

# YONA FRIEDMAN: DEMOCRACIA

*All texts were produced for the exhibition **Yona Friedman: Democracy**, held at the Memorial da Resistência de São Paulo from 26 June 2021 to 7 March 2022.*

With the exhibition **Yona Friedman: Democracy**, the Memorial da Resistência de São Paulo shares the legacy of Yona Friedman (1923–2020) on communication, a topic to which he dedicates a major part of his production in an attempt to create a universal, accessible language to talk about individual autonomy, social issues and human rights.

Curated by the Resistance Memorial team, the exhibition is held in a partnership with the Fonds de Dotation Denise et Yona Friedman, Jean-Baptiste Decavèle, and in collaboration with the Centre National Édition Art Image (CNEAI) and Sylvie Boulanger.

By proposing alternative forms of communication, Friedman tried to encourage people to think for themselves and to revert what he deemed to be one of the greatest political and planning problems of modern society: the fact that modern societies base their thinking on abstract ideas, such as the financial market, success and progress, and as such become estranged from individuals' actual needs.

Using a casual, easily conveyable language - cartoons - Friedman proposes the right to understand and to interpret as a basic human right. The exhibition directs our gaze to manuals produced by Friedman from the 1970s in a partnership with institutions such as Unesco, the United Nations University (UNU) and the former International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU), now International Council for Science (ISC). The manuals, republished after 2000 by CNEAI, encapsulate his intention to make knowledge public in order to educate.

Friedman saw the streets as a museum, a public platform open to social participation. Following this lead, the exhibition is an act of sharing which encompasses urban interventions in collaboration with collectives Paulestinos and casadalapa, makes the above-mentioned manuals available for the public's spontaneous use and brings in Unicornia, a concrete proposal for turning certain territories in huge open-air museums. Public meetings are also set to be held in collaboration with Sesc Bom Retiro.

In an illustrated reflection on democracy and its imperfections, Friedman ponders our forms of social organization while explaining concepts such as laws, poverty and economy and pointing out how they can reproduce inequality and injustice and suggesting means for their transformation.

He saw a potential for action in the act of understanding itself. Interpreting democracy becomes the central issue: what is it and in whose service does it exist?

In a time in which issues that are non-negotiable for the Memorial da Resistência are everywhere being called into question and negated, Yona Friedman's defense of an open and participative form of knowledge sharing is crucial for our reflection on the role of communication in the struggle for the appreciation of democratic principles, for the exercise of citizenship and for human rights education.

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## YONA FRIEDMAN.

Yona Friedman (1923-2020) was an architect, artist, sociologist and anthropologist. Born in Budapest, Hungary, he studied architecture for the first time as an auditing student at the Budapest Technology and Economy University.

A Jew, he was thrown into prison and experienced the violence of war as a refugee, moving at first to Bucharest, Romania, and then to Israel. It was in Israel that he finished his higher studies at Technion, Haifa, where he also worked as an architect from 1949 to 1957.

His first designs were a direct response to post-war demographic problems and the challenges of reconstruction. In 1953 he started conceiving the principles of what he would call "mobile architecture": participative, mobile structures based on notions of flexibility and self-planning and incorporating minimal contact with the soil in order to enable ease of transformation according to inhabitants' desires.

These concepts were present throughout his production and became decisive for the idea of what he would call the Spatial City, a highly innovative design for urban organization.

From the 1960s, now living in Paris, France, Friedman developed an oeuvre centered on communication and on the transfer of ideas, proposing an accessible, democratic language by means of videos, drawings and different kinds of publications.

Few buildings designed by Friedman were actually built, including the Bergson High School in Angers, France (1979), and the Simple Technology Museum in Chennai, India (1987), made with local materials such as bamboo.

His work defies classifications and categories and encompasses publications, exhibitions and investigative designs in areas such as architecture, ecology, politics, sustainability, language and improvisation, propagating thoughts on all sorts of issues related to life in society.

