

Nomeda & Gediminas Urbonas *VILLA LITUANIA*



**MUSEO
DELLE
CIVILTÀ**

 **DIREZIONE
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MUSEI**

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INTRODUCTION

As a “museum of museums” that places its collections of archaeology and anthropology, earth science and historiography, art history and folk traditions into relation with one another, the Museum of Civilizations is a natural setting in space and time for collective and participatory reflections on the museum itself, and accordingly supports research practices that analyze and reposition the identities and functions of contemporary institutions.

A new collaboration with the Embassies of the Republic of Lithuania in Rome and at the Holy See, with the Sovereign Order of Malta, the Lithuanian Culture Institute and the Mo Museum of Modern Art in Vilnius celebrates the mutual support of precisely one such practice under development by the artist duo Nomedà and Gediminas Urbonas.

In the *Villa Lituania* project conceived in 2007 and awarded at the 52nd edition of the Venice Biennale, their artistic practice is corroborated by scientific research also enhanced by their multi-year teaching position at the MIT Department of Art, Culture and Technology in Boston), political engagement in their analysis of the dynamics of public opinion and communication, the symbolic dimension of architecture, design and urban planning, documentary research in the field, and the evocation of historical memory with the performative possibility of its reinvention and catharsis. The *Villa Lituania* project reverberates with many of the themes and methodologies featured in the Museum of Civilizations program since fall 2022, bringing the awareness that contemporary artistic languages can represent unprecedented and imaginative forms and subjects of cultural repair to the center of the institutional narrative. In this sense, the gesture of re-displaying Museum collections can mend the rifts in the relations between cultures, reconstruct their disequilibria, and catalyze the co-creation of narratives of the past that from their original historical and political premises and conditions can inspire alternative epistemologies in the present. The objects in the Museum of Civilizations collections could also be interpreted as silent ambassadors of a potential counter-diplomacy or a precisely alternative diplomacy, as witnesses of power relations that were previously asymmetrical

due to their association with systemic subtractions or the interruption and silencing of histories over time, and that can now be redefined as autonomous by claiming on behalf of the objects' communities the right to tell their own stories themselves on grounds other than those with which the objects and their stories were musealized in the past. Continuing with this metaphor, even museum storages can reconfigure themselves as involuntary assemblies from which re-installations can draw elements that allow multiple interpretations or in which they can find and share even surprising correspondences with the sensibilities and urgencies of our own time.

This might explain the Urbonas's re-evocation of the popular tradition of carrier pigeon racing for Villa Lituania, a form of symbolic-diplomatic connection hypothetically capable of healing a real wound in Lithuania's collective memory of its diplomatic representation in Italy during the 20th century. In the installation's multiple junctures and layers, it takes responsibility for a historical reconstruction that by also welcoming the possibilities inherent in interspecies dialogue between birds and humans transforms the Villa into an entity in movement between nature and culture, a matrix of a renewed freedom that arises from the possibility of inhabiting spaces and times in ways other than those conveyed by official History in order to bring its own version of History to life outside its original (walls) vicissitudes.

Andrea Viliani
Director
Museum of Civilizations, Rome

AN INTERSPECIES EMBASSY

The *Villa Lituania* project by artists Nomeda & Gediminas Urbonas returns to Italy sixteen years after representing Lithuania at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007 winning the Jury's Honorable Mention, and now being presented at the Museum of Civilizations on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the death of Stasys Lozoraitis Sr., a diplomat who lived at the Villa from 1939 to 1940.

Villa Lituania is a multimedia installation that revolves around the history of the building of the same name (built in Rome at Via Nomentana 116 by architects Pio and Marcello Piacentini in 1912). Hosting the Lithuanian Embassy from 1937 to 1940, it was seized by the Soviet Union and became the symbol of the last territory occupied. When the USSR collapsed in 1991, it was used as the seat of the Consular Office of the Russian Embassy in Italy, a function it still serves today. Now Villa Lituania continues to exist as a container of collective and personal stories, and it offers a starting point for analyzing the story of liberation from foreign occupation in terms of art and the relationship between humans and animals as a potential means of escape from conflict and its sedimentations.

