

TIGHTROPE WALKING

Mariana Cánepa Luna on Colectivo Tercerunquinto





Living at altitude, Mexico city's twenty million inhabitants are under the constant threat of seismic activity, the perpetual surveillance of a volcano and suffer apocalyptic air pollution; conditions that translate into a *modus vivendi* that seems to balance urgency against improvisation.

Colectivo Tercerunquinto (Julio Castro, 1976; Gabriel Cázares, 1978; Rolando Flores, 1975) plug into the elusive sense of humour that comes from living in these oppressive circumstances. Looking at architecture as a social condition rather than as a science or a field of study, they insist on pushing its limits via unexpected constructions, alterations, multiplications and the demolition of elements, such as doors, walls, fences, windows, staircases or benches. Their work trades on simple ironic gestures that test the interface between architectonic and urban systems, analysing the effects these may trigger on a personal, social, cultural or political level.

3er 1/5 (as they sign their printed work), studied fine art together in the north eastern city of Monterrey, which is known for its prolific industries, such as brewing, finance, glass, and steel. The group became known in Europe when Francis Alys nominated them for a grant for 'up and coming artists worthy of support' under the auspices of his 2004 blue Orange Prize. In recent years the group has participated in numerous group exhibitions in their home country, often presenting cunning interventions that redirect people's behaviour towards architecture.

Tercerunquinto use irony and absurdity as critical mechanisms to pose doubt, question meanings and mark deliberate contradictions. Parallel to the 2002 Art Basel Miami Beach art fair, they were invited to participate in the group exhibition 'Mexico: Sensitive Negotiations' at the Mexican Cultural Institute. The collective decided to tear down the walls that separated the exhibition space from the adjacent Mexican Consulate as a way of including the routine of these official premises in the exhibition. More than a merely playful gesture, this brazenly pragmatic solution to audience outreach exposed the free flow of visitors to the monotonous activity of legal paperwork and vice versa, the employees of the consulate to the bustling art crowd.



Tercerunquinto, *Untitled*, Madrid Arco 2005

In *Project for MUCA Roma*, (2004) [a venue managed by the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México [UNAM]], their work took on a clearer social dimension through the direct cooperation of the local community. For two months the gallery space was transformed into a fence-and-lock-protected warehouse where local black-market traders were invited to store their goods. Tercerunquinto's input into the space was almost non-existent; all their energies went towards acting as mediators between the cultural administration of the venue and the informal merchants, fostering mutual trust from understandable suspicion. The merchants were given identity passes allowing them access to pick up their goods, and the lawyers representing UNAM drew up contracts to protect the 'illegal' status of the merchants' activities. In the brightly lit galleries, visitors could see the variety of materials that were stored in the space through the windows of the building, which included copies of old master paintings piled with easels, clothes, furniture and an archive containing copies of the legal agreements. Testing the role of art institutions as a public service, this project provided an operational safe haven for a parallel economy that is usually out of sight or out of mind.

For *Project for a public sculpture in the outskirts of Monterrey*, (2003), the collective built a minimal-looking 430 sq ft low concrete block near a sporadic settlement. Far from being a literal counterpart to the so-called discussion 'platforms' that now seem to accompany every art fair and biennial, the stage sparked action that was outside the jurisdiction of art. Located in an area lacking any permanent structures, let alone any paved streets or housing, its use emerged spontaneously or through necessity from within the local dispossessed community. An altruistic religious group slowly appropriated the structure, turning it into a hub for the donation of medicine and food, a place for haircuts, delousing animals and eventually evangelism. Political gatherings also took place to discuss the most immediate needs of the community [the supply of water, electricity or schooling]. Today it has been converted into a shack and is known as *El Dispensario*, acting as a sort of community clinic.



