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Insurgent Finances: An Interview with Gabriela Ceja and Fran Ilich

Marisa Lerer and Conor McGarrigle

When the financial crisis of 2008 exposed the opaque workings of global financial markets, it led to calls for alternate economic models to replace the excesses of contemporary capitalism. A decade on, it can seem that those calls went unheeded. However, in the collaborative social practice of Fran Ilich (b. 1975) and Gabriela Ceja (b. 1984), sustainable alternatives modeled on ancient modes of exchange are being developed with projects that are deeply embedded in economic practice; whether that is running a functioning microbank complete with complex financial instruments in *Spacebank* or serving Zapatista coffee from Chiapas, Mexico in the *Diego de la Vega Coffee Co-op* in the Bronx in New York City. In this interview the artists discuss how, through building alternative durable and sustainable economies and exchange networks, another world is possible.

Keywords: Diego de la Vega Coffee Co-op; Spacebank; Possibleworlds; Zapatista; Sabotage Tlacatlaolli Variable; Fran Ilich (b. 1975); Gabriela Ceja (b. 1984)

***Spacebank* (2011), which touts the slogan “Don’t hate the banks, become the banks,” is a community investment bank, complete with debit card issuances. The slogan suggests that alternative banking models are possible, and *Spacebank* is structured like a commercial bank complete with complex financial instruments such as Digital Material Sunflower currency and trading platforms – the Brooklyn Stock Exchange – which are familiar from financial markets. However, these are blended with aspects of alternative exchange, virtual and crypto currency, and even hacktivist intervention. Could you explain the main objectives for these projects and discuss the importance of the structures that you have developed?**

Ilich: In 2005 I founded *Spacebank*, together with *Possibleworlds*, a co-operative webserver. One was to be the economic body, the other the political body. Originally I did not know a server would be the project that I would work on; it could have been a coffee shop or a net.island. *Net.island* was an unrealized project that I started thinking about in 2004 in which I planned to possibly buy an island co-operatively in the Philippines for US\$20,000. The process of thinking about how to buy the island and where and what would happen on the island acted as an incubator for *Spacebank* (Figure 1). The important thing was to have a social space that could help produce and sustain content, life, and relationships between people that were not just transactional and



Figure 1. A client's *Spacebank* ATM debit card in Bogotá, Colombia (founded 2005). Image: Courtesy Barbara Santos.

which was sustainable. That is why the name of the project is *Spacebank*, because it was meant to do the banking in such a space, which over time could and would become another sort of space: a co-op apartment, an alternate reality game, and a small archipelago of projects. The objective then, as it is now, is to keep tabs on finance and to allocate resources to where it makes the most sense, within the logics of money, as well as politically. The project never subsidizes; instead, I designed it to create financial flows that actually work. Artistic, political, and social projects tend to drain resources and give back very unclear results. I needed to make *Spacebank* sustainable over the long term, and in that sense, go for measurable, tangible bets. I needed to create accountability with peers, instead of focusing on relationships that sometimes are unilateral or purely imaginary. I sought results that could lead to the project's continuation within a direction that allowed it to reproduce itself and to put "your money where your mouth is" in a very literal sense. So little by little I had to match the productive resources we had access to, with people that had either money, labor, or time to invest in them.

That led to the creation of more sophisticated financial instruments with a pedagogical dimension in order to experience first-hand the relationship between finance and social organization. Part of that was creating an internal stock market and the network currency called Digital Material Sunflower, which is a floating currency – you can check the prices on the currency converter widget included in the Apple computers dashboard and on the iPhone with an app (Figure 2). These are set by a company that works with hundreds of currencies. Besides the digital realm, we issued metal coins and paper notes in different denominations. And so, *Spacebank* has worked thus far in building and sustaining the infrastructure and labor of a small support network and alternate reality game.

Proceeds from your community-engaged work, *Diego de la Vega Coffee Co-op*, benefit farmers in Chiapas, Mexico, many of whom belong to the anti-globalization Zapatista movement (founded in 1983), which fights for land reform in the area. Your project centers around organic coffee that is grown by Zapatista autonomous



Figure 2. Fran Ilich, *Digital Material Sunflowers* from *Spacebank* (founded 2005). Image: Courtesy of the artist.

agricultural workers and connects New York City laborers with them. The work appropriates its title from Johnston McCulley's fictional pulp character whose secret identity is Zorro. In McCulley's story, De la Vega is the son of an indigenous mother and Spanish father and is a wealthy hacienda owner who fights for social justice against colonial powers. Zorro as a masked figure shares some parallels with Rafael Sebastián Guillén Vicente, the leader of the Zapatists movement, who hid his true identity and fought under the *nom de guerre* Subcomandante Marcos. Marcos, like Zorro, only appeared masked in public. The funds for the project support better farming practices and living circumstances for the indigenous communities in Chiapas. What is the role of art practice in the creation of social and economic justice?