Nomeda & Gediminas Urbonas approach the complexity of the building's extended role in diplomacy from an artistic perspective, both searching for historical truth in unpublished archival footage and interviewing witnesses, but also imagining actions that might provide forms of repairing relations between the two nations. Among these, one driving force behind the project draws on the tradition of carrier pigeons, which were used as long as 3,000 years ago by the Egyptians and Persians but also in the twentieth century's two world wars as a solution to sabotaged telecommunication networks. Carrier pigeons have been genealogically selected by humans to further refine their innate ability to travel long distances and return home. Distances over 1,800 km have been recorded during pigeon races, and the story of how the pigeon Paddy relayed information to the British about the Allied landings in Normandy on June 6, 1944 after escaping attacks by German hawks trained to intercept pigeons has gone down in history. The relationship between humans and birds becomes both a metaphor for peaceful

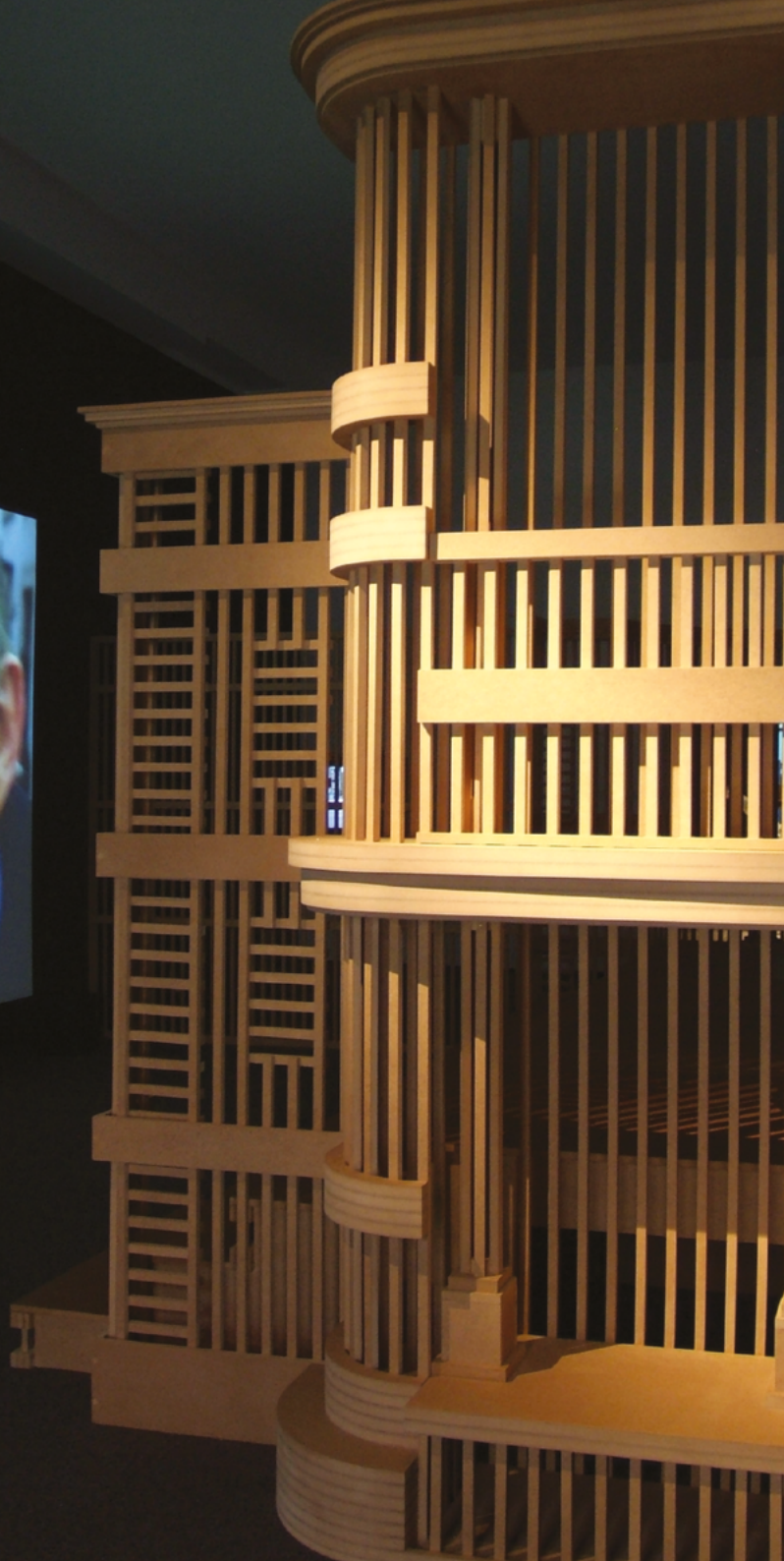
coexistence at Villa Lituania and an expression of an oppressed people's right to return home embodied in the primal instinct that animates the incredible efforts these pigeons make.

