

Assuming Asymmetries





LA GALERIE DES LOCATAIRES

(The Tenants' Gallery)

Paris and Other Places, 1972–Present

Artists/Contributors: Francesc Abad, Martin Abbaléa, Marina Abramović, Alice Aycock, Alain Bally, Didier Bay, Phil Berkman, Terry Berkowitz, Jean-Pierre Bertrand, Sonia Biard, Dunja Blažević, Christian Boltanski, Bernard Borgeaud, Charles le Bouil, Jacques Boursault, Claude Gilles Boutillon, Bruno, Daniel Buren, André Cadere, Philippe Cazal, Jacques Charlier, Michel Corfou, Mike Crane, Robin Crozier, Radomir Damjanović Damjan, Jacqueline Dauriac, Devichi, Jan Dibbets, Braco Dimitrijević, Eugenie Dubreuil, Da Rocha, Espiga, Michele Feltrin, Fernando de Filippi, Hervé Fischer, Alain Fleischer, Marie Cecile Froment, Antonio Gallego, Paul-Armand Gette, Giverne, Nicole Gravier, Sandro Greco, Klaus Groh, Groupe TO, G. S. C., G. S. K. C., Vladimir Gudac, Christian Hersant, Jocelyn Herve, Hessie, Pierre Hubert, Sanja Iveković, Miroslav Klivar, Sinisa Knaflec, Thierry Kuntzel, Nina Kujundzic, László Beke, Johannes Leismüller, Renato Mambor, Philippe Maj, Jozef Markulik, Jonier Marin, Dalibor Martinis, David Mayor, Annette Messenger, Antoni Muntadas, Sergio Oliva, Jacques Palumbo, Gina Pane, Pierre et Gilles, Pineau, Josep Ponsatí, Zoran Popović, Àngels Ribé, Gilles Richard, Maurice Roquet, Jean Roulaldès, Alain Roussel, Jerry Saltz, Sarkis, Predrag Sidjanin, Katharina Sieverding, Michael Snow, Danka Šošić-Vijatović, Nicole Stenger, Nikola Stojanović, Françoise Sullivan, Edward Suzanna, Bálint Szombathy, Mirosljub Todorović, Francesc Torres, Endre Tót, Goran Trbuljak, Peter Valentiner, Jiří Valoch, Pierre Vandrepote, William Vazan, Žarko Vijatović, and Paul Woodrow

Curator: Ida Biard

Edited by Marc Navarro

André Cadere, *Six Pièces de Cadere*, La Galerie des Locataires, 1973. Photo: Archive of La Galerie des Locataires, Paris

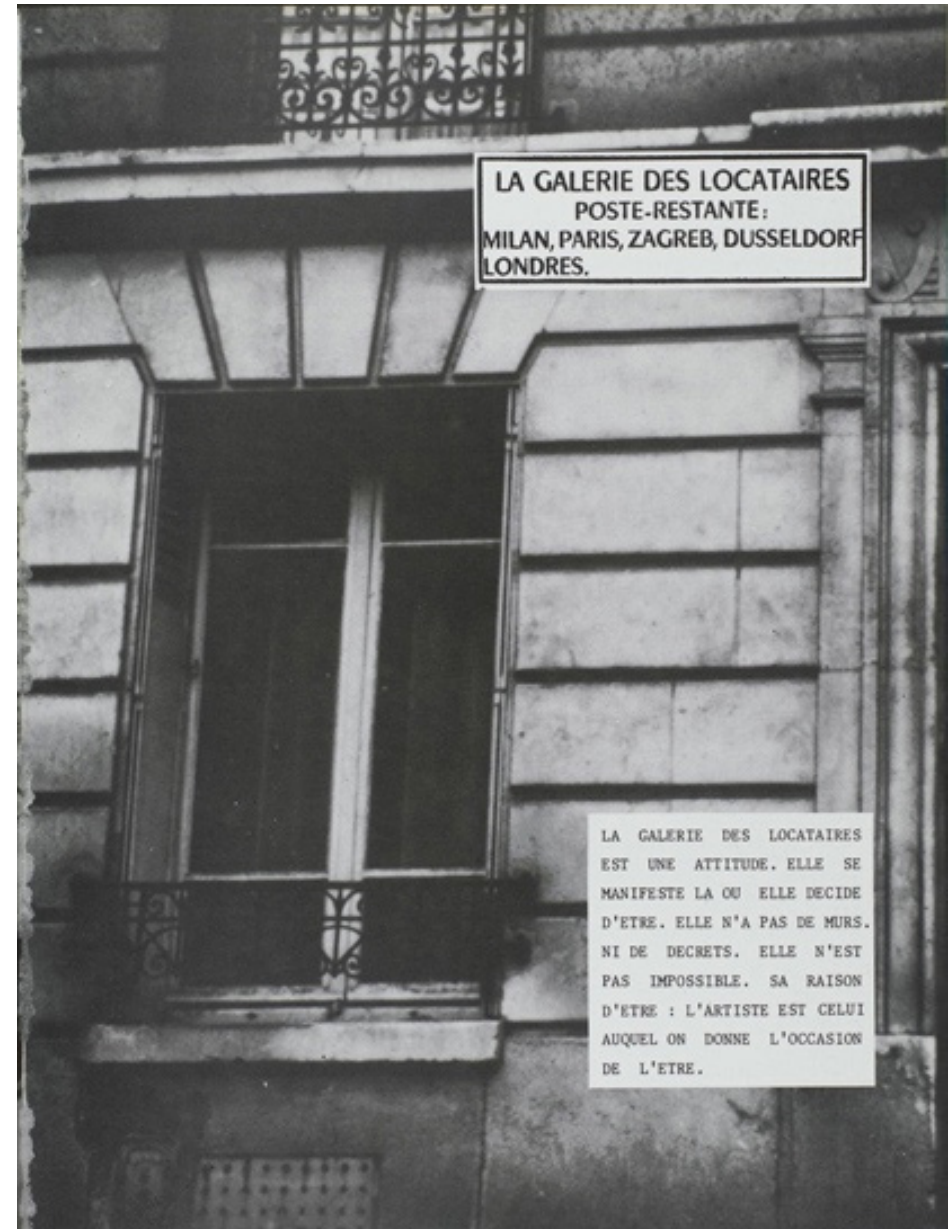
Communications: Ida Biard and the Question of the Public

Marc Navarro

Ida Biard defines La Galerie des Locataires (The Tenants' Gallery) as “a concept that led to practice.” Given that since its foundation in 1972 La Galerie was defined as an adaptable structure rather than a physical space, the name Biard chosen for the project purportedly invited to confusion and misunderstanding. The aim of this peculiar “gallery” and its activities was precisely to offer an experimental framework in which the transactional relations enabled by commercial galleries were deactivated. Through their activities La Galerie des Locataires gave room to artists that subverted the conventional models of dissemination of art, often inserting their works in the public space and question the contract between the artist and the audience, the temporality of art and its ability to actively influence everyday life.