Ilich: Personally I have been serving coffee for over a decade, a little after the project began in 2005. The idea behind it was that when *Spacebank's* co-operative server started pooling funds from its members, the money could either be saved in a bank account or invested. Most of the time the money was not needed for at least a year, so that allowed us flexibility and time, to use it back in our projects' infrastructure and content. Initially I started buying and selling Zapatista products such as ski-masks, coffee, and textiles. We also printed t-shirts [with Zapatista imagery] and bought and resold books from members of the co-op. We also sold Cuban tobacco and rum and Chinese beer. Eventually we edited books too and included many other products from lots of groups: Mayans from Guatemala, Mixe from Oaxaca, and also friends' collectives. The idea is that instead of providing liquidity to the traditional financial system (the banks) that makes the world we live in, we can instead pass it to people who are organized and building social and political alternatives that exist and already work, as long as we are able to convert whatever they give us back into liquid. We are interested in two-way relations. By having such products, we help participants expand, by selling the products to people whom they do not have access to. That is, we are creating a market, together. I used to think of this as ideologically correct products. We have supported not only Zapatista projects, but other kinds of

products as well. And the money always comes back, just like in any financial investment (however, we did have experiences in which we unwillingly subsidized people who did not deliver). Except here we are responsible for transforming a product back into money, otherwise we can end with inventory in storage and space is not an abundant or cheap resource in New York City.

We have lots of books and offerings that were given into the Patolli. Patolli is a Nahuatl word for one of the oldest games in the Americas. It is an ancient game which revolves around a system of transaction and human relationships. To play Patolli, a participant gives something that they have, which then becomes part of a redistribution machine. It functions as a community economy and also points to the asymmetry of economic relationships. For example, if a player offers a smile to the Patolli, how does that then translate into the person who takes a book, which is a product of knowledge?.

With the Coffee Co-op we would have loved to have a physical space where anyone could come, but that is near to impossible in New York City. We would have to pay thousands of dollars a month (Figure 3). We had temporary space when we were invited to participate in art projects, and we do own a co-op apartment in the city, which allows us to be somewhat protected from the realities of market capitalism. But, we had to work over a decade, spend only on the minimum costs, re-invest everything, and go bankrupt, or get rid of everything that was not working. For the most part we have to focus on actual [social and economic] relationships that function on a very fundamental level.

With our peer supplier co-op in Chiapas we understand that the product is decommodified coffee. After purchasing it from there, and transporting it to New York City, we do not sell it, but serve it in spaces that share affinities with the project. We accept alternative currencies: barter, labor, or money donations, and this can take many forms. Some want to give a smile, which of course we cannot take to our peers in Chiapas, and if we could, it would in fact just reinforce the status quo of extractivism. So we understand that the best and most useful need we can give to people who are already organized collectively, economically, politically, socially, and at the level of

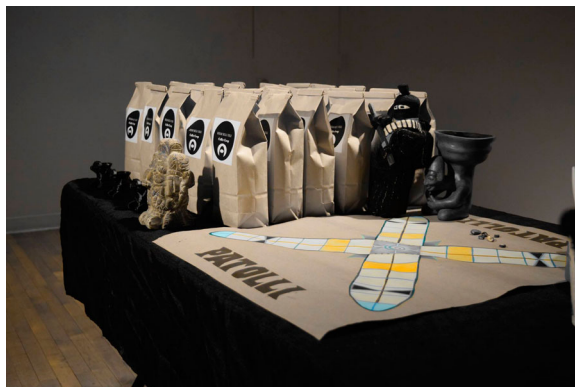


Figure 3. Gabriel Ceja and Fran Ilich celebrating the Art and Social Justice Working Group at the Bronx Museum (2016). Image: Courtesy of the artists.

education, food production, etc., is money. So we respect that and decide to send them money instead of problems.

