

EXIT  ART

UNFINISHED MEMORIES

30 YEARS OF EXIT ART

PREFACE BY Papo Colo

FOREWORDS BY Holland Cotter, Mary Anne Staniszewski, Rachel Gugelberger

WITH A conversation between Papo Colo and Jeanette Ingberman

EXIT  **ART**

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SOUL FUSION

YUCEF MERHI

I clearly remember that luminous morning of February 2000, a few days before my first birthday. It took me 15 minutes to walk from my house at Waverly and Mercer to Prince and Broadway. Going to Exit Art was truly exciting, but meeting Jeanette Ingberman and Papo Colo was a one-of-a-kind experience. I didn't have an appointment; instead, I had 20 slides, a freshly printed CV and a handwritten letter from Alfredo Ramírez, a great friend and a prominent Venezuelan artist who, years before, joined the P.S.1 International Studio program along with Takashi Murakami, and soon after befriended Papo Colo.

In my 22-year-old eyes, Exit Art was the quintessential SoHo gallery: a colossal loft with a café, a hidden performance space, a private darkroom, an unknown wood workshop, several offices and people—lots of people. But most important, all the exhibited works had something to say. They were vibrant, unconventional and sometimes radical.

When I arrived at the gallery, Jeanette was there. I told her my story, and she came back with Colo. He read the letter, smiled and we went to his studio. Once he opened the door I saw large-scale paintings hanging on the walls and lying on the floor. The whole space was filled with bright natural light. Colo took the slides, but threw out the CV. While looking at the images, he asked me some questions. A couple of minutes later, he picked three works. I was astonished when he said that those works will be included in the fall exhibition, *Neo: New Approaches to Artmaking* (2000). That was my first show in New York, and, of course, one of the best experiences I've ever had. Besides showing the works, meeting the other artists, getting reviewed in the *New York Times* and selling everything, I got to know Colo and Jeanette. During the next years I participated in *Danger* (2001); *Reactions* (2002); *Public Execution* (2004); *The Presidency* (2004); and *The Labyrinth Wall: From Mythology to Reality* (2008-09). In those years I met Jenny, Jody, Ed, Camilo, Eugene, Robert, Eric, Fawad, Fairfax, Bibi, Camila and Lauren, my Exit family. All of them worked at Exit Art and had a significant presence in my daily life.

Through Colo I learned the clandestine history of NYC. In his studio, when he stopped painting, he would tell me about his casual meetings with Ana Mendieta, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Cindy Sherman, the unknown lover of Jackson Pollock and so on. We talked about Artaud, Cocteau and Buñuel, while listening to Radio Tarifa, Manu Chao or King Changó. Then, he would start playing the piano or improvising some tunes on his acoustic guitar. Back from lunch, he would go to the theater room and direct the rehearsal of his most recent play. Afterwards, we would meet to talk about recent art projects, Latin American politics, boxing, Shakespeare, some film by Jodorowsky, or his childhood in Puerto Rico. Colo told me that he grew up on the second floor of a small Puerto Rican bohemian bar owned by his father, who happened to be a boxer. The bar was in front of a TV station, so all the actors went there. He had a mesmerizing childhood, but when he was 14 years old he felt the urge to move out and travel around. Because he was fascinated with ships and traveling, at the age of 18 he became a merchant marine and spent two years with the American Union.

Sometimes Jeanette would come to Colo's studio, a few steps away from her office. She was the muse and the executive; the actress and the director; the persona and the spokesperson. She was air, earth, water and fire. Every time I went to Exit Art, Jeanette was occupied with something significant, but somehow she was always available to say hello and talk. The guidance, love and support I received from her are still enlightening my life.

One day I asked Colo how they founded Exit Art, and he told me this short story: "When I arrived in NYC, I went to the Chelsea Hotel and spent all my money in one month. Then, I made a fake diploma and started looking for a job. Later on, I met Jeanette. She had already completed a master's thesis on law and art, so she was acquainted with the laws. I received a \$3,300 grant as a painter and had my fake diploma, which was an inspiration. Our first space was small, but we hit the scene. There was a newspaper called *SoHo News*, and we got a whole page review. That's how everything started. A couple of years later we made a show called *Forbidden Films*. It was about films that were officially censored. We made that show at the New York Public Library. It was a beautiful time because you could do much with little. Now it is the opposite."

Every single second I spent with Colo and Jeanette was authentic, substantial and powerful. In this sense, Exit Art was not a mere gallery. It was far from the traditional gallery structure. It was a soul fusion between Colo, Jeanette and the world.

One of the attributes I loved about the space was its labyrinthine style. Whether in SoHo or Hell's Kitchen, Exit was loaded with doors, rooms, corridors and memories. In my personal experience, Exit Art became a device to access culture; to enter art; to exercise design; to discover music; to understand theater; to do literature; to perform politics; to explore technology, ecology and so forth. It certainly operated as a gallery, but once inside, it was a parallel cultural universe where the entrance happened to be an exit from the art establishment.

Yucef Merhi (b. 1977) is an artist, poet and programmer. His artistic practice began in the mid-1980s. He is known as the first artist to exhibit a work of art that included a video game console, the Atari 2600. His career includes a worldwide exhibition record at venues such as, among others, Exit Art; the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; the Bronx Museum of the Arts; El Museo del Barrio, New York; and the Orange County Museum of Art, California. He also participated in the official selections of the 7th International Festival of New Film, Split, Croatia; the 2007 São Paulo-Valencia Biennial; and the 10th Istanbul Biennial.