

Metromuster





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Who are you and what is your relation to the Project Metromuster?

Xavi: We're speaking on behalf of Metromuster, which is a cooperative that's a few years old now. I'm Xavi Artigas and I have a background in sociology. I've been getting by for a long time in various trades, and I finally turned to the audiovisual world pretty late, exactly 10 years ago, and since then we've been forging this project. I started this project and immediately Xapo joined, and this project was mixed with 15M which was a really important movement that occurred throughout all of Spain, and especially in Barcelona. Since then we've begun to work on this project that has now become a cooperative...

Xapo: I'm Xapo Ortega, and I have a background in architecture, graphic design, and photography, and at one point, I got involved in social movements in Barcelona about 15 years ago. From there, I connected with 15M and met Xavi during the audiovisual commission, we began gathering everything that was happening surrounding 15M, in the camping plaza as well as outside of it: protests, actions, etc. All of this was mixed into the first project we made together, *Ciutat Morta*, that originated in 15M and that we've worked on for four years until now, when we've built the cooperative from other audiovisual projects.

When, where, and why was Metromuster created?

Xavi: Metromuster was created as an artistic project of mine around the year 2000. We made an important audiovisual project in 2008 with the specific objective of making a collaborative documentary called *No Res*. This documentary made its debut in 2011, at the same time as 15M which was also when Xapo and I met. From that moment on, Metromuster took the renewed power that was generated in the 15M movement. In 2012, we began working on *Ciutat Morta*, which is the most well known project that we've done.

Why the name "Metromuster"?

Xavi: Metromuster is a name that comes from a personal experience in which I had a failed artistic project in the context of a social movement that occurred in Paris. It was called "Anti pup" they were people who protested against publicity and dedicated their time to staging interventions on big advertisements in the Paris metro. In that context and inspired by their movement, I decided to make my personal project tearing down parts of those big publicity billboards that were in the Paris metro. And once they were torn down and put on metal sheets of quite a large size, they were totally decontextualized from their purpose of advertising a product, but it ended up just as background noise (In Paris, the metro advertisements

are pretty impressive) and from there I would make artworks with black ink stencils or engravings. The name is a play on words. I have a degree in sociology from Germany and the word for this design in German is *muster* and since it came from the metro it became "Metromuster." It's been a long time since the name has stopped making sense and as Xapo says it has already become absorbed into language and has a connotation for what our project is that has nothing to do with the original Paris project.

Why did you choose to have a legal entity of a cooperative for this project?

Xapo: Because we thought that beyond the fact that our work transforms outwardly, that is to say, our audiovisual projects try to have a social impact that changes things in society that we don't like in order to get closer to a model of social justice that today we're very far from... well, when we were forming ourselves as a business, because that's what we still were, we thought that transformation shouldn't only be outward but should also have impacts on our lives and be relevant to us in work settings in a way that's different than how it's been all of our lives and should also transform our habits of work and respect. We're in a precarious position, but there are some things that are different from the outside working world: the way we relate to each other, the horizontality of the work, how decisions are made... all of that is important.

There's talk of Metromuster becoming an independent audiovisual producer and I wonder, independent from what and whom?

Xavi: We have this slogan that we like a lot which is "deconstructing the codes of activism, audiovisual cultures." The label of independent firm is given to us, I imagine, because we're not a big production company that depends on the usual channels to make themselves lucrative in this business, like Mediapro or other big production companies that focus on documentaries do. We don't forget that in lowering the subsidization of the audiovisual world, in this country the documentary has become very fashionable, which is great, but many big production companies who were dedicated to making fiction have gone ahead with documentaries because it is possible to make a better documentary with less resources. We think it's a good thing, but this automatically makes us have to compete with big business, and then the idea of being independent pays more in this sense. We always have to be very imaginative when it comes to financing. For example, we're pioneers in crowdfunding, which today seems totally normal and obvious, but we can say with pride that we were the first production company that created a documentary with the strategy of crowdfunding. We continue to be very creative and we've creatively met the large economic necessities of making audiovisual projects, so we also consider ourselves independent in this.

There are six paid employees working in the cooperative. How do you finance this type of work?