La Galerie des Locataires emerged in parallel to conceptual practices between the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s. And with these arose the need for new spaces and structures suitable to accommodate the specific needs of an art that challenged the institutional and commercial framework of museums and galleries. While self-management was adopted by artists as the only viable method of producing their works, the emergence of alternative spaces met a fundamental need to disseminate and mediate without resorting to the traditional models. This operation enabled the appearance of new forms of relation between the work and the specific context in which it was inserted—in the case of Galerie des Locataires often appearing unexpectedly and parasitizing public space. The sense of urgency displayed by many of these artists and spaces informed the radical character of their works. In this context, what makes Biard's project especially relevant was the rejection of a stable structure and the adoption of circulating and ephemeral exhibition models. As Biard states, Galerie des Locataires “has no walls,” “is an attitude.”

Being “an attitude” instead of an enclosed “place” defined an approach to the artistic milieu that took into consideration the impact of art on the social fabric from which, according to Biard, it cannot be separated. Attitudes describe the way we operate in the world, expose our ethics, our affinities, and our dissent. Writing in 1989 of the specific social conditions and role of art in the moment that fostered La Galerie des Locataires, Beatrice Parent explained: “art was not a factor of integration, which would provoke recognition, but on the contrary a factor of resistance, an ideological tool for a radical change.”



“La Galerie des Locataires is an attitude. It shows up wherever it decides to be. It has no walls. No dictats. It is not impossible. Its *raison d'être*: to give the artist an opportunity to be.” Photo: Archive of La Galerie des Locataires, Paris

The convulsive sixties and their crystallization in the events of May '68 had an indubitable impact on the practice and critical work of an important group of intellectuals whose work developed further in the seventies, one of whom was Biard. In the curator's own words: "May '68 was an explosion of the frustrated aspirations of a youth animated by ideas of liberation and expectations of change from a society that had not yet escaped the political system of the 19th century ruling class. The support of some intellectuals, as well as the anti-bourgeois opening up to workers, the occupation of the Sorbonne, the Théâtre de l'Odeon, and the participation of artists from all creative fields, left a deep mark on the art world for a minority, of which I was a part. The violent repression of power, as well as the hypocrisy of a bourgeoisie afraid of losing its privileges, were the reasons for this social shift." Biard settled in Paris in 1963. Her student years at the Sorbonne coincide with the academic and artistic reception of Situationist thought and the group's theories concerning "unitary urbanism," "psychogeography" and public space. The idea of the city as a space in which to construct "situations" would find an echo in the activities of La Galerie des Locataires and their artist collaborators, such as the actions carried out with André Cadere in 1973 which adopted the form of a *dérive* through the Parisian streets.

By integrating itself into the daily life of the city and its streets, Biard's project also appealed to interests that, through the modification of its form and the regulation of its uses, modify or restrict our possibility of action. The time span between the beginning of the activity of La Galerie des Locataires in 1971 and its interruption with the declaration of a strike in 1976, runs in parallel to the years in which the artistic ecosystem of the city was facing a major urban and artistic change culminating with the opening of the Centre Pompidou in 1977. On one hand the institution was supposed to cover artistic manifestations that had no place in other Parisian institutions, on the other to structure a historiographic narration about the formation and evolution of contemporary artistic practices. The construction of the building was part of the great transformation of the urban centre of Paris, which saw the disappearance of Les Halles, the emblematic Parisian food market and nerve center of the city. Ida Biard remembers how this transformation changed "socially, economically and culturally a hitherto working-class neighbourhood," and how changes started to occur even before the museum opened its doors: "The area around the site of the future Centre Georges Pompidou was opened up. And the art galleries took advantage of the low price of small spaces around 1975. So, in 1977 they were already taking part in this new cultural policy whose primary objective was to stop the supremacy of the American art market and to restore Paris' image as the world capital of the arts." This attempt to capitalize the arts describes a line of force contrary to those that she herself defended from La Galerie des Locataires. For example, with her ongoing

project produced through the postal system, "Poste restante" (General Delivery) (1974), Biard enacted a deterritorialization of artistic practices, and a deregulation of its modes of circulation and exhibition, presenting them away from the institutional framework. "Poste restante" works as an invitation extended to artists to send their proposals to the post office box of the city where Biard is located for the duration of the call. Proposals are carried out as they arrive. Biard follows the artists' directions for their realization, adapts the work if necessary, and documents the process. Since its first edition, this action has been carried out in cities such as Milan, Zagreb, and Dusseldorf.

However, it was in a previous project carried out together with Goran Trbuljak and titled "French Window" (1972–73), that La Galerie des Locataires explored the possibilities of postal mail as a specific medium. For "French Window," the artists were invited to send their instructions, photographs or drawings, by mail to 14 Rue de l'Avre, Biard's personal address at that time. Upon arrival these proposals and documents were exhibited in the "rez-de-chaussée" apartment window, facing the street and exposed to pedestrians. More than fifty artists participated in this action, with a significant number of artists from the former Yugoslavia. Biard saw in the postal mail an ideal format to disseminate the work of artists from Zagreb and Belgrade that she was familiar with and whose work could hardly find a diffusion space in the city.

With "French Window" La Galerie des Locataires established a temporary contact zone between the East and the West in which art worked as a pretext. A similar will to establish a common ground appears to have given rise to another of her projects, "Simplon Express" (1989), a project in which the train's carriages became a nomadic exhibition space and the journey between Paris and Zagreb—a journey that Biard took several times over the years—the time frame for the realization of artistic proposals. The project, carried out after a long hiatus in La Galerie's activity, was part of a group of projects such as "Taxis avant minuit" (Taxis Before Midnight, 1987) and "Ailleurs" (Elsewhere, 1993–94) in which travelling would play a fundamental role.

In "Taxis avant minuit" artists such as Christian Boltanski, Daniel Buren or Annette Messager, long time collaborators of La Galerie and also participants in "Simplon Express," used Parisian taxis for their contributions, intervening inside the vehicles or proposing conceptual routes. Boltanski proposed a mysterious "shadow theatre" that took place inside an apartment which the participants attended inside the taxi while Buren altered the license plates by adding red and white stripes. In "Ailleurs" Biard invited artists to send their proposals by fax to hotels in Tokyo, Kyoto and Kobe where she stayed during



Christian Boltanski, *Ombres (Shadows)* Installation in a compartment of the Simplon Express, 1989. Photo: Archive of La Galerie des Locataires, Paris. © Christian Boltanski / Bildupphovsrätt 2021

a two-week trip to Japan. The only condition for the realization of their works was that they had to revolve around a very specific object: the traditional coffee pot (*džezva*) used in Sarajevo, which for Biard represented the daily life of the city. The choice of this object was not banal, with “Ailleurs” Biard wanted to raise awareness about the brutal siege of the city in the context of the Bosnian war, that started just a year before, in 1992. The actions carried out had to be filmed in situ and produced by Biard herself. For the realization of the proposals, a time limit of between 3 and 5 minutes was set. The video documentation resulted in a film that gives an account of the project.

The meticulous documentation of the projects carried out by La Galerie since the beginning of its activity, today allows us to trace through various documents a particularly vibrant and radical moment for art, but also to approach the idea of curating from an atypical position. Ida Biard never defined herself as the director of the project, in fact, in some of the documents issued by La Galerie, the title “Director of the Gallery” appears crossed out and the handwritten word “tenant” appears below. For some of her colleagues, Biard’s work was more related to communication than to mediation—at least not in the sense in which traditional galleries mediate between the public and the works of art they host. In

the words of Marijan Susovski: Galerie des Locataires does not exhibit or present artists’ works, but rather communicates, realizes and executes them on behalf of the artist. The term communication of the work of art corresponds best to the work of Ida Biard.² She was the channel that allowed the work to find the best possible communication of its content.

