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Whatever happened to Yomango?

Fifteen answers to a questionnaire

Yomango

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A very nice Italian girl who works for a big fashion company whose name she did not dare decline proposed, in August 2008, a questionnaire to Yomango as part of her doctoral research. Yomango, who has never had anything to hide (on the contrary, Yomango has always been about the magic of un-hiding), after years without making public declarations, tells her everything about its past and present, in this exclusive and rare interview that could have also been given the title 'The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about Yomango'. Yomango was represented in it by its usual multiple spokesperson, Paul Bannister.

1.

Even if the first public presentation of the Yomango project dates back to 2002, the ideas that generated it had already been in circulation for some time by then, and if one digs deeper into the story of the culture that (for want of a better imagination) is called

'alternative', one can find all sorts of sketches and precedents, some as exceptional as the yippies and *Steal this book*, put together almost forty years ago by that brilliant activist called Abbie Hoffman. In any case, the idea of Yomango, that is, of establishing a multinational dedicated to a form of civil disobedience that operated inside big commercial spaces, was developed around 2001-2002. Evidently, the experience that some people in the original group had had in events such as the anti-globalisation counter-summits, and in particular the protests around the G8 summit in Genoa (July 2001), all played an important role in the way in which the idea of Yomango became defined.

2.

Initially, Yomango's meeting spaces were weekly meetings and occasional workshops. In this first moment, the nodal group of the Yomango community came together essentially through the workshops. But where exactly these meetings took place is not relevant; suffice to say they were social movements and grassroots cultural spaces of Barcelona.

3.

Like every other franchise worth its salt, Yomango has had 'branches' or 'nodes' in Germany, Mexico, Chile, Argentina... and many other branches or punctual actions, many of which in all likelihood were never known to the group of people who originally started the project. One thing is certain: if big commercial enterprises have strict control over what its franchisees can or cannot do with the brand that they are granted in exchange for royalties (there being, in general, nothing to do beyond what is

dictated by the franchisor: MacDonald's, Benetton...), Yomango's policy was always to give maximum freedom to whoever adopted its brand, inviting them to express their creativity as much as possible. This is why even the name 'Yomango' would itself be replaced in many cases: Umsonst, Pinche Empalme... Likewise, in some of the cases where the brand would be kept the same, its meaning would undergo total re-signification: the origin of the term – the Spanish slang *mangar* [to steal] – makes sense only in Spain and in a few places in Latin America.

From the start, Yomango's actions were never exclusively directed at fashion multinationals; there is Yomango in every kind of multinational chainstore, and in particular those based in big commercial spaces such as shopping centres, department stores etc.

4.

We did not talk about *mangar*, but *yomangar*, in order to differentiate it from the simple act of 'stealing' or shoplifting'... The spirit of Yomango is not a consumerist one, and the act of magic that takes place in a Yomango moment of liberation (the magic of making things disappear and reappear) escapes the legal-illegal dichotomy.

5.

Obviously, yes, there have been many times when Yomango people all over the world were caught by security guards or the police, individually as well as in collective actions. This is part of the game and, in such cases, the thing to do is to behave in the most adequate way, knowing both our constraints and our rights in a given situation and operating 'tactically', so to speak.

6.

As a general rule, it is highly unlikely to end up in jail because of a Yomango action (at least in Europe), considering it counts a small offence if the values at stake are below a few hundred euros (in Spain the limit below which 'shoplifting' is not punishable as a penal offence is € 500). In those cases where it does count as a penal offence, there are, to my knowledge, no European countries where the possible punishments involve a prison term. In most cases, and at the very worst, Yomango legal problems can be solved by paying a fine. This does not mean there have not been a few heavier, legally more complicated cases.

Either way, Yomango's goal has never been to defy legality, but rather to 'fly under the radar'; Yomango's message is not 'legalise shoplifting', but rather: 'shoplifting exists, and it is neither an individual psychical perturbation, nor some sort of pseudo-kleptomania; we have to make it visible and turn it into a message, a story, a moment of reappropriation of those things that publicity is always promising, but never delivers'.

