

**PLEXUS**  
**AN ILLUSTRATED ART BOOK CATALOG**  
**1982-2008**



No Copyright by Sandro Dernini, 2009



Artwork by Richard Milone, New York 1986

It is a contribution for  
the safeguard of the Door of No Return  
of the House of the Slaves of Gorée, Dakar,  
as symbol of the erosion of humankind historical memory.

The Door of No Return



House of the Slaves, Gorée, Dakar, Senegal

Freedom



Artwork by Getano Brundu, Cagliari, Sardinia 1988

***THE VOYAGE CONTINUES...***

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Plexus Art Slavery Manifesto Open Call



Original manifesto by Frank Shifreen, New York 1988; modified by Seni MBaye, Dakar 2008

## ***INTRODUCTION TO PLEXUS PASSPORT***

by Leonard Horowitz, New York 1986

What you feel and see is your own creation...

We are called PLEXUS. I am labelling it: "Mytho-Compressionism".

This book represents, in a flat compressed version, the hopes, visions, poetry, music, dreams of hundreds of artists.

This book represents a small scale version, a special history of four operas. These Co-Operas were and are the personal visions of Art History, of Francisco Goya, of Purgatory, of Mythology trance-formed into a simultaneous Tableau.

Here, we have compressed history, re-created mythology.

Time has speed up and there is no time left for aesthetic distance between the artist as performer and the art observer. In these simultaneous Co-Operas we have destroyed this distance, and they in turn interact, creating a new operatic form.

We have extended the compass of vision to include the former observer as participant.

We are user friendly. Use us or lose us.

We are all independent thinkers and dreamers collating our collective visions collaboratively. Please experience us wisely and with an open heart. This is open ART



*"Homunculus"* by Eve Vaterlaus, Rosenberg Gallery, New York University 1993

## A Change of Perception



Artwork by Ivan dalla Tana, New York 1988

## **PREFACE TO THE ART SLAVERY CATALOG BOOK**

by Sandro Dernini

This book catalog illustrates, from 1982 to 2008 with a short pre-history, the story of Plexus - an unexamined part of the contemporary history of art.

In 1986, in the Lower East Side of New York, Plexus started its art journey on board a metaphoric art slave boat. Refusing the hierarchical star system of the Artworld, 220 artists acted intentionally the selling of themselves, handcuffed together and to their artworks, directly to the art market through an art slaves auction event. It was about the survival need for the artists to create their own independent avenues.

In 1988, at the House of the Slaves in the island of Goree, off Dakar, the largest slave trading centre on the African coast, and one of the first UNESCO's world heritage sites, today under a dramatic sea erosion, the flag of the *Plexus Art Slavery Manifesto* was raised up as a statement against the enslavement of art as a commodity and the disengagement of the artists from the community.

Against any form of slavery, the eroded Door of No Return of the House of the Slaves of Gorée became the symbol of the erosion of the memory of humankind as well as the place from where to start the repatriation of art into the community.

Looking for the acknowledgement of art as an underestimated resource for an effective sustainable development, to overcome the fake concept of *autonomous art* by means of a more complex interdependent vision, Plexus has situated "art" in an expanded community more related to a broader heterogeneous multicultural environment. Therefore, Plexus has linked the notion of "art" to the concept of "well being" - as a paradigm enhancing the quality of life for all.



From its beginning, in 1982 in New York, Plexus was conceived as an interdisciplinary project committed to the achievement of a heightened understanding of alternatives enhancing human experience. Since then, it has realized numerous experimental events, involving more than a thousand of artists and scientists around the world, mainly in New York, Dakar, Rome, Sardinia, Amsterdam, and Australia.

A Change of Eye



Artwork by Langouste MBow, Dakar 1986

Plexus uses the metaphor as a multi-category framework, a crossing over between knowledge and unconsciousness. The metaphor is ultra-rapid, it works with nanoseconds (billion fractions of a second), the time-scale of our computers. One nanosecond is so fast that it exists before its rational thought. The metaphor of art can help to perceive reality beyond our rational horizon.

The *erosion of the Door of No Return* is the Plexus metaphor for a change of route in the human use of human beings and the Ark of the WellBeing is the journey to safeguard the Door.

The radical transformation of today's scenery and the complexity of the issues raised and their interdependent components require, within the people-centered *bottom-up* sustainable development paradigm, not only new multicultural perspectives and transectorial models, but also creative approaches for a change of perception and consciousness.

At this time, in a global world in crisis, Plexus International has outlined a sustainable art model that might prove to be invaluable to grasp possibilities of global interaction, among artists, scientists, communities and institutions.