## MANUALS.

Claiming for each individual the ability to decide for him- or herself, Yona Friedman developed in the course of his work a language which advocates for the right to understanding and interpretation. Technical drawings, blueprints and complicated texts gave way to collages, sketches and cartoons in an oeuvre that focuses on communication in its clearest, most universal form.

According to Friedman, the right to understanding is an integral part of human rights. In his view, abstract theories divorced from individual experience become ideological objects that can be easily used to manipulate.

Contrary to excessively academic and conceptual models that end up by alienating the thinking subject, he assumes that images are necessarily implied in conveying ideas, because they constitute an immediate language that is not tied to a specific territory.

His publications display simple illustrations and minimal texts. It is up to reader to interpret them from his own unique, concrete experience of the world. His subjects are extremely diverse: from issues of livelihood and self-planning - in housing, water management, food crops and sanitation - to areas such as economy, poverty, wealth, inequality and democracy.

Published in simple booklets that could easily be carried around and reproduced, his manuals were distributed in over 30 countries, in collaboration with institutions such as Unesco and the United Nations University (UNU).

More recently, Friedman started to incorporate his concepts in short films and produced about 200 animated films, many of which were made available online under the tag *Slide Shows*.

In his quest for social autonomy, Friedman found in manuals a new way of communicating that was able to encourage autonomous thinking. He saw the act of understanding as a gateway for action, and the manuals encapsulate his intention to convey knowledge and make it public in order to educate.

## CULTURAL SPACES.

Understanding museums as metaphors for thinking out the city, Friedman developed a series of proposals for cultural spaces produced with temporary, adaptative and collectively-built structures based on simple instructions and on reusable materials such as cardboard, Plexiglas, wire and wood.

In his view, buildings were not as important as the objects to be presented. For that reason, he chose the street as the quintessential public and democratic place for creating collaborative spaces of urban intervention.

Friedman criticized institutions that offered visitors ready-made answers, and proposed instead museums built by the people and for the people. His first design in this vein was the *Museum of Simple Technology* in Chennai, India, built by local residents on the basis of techniques and instructions included on the Communication Centre of Scientific Knowledge for Self-Reliance manuals.

In the following years, he proposed further ideas that transferred the leading role to the individual. Such is the case of the *Street Museum*, which in each new iteration calls the local public to exhibit in Plexiglas or cardboard boxes the objects they would like their neighbors to see.

He also proposed the *Graffiti Museum*, in which plastic sheets set up in temporary structures take all visitors' graphic interventions.

Doing without all built spaces, he designed an *Open Air Museum* for the Île Seguin, in the outskirts of Paris. In the open air museum, large-scale patterns and images would occupy the landscape itself.

In the project for a *Promenade Museum*, the exhibition takes place as one walks through urban space. The idea of building less and less also led him to propose his so-called *iconostases*, structures made of diverse materials that can be easily handled in order to serve as supports for exhibits. A metal version was used in what he called *Museum without Building* - a design for a public space which would be open for exhibitions, debates, meetings and the discussion of new ideas.

## UNICORN.

One of Friedman's proposals for turning territories into museums are the so-called "Nazcagrams", whose name derives from the geoglyphs found in Nazca, Peru. Seen from on high and several kilometers long, the large-scale images fill the landscape in an open-air exhibition.

The diagrams, shown by Friedman in sketches and collages, resemble animals and mythological beings such as the "licorne", a character that recurs in and is representative of his work: "I like unicorns: they do not exist, and so they are peaceful." Friendly, elegant and always feminine, they are the main characters in a series of short stories narrated and illustrated by him, such as *La licorne nage dans la merdemots* (which is difficult to translate due to the play of words, but can be approximately rendered as *The Unicornia Swims in a Sea of Shit-words*).

The short story tells how the creature finds itself plunged in words that, like those used in political discourse, are so abstract that she has come to lose their effective sense. In order to criticize empty, opaque words, the unicorn decides to keep silence from then on.

