SANTIAGO SIERRA
THE BLACK CONE
MONUMENT TO CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE
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Listasafn Reykjavíkur
Reykjavík Art Museum
Santiago Sierra  The Black Cone
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Introduction
The Black Cone, Monument to Civil Disobedience.


SVARTA KEILAN,
MINNISVARDI UM BORGARALEGA ÓHLÝDNI

"Nú legg ríkisstjórn brytur á ríett bæganna,
þá er ídsprengð helgasti rættur og ófrávikjanlegasta
skyldan bæganna sem og þvers hluta þjóðgarðar.
"Yfirlýsing um rættindi mana og borgara (1793)

THE BLACK CONE,
MONUMENT TO CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

"When the government violates the rights of the people,
the revolution is for the people and for each portion of the
people the most sacred of rights and the most
indispensable of duties."

Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1793)
Introduction
Haftor Yngvason

On January 20, 2012, Santiago Sierra staged a three-hour performance in front of the Icelandic parliament building. The performance marked the opening of a retrospective exhibition of his films and videos at the Reykjavik Art Museum and, importantly, commemorated historic protests that took place at the site exactly three years earlier. Following the collapse of all of Iceland’s major banks in October 2008, thousands of protesters had gathered regularly on the lawn in front of the parliament building to protest the government and its neoliberal policies. On January 20, 2009, when the parliament returned for its first meeting after the holidays, the protests reached a climax, and a few days later the government resigned.

Sierra’s performance consisted of the slow process of cracking a six-feet-high monolith with wedges. At the end of the performance, a black cone (alluding to black, cone-shaped hats that condemned people were forced to wear in humiliation during the Spanish Inquisition) was installed and left in the crack. Entitled The Black Cone, Monument to Civil Disobedience, the monolith contains a plaque with an article from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, which served as a preamble to a constitution that was adopted by the French National Constituent Assembly in 1793: “When the government violates the rights of the people, insurrection is for the people and for each portion of the people the most sacred of rights and the most indispensable of duties.”

The connection of civil disobedience to the right of insurrection is conspicuous, and may seem incongruous at first. While “insurrection” suggests an open clash between opposing parties, “civil disobedience” is usually understood, as Uri Gordon points out in his essay in this book, as a limited corrective action, intended to pressure a government to change selective laws or policies. Liberal political philosophers, such as John Rawls, have sought to tame the concept of civil disobedience further, limiting it to a nonviolent, public political action, carried out in a context of “near-just” constitutional democracies. For an act to count as true civil disobedience, Rawls stipulates, the protestors have a duty to comply with the general law and to accept the consequences of their transgressions, so as to leave everything but the contested legislation unchanged. Far from challenging the authority of the state, the very act of disobedience thus entails the protestors’ fidelity to the law and allegiance to the state. But, as Gordon argues, if the notion of insurrection may seem more radical, it also has been exploited as an “ideological device...to generate loyalty to the basic institutions of the capitalist state.”

Loyalty, fidelity, compliance—these are qualities that Sierra consistently calls into question in his art practice. The Black Cone is no exception. If these civic virtues are invoked, inevitably, by the monument’s placement in front of the parliament building, it is explicitly to challenge them. As Eleanor Heartney shows in her essay, the monument does not conform to the established conventions for civic sculptures. “The Black Cone celebrates a citizen-generated refusal to accept the hitherto-unquestioned status quo.” The monument may thus be seen as a direct
challenge to the State’s relentless demands for conformity and consent. In this regard, the “civil disobedience” referred to in the title of the monument is closer to how Thoreau used the term in his 1849 essay Civil Disobedience (from which the term derives its popular use) than to Rawls’s domesticated concept. As A. John Simmons has shown, Thoreau “argues that his government and law have no legitimate claim to his obedience or support at all.” Thoreau himself stated that when he refused to pay a state poll tax because of the state’s support for slavery and the Mexican-American war, his intention was “to refuse allegiance to the State, to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually.” He denied not just the authority of particular laws but the authority of the government itself. “The only obligation which I have a right to assume,” he proclaimed, “is to do at any time what I think right.” With these words, Thoreau stands, according to Simmons, “on familiar anarchist ground, denying that the state’s demand for obedience could ever be legitimate.”