Art is a cultural product that has its historical value and this book as a catalog presents in a chronological sequence the non stop 25 years art activity of Plexus with the purpose to call for attention on the erosion of the value of history in contemporary art. Within an art environment known for the brief historical duration of its art groups and movements, the "unique quarter of century" art documentation reported in it, provides to Plexus International a historical artistic credit line and, at the same time, it challenges the notion that the artistic identification is conferred only by the ArtWorld.

### A Change of Perceptive



Piero della Francesca's Entropy concept image by Franco Meloni, Cagliari, Sardinia 1990

Within a Plexus archive of more than 50.000 photos and hundreds videos, to deal with the methodological problem of selecting the 1157 images reported in this book catalog, I applied the phenomenological methodological approach pointed out by Alfred Schutz in *Reflections on the Problem of Relevance*, that I used in 1997 to complete at New York University my Ph.D. dissertation on *Plexus Black Box*, published in 2007 by the Sapienza University of Rome Academic Press. I am aware that many artists' contributions are partially reported and I apologize for it, but this book catalog is only a framework in progress for the development of a collective interactive online publication, where the whole Plexus archive will be posted and all participants can fully report their art contributions (images, texts, videos). In conclusion, it is an open invitation to come on board the Ark of the WellBeing, [www.plexusforum.net](http://www.plexusforum.net), to travel together to safeguard the access through the DOOR OF RETURN to all future generations.

### An Art Change in Consciousness



Langouste MBow, Medina, Dakar 1987

**Plexus International** is a beautiful creative tool for a partnership of “the artists in the first person” to exchange their works without filters or barriers. The “Market” eventually will recognize it, particularly when the issue is the international debt of the Third World vs. the First World, and the role of "art" in the opening of the Door of Return for our future generations.

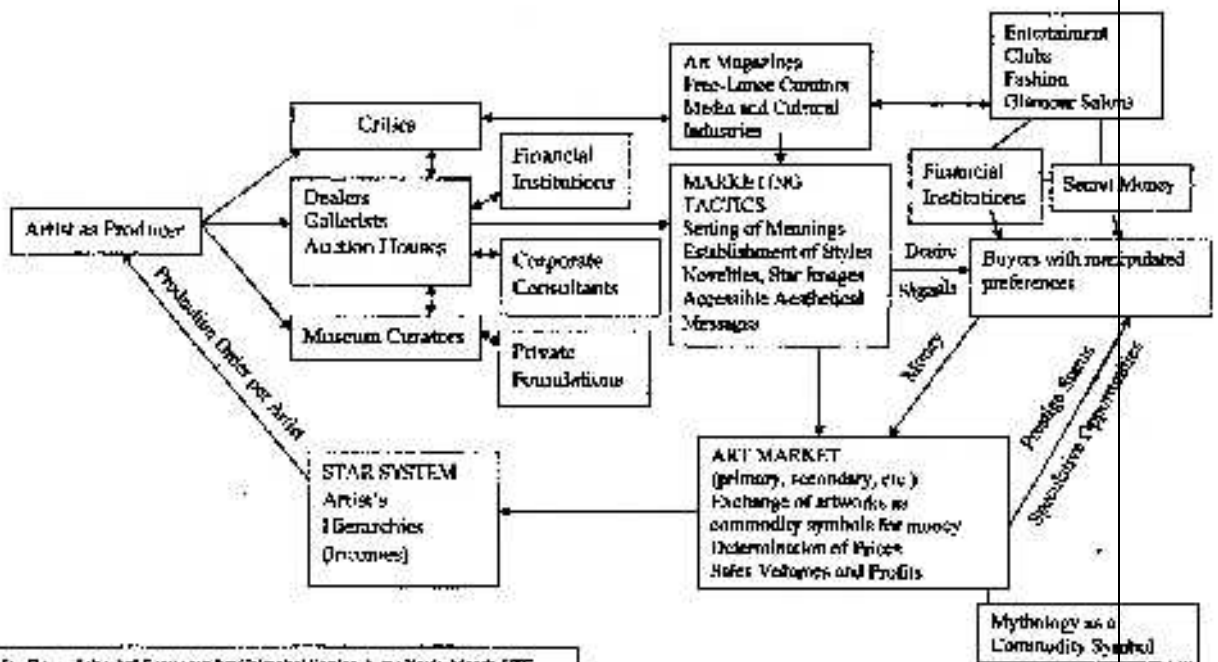
Plexus Map Through the Door of Return



Concept image by Sandro Dernini, Rome 2009

**Plexus Art Opera 1: Goya Time, 1985, New York**

**THE STRUCTURE OF THE ART MARKET**



Circular Flow of the Art Economy by Cristóbal Denicé, New York, March 1985

Cultural Community Civic Center CUANDO, Lower East Side, New York 1985

# **PLEXUS AND ITS PRAXIS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY**

by José Rodríguez, New York, 1992

From the Porto Rican cultural tradition from where I come from, I was educated that the artists are the first voices speaking on behalf of the community, and that the artists are not separated from the community in which they belong. In its years of intensive existence, Plexus has understood its action praxis as a social praxis exercised in the community. This intensive experience of Plexus has been exercised in two levels:

One of those has been the praxis of art in the best tradition of the Avant-garde creativity, with the artist regaining his social praxis and regaining his "First Person" - able to define his creativity, able to name his art. The Artist in the First Person and its praxis within the community insurances the possibility of naming and defining the cultural production. The Plexus praxis is a continuation of a tradition which took the responsibility to confront "art" as another institution of the dominant power structures. The praxis of Plexus is not a praxis of the form of the autonomous-logocentric art, but is a creative praxis that liberates art from its role as an institution as well as a commodity. The praxis of Plexus is the negation of art as an institution.

The Plexus praxis is the elaboration of the artist's context within the community's context. Because of its Avant-garde tradition, the other second element of Plexus intensive experience is in the maintenance of the "living tradition in art."

This living tradition in art is the one that defines the community as the space of the living culture. Culture becoming the beholder of magic, the beholder of shadows, in the state of permanent becoming. The living tradition in art is in ultimate sense what defines a community, it is by keeping the oral tradition, the passing from generation to generation the essence of the community, the essence of culture - culture as a living experience.

The living tradition in art is also the act of self-definition of the self-image of a culture of a community. The only possible way of defining culture is as a living organism.

In this sense, Plexus perceives culture and its by-products as a creation of the present.

**Do you want that pound of flesh sliced or unsliced?**



Artwork by Mitch Ross, New York 1987

# THE JOURNEY OF PLEXUS

by Barnaby Ruhe, New York 1992

PLEXUS is the shaman journey along the lines of Van Gennep's Rites of Passage's format. That is, the Plexus art opera is an evolving art action that engages in three distinct phases:

The first phase is the identification and dialogue with the Norm or status quo, embracing the system of art logic even as the embrace is deadly.

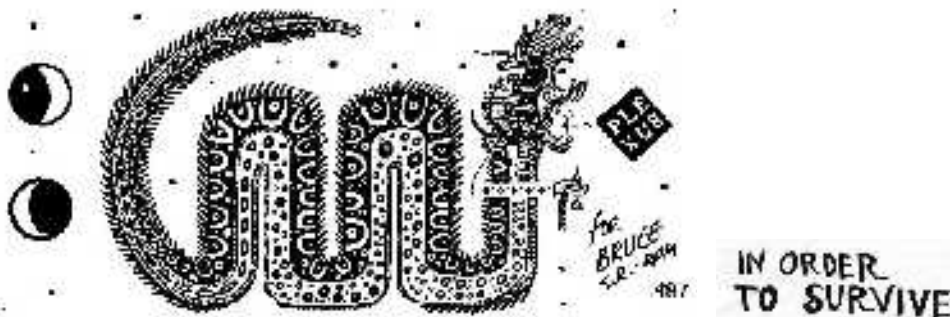
The second phase is the "dematerialization" of our constellation of concepts surrounding art activity; this phase is what Victor Turner calls the 'liminal' phase where roles reverse, definitions are tossed back into the air, confusion reigns around blazing ambiguities functioning like a Roschartz blot, and artists dive in with no clear functions delineated. At first, the second phase seems like just so much nonsense, like acts of desperation.

The third phase is the re-materialization around the PLEXUS metaphor. As a pearl formed around an irritating grain of sand, PLEXUS sets up a metaphor that engages art activity without precise directives. You have to be there: Artists congregate because of a sensed 'communitas' and mill about when the directives are clearly unclear. At some undetermined moment, the mob coheres into congruity.

Art shapes itself around a symbol. Plexus takes a shape that is of the moment, yet reflective of the undercurrents of the 'zeitgeist' of the age.

This is possible because the second phase functions as an inkblot, allowing within the ambiguity the surfacing of associations from the (collective/community) unconscious.

The shamanic journey invariably engages a 'trance' phase that integrates 'reality' with the experiences surfacing at the second phase. Groups engaging a common mind or mood have been documented. Finding that common esprit is not the reaction to orders from a leader, but discovered from within. Hence the urgency of the metaphor as the activating ingredient in the Plexus art opera. Its very ambiguity serves to entrance the participants during the second phase of the ritual journey. The metaphor is by necessity ambiguous, which is capable of multiple meanings. The dramatic metaphor collects the collective sentiment of the group whose minds are open ended.