Evoking this potential in 2007, the artists proposed setting up a pigeon loft in the Russian Consulate's garden that would receive birds bringing messages of peace from the Lithuanian Pavilion on the Venice Biennial grounds. When the Villa Lituania site was rejected as a destination, the Lithuanian-born Italian architect Massimiliano Fuksas—building the new “La Nuvola” Convention Center at the time—enthusiastically welcomed the artists' idea, suggesting that the pigeons' return loft might be hosted in Rome's EUR district nearby. Despite support from numerous institutions including Rome's 9th Municipality and the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities' Directorate-General for Architecture and Contemporary Art at the time, not even the latter solution was adopted. After conferring with many carrier pigeon trainers in Italy, Lithuania, and Poland, in a symbolic gesture, Urbonas released in Venice 1,000 birds on the day that the Lithuanian Pavilion opened in Venice, all of which flew back to their places of release the following month. No pigeon loft will ever be erected in Rome, but the installation at the Museum of Civilizations provides a copy of one in the guise of Villa Lituania around which nine videos made during the process will be projected from five locations to illustrate the intertwining stories of an affair that is seemingly immobile in its historical context but actually extremely current instead in imagining art as a tool that can rewrite narratives and change points of view even years and years later with unexpected dislocations in space and time.

These videos are woven with the many stories and testimonies the artists gathered carefully, such as the childhood memories of Kazys Lozoraitis (son of Stasys Lozoraitis Sr.) at the villa and the investigations of journalist Saulius Kubilius on the erasure of the inscriptions praising Lithuania's liberation from Soviet occupation prior his 1989 visit to Rome of Mikhail Gorbachev, then the President of the USSR. Working around Villa Lituania's stories also provided Urbonas the opportunity to investigate a history of protest, observing the evolution of its forms and the degree of repression and self-censorship exercised over it. Working with Villa Lituania and its stories also provided Urbonas with the opportunity to investigate a protest movement: how its forms evolved with the degree of repression and self-censorship exercised over it. If the health

of a democracy can also be assessed by the freedom it allows in the challenges posed to its governing power, then many of the installation's videos may be seen as being fundamentally important and timely exercises in keeping the participation of citizens and organizations in public life critical and alive.

The Villa Lituania installation by the artists Nomeda & Gediminas Urbonas brings witness to the art's power of diplomacy in mediating complex conflicts and legacies, here, through the creation of an interspecies embassy that offers an artist's hypothesis of cultural reparation. The exhibition itself embodies the homecoming spirit innate to carrier pigeons, finally bringing the pigeon loft imagined by the artists to Rome, just footsteps from "La Nuvola" Convention Hall and a few kilometers from where Villa Lituania still stands at Via Nomentana 116.



VILLA LITUANIA: A STORY I HEARD FROM MY FATHER

Villa Lituania, a project developed by Nomedas & Gediminas Urbonas being presented at the Museum of Civilizations, is an installation, a narrative, one story, many stories. It is also a physical place here in Rome, but as the current seat of the Russian Consulate, it can only be seen from outside. A building important for Lithuanian national history, the villa also comprehends the many personal stories of the people who made the nation's history. Villa Lituania holds high significance not only for Lithuania and its role in the nation's story but also in the events the world has witnessed in the Russian aggression against Ukraine in February, 2022.

I heard the Villa Lituania story from my father as the memories of a boy who had come to Rome from Kaunas in the Summer of 1939 with his parents and a brother after my paternal grandfather, Stasys Lozoraitis Sr., the Lithuanian diplomat and Foreign Minister from 1934 to 1939 had been appointed Ambassador to Italy. A handsome edifice, the villa was a hotel particulier as they would say in France, with a large garden and a majestic gateway on Via Nomentana whose impressive elegance can be seen in black and white photos taken at the time. It was chosen by a nation that had, like its Baltic neighbors Latvia and Estonia, received its independence only in 1918 and was building its institutional and international identity in the period between the two world wars. The choice of such a striking building as diplomatic headquarters in Rome was crucial for Lithuania. It demonstrated the nation's readiness to assume presence on international level while also emphasizing the importance of Italy in Lithuanian foreign relations at that time. This all ended in June 1940. The USSR occupied Lithuania. A delegation of Soviet representatives came here and commanded my grandfather to hand over the keys to the Villa with everything inside (all its furnishings and especially its archives). An enormous effort was required to delay the "handover" until the documents could be secured. What the Soviets finally received in August 1940, was an empty shell (even the flowers in the garden had been cut down), with the Lithuanian flag at half-mast.