Thoreau insisted that “all men recognize the right of revolution; the right to refuse allegiance to and to resist the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable.” The grounds for the protests in front of the Icelandic parliament building were partly the government’s inefficiency in monitoring the banks and preventing the disaster (a special tribunal later charged the prime minister with gross negligence), but the discontent went much further. The calculated efforts of the government to deliver the country into the hands of the market forces that plunged it into economic and political crisis were too great to endure. Whether those protests will eventually lead to crucial changes has yet to be seen, but the lasting significance of The Black Cone, Monument to Civil Disobedience is to offer a constant reminder to the citizens that they do not owe political obligation to the State, and a reminder to the government that consent can only be conditional.

Noncompliance is also at the heart of another public project, NO, Global Tour, which Sierra presented in Reykjavik in conjunction with the exhibition. Consisting of two ten-feet-high letters forming the word “no”, the sculpture had traveled throughout the world since 2009, appearing at various politically and economically significant sites on three continents (the sculpture came to Reykjavik from New York City, where it had appeared in the Financial District during Occupy Wall Street). In Reykjavik, the sculpture was mounted on a flatbed truck and presented at several public locations throughout the city, including the parliament building, and in front of the banks that had crashed and were rising from the ashes, much in their original form.

A third public performance presented by Sierra in Reykjavik was the destruction of the letter “L”. The event, which forms one component of Sierra’s most recent work, The Destroyed Word, was one of ten similar actions at different locations around the world, each involving the destruction of a new letter in a new material. The 3.6-meter-high “L” was fabricated in aluminum, which is a significant material in Iceland because of the country’s reliance on global aluminum corporations, which have built plants around the country to capitalize on its geothermal energy resources. All of the ten destructions are published in these pages to bring the destroyed letters together for the first time and spell out the destroyed word.
Finally, a fourth public project was an advertisement for “former or current bank employees or financial workers, guilty about their complicity in the current economic situation for short term paid work in an art project.” The ad was placed in the Icelandic newspapers in the days prior to the opening of the exhibition. The plan was to hire two workers and have them face a blank wall in the museum, in shifts throughout the exhibition, but the ad did not result in any serious applications.

The exhibition itself, Santiago Sierra: Films and Works, was presented at the Reykjavik Art Museum from January 20 to April 10, 2012. It was the first exhibition of the complete collection of Sierra’s films and video documentations and consisted of forty-eight videos, divided into ongoing video projects, performances and documentations of sculptural projects. Beyond merely presenting a comprehensive overview of Sierra’s artistic career, the videos offer an opportunity to explore his projects from a new angle. They iterate some of the well-known and consistent features of his practice, such as hiring (marginalized) individuals to do (degrading) tasks for (minimum) wage payment. But if these features reproduce standard ways of doing business, implicit in Sierra’s photographs, the videos add an uncanny portrayal of the good-natured consent of the workers to their (exploitative) employment. Seeing a group of prostitutes amiably resigning themselves to being tattooed across the back with a line, or a group of unemployed laborers moving heavy concrete blocks around a gallery space, apparently quite contentedly, may reduce the shock experienced by how they’re being treated. Their diligent performance of the assigned tasks (pointless as the tasks may be) with teamwork and camaraderie may indeed look less cruel than the depictions of the same circumstance in Sierra’s disarmingly direct and dispassionate photographs. But that only goes to show how misplaced the moral outrage at his work is. It is not the crossing of moral boundaries that are at stake but the inequities of the market system that places its workers in such situations. What Sierra does in his videos and photographs alike is to confront society with itself, and he does this by interrogating its underlying structures from within. If in the process his works reproduce social and economic injustice, it is with irony and a biting critique of the violence involved.

The public projects The Black Cone, Monument to Civil Disobedience; NO, Global Tour; and Destroyed Word express, as does Sierra’s past work, a dissatisfaction with the failures of democracy in the light of democracy’s own principles of justice. Such dissatisfaction was keenly felt in Iceland in the wake of the economic crash. The parliament had failed and the population was forced to confront a gaping lack of integrity in many of its social and economic institutions. By presenting Sierra’s exhibition and public projects in Reykjavik at this specific time, the hope was that a discussion of his artistic approaches would inform the process of reevaluation that the country has to go through. By exploring Sierra’s strategies of public intervention in response to social issues in diverse sites and sociopolitical situations, the exhibition would at least help focus attention on the importance of uncompromising critical evaluation of the social and political structures that caused the crisis.