Situated at a time when a professional terminology for the organization and conceptualization of exhibitions and artistic events had not yet been accommodated in either institutions or official academic programs, Biard’s work as La Galerie des Locataires may be defined as that of a “proto-curator.”³ La Galerie was an early experiment in creating situations, providing the necessary conditions to make something happen, to meet, or to identify and make visible through communication, strategies of artistic labour that, due to their fragility and elusiveness, were being ignored by the institutional framework and conventional galleries.

Since its reactivation in 1982, La Galerie des Locataires has maintained its spirit and projects such as “Poste restante” have had successive editions, the most recent taking place at the beginning of 2021 amidst a global health crisis and restrictions on mobility. Although the original context in which many of these activities were developed has changed radically, today they take on a new significance. With the pandemic in many cases forcing institutional life to a halt, La Galerie des Locataires continues to make art circulate in alternative ways: going public without a pre-determined audience, disrupting without being noticed.

1. Béatrice Parent, “La Galerie des Locataires,” in *La Galerie des Locataires* (Rome: A.A.V.V. Edizioni Carte Segrete, 1989).

2. Marijan Susovski, “La Galerie des Locataires. Zagreb-Paris,” in *La Galerie des Locataires*.

3. Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, “La Galerie des Locataires,” in *Les promesses du passé: Une histoire discontinuée de l’art dans l’ex-Europe de l’Est* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2010), 185.

No Walls: The Poetics of Dissemination A Conversation with Ida Biard

Marc Navarro



Ida Biard installing Daniel Buren's work for "Poste restante," Budapest, 1974. Photo: Archive of La Galerie des Locataires © Daniel Buren / Bildupphovsrätt 2021

Marc Navarro: The story of La Galerie des Locataires, which is also your personal story, can be told through your trips back and forth between Zagreb and Paris. When and how did you come to settle in Paris?

Ida Biard: I arrived in Paris in 1963 and enrolled at the Sorbonne where I obtained a master's degree in art history. Throughout my years as a student I

earned my living as a saleswoman, au pair, or maid. Luckily, I visited the Musée d'Art Brut (Museum of Art Brut), then located in Rue de Sèvres, where a Yugoslav painter, Slavko Kopač, worked. He helped me to do things closer to my concerns: assisting in the editing process of the *Fascicules de l'Art Brut*.¹ Throughout those years I never lost touch with Yugoslavia. I went there at least twice a year. I was raised by my

father-in-law, a painter, and it was our discussions about art and the social condition of artists that brought me to Paris. At the same time, I hung out with young artists in Zagreb, Belgrade, and then Paris. That's what gave birth to the concept that, by the end of 1971, led to praxis, the activity, of La Galerie des Locataires.

MN: Your collaboration with the Musée d'Art Brut seems significant. The institution promoted by Jean Dubuffet was born as a counter-narrative. From an institutional point of view, the Musée d'Art Brut called into question the validity of the traditional museum. Do you think that some of these ideas can be identified in La Galerie des Locataires?

IB: We are all influenced by accumulated knowledge, the layers of adhesion or rejection in relation to its content. It is true that from adolescence I was impressed by the story, the adhesion of my artist father-in-law to the theses conveyed by Art Brut, and the posture of Jean Dubuffet, its "inventor." His texts, especially that of 1968, *Asphyxiante culture*,² reinforced some of my perspectives on the artistic world. However, I did not at all agree with his ambivalent way of using Art Brut as a basis for his own creation, going so far as to forbid painter and curator Slavko Kopač from exhibiting his own works in

the Musée d'Art Brut, as well as other authoritarian injunctions that made access to his Art Brut collection highly selective.

MN: La Galerie des Locataires maintained a critical position toward the commercial art circuit. What experiences shaped this position?

IB: In material difficulties, I tried to work in galleries, thinking that art historians had a place there. I managed to get a month's trial job as an assistant to Jacques Dupin, a poet, in charge of art book editions at Galerie Maeght—one of the most prestigious in Paris at the time. During the interview with Mrs. Maeght, owner of the gallery, I introduced myself as an art historian. She replied curtly: "To work in a gallery you would have done better to have studied economics!" During this short visit to Galerie Maeght, I met Jean Clair, responsible for the publication of the magazine "Chroniques de l'Art Vivant" who agreed to publish the announcement concerning "French Window."³ This immediately triggered collaborations with many young artists looking for non-institutional places to express themselves. My status as an art historian is the driving force behind the activity I carry out. La Galerie des Locataires is the expression of my attitude, a mental creation allowing the realization of activities beyond the reach of the institutional system. Its specificity



Passers-by hold Hesse's embroidered textile in Piazza del Duomo. The piece was part of "Poste restante" in Milan, 1973. Photo: Archive of La Galerie des Locataires, Paris

is that it does not depend on any of the constraints of the system governing the art world with its galleries, museums, and the art market.

MN: Where would you place your practice in relation to more recent definitions of the curator?

IB: In my original statement regarding La Galerie des Locataires and its activities, I stated that it is an attitude—the role I perform is primarily an expression of that attitude. From that point on the concepts of curator or later, around 1980, exhibition curator,

are no longer appropriate to it. La Galerie des Locataires by its way of proposing, from the very beginning, the reception of artists' works in the form of mailings to post offices, eliminated the possibility of a traditional exhibition with all that this implies. The artists who responded had to include instructions for the presentation, realisation, or communication of their proposals. La Galerie des Locataires did not choose the artists participating in its activity in these specific cases. Some collaborations—such as those with André Cadere, Sarkis, Daniel Buren, Annette Messager, Goran Trbuljak,

Alain Fleischer—gave rise to specific realizations.