7.

Of course at some point Yomango managed to instil fear in the heart of big companies! Of course we did – and we have evidence that proves it! (Among other things, lawsuits brought against us by legal firms working for multinationals. Luckily, after long processes, these would generally result in nothing at all).

8.

Yomango was never postulated as an alternative or incompatible mode of action in relation to others. The ideas and forms of boycott or manifestation are no doubt many, and we find almost all of them valid in principle. As a good brand, Yomango is in competition with other great brands, never with practices of protest.

9.

'But how can you possibly justify stealing from people?': that is one question that has often been asked of Yomango. But of course Yomango does not steal 'from people'! In fact, it serves to show that there are, properly speaking, no people behind big transnational commerce and the world's great chainstores. Their entire system is absolutely impersonal, whether that refers to the non-existent freedom of the individual shop, always the predicament of franchisees (who run all the risks while having to share their profits with the 'mother' company, all the while being condemned to never exercising their own creativity), or to the direct consequences of 'unknown loss' – the nice euphemism that businesses apply to those products that, when stock is taken, are found to have gone 'missing' without having ever been sold.

What is more, Yomango moments could, in many occasions, rely on the support, favour, or direct facilitation of workers at these chainstores, some of which eventually went on to become active members of Yomango promoting groups.

10.

There were many times when people proposed us the following dilemma: would it not be better to protest simply by refusing to

buy at certain stores, rather than contributing to their centrality by consuming their products, be these stolen or bought? To which Yomango could reply with the following question: would it not simply be better to have more humane companies, instead of those who sell products that come from countries or factories the fairness (or otherwise) of whose production criteria we have absolutely no possibility of controlling; would it not be better to be able to decide autonomously, rather than by induction, our criteria of what it is that we need, what it is that we consider new, what exactly counts as quality; or to have our own criteria of fashion, rather than having them imposed by some multinational's head office? We know how hard it is today to distinguish between good and bad chains... This is why Yomango makes no distinction among chains: what it expects is, precisely, that we don't allow them to become natural to us, but confront their existence and break with *all* our chains.

(As an aside, let us say that what we wish to say here is not that it is entirely impossible to create commerce at a large scale that would be based on a functioning that is respectful towards the environment, with the producers, with the workers. The thing is, at this large scale, it looks like no-one would allow you to do it...)

11.

It is true that, in times of crisis, it is difficult to expect people to stop from consuming the economic products for sale at places like Zara or Mango. Fair enough: but if you can get these clothes relatively cheap when you buy them, with Yomango you can get them for free!

The logic here seems to be that people buy 'cheap' clothes from the big chains because it is expensive to pay for clothes or products that are singular and creative; the problem, however, is that that creativity may be expensive when we buy it, but it is actually quite cheap when we sell it to big business! This is the paradox by which the creativity appropriated by multinationals and chainstores turns out, in the medium to long run, to cost quite dearly. On the consumption side, it reduces 'creativity' to the use of the credit card. On the side of production, it applies economic optimisation at an enormous scale to every act of creation, paying very little to very many 'creative' people, who play a very marginal role in the process of valorisation – reduced to exploitation in their work of re-creating or optimising for the company the 'new tendencies' that generate staggering profits. ('New tendencies' whose origin, it must be said, are neither in the company nor in the 'creative' types themselves, but 'out there': it is a common good, and, as such, stolen by businesses so they can be financially exploited. Yomango has always said: 'property and appropriation – commercial, private, intellectual – are the real theft'.) These 'creative' subjects, usually young and full of enthusiasm, are kept in a state of precarious work and constantly submitted to psychological blackmail: 'do you want to be creative in a difficult world like today's? Then be so for our company, or live in the wilderness'.

Yomango can, therefore, also be understood as the first link in a new form of creativity, based on personal initiative, but at the same time shared and placed in common; in the recycling and free circulation of ideas and goods; in collective happiness as an indispensable pre-condition of personal happiness.

12.