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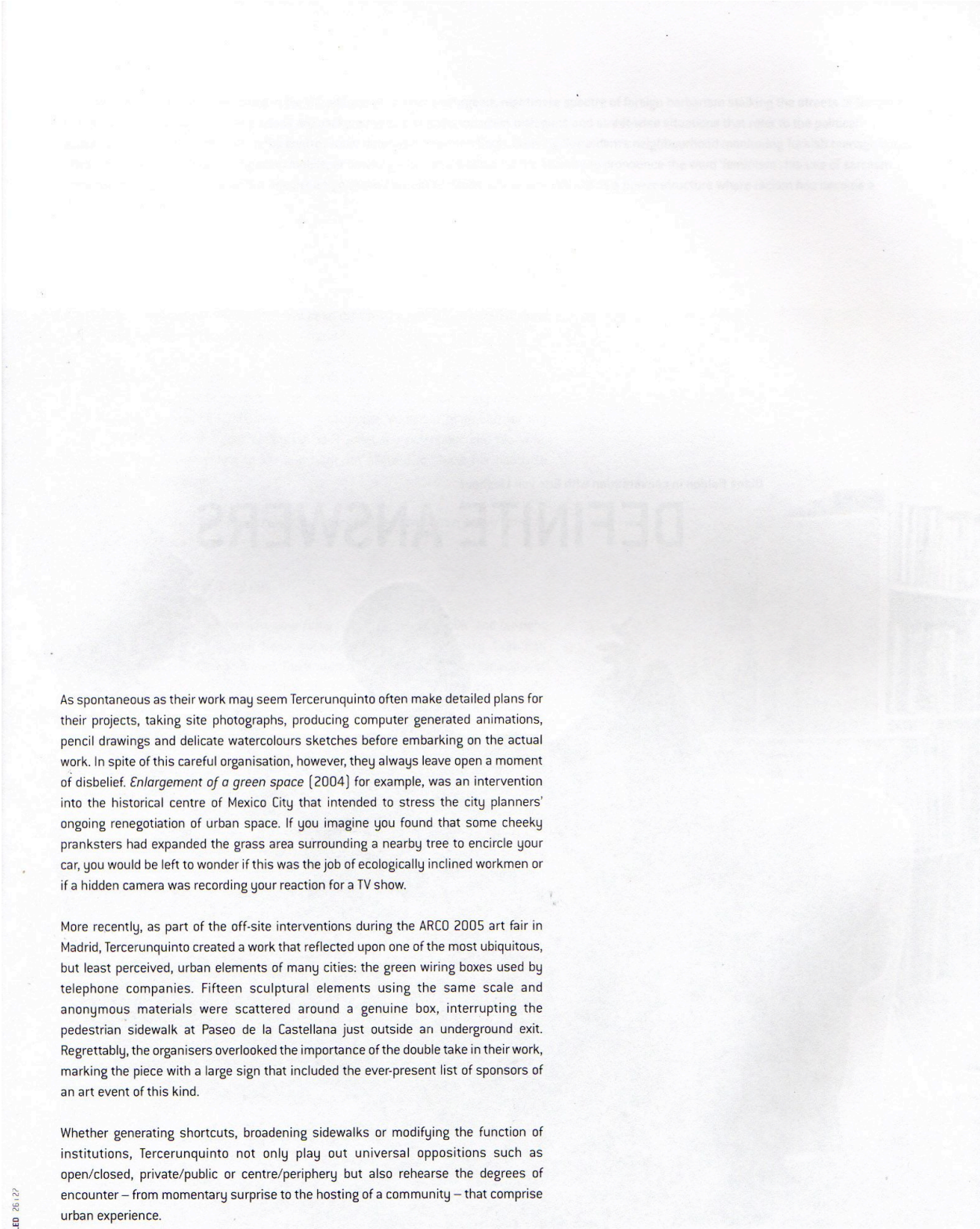
Tercerunquinto, Project for a public sculpture in the outskirts of Monterrey, [2003], Mexico



Tercerunquinto, *Project for a public sculpture in the outskirts of Monterrey*, [2003], Mexico



Tercerunquinto, *Project for a public sculpture in the outskirts of Monterrey*, [2003], Mexico



As spontaneous as their work may seem Tercerunquinto often make detailed plans for their projects, taking site photographs, producing computer generated animations, pencil drawings and delicate watercolours sketches before embarking on the actual work. In spite of this careful organisation, however, they always leave open a moment of disbelief. *Enlargement of a green space* (2004) for example, was an intervention into the historical centre of Mexico City that intended to stress the city planners' ongoing renegotiation of urban space. If you imagine you found that some cheeky pranksters had expanded the grass area surrounding a nearby tree to encircle your car, you would be left to wonder if this was the job of ecologically inclined workmen or if a hidden camera was recording your reaction for a TV show.

More recently, as part of the off-site interventions during the ARCO 2005 art fair in Madrid, Tercerunquinto created a work that reflected upon one of the most ubiquitous, but least perceived, urban elements of many cities: the green wiring boxes used by telephone companies. Fifteen sculptural elements using the same scale and anonymous materials were scattered around a genuine box, interrupting the pedestrian sidewalk at Paseo de la Castellana just outside an underground exit. Regrettably, the organisers overlooked the importance of the double take in their work, marking the piece with a large sign that included the ever-present list of sponsors of an art event of this kind.

Whether generating shortcuts, broadening sidewalks or modifying the function of institutions, Tercerunquinto not only play out universal oppositions such as open/closed, private/public or centre/periphery but also rehearse the degrees of encounter – from momentary surprise to the hosting of a community – that comprise urban experience.