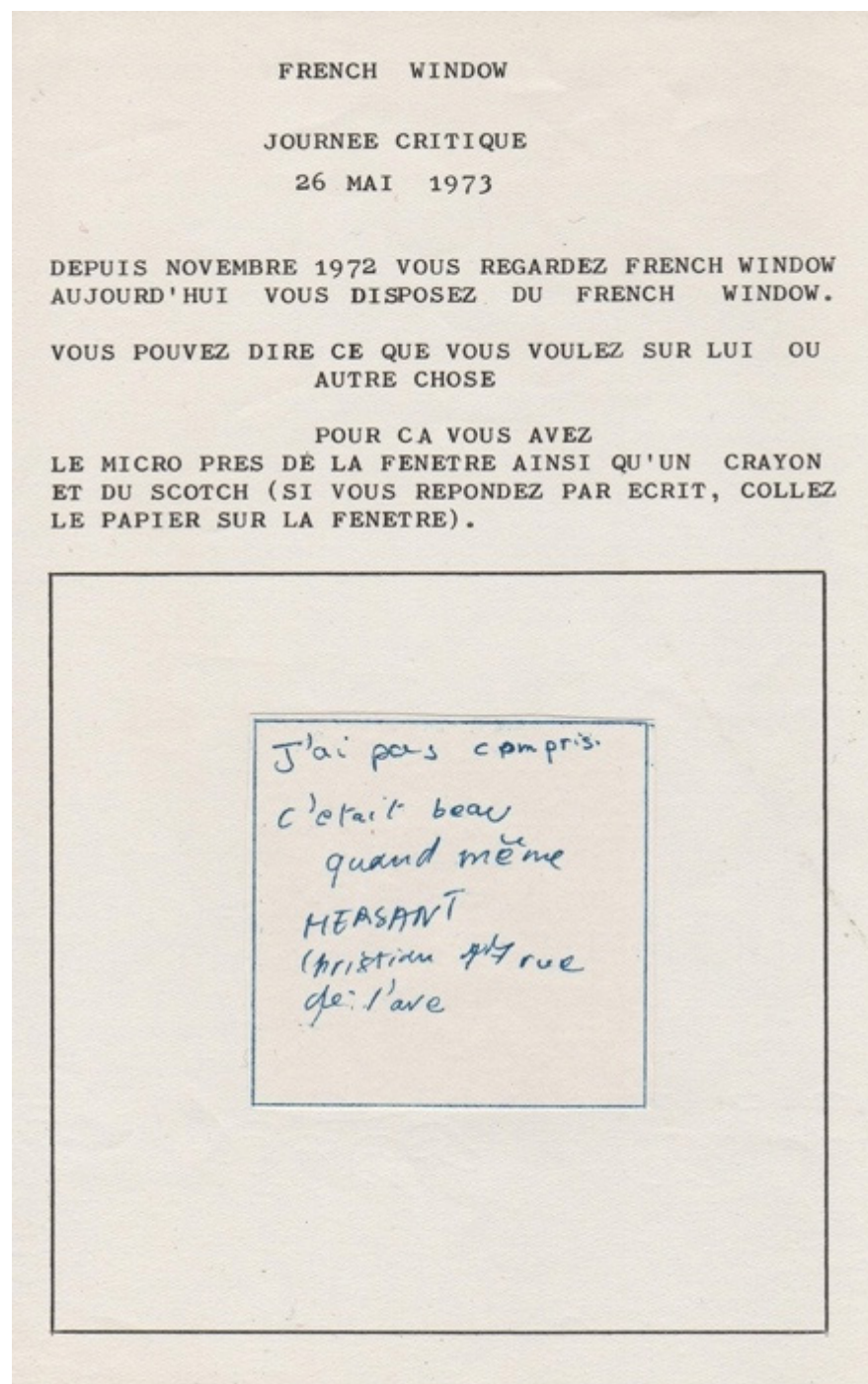
MN: We tend to identify the seventies as a transformative period for art. Do you think that La Galerie is a product of this transformation?

IB: To make a long story short, I would say that processes of transformation in the field of art are part of the global history of human activities and their economic, technical, philosophical, societal, and even biological transformation over the centuries. However, moments of rupture in the specific field of the arts correspond most often to the emergence of new scientific and technical discoveries or ethical behaviour. The latter being linked to societal facts, changes in the systems set up by power and their more or less authoritarian or even contemptuous intrusion into the lives of ordinary citizens, "the people," let's say. So, the period we are talking about, as far as I am concerned, does not seem to me to be a period of great transformation, because it was preceded at the beginning of the twentieth century by artistic movements which, moreover, were at the origin of the term "avant-garde." The activity of La Galerie des Locataires corresponds to participation in the specific questions that had already appeared in the artistic field a few years earlier, and which were of two

kinds. One concerned public space and the place of the artist and his production in the fabric of society. The other was closely related to the first, but it brought about a radical change in the perception of his production. The term "travail" [work] was now used instead of "oeuvre d'art." I used the term "Galerie" to point up the difference in approach and collaboration between artists working together from what one experiences within the gallery system and its mode of operation.

MN: Was Galerie des Locataires a structure that fostered the encounter between artists and encouraged debate around artistic practices? How and where did these encounters take place?

IB: As far as the activity of La Galerie des Locataires is concerned, exchanges, as well as the realisation of the works', have no specific place. They occur in streets, cafés, cinemas, trains, hotels, post offices,—the places where the works are realised—at the same time as meetings and discussions take place in producing the projects. Just as in the days of the ancient polis, the locus of activity is the public square. I did not set up a specific network. The participation of artists expresses, it seems to me, their support for some of my proposals. Since La Galerie des Locataires' strike, its activities have been sporadic,



ephemeral, and correspond—for instance—to the reactivation of a way of working. I am thinking of the realisation or communication of the works received at the post office address of the place where I am currently located.

MN: The foundation of La Galerie des Locataires can be seen as a response to the rigidity and impermeability of the museum as an institution. It is however also an opportunity to imagine other forms of relationship—perhaps more participatory and open—with the public. What alternatives did La Galerie propose in comparison with conventional galleries when it was initiated?

IB: La Galerie des Locataires is first and foremost reflective, an analytical look at the system that manages, in this case, the fine arts. The museum institution is one of the players, and not the least important one. The others: the state through its ministry of culture; galleries; art centres; collectors; auction houses; foundations; art fairs—each is linked to the other and all interact closely in the functioning of this system. As an institution the museum opened up to contemporary artists—that is, to artists with a certain notoriety—after

the '80s under pressure from galleries that needed the museum's valorization of their *protégés* in relation to the art market. Representatives of state institutions, creative inspectors, and curators participated in and supported the private sector. The situation of young artists in the 1970s in relation to this system was not enviable. They did not have access to it. So, they were looking for and thinking about alternative ways in which they could become visible. There was one space not infiltrated by the system: public space and [artistic] forms not subject to conventional exhibition rules. The formula still in force of the "democratization" of art has nothing to do with the activity we were carrying out in these spaces not yet colonised by the structures of the system. The public, the citizens with whom we rubbed shoulders, took part in the events and weren't just passive viewers. During "French Window" I organized a day during which passers-by could express their opinions about what was happening there. "I didn't understand. It was beautiful anyway," one of them wrote.

MN: What was the reaction of passers-by when the Buren piece was activated in Budapest?

"I didn't understand. It was beautiful anyway." Biard organized *Journée Critique* (Critical Day) as part of the project "French Window." Passers-by were invited to write their thoughts about the "exhibition," 1973. Photo: Archive of La Galerie des Locataires, Paris

IB: During the realization of the artists' proposals in public places I never experienced hostile reactions from passers-by, nor from the public authorities. On the contrary, passers-by expressed curiosity, asked questions, were indifferent or, on the other hand, some helped me to carry out the work. In the specific case of Buren's piece, the reactions were of friendly astonishment.

MN: How did you come up with the idea of using a train, the Simplon Express, as an exhibition space?

IB: I have been travelling with the Simplon Express since 1963: from Paris to Zagreb, and from Zagreb to Paris. In 1989, and again 23 years later, I shared the experience of this trip with the artists. The Simplon Express was the privileged place where East and West met, where these two civilisations rubbed shoulders smoothly. Travellers settled in this mobile space naturally engaged in conversation, curious to get to know their neighbour, or simply sharing meals during a long journey. Those, like me, who for almost half a century travelled this route observed the changes until the train's disappearance. It is indicative of the diminishing interest of the West, preoccupied by its crises, in the East, its neighbour of little importance. Today, when I think back, I notice that I was sensitive to these exchanges, spontaneously manifested, naturally,

during these journeys, between people from these two cultures that politics tries to ignore. By bringing the Simplon Express back into circulation with the "Simplon Express/ Le Retour" project, La Galerie des Locataires has, through plural artistic projects, re-established the circulation of those previously suspended human relations. To signify the resurgence, albeit temporary, of the Simplon Express with this project is the expression of a stubborn will to insist on the urgency of re-establishing spontaneous social relations between peoples and cultures free from the dictats of private or corporate interests. I would like to cite a text by Guy Tortosa by way of completing my answer:

"Did Marcel Duchamp's *Jeune-homme triste dans un train* (Sad Young Man on a Train) (1911), the anti-model of modernity that he painted at the dawn of a century that began as it was to end (in Sarajevo), foresee that we would one day cease to believe as naively as he did in his time in the progress brought about by machines?