The Black Cone, Monument to Civil Disobedience was originally intended to sit on the grass in front
3 Cubes of 100 cm on Each Side Moved 700 cm.
Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, Sankt Gallen, Switzerland, April 2002.
of the parliament building, Austurvöllur Square, for the duration of the exhibition. When Sierra offered to give the sculpture to the city of Reykjavík, with the intention that it be placed permanently next to the parliament building, lively debates began in newspapers and on the Internet, as well as in official political forums. In a letter to the city, the parliament’s speaker’s committee objected to the placement of the sculpture on Austurvöllur Square, arguing that it disturbed the general plan of the historic square. With Sierra’s approval, the objection was met with a proposal to move the monument approximately sixty feet to a location in front of the main entrance to the parliament building, where it would not affect the appearance of the square. The speaker’s committee still objected adamantly but without offering a reason for its continued opposition. At the recommendation of the Reykjavík Art Museum’s acquisition committee, a majority on the city’s culture and tourism board (which is responsible for all art in the city’s public places) voted to accept the sculpture. After a positive review by the city’s planning committee, the proposal was sent to the city council’s executive committee for final approval. The committee was unable to reach a unified conclusion so the proposal was sent on to the full city council, where it was approved by a majority vote.

The mayor of Reykjavík, Jón Gnarr – an artist and a self-proclaimed “anarcho-surrealist” who led the Best Party to a landslide victory in the city elections that followed the economic crash – started the discussion in the city council chambers with the comment, “Finally we discuss art. It is long overdue.” The discussion was thoughtful and frank, with the members of the majority presenting their own personal arguments rather than a unified front. After a back-and-forth that lasted one and a half hours, the mayor remarked on the fact that no two speakers seemed to agree on how to understand Sierra’s work in general.

The main argument that had surfaced against the proposal in discussions prior to the city council meeting was presented by a representative of the Independence Party (which had led the national government before the crash): “Austurvöllur Square is in the center of...one of Iceland’s most important historical sites, along with Þingvellir. In the square there is nothing but flowers, trees and grass, and the statue of Jón Sigurðsson [the leader of the 19th-century Icelandic independence movement], who was and remains a symbol of unity; and it is not appropriate to place a symbol of discord on this renowned national historical site.” To this, the representative of the Best Party who chairs the culture and tourism board responded, as he introduced the proposal in city council, that conflicts had their place in politics and pointed out that Jón Sigurðsson was well known for leading the resistance against the adoption of Denmark’s constitution at a national assembly in 1851. “It was in response to his protest that other assembly delegates proclaimed, ‘We all protest,’” which was used as a constant refrain in the 2009 protests.

At the city council meeting, a representative of the Left-Green Movement stated that she could not accept the proposal “not because the placement was bad, and not even because the artwork, as such, was bad, but because I cannot accept and endorse an artwork by a man who is famous for
ATVINNUAUGLÝSING

Óskað er eftir fyrrverandi eða núverandi bankastarfsmönnum eða starfsmönnum fjármálastofnana, sem eru sakkinnir vegna hlutdeildar sinnar í ríkjandi efnahagsástandi, í launað skammtímainverkefni fyrir listgjörning. Svör berist Listasafni Reykjavíkur í netfangið listasafn@reykjavik.is fyrir 18. janúar.

JOB-WANTED-AD

Wanted, former or current bank employees or finance workers, guilty about their complicity in the current economic situation for short term paid work in an art project. Please contact Listasafn Reykjavíkur, listasafn@reykjavik.is before January 18th.
repeatedly humiliating disadvantaged people in his work." She noted that the artist "did not always do so. He has often been right on target with fantastic works, without anybody being hurt, but he has then crossed the line and so offended my sense of justice that I do not want the city of Reykjavik to endorse him in the way that is proposed." At the meeting of the culture and tourism board, another representative of the Left-Green Movement recorded the following statement: "Although the arrival of the work [The Black Cone] in Iceland has some connection with the Kitchenware Revolution of 2009, the work has a far wider significance. The Black Cone is a beautiful and necessary monument to civil disobedience, and thus to the unified power of individuals vis-à-vis the state and the authorities."