Xapo: We're in a process of change right now, we're developing the business's economic plan. We've spent a little more than two years as a cooperative, and part of the finances comes from the direct work that we do, meaning commissions that we get to develop a creative idea and execute an audiovisual work, whether it's a political campaign or related to a social movement. That's one part of the income and since a year or so, we started to finance ourselves in other ways. Through the public finance of ICA (Cultural Institute of Spain) and ICED, and the foundations that are in the social field and would be interested in our project, and we work to find where we could capture those revenues. We're sort of in

a transition in which we're no longer doing certain types of commissions that don't do much for us other than make a little money and instead trying to dedicate ourselves to making big projects with private and public funding.

What does “work” mean in the context of this cooperative?

Xavi: To be a cooperative doesn't necessarily mean that the work is different. In fact, a criticism that we have in this country is that there are many cooperatives that function like any other business. There are many fake cooperatives that make their workers become cooperative members so that they can't unionize. It's supposed that when you're in a cooperative, everyone is the owner, therefore you don't have a boss because everyone is the boss. If done right and within the logic of what we call a social and solidarity-based economy, cooperatives can be a great tool to get rid of hierarchies between workers, which is complicated because in a world where there's so much specialization, it's not easy to form these work relations in a totally horizontal manner. We're learning, but we deeply believe that if it is done right, the results can lead to the kind of working life which is much more relaxed, in principle, without the pressure that comes from a hierarchy. Instead, work is voluntary, which is also dangerous because when someone has complete motivation and identification with the project, it can lead to infinite self-exploitation. We're in a learning process, I think we're still not doing everything yet, but I'm confident that it's going to end up well and be worth it – even though our salaries are lower than an average wage. It's true that the structure that we created is much more resilient, and this is evident in the fluctuations in the market. We have very slow growth, but when we reach a standard that will allow us to live well, and I think that we're not that far away, I think we're going to be quite resistant to any threat and, above all, what we're learning in terms of human relationships is priceless.

Xapo: I would add that in our case, in Metromuster, we're a non-profit cooperative; that is to say that all of the economic surplus of each year aren't handed out to working members, although we could raise the salary for next year. Being “nonprofit” means that we devote a series of human resources (which we try to measure and manage) to projects that don't have funding. That's in the statutes of the cooperative. We try to lend a hand, in terms of communication and video, to projects that we feel implicated in politically but that we know aren't funded because there are no resources to fund these projects.

What criteria do you have for which commissions you accept?

Xapo: There's a shared political consciousness in the cooperative. It's very diverse because each of us come from a different place and we try to do projects that are politically compatible with everyone. Every Tuesday we have an assembly where we put on the table the projects that we could do and between all of us we try to decide which ones are politically compatible with our interests.

What's the relationship between Metromuster and 15M?

Xapo: Metromuster was just Xavi, and when we met through 15M it took on a different dimension. Also it took on another dimension in terms of how we relate to social movements because it opened the door for us to get to know many projects. 15M arose in the plaza and it was very visible at that time; later, it transformed into many other projects which were born from it. 15M allowed us to build relationships with other social movements in a very fluid way, with a lot of trust between us.

Xavi: I think that there were some basic theoretical principles that were already defined in Metromuster 2008 or 2009, which are basically three principle: cultural freedom, the will to create social change, and communal cinema. So it was very difficult to start projects with just that, above all because we didn't have the contacts or the connections to social movements that formed during and after 15M. Therefore, in a way, I think that 15M was a catalyst for principles that were already there but that couldn't quite take off until this movement took place. In that sense, for me it was magical to meet Xapo and a lot of other people and to be able to do all these things that were on paper but were much more complicated to bring to life.

The work that Metromuster has done tends to be referred to as “video-activism,” can you explain this concept to us?

Xapo: It's complicated. Video-activism, supposedly, when we first came together, meant a form of video with a strong and defined character. Before 15M, there was a notion that any video that was focused on motivation counted as such, especially if it held a focus on our values. With the 15M movement taking place, that was broken down and we realized that beyond doing it badly, we could introduce aspects of marketing and publicity in order to use them against capitalism or what we thought wasn't working in it. And 15M broke the norm that existed before it, that anything, even something poorly done can be interpreted by anyone and can mean something. So one of the things that I think we learned from 15M and that we've tried to develop is first, how to make high quality audiovisual productions, both in the artistic and technical sense, and second, how to break from the self-referential codes of activism. The break from the type of self-referential language that isn't understood outside of the movements themselves in order to reach more people. This brought us lots of criticism from and many discussions with people who had been working in the field for a long time during 15M, but I think that little by little it has become understood that we can reach common people with a message that's just as radical, just changing the language.