'On ne part pas' (One does not leave) wrote Rimbaud when he was still just a poet. Could he also have sensed, a few years before the invention of cinema, that, whatever one may say, the traveller does not buy a ticket to go from one station to another, but rather a ticket to see a film, or to access the works of a

gallery which is the world, and of which we will never be more than tenants?... Titled *Galerie des Locataires*, the unpredictable, collectively inhabited work that is the Simplon Express, said this in its own way in 1989, and again in 2012: the train is a film, a theatre, a performance, or even a museum, and for this film or museum, which we metonymically designate by the beautiful and misleading term, 'journey,' our thoughts constitute the subtitles and captions, if not the script."⁵

MN: In relation to your projects developed around means of transport such as the Simplon Express, I wonder whether the spontaneous relationships or "structures of feeling" that emerged spontaneously during the journey were similar to the relationships established in La Galerie's other projects?

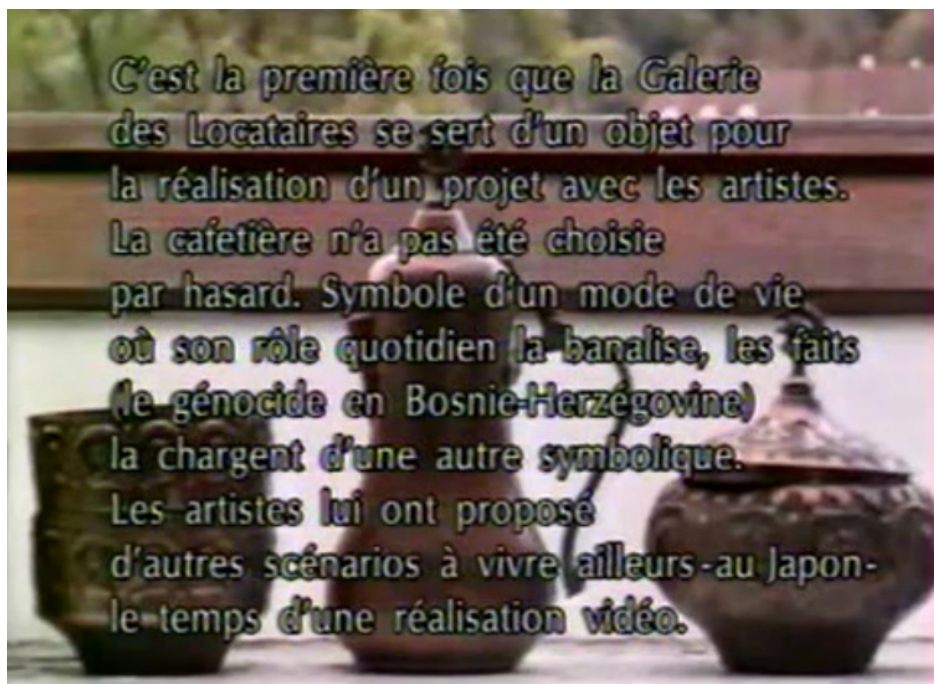
IB: After the 1980s and the changes in the art world, I made proposals to artists which took them out of their familiar environment and outside their usual way of working. Mobility, unpredictability, material constraints, among other things, as well as the media used, were my tools to bring them out of the system. At the same time these experiences moved their work into the context of a direct relationship with an uninitiated public. The experience was renewed this year [2021] with the project proposal for staging "Poste restante"

in Crikvenica, which will be an index of the radical changes in the behaviour of the artists themselves in relation to a proposal that in part responds to the material constraints imposed by the global pandemic.

MN: How did the idea of documenting "Simplon Express" and "Ailleurs" in film form arise?

IB: La Galerie des Locataires has produced several video documents or filmed exhibitions. In chronological order: "Simplon Express," "Ailleurs," "L'air du large" (Sea Air), "Simplon Express/Le Retour." I regret not having been able to do this during "Taxis avant minuit." In most of the projects, La Galerie is guided first and foremost by the desire to take the artists out of the usual context of the presentation of their work, but also by the desire to shake up the very form of the work. The artists' proposals involve a certain delegation of decision-making during the realisation of the projects, since this is most often carried out by La Galerie des Locataires.

MN: The distinction between the public and the private is essential to understanding the intention behind some of your projects. Structures such as postal mail or transport services are adopted by La Galerie as means for exhibiting and disseminating the artistic work. Artists often start



“For the first time La Galerie des Locataires employs an object for the realisation of a project in collaboration with artists. The coffee-pot has not been randomly chosen. It is the symbol of a way of living: it’s ubiquity makes it seem banal, but recent events (the genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina) confer on it a symbolic meaning. Artists proposed scripts allowing it to live elsewhere—in Japan—for the duration of the realisation of their videos.” Film still: *Ailleurs (Elsewhere)*, 1993–94, Archive Galerie des Locataires, Paris

from a limitation defined by the medium itself. But at the same time this creates a more egalitarian and democratic framework. For example, in “Taxis avant minuit” the artists had to use Parisian taxis as a space for their proposals. How important is the “medium” in your proposals? Is it a poetic or a political agent?

IB: I’d like to answer: both at the same time. Political, because everything

we do—and even do not do—in the context of our community life is political. Poetic, because such moments arise, for example, in “Taxis avant minuit,” when the passer-by is surprised by the invitation to get into the car which offers him a route defined by the artist and thus takes him on an adventure for which he was not “prepared”; on his return he often leaves with another taxi, and so on. Thus, for the public, for the artists, these proposals open up other

possibilities of expression, encounter, and collaboration. The artist leaves the safe environment most often frequented by an audience initiated in art.

MN: It seems logical that this economy of means with which many of the projects have been developed has facilitated the participation of many international artists in very different political contexts. What was the role of La Galerie in relation to the East? Do you think it has played an important role in the visibility and articulation of other artistic contexts?

IB: The use of random means for the realization or communication of the works received was, at the same time, a response to the singularity of these collaborations—nomadic and ephemeral. La Galerie des Locataires conveyed a spirit of activity which, because of its mobility, goes beyond the local and is open to the participation of artists on an international level. It is true that the majority of artists who responded to La Galerie des Locataires proposals came from Eastern European countries: Yugoslavia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland; but those from France, Italy, Germany, England, the Netherlands, Brazil, the United States, were not absent. I am poorly positioned to evaluate the role played at the time by La Galerie des Locataires in the visibility and articulation of other artistic

contexts. Humbly, sincerely, I believe that I contributed to it, first, by offering a concept, a way of operating, that was specific and unique to La Galerie des Locataires.

MN: Self-managed initiatives often depend on private funding or on a network of partners and solidarity between different agents. A sense of community. How important have ideas such as “cooperation” or “interdependence” been for the development of your activity?