More than important, the internet has been fundamental for the diffusion of Yomango. The first phase of the project (the introduction of the brand) was almost exclusively based on the physical space of the city and on mass media. From that point on, however, Yomango became a viral brand whose avowed aim was to arrive at losing control of itself, which was made punctually possible thanks to the extraordinary potency of the network of networks; thanks, for sure, to the discussion and sharing forum that Yomango installed on the web, as well as the website for the diffusion of copyleft news, models, information, texts and images.

This, so to speak, 'historical' webpage (http://www.yomango.net) was effectively and definitively frozen on July 7th 2007; but this has not meant the end of Yomango as either brand or way of life. Its freezing (not disappearance) was the result of many things changing in the world in comparison to the distant 2002 – including, naturally, the lives of those people who had originally set Yomango in motion and who maintained the site. On a larger scale, we have been fortunate to see an increase in the world's collective consciousness concerning phenomena linked to the hyper-exploitation of both human and environmental resources. At the same time, many practices of cultural interference such as Yomango have entered the fray, managing to infiltrate both mainstream media and the world of art and culture; managing, in fact, to contaminate even the culture of commerce itself – which, as we know, has now nefariously appropriated alternative propaganda languages and techniques, placing a question mark over the effectiveness of some of our tactics over the last two decades.

There are those who see the latter as signalling the loss of the purity of those original forms of communication guerrilla or cultural subversion. Yomango thinks, on the contrary, that this

demonstrates that certain ideas would have to come out victorious. The matter is to not drop the guard now, out of optimism or defeatism, but to think the next steps. In what concerns the Yomango and Yomango-related nodes that remain active in various cities across the world, it seems to me that they have all been going through very nearly the same reflections, and similar trajectories – regardless of all the differences in individual lives and the heterogeneous contexts they are in.

The original webpage has stopped being an active forum to become a prolific centre of documentation. And Yomango has remained a way of life, above and beyond the old online forum. Actions in the old spectacular style now hardly take place; but this does not meant that they cannot be done, anywhere, some time in the future; above all because they are not that difficult, and because we are everywhere!

(To find other websites belonging to the global Yomango community, have a look at number 15. Or ask Mr. Google.)

13.

Yomango has undoubtedly served as a way of activating a certain collective reflection on the role that consumption plays in our lives. When I say collective, I evidently do not mean 'the people' or 'society in general', above all because it is very difficult to make such generic categories mean much in the present time. Yomango, like many other contemporary communicative phenomena, has functioned in a viral way across many communities. In this sense, it has not only aided critical thought, but also a *practical way of thinking*; creative, disrespectful, with a taste for rupture. After all, if we are not disrespectful in the face of what exists – if one is not

ready to take the board where the game is played and stamp on it –, how can we be truly creative?

14.

A world without brands? Yomango never really dedicated itself to thinking how we could ever become completely free of them, since, properly speaking, Yomango is itself one, even with its own advertising slogans (all of which, in turn, have been obviously *yomangados* from somewhere else: 'connecting people'; 'because you're worth it'; 'you want it, you got it'...). If we put some thought into it, a brand appears as primarily a simple mark of recognition that applies to the production of certain goods or services, whose function is subsequently expanded until it becomes a sign of belonging for those who carry or consume it; a sign of identification that functions on the grounds of an idea, or rather a 'story', that condenses around it. Yomango's intuition (but also that of many others in these last years) was to realise that what we needed to do was to create brands – ideas, stories, forms of belonging – that are not decided in a head office, by a few, for the consumption of many.

Yomango as a proposal for 'branding from below'? That's not a bad idea now, is it?

15.

Yomango:
http://www.yomango.net
http://www.yomango.net/links/amigos
http://www.yomango.net/links/inspiracion
http://translate.eipcp.net/transversal/0307/raunig/es

Umsonst:
http://info.interactivist.net/node/4588
http://www.berlin-umsonst.tk
http://translate.eipcp.net/transversal/0307/kanngieser/en

Compartiendo Capital:
http://compartiendocapital.org.ar

Pinche Empalme Justo:
http://www.pinche.com.ar

Free shops:
http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tienda_gratis
http://www.productosgratis.blogspot.com