On our side, what we do is a performance, a geo-drawing, a socio-economical sculpture connecting social movements in an emotional and material way. We bring the rebel poison of coffee, and serve it where it is needed. Instead of creating more art that is so literal in a political way (we could do posters with slogans and so on that would not change anything), we decide instead to pay homage to the Zapatistas and their support network. We try not to speak at the events where we serve it; we just serve it and share common ground as conspiring waiters (Figure 4). It is very humble work. It is the opposite of what art and performance tends to be, as much of performance art is often flamboyant or bombastic and its central focus is on the artists themselves.

There are a vast number of ancient Maya archaeological sites located in Chiapas. The ancient Maya used cacao beans as barter currency. You wrote that coffee is part of a tradition of alternative currencies in your description of *Diego de la Vega Coffee Co-op*. How does coffee function as an alternative currency? Have other examples of alternative currency that you see historically or in our contemporary moment inspired this approach? To what degree is your project practical or conceptual?

Ilich: This particular coffee is decommodified, in the sense that it is not a part of the traditional market. You can only acquire it from the Zapatista farmers if you have a relationship with them; it is meant to nurture another possible world, a world where many worlds fit together. We use the coffee to inspire and get ideas and to be productive, but we also share it with like-minded people who can contribute something back to the cause. It is not about money. And all of this is thanks to the gift of the Zapatistas. For me this is about fighting the walls of capital and showing that indigenous America (Amerindian, not Latin American) can work together in sustainable and creative ways.

Recently they gave almost 5000 kilograms of coffee to people's initiatives in the United States that are fighting against the walls of capital, in particular the one that exists between the US-Mexico border. I worked in the past by organizing *Borderhack* (2001), a tactical media annual event that took place physically on the border



Figure 4. Film still of Fran Ilich and Gabriela Ceja at the 2017 New York City Anarchist Book Fair from *Love and Labor* (2017). Directed by Stephanie Andreou and Sarah Keeling. Image: Courtesy of Fran Ilich.

between San Diego and Tijuana. The *Diego de la Vega Coffee Co-op* received 1% of the coffee production. We will use it to start a new phase of the co-op, called *Momochtli* (which means popcorn in Nahuatl, the language of the people that gave birth to popcorn), where we will try to take things into a much more ambitious phase. This project will mimic and subvert the relationship that Hollywood has to corn, the economy, and storytelling. According to Mayan mythology, humans were made by the Gods from corn. And in a more western sense of history, in that same part of the world, humans invented corn and corn made them back. Years later, the Aztecs knew that whoever controlled the monopoly on corn held power. And look at the United States after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); the US has a monopoly and is in control. [The United States and Hollywood] make the stories and attempt to win the hearts of people with them. They sell transgenic popcorn and make millions of dollars out of it. Just imagine the role that undocumented, indigenous cheap labor plays in that. Now, these indigenous people were disposed of by the Hispanic people in Mexico, and they are in part who support Mexico economically by sending remittances from the US.

It is also told that Momochtli (popcorn) was born when Huehuateotl (the ancient god of fire) met with one of the gods of corn. Corn popped and Momochtli was born. Since then it was used for offerings on altars and storytelling. Today Hollywood movies and cinemas are like bonfires, with shamans. Now there is basically no native popcorn in Mexico; imagine the kind of stories that could be told if the relationship between community cinema and indigenous native popcorn could be connected. So that is our new project; we invited a few audio-visual creators and activists from Mexico, Peru, and Colombia to collaborate with us in the Bronx, New York [to create and screen community cinema]. Our first public event [around this project] was in Amsterdam in the 2018 *Creating Other Futures* exhibition.

Coffee drives economies in Central and South America and in Africa. It is a globalized, agricultural commodity traded on the market. However, it is a precarious, unprotected commodity that is vulnerable to global prices. In the 1980s, we witnessed the fall of coffee prices to overproduction, making its susceptibility to the forces of globalization readily apparent. Locally, coffee – as a premium product – has a great impact in cities as an agent in the gentrifying forces through cafés, which can be catalysts for and signs of gentrification. How does your project engage with the complicated economic entanglement inherent in coffee production, distribution, and consumption?

Ceja: Any resource existing in the earth has been subject to commodification and speculation, from the most fundamental elements of survival and the most futile, or harmful. The unstoppable creation of markets has shaped forms of labor such as the great sugar plantations in Brazil and the Caribbean followed by a coffee fever, with similar exploitation patterns. Agriculture can be enslaving or empowering, depending on the systems that it nurtures. In 1910, one of the most important claims in the Mexican Revolution and the first Zapatista rebellion was precisely the redistribution of the land to the indigenous people. The slogan “The land for he who works it” became tremendously relevant again when indigenous communities were threatened

by land dispossession through the signing of NAFTA in 1994. This is why food sovereignty was the most urgent strategy for Zapatista communities to survive neoliberalism.