IB: The basis of these activities was the spirit of cooperation between the artists and La Galerie des Locataires, not subject to funding, which would become an assumption limiting the independence and expressive form of their collaboration. Moreover, La Galeries des Locataires’ “Strike” was an expression of its refusal of the servile attitude of artists towards the development of the art market and conventional galleries, with which they had collaborated since the installation of some of these around the construction site of the Centre Pompidou in 1975.

MN: You mentioned before the importance of language in the transformation of artistic practices in the 1970s. For example, you talk about the substitution of the word “oeuvre d’art” by “travail.” This suggests a

new way of relating the artist to the institution and society, but also a different relationship between the artist and her production, perhaps an increased professionalization?

IB: The artists of the 1970s are the heirs of the artistic movements of the early 20th century which opened up this path that swept away the mythology surrounding artistic creation. The new technologies of reproduction, including cinema and photography, offered artists a “virgin” field of investigation. Artists such as Marcel Duchamp or Joseph Kosuth, later on, were the emblematic figures whose works directly influenced this generation. The writings of Walter Benjamin concerning the reproducibility of the work of art, sociologist Raymonde Moulin’s book on the art market, *Le marché de la peinture en France*, the writings of Guy Debord and others, contributed to questioning the system governing the art world, but also its production and art’s relationship to it.⁵ Thus, the vocabulary used by the artist to name their production, the way in which they inscribed in the fabric of society, evolved with the use of words. Annette Messenger’s *Les travaux de la salle de bain* (The works of the Bathroom) is an example of this. On the other hand, my collaboration with André Cadere was part of the disruption of ofthe art system with the “illegal” presentation of his work at the opening

of the Adami exhibition at Galerie Maeght in Paris. We sent out invitations for this action from La Galerie des Locataires in 1973.

MN: In the works developed with Annete Messenger, La Galerie communicated by mail a set of activities, which, because of their private nature, are not considered of public interest.

IB: Annette Messenger’s work in the 1970s was in part a search for other venues and ways of exhibiting than those offered by institutions and the art world. So, she was among those looking for collaborations outside conventional places, but also reflecting on their work’s form of presentation. Hence our collaboration. The form in which these three projects—*Les travaux de la salle de bain* (Work in the Bathroom), *Les courses journalières* (Daily Shopping), *La lecture journalière* (Daily Reading)—were realised was the result of a decision taken by the artist and La Galerie des Locataires; in this particular case postal mailing was preferred to other forms of exhibition. To complete my answer to this question, I would like to mention another project carried out with Alain Fleischer, first in Budapest in 1974, then in Paris in 1975. The realization of this work followed the scenario laid down by the artist and carried out by La Galerie des Locataires. The involvement of La Galerie in these



Annete Messenger, *Les travaux de la salle de bain*, La Galerie des Locataires, 1974. Photo: Archive of La Galerie des Locataires, Paris



Ida Biard standing left, with *Evidenziatore* by Renato Mambor at the flea market, Porte de Venves, Paris, 1974. On this occasion, Biard distributed a survey to the market's customers inquiring about Mambor's piece. The questions were: "What is it?", "In your opinion, for what purpose can it be used?," "Would you like to own it?," "Name/profession?" Photo: Archive of La Galerie des Locataires, Paris

productions was, therefore, an ethical and moral challenge. It had to decide the form of exhibition and communicate the artists' initial proposal, to realize it without betraying it.

MN: Some of the artists you collaborated with were simultaneously participating in a conventional circuit that included commercial galleries and institutional projects. Independent spaces allow artists to develop their work outside the constraints of the market and the institutions, but the possibility for a "return" on independent projects is very limited.

Do you think there is a possibility of feedback between these actors, or on the contrary, do you think that this relationship should be asymmetrical to guarantee the independence and radicality of projects such as La Galerie des Locataires?

IB: La Galerie des Locataires is my field of investigation, of reflection. It relates to the inclusion of artistic work in the fabric of society, but also to the collaboration of artists with the institutions that host them, and how this in one way or another adds value—often in terms deriving from the world of commerce—

to their initial proposals. At the same time, I remain amazed that fine artists in France, for example, still accede to being treated like craftsmen. In her books, Raymonde Moulin describes this societal attitude to visual artists which keeps them in a very fragile economic situation, and dependent on the system. Since 1981 I have been offering artists excursions out of this situation with proposals that I would today call poetic, rather than utopian or radical.

MN: Regarding the public, you say that it is important for the artist to leave those spaces frequented by the art-initiated public. In some of La Galerie's proposals, the public plays a fundamental role: on one hand it often becomes "the public" involuntarily, on the other it sometimes seems important that the public actively participate in the realization of the artists' proposals.

IB: Art that is locked up is already in a museum. Emerging artists often search for themselves for years. Highly professional networks offer them certain possibilities, mainly linked to funding and communication, but within a well-defined and very specific framework of place. I introduce a certain instability into the context in which artists' projects are developed. However, I don't believe that I am undermining the autonomy of art, which is in even less conceivable

today than hitherto, since as a field art participates fully, like other human activities, in a globalized economic system.

MN: "Ailleurs" was a reaction to a historical event: the siege of Sarajevo. What did this project consist of and how did the journey unfold in this case?

IB: The war that put an end to the existence of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, from which I came, provoked in me the feeling experienced by all orphans. I was in mourning, cut off from all my friends with whom I had collaborated, with whom I had shared ideas and commitments. We were now scattered in the republics that had become our enemies. The atrocity of the genocide perpetrated in Bosnia-Herzegovina was unbearable. Taking advantage of a trip to Japan in 1993, moved by this reality that was gnawing at me, I put a coffee pot in my suitcase—the object of a daily ceremony in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but also elsewhere in former Yugoslavia. Thus was born the "Ailleurs" project. Travelling between Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka, I sent faxes to artists to present their proposals for the project. So, for the first time I used an object which became the theme of the scenarios to be realized, faxed by the artists to the places where I was.

MN: La Galerie has collaborated with André Cadere on several occasions. What was the basis of this collaboration?

IB: I met André Cadere at the beginning of La Galerie des Locataires' activities at the end of 1972. Our mutually enriching dialogue and sharing of our points of view quickly turned into a very intense collaboration. Even then the art world feared him, because he would appear at people's openings with his stick, which they called his "weapon," and disrupt the ceremonial with his presence alone. He was an absolutely committed artist. His work served an attitude. He used to say to me: "It is not difficult to acquire the stick, but the most important and annoying question for buyers is what they will do with it." After his death, curators who presented his work were simply traitors, for they answered the question he asked them—what will you do with it—by denying its content, laying the stick on the floor or leaning it against the walls of museums and galleries. It's true that Cadere did the same thing, but he accompanied it with an action such as the one we performed at the Adami opening at Gallerie Maeght in Paris.