At the city council meeting, a representative of the Independence Party presented The Black Cone as a symbol of violence, noting that even though most protestors had been peaceful, there were rioters among them who acted violently and injured police officers. The sad fact was that a legally elected government was ousted with threats of violence. "I don't see a reason to memorialize them [the protests] with a special monument," he stated. "At least it could have been placed somewhere else, not in this nationally sacred location." A representative of the Social Democratic Alliance suggested that the councilor's distress was misplaced. It should rather be directed at the causes of the Kitchenware Revolution; the causes of the crash. "We lived with an economic policy that deliberately inflated the value of the Icelandic krona...in order to create a false sense of wealth. These were castles in the air and they came crashing down in the fall of 2008." The monument, he suggested, should be seen as a symbol of the great distrust that prevails in western societies after the crash. According to polls, he pointed out, there had hardly been any confidence in the Icelandic parliament since the crash, and the same was true for the financial sector. "The monument is an international symbol of forces for change that have not yet ended."

Thanks
On behalf of Reykjavik Art Museum, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Santiago Sierra for donating The Black Cone monument to the city, and for contributing to the social and political discussion in Iceland, via his exhibition, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Thanks also to Einar Örn Benediktsson, chair of the Reykjavik culture and tourism board, and Hjálmar Sveinsson for their support of the monument, and Thor Sigmundsson for his expert advice on stonemasonry and for conducting The Black Cone performance. Finally, I'd like to extend special gratitude to Reuben Moss, who provided invaluable support in the preparation of the exhibition, the monument and this publication.

(Endnotes)

1
A. John Simmons, "Disobedience and Its Objects."
The Traps of Santiago Sierra
The Traps of Santiago Sierra
Eleanor Heartney

Luis Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel* is a surrealists ode to the barely suppressed savagery of the bourgeoisie. This dreamlike black-and-white film presents the story of a group of high-class guests who arrive for dinner at a mansion and find at the end of the evening that they cannot leave. As the days drag on they give in to their worst instincts, which include murder, suicide, incest and larceny, before being unaccountably released when they reenact the first night's dinner party. Screened in 1962 to a baffled audience, the film has been read in myriad ways during the subsequent decades. It has been seen as an allegory of Franco's Spain, an indictment of the vacuity of the privileged, a parable of the futility of revolution and an invocation of coming apocalypse.

Spanish artist Santiago Sierra has remarked that *The Exterminating Angel* is "part of the core of my work." It is a claim that is as provocative as it is credible. While Sierra enlists individuals for his projects from a social spectrum at the opposite end from Buñuel's upscale diners, the scenarios he sets up create similarly unsettling questions about class, empathy and responsibility. Sierra employs drug addicts, prostitutes, undocumented workers, unemployed war veterans and other representatives of marginalized groups. Paid minimum wage (or at times in more controversial currency, such as hits of heroin), they are enlisted to undertake pointless and often degrading jobs. Sierra's workers stand for hours facing a wall, engage in public displays of masturbation or anal sex, are tied from their ankles to wooden blocks, participate in the digging of thousands of holes in a vacant lot. These actions are undertaken under the auspices of cultural organizations in locations -- among them the street, in art galleries and during international biennials -- where the privileged classes who frequent art events will be forced to encounter them.

It is here that the parallels with Buñuel's film become clear. In *The Exterminating Angel*, the wealthy dinner guests may be insulated from the social upheaval threatened by Franco's repressive policies, but they are trapped within a hell of their own making. Once they discover that they cannot escape from the luxurious villa where they have gone for dinner, they quickly descend into barbarism. For Sierra, the worlds of art and culture play a role analogous to Buñuel's piously appointed prison. In his work, art world denizens are trapped by the contradictions of their own situation. Seeking edification and aesthetic pleasure, they normally are able to overlook the economic vulnerability of the class of workers from which Sierra draws his participants. But in Sierra's projects, this pleasant illusion is shattered as art audiences are ensnared in direct contact with "performers" who represent the underside of the neoliberal order that makes their comforts possible.

