers about what they were doing and that as she didn't want to put anyone at risk, she was cancelling the project. The Sweden Democrats, the party that advocates a return to cultural purity, also inquired about the money that was to be spent on the project; as a party with representation in parliament it was entitled to demand all of the relevant material from the agency. Núria Güell asked not to be forced to reveal the identity of the four migrants hired by the state to do fundraising for Swedish culture. With a substantial amount of money having already been spent, the project was unilaterally cancelled.

Núria Güell met with the four Romanian gypsies in a highly emotional meeting during which some significant statements and concepts were voiced. The four migrants were surprised that no one had asked for their opinions and that everyone else was deciding on their behalf. If there was any risk involved, they argued, they were able to make up their own minds; they knew perfectly well when someone was taking advantage of them. They were upset and didn't understand why others were allowed to make the decision for them. Because they lived in the streets and slept in waste ground, it seemed, anyone could do whatever they wished with them without any consequences. The Swedish state had given them a real chance, and now it had been snatched away.

They had been told that they were no one and would never be anyone. They could continue to be paid to do nothing, but they saw no sense in that. They believed that every individual should be allowed to set his or her own limits, no matter how extreme the circumstances. They declared, for instance, that they would never work as prostitutes. The girl — there was one girl and three boys — explained that she would work as a cleaner, but one of the boys vowed that he would never do such work. Another boy replied that he would clean windows. They started to talk about the boundaries between the dignified and the undignified, but all of them agreed that when a contract puts you on an equal footing, and when everything is specified on paper, you have the right either to sign it or not. They had a contract, and the state had breached it. The NGO had also been the victim of a breach of contract; they had carried out many of the procedures and they were the ones who had been tasked with finding a person to conduct Swedish classes — another salary to be paid by the Swedish state. Already there were five external salaries to be paid for several months for a project that nobody wanted to have anything to do with any longer. If the NGO wished to sue the state they would probably have won, but they elected not to.

The Creative Time Summit arrived. Caught up in the middle of this situation, Núria Güell took part in the conference and made her presentation, which had been on the schedule right from the word go. Each artist was allotted ten minutes, and Güell used her time to speak about other projects, not mentioning the one that had just been cancelled by the body organising the Summit. Later, someone from an art journal asked her why she hadn't spoken about the cancelled project, since the information about it was in the public domain and, even though it had been cancelled, it was in some ways still active. Núria Güell replied that the format of the Creative Time Summit didn't provide for a discussion, nor did she have enough time to explain satisfactorily what was happening. A large part of the article about the Creative Time Summit published by that journal focused on the cancelled project. The Summit was divided into various sections, with presentations dealing with emigration, political action, or nationalisms, with the participation of Saskia Sassen, Tania Bruguera, Jonas Dahlberg, and Joanna Warsza, among others. Several projects were explained and a discussion took place about the need for art to be engaged in an increasingly worrisome reality.

The government went into crisis mode. In the national parliament, the extreme-right party and the alliance of right-wing parties rejected the budget. The crisis meant that there would be more elections in a few months, and the coalition of Social Democrats and Greens was forced to continue working within the budget drafted by the previous right-wing government.

Núria Güell proposed redirecting the project to take stock of everything that had happened, either through interviews or discussion. Much was at stake — a lot of groundwork and investment. But Statens konstråd didn't want to “uncancel” Núria Güell's project. It had already been cancelled, therefore doing something with it would mean starting a *new* project, and there were no plans for a new one. Everything was becoming entangled in the logic of red tape.

Another project by Núria Güell had been cancelled. Another project that didn't get beyond the production stage, another project that didn't reach the situation of real confrontation that it had been intended to achieve. Another project that remained in the domain of art and couldn't step onto the street. Another project by Núria Güell for which “people are not ready.” It's a phrase she has had to hear on more than one occasion, although this time it was the institution itself, rather than the society interrogated by her works, that was not prepared. However, on some level, the project *has* continued working: it has triggered a crisis, it has forced a rethinking of the acceptance of political *diktats* from a governmental organisation, it has been taken up by the media, and it has sparked a debate on the limits of what can and cannot be done. The various stances adopted are cloaked in morals, the structure of informal power has become formalised, and terms like institutional racism and classism are starting to be taken under consideration. The attempt to alleviate problems gives rise to new ones and introduces doubts about the management of an agency that promises to give shape to a new hub in the country's institutional contemporary art system. The shot backfires. Stopping the bullet means becoming the victim. And with victims, just as with Romanian gypsies, the best thing to do is to keep them at a prudent distance.



Creative Time Summit Stockholm
2014. Video frame.