Friedman is emphatic in affirming that his character, although fictional, is not utopic, because it is an expression of his fatigue in dealing with the social and political structure of the modern state, which ignores citizens' actual needs and bases its actions on abstract concepts, such as the financial market, success and wealth.

All of Friedman's production is addressed to the common citizen, the man in the street. In the street itself, the unicorn acts as a kind of public platform for debate which can be activated, modified and complemented by those who use it. It is used for discussions about the function of the museum and the importance of social participation in the construction of more democratic spaces.

# CAPTIONS

## **MOBILE ARCHITECTURE**

Yona Friedman attended the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the International Congress of Modern Architecture as a non-official participant. The Congress took place in Dubrovnik, Croatia. On that occasion, he presented the initial ideas of what would become his mobile architecture manifesto, first published in 1958. In the publication itself, Friedman proposed a constructive system that would allow occupants to determine and easily change the design of their own houses if they so desired. Although it was met with little interest from his colleagues at the Congress, Friedman developed his theory further and was still alive when it became a significant influence for architectural movements in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **SPATIAL CITY**

The ideas presented by Yona Friedman in his *Mobile Architecture* manifesto were brought together in the *Spatial City*, a design for a multi-story megastructure raised over a city and filled in and expanded by means of individual prefabricated units according to residents' needs. The proposal was a direct response to dramatic urban growth in the post-war period and aimed at optimizing land use. In it, Friedman addresses key questions which are also present in his other works, such as individual freedom of choice, structural flexibility and the defense of an architecture built around humans and other living beings.

## **ANIMATION FILMS**

The early 1960s were marked by Yona Friedman's interest in languages such as animation and cinema. With his wife, film editor Denise Charvein (1922-2007), he started producing films based on African folk tales, with soundtracks made from songs collected and recorded by UNESCO. Conveying information by means of simplified drawings and few dialogues, these works lay the foundations for the manuals, a series of publications in cartoon form developed by Friedman in the following decade. The films' success ensured the authors the Golden Lion prize at the 1962 Venice Film Festival for *Annalya Tou-Bari*, which is presented in this exhibition. Discovered and restored by CNEAI years later, twelve of Friedman's animation films were collected and made available in a DVD.

## **MANUALS**

From the 1970s, Yona Friedman began to develop his so-called manuals – publications with simple drawings and very little text. Encompassing a comprehensive program of subjects related to daily life, they were supported by organizations such as UNESCO and were widely distributed in the 1980s through the Communication Centre of Scientific Knowledge for Self-Reliance, founded by Friedman under the sponsorship of the United Nations University (UNU). Printed in thousands of copies, the manuals were made available in Asia, Africa and Latin America. They were collected and published by CNEAI in a three-volume series between 2007 and 2009.

## **MANUALS. VOLUME III**

The third and last volume of the *Manuals* series, published by CNEAI, brought together materials produced by Yona Friedman on issues such as language, human rights and communication. The one entitled *The Right to Understand*, included in the publication, was translated into Portuguese and will be partially presented at the exhibition.

## **DEMOCRACY**

In his book, Yona Friedman addresses issues such as social inequality, economy and laws. His reflections not only point out the imperfections of democracy, but also suggest possible alternatives for change. The book, published by CNEAI, was partially translated into Portuguese and will be presented in this exhibition.

## **THE GREAT LICORNERIE**

Unicorns are characters in some of Yona Friedman's short stories. They are peaceful and friendly creatures and are always female. These drawings, collected and published by CNEAI, record the ways and mores of those fantastic beings through the eyes of their creator.

## **UNICORNIA SWIMS IN A SEA OF SHIT-WORDS**

A free adaptation by the Memorial da Resistência team of the short story *La licorne nage dans la merdemots*. In French, the term *merdemots* plays with the phrases *mer de mots* (a sea of words) and *merde mots* (shit-words).

## **GRIBOUILLI**

*Gribouilli*, which can be translated as "scribble," is one of the spatial structures devised for Yona Friedman for free, impromptu use. It can be intuitively built by anyone from simple materials and without any kind of technical drawing.

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