Sierra explores the themes of entrapment and exploitation in various ways. Perhaps the clearest echo of *The Exterminating Angel* appears in Sierra's *The Trap* (2007). This work was first performed in Santiago de Chile for a small and very select group of participants, among them noted politicians, journalists, academics and writers. Thirteen invited guests were directed one by one through a long
wooden corridor that led to an open space. There they were confronted by a large crowd of unsmiling Peruvian workers, representatives of a group that now makes up the bulk of Chile’s domestic workers. After having their fill, the guests turned around to retrace their steps, only to discover that the route back had been changed and that the corridor now led straight to the street. Upon exiting they were handed their car keys and thanked for their participation. Like Buñuel’s protagonists, these representatives of the city’s social and cultural elite found themselves unexpectedly trapped in a disorienting and vaguely threatening situation. Thrown into uncomfortable proximity to the urban underclass, they were forced to make an undignified escape.

The theme of the trap also informs Sierra’s contribution to the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003. Sierra, as the official Spanish artist, closed off the Spanish Pavilion, posting guards at the entrance to ensure that only Spanish citizens with passports could enter the space. Once inside, however, their sense of privilege dissipated as they discovered that the pavilion only contained the debris from the previous Biennale’s presentation. This did not prevent the non-Spanish Biennale visitors from feeling resentful of their exclusion. Trapped outside rather than inside, they were cast into the role of unwelcome interlopers barred from a mysterious inner sanctum. In this way, for a moment, they found themselves on the wrong end of the rituals of isolation and exclusion that underlie the creation of national identity, social status or, here, membership in the club of the art elite.

Because many of Sierra’s works are connected to art exhibition spaces, biennials or art institutions, his work is often classed as a species of institutional critique. This umbrella term covers art that examines the political, economic and social conditions of its own existence. However, while this certainly is an important element of Sierra’s work, it construes his intentions too narrowly. For Sierra, the art world is simply a microcosm of the much larger system represented by global capitalism. The real trap in his work is an economic system predicated on a set of relationships that require one group to exploit another.

In examining this system, Sierra’s great subject is labor – the fuel that makes the capitalist system run. His work strips away the uplifting rhetoric in which labor is often cloaked, in particular Calvinist notions of work as a liberating source of personal redemption. (The most notorious example of this is, of course, the sign over the gate in Auschwitz that declared, “Work will set you free.”) Such rhetoric often accompanies efforts to slash worker protections, unemployment benefits and wage supports in the name of economic freedom and personal responsibility. But the real effect of the weakening of the value of labor has been the creation of a global economy based on the precarious worker. Developments like outsourcing, “right to work” laws and attacks on unions all undermine the economic and social security that was once considered part of the worker’s social contract in order to produce a labor market that is liquid and flexible.

Sierra underscores the precarity of contemporary workers in a variety of ways. Many of his works touch on the contradictions created when demand for cheap foreign labor clashes with increasingly harsh restrictions on immigration. For instance, his April 2001 Object Measuring 600 x 57 x 52 cm Constructed
Object Measuring 600 X 57 X 52 cm Constructed to Be Held Horizontally to a Wall.
to Be Held Horizontally to a Wall outlines a task to be done in Switzerland by political exiles who are not officially allowed to work. A few months later he staged 20 Workers in a Ship’s Hold in Barcelona, a work that alluded to the Spanish public’s ambivalence about the influx of sub-Saharan immigrants willing to work under substandard conditions for minimal wages. Sierra’s employees were hired to hide in a ship’s hold as the ship sailed back and forth between two ports. With its emphasis on hidden human cargo, the work made reference both to the slave trade and to the means by which undocumented workers cross borders illegally. In practice, however, the voyage turned surprisingly buoyant, with workers emerging from the hold en route to entertain themselves in a party atmosphere that eventually turned so raucous that local authorities had to close the performance down.

Contravening Marx, however, the “work” done by Sierra’s recruits is neither productive nor socially useful. Nothing of value was created by people hired in Pusan, Korea, to block a museum entrance or paid in Helsinki to lie for four hours a day in a ditch outdoors not far from the parliament building. Or at least nothing of value in the conventional sense of that word. As Sierra points out in Person Saying a Phrase (2002), a work employing a panhandler in Birmingham, England, the art world generates another kind of value. The worker was instructed to declare, “My participation in this project could generate $72,000 profit. I am paid £5.”

In Sierra’s productions, workers are interchangeable elements, performing activities that require no special skills or individual decision making. Often they are only required to sit or stand inertly for hours. In this they present a perverse parallel to the aesthetics of minimalism, with its reliance on seriality and repetition. This is particularly evident in a work such as 8 People Paid to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes (1999), in Guatemala City. Here Sierra hired men to sit in boxes in what turned out to be excruciating heat for four hours. The video of this work begins with the workers having the boxes lifted over them. After this, it continues for almost two hours, showing nothing more than this set of boxes standing in a huge industrial space. Anyone missing the beginning could thus easily mistake it for an installation of minimalist art.