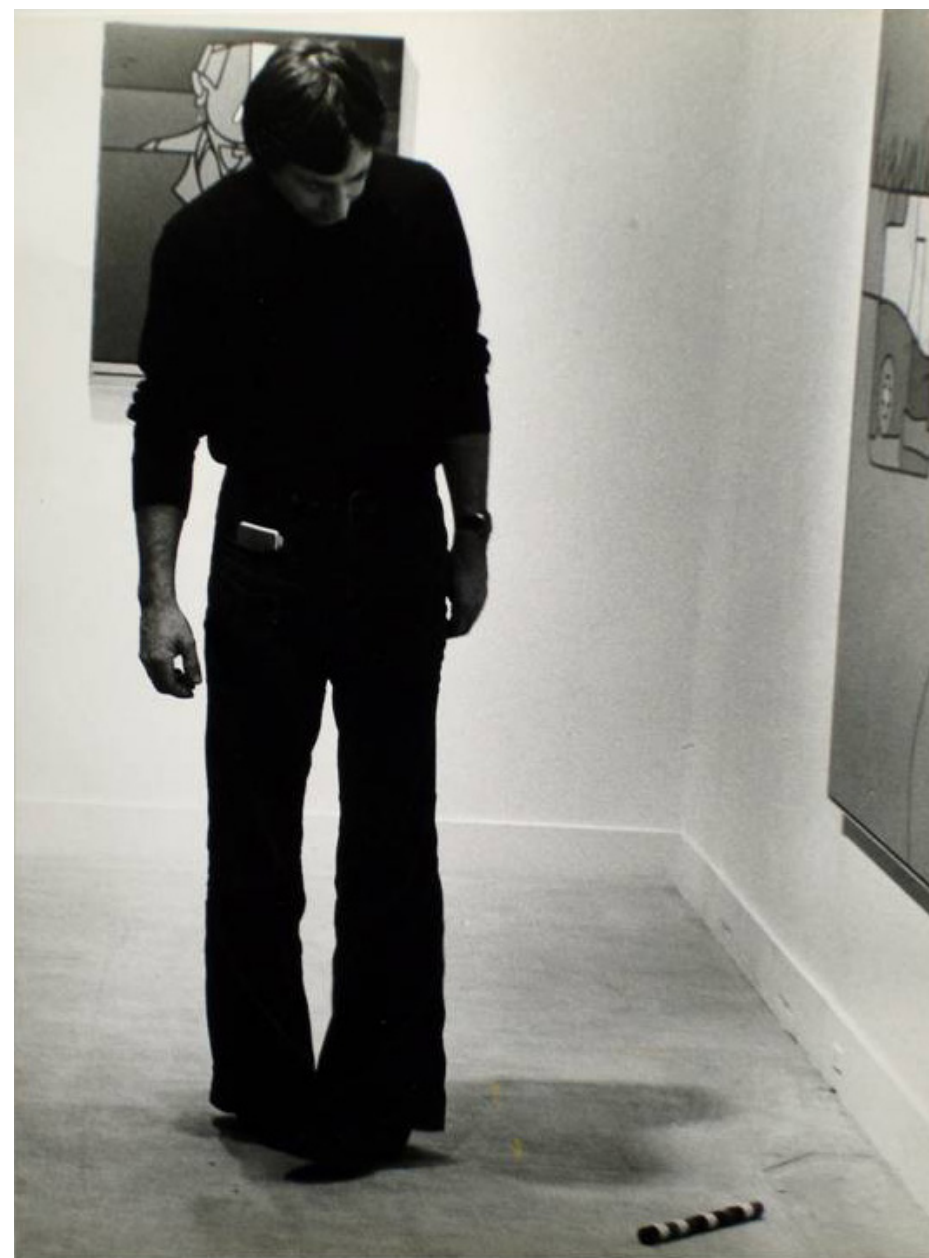
MN: The use of surveys is repeated in several of your projects, such as the project developed with Renato Mambor. Why did you use this working method?

IB: During the realization of the projects, I tried to find a way to execute them following the artists' specifications as closely as possible. In Renato Mambor's project it was obvious that it was a question of carrying out a survey in the public space around an object that he had made for this purpose. I myself used this method to gather the testimony or reactions of passers-by during "French Window." In 1982 La Galerie des Locataires, together with the artists Alain Fleischer, Bernard Borgeaud, and Jean Roualdès, created a "radio exhibition" for the channel France Culture. Listeners to the program reacted with comments about what they had heard. In this case it was not strictly speaking a survey. This participation or reaction of the listeners was part of the concept of the program.

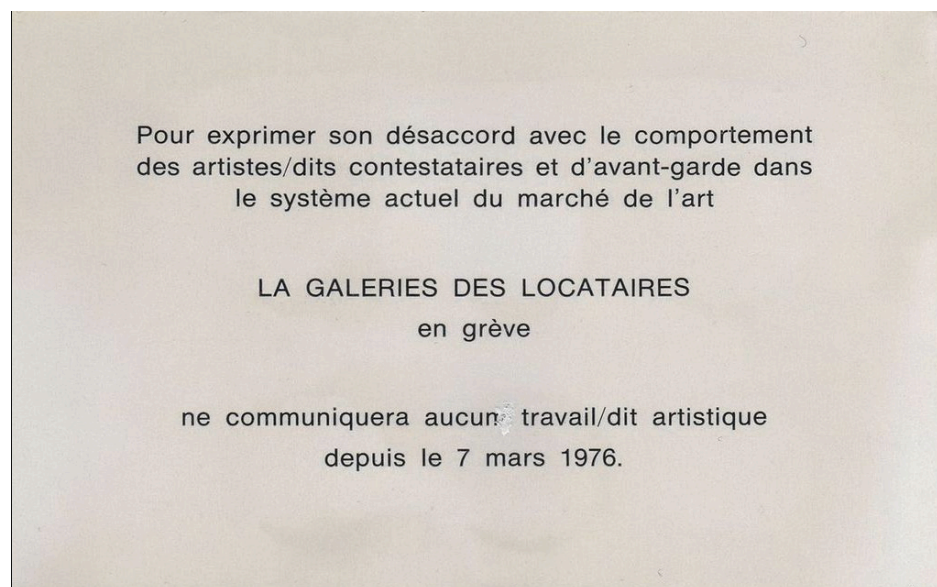
MN: In 1976 you declared a strike. What triggered this decision? How did this situation affect the activities of La Galerie des Locataires?

IB: The proclamation of the strike for me involved an activity. At that time, I offered the participating artists a moral contract preceded by a questionnaire on the reasons for their cooperation with La Galerie des Locataires.

MN: In the case of La Galerie, the strike implied not publicly communicating the work of the artists. Today



Documentation of the action of André Cadere and La Galerie des Locataires during the opening of Valerio Adami's exhibition, at Galerie Maeght, Paris, 1973. Photo: Archive of La Galerie des Locataires, Paris



Statement by La Galerie des Locataires declaring their strike in 1976. After the announcement, it would not resume activities until 1982. Photo: Archive of La Galerie des Locataires, Paris

communication has become a strategic area of activity for art institutions.

IB: Since the 1980s communication and advertising's importance to cultural events has grown, and they are now becoming the central vehicle for their visibility. This has brought changes to the strategies of consumer society. In the field of artistic activity, it seemed to me that these communication and advertising strategies were inappropriate. They often reduce their substantive content to mere commodities. The activities of La Galerie des Locataires could not fit into this distorting and reductive framework.