Artwork by Richard Milone, New York 1986



***Plexus is a tendency to watch what happens in this planet with a consciousness of what happens, with no separation between the world and the human being. Plexus is not an organization, it is more about a philosophy, a thought a proposition, a regard on how we deal with the issue of the human being. Plexus is a tendency in direction of the unity, against any definition or classification which makes separations.***

Kre MBaye, Dakar 1988

## **PLEXUS. THINK A DREAM**

by Alessandra Menesini, Cagliari, Sardinia, 2004

Plexus, a chameleon.

It is not a movement, but it moves and, if only it skims you once, you are gotten in forever. It was born in America by a Sardinian father and has adepts not always conscious in Senegal and in Australia, in Rome and in Gavoi, Sardinia. Almost all over the world.

Sandro Dernini talks about it as a triangle, with his vertexes in Australia, Africa and USA, but Plexus is more like an uneven geometric figure. It has many angles, derivations and derailments. It counts a remarkable number of events with regular title, date and place, accountable of many collateral effects. Plexus artists are never divided in minor or major: many times, moving a single little stick, unfurling a sail or heaping some ash it is enough to be Plexus. Forever and no matter how.

Plexus the snake is aware to have changed his skin from 80's to post 2000. At the beginning, there was the cross over between community and art-science, very quickly evaporated in the following years and landed into a subject-concept with amazing implications: the erosion.

May be they are getting old, may be they are sadly getting aware of their lost of identity, but the erosion measured with the meter at the House of the Slaves of Gorée is the erosion of individual and universal lost. The ocean is rising on the tragic double staircase of the Maison des Esclaves, the Door of No-Return where black slave traders launched ships full of Afro-Americans who would later invent Jazz. The ocean is rising and every years hits away some centimetres of history and souls.

Plexus used many metaphors and created many metamorphoses. It produced an intermittent and waving community, fed by temporary enthusiasm and eternal hates, admiration and scorn, tedium and passion. But, as people write on walls, Plexus lives.

You can't find its definition in any encyclopaedia: born in 1982 in a loft of Chelsea and transmigrated soon in a burned basement of East Lower Side, in the Downtown of New York City.

Difficult delivery, historicized by Sandro Dernini ten years later in a Ph.D. dissertation discussed at the New York University. Baptized with a long name: "A metaphoric and mythical journey on board of the ship of art slaves." Immediately, liberated because they ignored the market, art gallery's openings and, almost always, the critics. Departed from the compression - the final synthesis of concept and object - to arrive now to study (and fight) the erosion. In practice, from a ramified symbolism to the acknowledgment of a whole - not only material - impoverishment. Nuraghic towers, American natives' simulacra, tribal masks, cans snatched from Andy Warhol, Buddha's statues, everything has been compressed in the Plexus Black Box, like those of the aeroplanes, where to preserve myths, cultures, roots. A navigation that has utilized a real ship, the Elizabeth, a rusty coral craft, with the hold full of paintings and sculptures and the deck as stage of involving participatory happenings.

"In order to survive" was the starting route: it hasn't changed and has continued to utilize the wonderful logo designed by Fred Toller, to draw manifests and to organize parties that turn into rituals.

Metropolitan character, urban people. Painters and musicians, writers and scientists, academicians and dancers, poets and graphics that met at the Nuyorican Poets Cafè, in the Lower East Side. Everyone caught by the whisper or the spires of Plexus. Syncretism celebrated in unforgettable and ephemeral performances and installations, moments that rarely leave behind them concrete objects, but create a sort of magic dust

that sticks everywhere.

The diktat of those years is the Art Coopera, a work without single signatures in a utopian collaboration, often effective, documented by photos and videos as it was land art. So, the lonely Sardinia brought to N.Y.C. its Mediterranean bronzes and its stones of giants.

Thirty years separate the Culturas Unidas Aspireran Nuestro Destino Original from the meter that measures the disappearance of Maison des Esclaves of Gorée by an ineluctable bradyseism. Even if the navigation was zig-zaging, it landed in the starting point. University professors meet squatters that live those abandoned houses that have to be demolished and plant flowers in the ground; dancers dance on the mathematicians' and physicists' diagrams, for another bets of Plexus: finding the match between art and science, understanding how creative are calculations and how scientific are the fanciful arts.