These issues prompt fundamental inquiries for all of us in urban environments, issues that *Diego de la Vega* acknowledges: What economies do we foster? What networks do we create or involuntarily participate in? What strategies are we going to apply to make or be part of a utopian, yet sustainable alternative? We realized that real power lies not only in books, ideas, or conversations but actually in coffee itself through the economy, which is a form of power. Thus, we believed it was necessary to create our own networks and our own financial flows through Zapatista coffee that went from Chiapas to Tijuana, from Tijuana to New York, from New York to every place we served this “other coffee.” In a city like New York, which in some neighborhoods has three coffee shops on each street, it still meant and fostered another system.

Your projects develop complex and often playful structures that alternate between subverting existing forms and creating viable alternatives. The boundaries are frequently blurred between poetic gesture and radical action, artistic project and business venture, and even game or real life, as with your Alternative Reality Game *Sabotage Tlacatlaolli Variable*. Can you discuss where the boundaries lie between



Figure 5. *Fran and Gaby Next to the Possibleworlds Co-op Server.* Variable Network State Card Game (2015). Image: Courtesy of the artists.

your work and its existence within the context of the art market, and its broader socially engaged context that seeks to demonstrate that another world is possible?

Ceja: Whether we want it or not, we have already been assigned roles in this world's endless movie – roles according to our class, race, or origin. We are already players in local and international games with inexplicit rules that are constantly being negotiated somewhere we do not have access to. The alternate reality game *Sabotage Tlacatlaolli Variable* makes opportunities to take back the power of playing our own game in real life (Figures 5–7). It has three classes of people including money/investor, labor, and operations. There were 300 people playing it, but it is not a playful or fun game. In the game there are missions for people and people produce things such as articles and videos as the labor actors in the system. They are then paid through shares valued through an external algorithm. The economy itself is a game. Money is not real. We are aware that some players start in the game of life with lots of leverage, while others are born with centuries of disadvantage. And speaking of performance and social engagement, politics seems like a masquerade in which politicians play roles in which they pretend to fight for certain causes while hiding the real intentions of the powerful interests they serve. The field of action of an artist is expected to be



Figure 6. A Representation of Land Purchased through Spacebank in Baja California. Variable Network State Card Game (2015). Image: Courtesy of the artists.



Figure 7. *The Lucky User Who Gets This, Has Been Given Homework.* Variable Network State Card Game (2015). Image: Courtesy of the artist.

within institutional or market frames of validation, and through these organizations art is placed in safe spaces where it can exist as an idea or possibility, while its real potential takes place precisely where it is capable of transforming time, space, or relationships, thus making another world possible.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

FRAN ILICH is a media artist and writer based in New York City. He is the author of the novels *Metro-pop*, *Tekno Guerrilla*, *Circa 94*, and the book-length essay “Otra narrativa es posible: imaginación política en la era de internet” (Another narrative is possible: political imagination in era of the Internet). He has held fellowships at Eyebeam and A Blade of Grass. He was Editor-at-Large for Sputnik Cultura Digital Magazine in Mexico City, researcher at Centro Multimedia of the National Center of the Arts, and screenwriter of the *Interacción* series at Discovery Channel Latin America. He was Visiting Lecturer in the Literature Department of the University of California San Diego and directed seminars on narrative media for the Universidad Internacional de Andalucía in Seville, Spain. He participated in Berlinale Talent Campus, Transmediale, ARCO, Documenta 12 and 13,

and has shown at the Walker Art Center, Creative Time Living as Form, Open Engagement, the Bronx Museum of the Arts, and the EZLN's Festival Mundial de la Digna Rabia. The Vera List Center for Art and Politics and No Longer Empty have commissioned his work.

GABRIELA CEJA is an artist, researcher, and educator. She explores working environments in Mexico and New York City in order to amplify the voices of people whose life paths have been affected by classism, racism, exploitation, and alienation. Believing that art and education are tools for social change, she also designs programs that blur the boundaries between disciplines, institutions, and publics. She received a 2016 scholarship from the Joseph S. Murphy Institute for Worker Education and Labor Studies Institute to pursue an MA in Labor Studies at Lehman College, City University of New York.

MARISA LERER and CONOR MCGARRIGLE, respectively from Manhattan College (New York) and Dublin Institute of Technology, are the Guest Editors of this Special Issue.