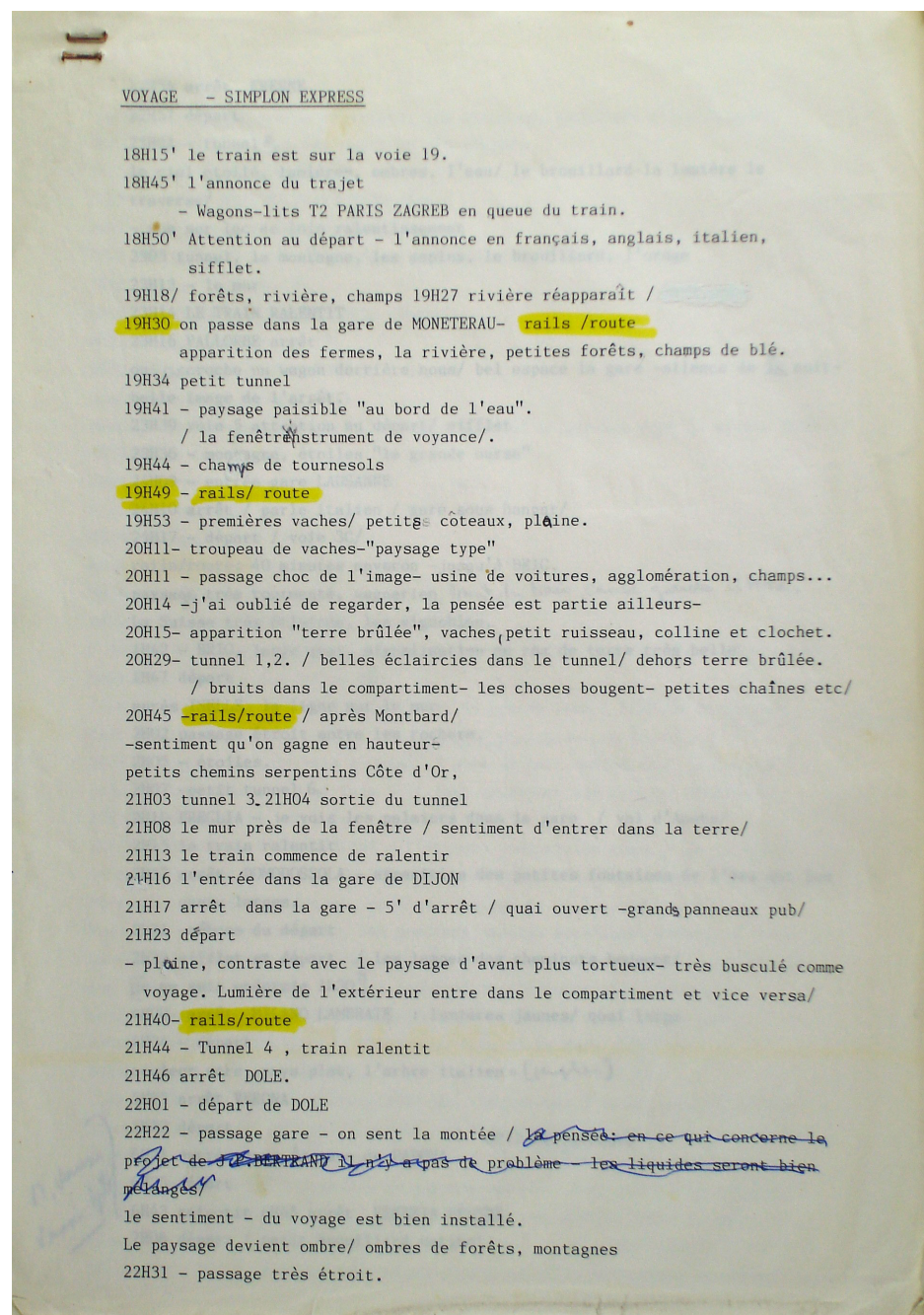
MN: What was the content of the "moral contract"?

IB: At a certain point in our conversation, I noted that my activity of collaboration with artists could also fall within the semantic field of poetry, very close to utopia—a term that is often invoked to characterize the activity of La Galerie des Locataires. However, the mental work of analysis and position-taking that precedes this activity owes a great deal to ethical and philosophical adherence to the writings and positions of certain thinkers concerning the society of consumption and spectacle. Guy Debord's *La Société du Spectacle*

(1967), emphasizes that in this society everything becomes a commodity, and this [economic] form dominates all the other values of human activity. The grip of consumer society on the very lives of individuals reduces them to commodities. In the book *The Crisis in Culture* (1961), Hannah Arendt notes that action is far superior to work, and even more so to labour, in relation to the complex concepts governing life and art in contemporary societies. Being a skeptical but optimistic person, Emil Cioran's attitude and writings stimulated me to use the reactive term "poetic" as implicit to the concept of utopia as part of an engaged criticism and disruption of the prevailing mores of the artistic field. Quoting an aphorism by Cioran from memory: "Poetry becomes a means of translating one's thoughts or a temporary remedy for one's lucidity. Like life, it has the excuse of proving nothing." In reference to my work, these few lines were necessary to justify the proposition of a moral contract for the participating artists—something which came about at the precise moment that, as galleries opened up around the gaping hole

from which the Centre Pompidou would emerge, their positions in relation to the art world changed.

1. The *Fascicles de l'Art Brut* were a series of publications launched by Jean Dubuffet in 1964.
2. Jean Dubuffet, "Asphixiante culture," Ed. Pauvert (Collection Libertés Nouvelles), 1968, Paris.
3. *Croniques de l'art vivant* (1968–1973) was a publication directed by Aimee Maeght and published in Paris. The managing editor was Jean Clair.
4. Raymonde Moulin, *Le marché de la peinture en France*, Editions de Minuit, 1967, Paris.
5. Text by Guy Tortosa for "Simplon Express/Le Retour," 2012.



The Trip—Simplon Express

- 18H15' the train is on track 19.
 18H45' the trip is announced
 - Sleeping car T2 PARIS ZAGREB at the end of the train.
 18H50' Attention the train will now depart—announcement in french, english, italian, whistle.
 19H18/ woods, river, fields 19H27 the river appears again /
 19H30 we pass by MONETERAU station—rails/route
 the farms appear, the river, small woods, fields of wheat.
 19H34 small tunnel
 19H41 - quiet landscape "au bord de l'eau."
 /the window instrument of vision/.
 19H44 - sunflower fields
 19H49 - railways / road
 19H53 - first cows / small chateaux, plain.
 20H11 - herd of cows - "typical landscape"
 20H11 - shocking passage of the image—car factory, agglomeration, fields...
 20H14 - I forgot to look, my mind went elsewhere—
 20H14 - appearance of "scorched earth," cows, small stream, hill and bell.
 20H29 - tunnel 1,2. / nice clearings in the tunnel / outside scorched earth.
 /noises and the compartment—things are moving—small chains etc /
 20H45 - railways/road / past Montbard /
 - feeling we are gaining height - small serpentine paths Côte d'Or,
 21H03 tunnel 3. 21H04 exit from tunnel
 21H08 the wall by the window / feeling of entering the earth/
 21H13 the train starts to slow down
 21H16 entering DIJON station
 21H17 stop in the station- 5' stop / platform open—large advertising signs /
 21H23 departure
 - plain, contrast with the more tortuous landscape before—very tilted as a journey. Light from outside between compartment and

Text sent to the artists before departure of the Simplon Express (excerpt), 1989. Photo: Archive of La Galerie des Locataires, Paris

vice versa/
21H40 - railways/road
21H44 - Tunnel 4, train slows down
21H46 stop DOLE.
22H01 - departure from DOLE
22H22 - station tilt—you can feel the climb

the feeling- of the journey is well established.

The landscape becomes shadowy / shadows of forests, mountains

22H31 - very narrow passage.

Radomir Damnjanović Damnjan's intervention on the platform of Milan station. Film stills from *Simplon Express*, 1989