It's a galaxy that doesn't distinguish insiders from outsiders, but swallows up protagonists and spectators, and also who passes by and stops. Maybe the reason for Plexus longevity is that it's also elastic. Twenty-five years are a lot for contemporary art. Only those who change and free them-self from old terms and old techniques, and do not cultivate nostalgia but curiosity, can survive.

Mona Lisa, Celts, Goya, Eve (the one hunted from Heaven), Nuraghic towers, tepees, fractals, Uncle Sam and Lorenzo of Medici, the Minotaur, there is an aesthetics of contents in Plexus that often, not always, moves on an aesthetics of objects. Interesting works made by interesting artists. Well done, probably also out from Plexus but, anyway, lighted by its snaky flames, waving movements sometimes shaking that are not looking for the artworld but for the art of the world.

### The Plexus Voyage Continues...



The Elisabeth boat, Channel of Sicily, Mediterranean Sea 2008

## **Pre-Historia:**

### **The Italian Alternative Cultural Movement of the 70s**



In 1978, in Rome, some members of the L.I.A.C.A. (League of Italian Alternative Cultural Associations) sold themselves as slaves, for 24 hours, in a slaves auction performing event, staged at *il Cielo*, an underground space in the historical area of Trastevere. It was organized by Giovanna Ducrot, Sandro Dernini, Massimo Vincenti, Flavio Merkel, among others, as a provocative action to gain attention on the police's repressive action against the freedom of expression in Italy.

#### **For Freedom of Expression**



Claudio Mapelli and Romano Rocchi , Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome 1976, photos by Beppe Forli



The Italian Alternative Cultural Movement of the 70s



Dominot Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome 1976, Daniela Gara, photos by Beppe Forli

**Recalling the 1978 LIACA Cultural Slaves Market Event in Rome**



Gianni Romoli, Massimo Vincenti, Sandro Dernini, Flavio Merkel, Paola Muzzi, Giovanna Ducrot, Sandra Montagna, Cristina Torelli, Rome 2000

**A Recall of the LIACA's Spazio A...**



Stelio Fiorenza, Massimo Vincenti, Flavio Merkel, Sandra Montagna, Paola Muzzi, Giovanna Ducrot, Sandro Dernini, Cristina Torelli, Rome 2000



Sandro Dernini, Ciccì Borghi, Marilisa Piga, Pietro Zambelli, Annamaria Pillosu, Piernicola Cocco, Cagliari, Sardinia, 2006

## The New York University Center for Italian Contemporary Culture

In early 1980, in New York, Sandro Dernini, with Luigi Ballerini, director of the NYU Italian Studies Program, founded the Center for Italian Contemporary Culture of New York University. Its purpose was “to foster the outstanding and representative, rather than the expected and faddish, thus to ensure to develop, over time, a rounded picture of the Italian culture.” The Centre's activity was opened by program *The Artist in the First Person*, produced directly by Italian artists operating in New York without any support from the Italian Cultural Institute.

### The NYU Center for Italian Contemporary Culture



Sandro Dernini

photo by Raul Calabrò



Massimo Sarchielli, New York University, New York 1981, photo by Raul Calabrò

In the fall of 1981, in New York, the idea of what was after called "plexus" came out from a long night conversation between Sandro Dernini and Giancarlo Schiaffini and other two Italian musicians, Antonello Neri and Massimo Cohen. By reflecting on existing limitations for contemporary experimental art works within cultural institutions, they envisioned a multi-arts creative performance space, independent from interferences by mediators (agents, art critics, dealers, etc.) of the art market.



Giancarlo Schiaffini

*The seminal idea for setting up the multiform structure complex of Plexus was conceived in 1981 in the kitchen of east 6th street, in New York, by Sandro Dernini, Antonello Neri, Massimo Coen and myself. There, we were talking about how to organize a space to perform many different kind of music. This conversation began some years before, in 1978, when I started my collaboration with Sandro in Cagliari. I played some concerts of improvised music and we were talking about the role of improvisation, the role of music, the role of performance and of performance art and of any kind of performance you may think of. So there we placed the seed of Plexus several years before it came out. In the kitchen, in 1981, we were three performers and a maitre a penser, a provoker, to stimulate our creativity, all of us were and we are in several performing arts, music theatre, movies as well, dealing with improvisation in different sites, sometimes we play music completely composed organized, sometimes totally improvised, with all possibilities between the two extremes. When you perform or improvise, even in a theatre piece, a lot parameters you have to consider, which are may be the skeleton of such a work, in the definition of my work and of a project like Plexus.*

Giancarlo Schiaffini, Rome 1994



Sandro Dernini, New York 1981, photo by Lynne Kanter