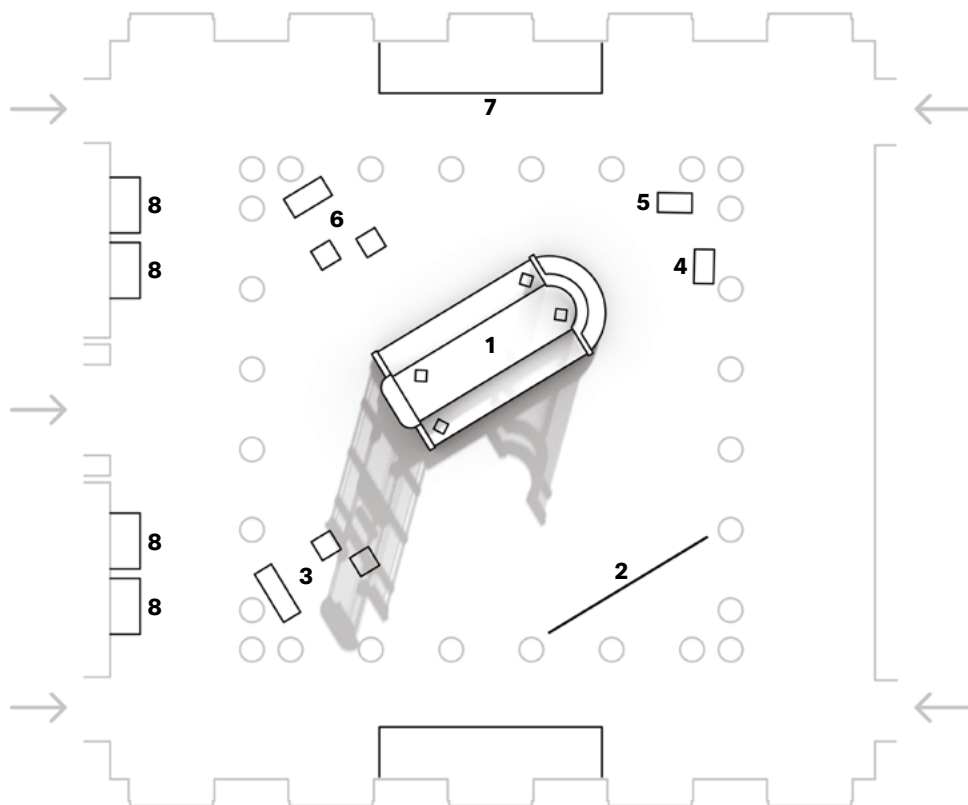
Lithuania remained under Soviet occupation until 1991, a long and terrible period in which hundreds of thousands of

Lithuanians were killed or deported. An armed partisan resistance movement operated from the Summer of 1944 to the early 1950s in hopes that the Iron Curtain raised over the country would fall. All during these long years, a core of diplomatic service remained and resisted in Lithuania and abroad under the coordination of my grandfather, who had been entrusted with the task by the nation's last Foreign Minister, Juozas Urbšys. For nearly fifty years, Rome was an important link in this network with the mission of maintaining the idea of Lithuanian independence and autonomy until liberation arrived. The archive, library, and documents that had been saved from Villa Lituania continued to be jealously guarded, travelling with my family as we moved from one house to the next. I dwell on this detail in the attempt to transmit the value that an archival heritage has for an occupied country—especially when its occupier has tried to erase and destroy everything that represents the occupied country's identity. Its archival heritage is vitally important in its reconstruction, historical and identitary. Even what may seem trivial to our eyes, such as decorative objects or collections of old photographs, become precious to the victims of a brutal attempt to erase everything: peoples' lives, their lives, their, belongings, their country.

In writing these few lines about Villa Lituania, it is also my duty to remember another family who lived here, other children who once played in this park. Let me recall the family of Voldemaras Čarneckis, a diplomat and Plenipotentiary Minister who had preceded my grandfather as the Lithuanian representative in Rome. After returning to Lithuania in 1939, he was arrested by the Soviets in June 1941 and deported together with his wife and their five children. The family was broken up. Čarneckis was shot in a gulag. His wife and children lived for another fifteen years in Siberia. Villa Lituania has many stories to tell, many that explain why the Baltic countries feel so close to Ukraine today and offer their help to this wounded yet resistant country.