Other works echo the Marxist critique of capitalism as a mode of instrumentalizing others. In 2000 Sierra hired a team of workers to hold a piece of Sheetrock in a Mexico City gallery at a 60-degree angle for hours on end. In 2004 he employed Iraqi immigrants in London to stand before a wall and be sprayed on their backs with polyurethane until they were completely hidden. In such works, individuals literally become nothing more than inert matter performing the role of building materials.
Seriality is also underscored in works like 160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People (2000), in which the backs of four prostitutes paid with shots of heroin become the canvas across which a straight line is inscribed. In another version of this work, six unemployed young men in Havana were similarly tattooed for wages of $30 each. The Penetrated (2008), one of Sierra’s more elaborate productions, is a performance in eight acts, each involving couples of various specified races and genders lined up in a room performing anal sex. Shot from a distance, the rhythmic bump and grind of the participants is remarkably unerotic, turning the sex acts into a set of interchangeable mechanical gyrations.

In her exhibition catalogue for the 50th Venice Biennale, curator Rosa Martínez relates Sierra’s use of living materials to minimalism’s antihumanistic undercurrents. She references Hal Foster, who argues that “the seriality of minimalism and pop is indicative of advanced capitalist production and consumption, for both register the penetration of industrial modes into spheres (art leisure, sport) that were once removed from them.” Similarly, Martínez argues, Sierra “lays bare the repetitive mechanics of labor exploitation and human submission for economic ends.” In an interview with the artist, she elicits the statement, “At heart, I am a minimalist with a guilt complex.”

This admission of guilt goes to the heart of the controversy that inevitably swirls around Sierra’s work whenever projects are performed or the documentary videos made from them are shown. Is he or is he not simply participating in the exploitation of the workers whose plight he claims to be illustrating? Can his work offer an effective critique of the capitalist system when it appears to reinforce the hierarchies it appears to attack?

Sierra feeds this controversy with his vocal disavowal of social purpose. In the same way that he challenges the uplifting rhetoric that surrounds labor, he also dismisses the liberatory language that often surrounds performance art. In a 2006 interview he declared, “I don’t want to be an accomplice to the monumental self-deceptive collective of changing the world.” In fact he acknowledges that he is part of the problem, noting, “A banker who buys one of my pieces is like a newspaper that accepts letters to the editor. Self-criticism makes you feel morally superior, and I give high society and high culture the mechanisms to unload their morality and their guilt.” With such statements, Sierra declines the role of critic, presumably because that would require him to assume an external position. Instead, like Buñuel’s dinner guests, he remains trapped in his own complicity.

The critical debate over Sierra’s work has centered on the merit of this approach. The most spirited discussion has been carried on between critics Grant Kester, who mocks the notion that Sierra’s scenarios reveal anything new to the jaded art-world audiences for whom they are staged, and Claire Bishop, who maintains that the strength of Sierra’s work lies in its unwillingness to promise a false reconciliation of the tensions that underlie class, economic and social relations. Kester asks, “Do we take Sierra and his critics at their word and assume that they really believe a performance in which an illegal worker sits in a cardboard box for four hours in a gallery is
going to change anyone's consciousness of racism or class oppression?" For Bishop, by contrast, it is precisely the lack of redemption that is the point. She remarks, "The work does not offer an experience of transcendent human empathy that smooths over the awkward situation before us, but a pointed racial and economic nonidentification: 'this is not me.' The persistence of this friction, its awkwardness and discomfort, alerts us to the relational antagonism of Sierra's work."

Though they diverge both on the value of Sierra's work and on the larger purpose of art (Kester presents a communitarian vision of art as an act of social healing, while Bishop valorizes the disruptive aspects of modernism), Kester and Bishop are united in identifying negation as a key aspect of Sierra's practice. Which brings us to Sierra's NO, Global Tour, an ongoing quixotic journey in which the artist posts a huge sculptural NO in potent locations around the globe. The NO sculpture, dragged from site to site on a flatbed truck, has appeared in world capitals like Berlin, New York, Brussels, London, Milan, Nagoya, Mexico City and Reykjavik, and in symbolic places like mining areas in the former GDR, industrial and working-class neighborhoods in cities like Buffalo, Detroit and Dortmund, and oil refineries in the Netherlands and Marseille.