I am very grateful to the Museum of Civilizations and Nomedas & Gediminas Urbonas for giving fresh impulse to the *Villa Lituania* project. They have allowed me to remember and reflect on what once was and what is today.

INSTALLATION MAP



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|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Loft model | 5 | Defending the Villa. Graffiti, Defending the Villa. The Latvians |
| 2 | Ambassador in Exile, Defending the Loft, Rehearsal at the Palace of Culture and Sports | 6 | Architecture Workshop (Heart & Hearth) |
| 3 | Ambassador's Song, Villa Lituania International Pigeon Race | 7 | Villa Lituania. Timeline |
| 4 | Calling the Russians | 8 | Memorabilia: Trophies, Poster, Pins, Pigeon Shitcheater, Bag, Book |

MOVIES SYNOPSIS

AMBASSADOR IN EXILE

single-channel projection, 11:25, 2007

In the film the diplomat Kazys Lozoraitis remembers his childhood spent with his father, the ambassador, and his family living in Villa Lituania, Lithuanian embassy in Rome during 1937-1940. Excerpts from the Lozoraitis family archive register the moments of everyday life in the villa. The idyllic story of living in Italy is complemented by the revelation of the circumstances of the embezzlement of the embassy.



DEFENDING THE LOFT

single-channel projection, 7:48, 2007

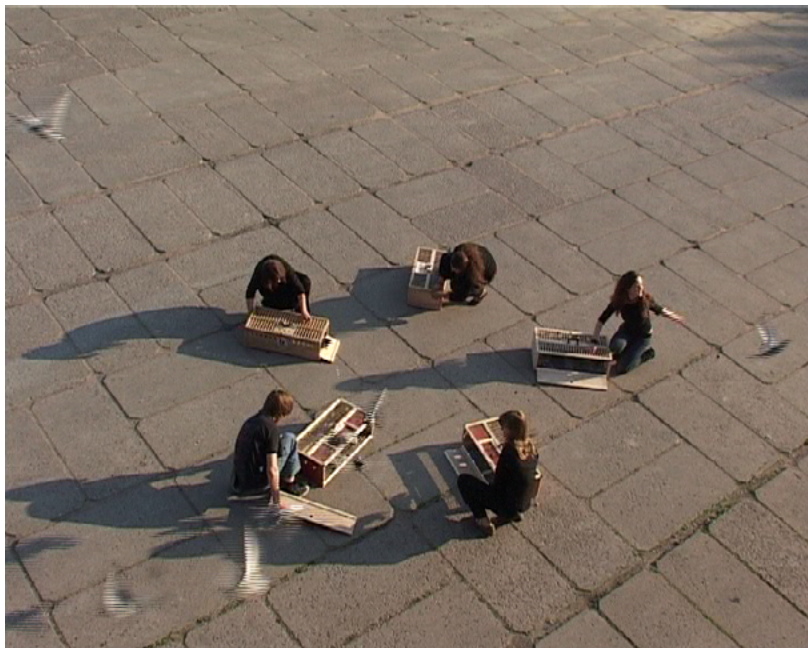
The video narrates a story about a well-known pigeon loft in Vilnius. Located at the foot of the Vilnius TV and Radio Tower the loft was caught in the Soviet military blockade of the Communication Tower in 1990 (when the Gorbachev government made the decision to try and get the break-away state back), and the loft's owner broke the lines daily to look after his birds.



REHEARSAL AT THE PALACE OF CULTURE AND SPORTS

single-channel projection, 7:48, 2007

The Vilnius Palace of Culture and Sports is a landmark building in the Lithuanian capital. Like many public soviet-era buildings, however, its fate is uncertain. The vast open space in front of the building is used by pigeon fanciers for training.



DEFENDING THE VILLA. GRAFFITI

single-channel monitor, 5:48, 2007

In the film Saulius Kubilius, a journalist working for Vatican Radio, remembers the inscriptions on the Roman walls dedicated to the topic of Lithuanian freedom. Many of these inscriptions were written near the Vatican, on the street where the tourist buses to the station ran. The notes were cleared in 1989, before the visit of USSR leader Mikhail Gorbachev.



DEFENDING THE VILLA. THE LATVIANS

single-channel monitor, 1:58, 2007

In the film, Saulius Kubilius, a journalist working for Vatican Radio, recounts an episode in which a group of Latvian émigré's seized upon the symbolic potential of Villa Lituania (notorious building of Lithuanian embassy during 1937-1940), as a protest-site.



CALLING THE RUSSIANS

single-channel monitor, 1:37, 2007

This short video documents artists' communication with the Russian Department of Foreign Affairs seeking permission to build a pigeon loft in the grounds of Villa Lituania, Lithuanian embassy in Rome during 1937-1940, where at the moment the Russian Consulate in Rome operates.



We only propose to organize a pigeon race,

AMBASSADOR'S SONG

single-channel monitor, 3:32, 2007

A group of activists stand in front of the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Vilnius and sing “Una Paloma Blanca”, a popular folk hit about the white dove. The lyrics of the song tell of a free-flying bird that was previously imprisoned, but now its freedom can no longer be taken away.



VILLA LITUANIA INTERNATIONAL PIGEON RACE

single-channel monitor, 4:00, 2007

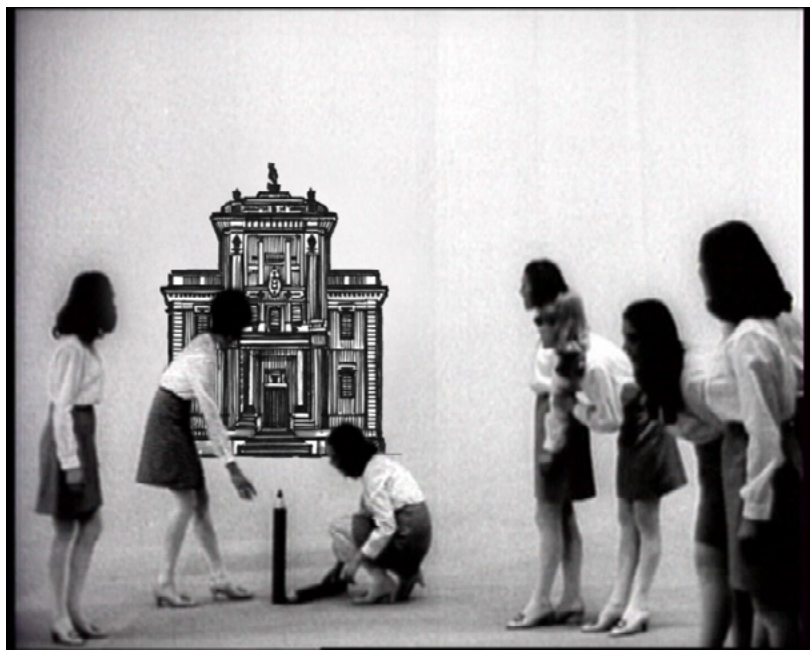
The short video documents the 1st International Pigeon Race for the trophy of Villa Lituania, which was also an opening performance of the Lithuanian pavilion at the 52nd Biennale di Venezia. 1200 pigeons from Italy, Lithuania and Russia took part in the competition.



ARCHITECTURE WORKSHOP (HEART & HEARTH)

single-channel monitor, 1:18, 2007

The artists have re-animated a popular 1960s Lithuanian television song-clip “Heart and Hearth” to become an anthem to Villa Lituania. In the background of the girls singing about the construction of the dream house an animated silhouette of a villa appears giving the song a new meaning.





ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Since 2009, Nomedas and Gediminas Urbonas have had full-time positions with the Art, Culture, and Technology program at MIT. Their work has been presented at documenta11 (2002), the 3rd Berlin Biennale (2004), Pro-test Lab (Vilnius, 2005-07), the 32nd São Paulo Biennial (2016), and Critical Zones (ZKM, 2020), among many other exhibitions. They also conceived *Villa Lituania* and the *Swamp School* as the official Lithuanian contributions to the 52nd Venice art biennale (2007), and the 16th Venice architecture biennale (2018), respectively. In 2023 the Vilnius National Gallery of Art dedicated the retrospective *Partially Swamped Institution* to the artists. They have organized symposia such as *Artistic Intelligence? Making it together* in the Multispecies World at the University of Bologna (2023), *Zoetics+* at MIT (2018), *The Future Fictions Summit* at Asbrú, Reykjavík (2016). Their publications include *Swamps* and *the New Imagination* (Sternberg Press / MIT Press, forthcoming in 2023), *Public Space? Lost & Found* (SA+P Press / MIT Press, 2017), and *Devices for Action* (MACBA, 2008). Their work is collected by the MO Museum of Modern Art, Vilnius; MACBA, Barcelona; and the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki, among other institutions.

VILLA LITUANIA, 52nd VENICE BIENNIAL, 2007

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Pigeon Athletes

Giedrius Ilgūnas

Pigeon race

Nomeda Urbonas

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