There is a powerful muteness to the NO – it brings to mind Melville's famous story Bartleby the Scrivener. This is the tale of a law clerk who responded to all requests, even, ultimately, the request that he eat, with the phrase "I would prefer not." These NOs, both Sierra's and Bartleby's, are absolute. They represent an unbulging refusal to accept the conditions of the world as it is. And in that refusal may be the key to the social consciousness that Sierra's critics denounce him for lacking. Sierra indicates as much in interviews he has given on his larger purposes. In 2004 he told fellow artist Teresa Margolles, "Negativity is the only coherent reaction one can have in a society where the battle's already lost."

What is the most effective response to a world in which inequality seems to build on inequality in an ever-escalating spiral? How does one reconcile social conscience with a social existence predicated on injustice? Sierra's answer is that one must refuse false solace and easy answers. In The Exterminating Angel, the trapped guests eventually escape their prison by meticulously repeating every moment of the dinner party that preceded their imprisonment. But their escape is essentially futile, as it leads to a reinstatement of the status quo, and in the last scene they find themselves trapped again in the church to which they have gone to give thanks for their delivery.

Like Buñuel, Sierra presents a dark assessment of art's potential to effect social change. Nevertheless, in the unsettling of categories that occurs when he springs his traps, Sierra holds out a glimmer of hope. In a recent interview he maintained, "What I think is that people should not go out and manifest
themselves, but start doing things for themselves – explore forms of self-organization on every level, and start breaking the ties with the state: stop working for the state, don’t let your children join their armies, overthrow the actual educational system and provide a parallel one, and so on. Basically, get out of the system. It’s about deploying an active and creative opposition in order to create a new society.”

Sierra had the opportunity to explore this idea further in *The Black Cone, Monument to Civil Disobedience* (2012). Created in conjunction with his retrospective at the Reykjavik Art Museum, this work commemorates the antigovernment protests that rocked the city in January 2009 and forced a change of leadership. It consists of a large cracked boulder split by a black cone and bearing an inscription from the 1793 French National Constituent Assembly’s Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.

*The Black Cone* departs from established conventions for civic monuments in radical ways. It does not conform to the hoary tradition of the war memorials found in so many town squares. Nor does it celebrate the nation’s political victories or foundational myths. It does not draw attention to the achievements of great men or women. Equally, it steers clear of the newer tradition of the anti-monument that somberly recalls a historical catastrophe, in the manner of Maya Lin’s wound-shaped Vietnam memorial or the disorienting forest of stelae that comprise Peter Eisenman’s memorial to the Holocaust. It fails to provide the emotional satisfaction of uplift, shared catharsis or consensus. Instead, Sierra’s sculpture commemorates a still raw act of civil disobedience. Like the cone that splits the rock, the 2009 protest exposed the fault lines in Icelandic society in ways that remain unresolved. That *The Black Cone* does not reflect a settled state of affairs is clear from the continuing controversy over its status, location and possible permanence.

*The Black Cone* does have various art-historical precedents. In particular it bears kinship to the Russian Constructivists and their exploitation of the language of minimalism in the service of revolution. The cone that breaks the rock recalls the red wedge of Bolshevism that El Lissitzky envisioned breaking through the white circle of the Russian antirevolutionary forces. But in keeping with Sierra’s anti-utopian stance, his cone does not provide a clean break. The jagged crack in the rock is a reminder that what is broken may not be easily mended. Here there is no false promise of painless social transformation. Instead, like Sierra’s NO, Global Tour campaign, *The Black Cone* celebrates a citizen-generated refusal to accept the hitherto-unquestioned status quo. It is a reminder that change is messy, uncertain and difficult to control. As such, *The Black Cone* is a stand-in for Sierra’s whole enterprise. It marks the potential for change, but serves as a reminder that the rest is up to us.
(Endnotes)


9. Interview with Teresa Margolies, Bomb.

ESSAYS BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY AND URI GORDON
/ INTERVIEW BY HANS ULRICH OBRIST

THE BLACK CONE
NO, GLOBAL TOUR
NO POPE
DESTROYED WORD