Thinking about Metromuster's projects like *Termitas*, *Tarajal*, *Ciutat Morta* and now *Idrissa*, we're talking about the tools that you use to join the battle for collective imagination. After studying your materials, I have come to the conclusion that Metromuster has placed a great focus on the following processes: 1) constructing a denunciation of the foundational power structures of modern Western societies: colonialism, capitalism, and discrimination of sex, class and race; 2) transforming of public opinion and the collective imagination with the purpose of revealing how hegemonic powers use the media; 3) supporting changing the current cultural paradigm; 4) cultivating citizens' critical consciousness and faith in transformation during a time of capitalism and a crisis of trust. Would you add anything else?

I think you've said it all. Without ever writing it down or reflecting on it in that way, I completely identify with your analysis. I would only add, well it's sort of implicit, that for us the fight goes beyond what we can record with our cameras and show through the screens of the cinema or your laptop. In other words, I think that we have become experts in making a kind of documentary mechanism that has the will to transform reality while at the same time documenting real life. So I think that some of our products are characterized by doing certain campaigns that, with the justification of wanting to do a documentary, have made something happen. We have a very good, recent example in the documentary *Idrissa* that we've been doing for a while, more than three years. Unexpected things have happened but they've happened because of the fact that we were making a documentary; if we hadn't been, they wouldn't have

happened. One of the things that happened was that Idrissa Diallo's family found out about the death of their family member; the fact that now we'll be able to repatriate the remains and that they'll be able to have a proper ceremony is an act of reparation. Also it's very probable that they'll change the name of the plaza "Antonio López," where just yesterday they removed a statue because it has a history involved in slavery, they'll change the name to "Idrissa Diallo," and it's not a coincidence that that's the protagonist of the documentary that we've been working on for a long time. So, there's a truly activist labor, not only video-activist, but it's about the will to make videos and to tell all of these stories in a documentary that will have an impact but, in the end, the documentary is the least of it. The most important thing is all that we've done to get there. I think that that's something that we, Metromuster as a project, contribute.

In many ways, Metromuster does work regarding awareness and informal education that seems to be absent from institutional agendas and formal education. It seems like with public subsidies, the cooperative fulfills a pending need in democratic institutional agendas. Don't you find this situation paradoxical?

Xapo: Yes, and it's very bad, but we also believe that there's a certain attempt to change since 15M, especially if we're talking about institutions such as, for example, public television, which is where we can be reflected the most. In the case of *Ciutat Morta*, of 4F, or of cases like Esther Quintana's, we believe that the work that's been done, whether it's audiovisual like ours or journalistic or investigative, has penetrated the journalistic consciousness, in some cases though not in all, they're more sensitive to certain issues. So, it's more effort for those in power to cover them up or just focus on other things. For example, in the case of Esther Quintana (who is the tenth person to have lost an eye because of a rubber bullet), they tried to do the usual thing, that is, to blame the victim, to blame the social movements. But this time it didn't work out well for those who hold the power, and public opinion, after having experienced 15M, clearly positioned itself as critical against the police forces of the Spanish state and against those in power at the time. We believe this is something that's happening here. Right now, even after October 1st, many people who weren't mobilized, people who normally weren't out in the streets before, are positioning themselves as critical of power and abuse much more because of the violence suffered at the hands of police forces.

Xavi: Yes, it's interesting that you've mentioned education and one thing that we always talk about is that what we do-- beyond artistic quality, which is very important to us-- we always want to engage with pedagogy. It's interesting that we deal with many issues that aren't being talked about in departments of pedagogy. And so the State, in its public function of educating the people, doesn't take into account a whole series of things that we, humbly and from our little place, are putting out there. And it's a shame, really, that we're so praised for this when in reality it should be an obligation that other spheres provide this. This says a lot about our society and what it lacks.

What relationship does Metromuster have with the university environment? Are you perceived as a valid contributors?

Xavi: They invite us once in a while as some sort of exotic group, like an example of people that are really invested in their work, but the schools never incorporate our ideals into anything and there's never been a stable collaboration, it's very sporadic. Something that always puts us in a really bad mood is when they tell us, "You're very important," or "What you do is great, keep it up." It's infuriating because a critical spirit should be everywhere, especially in schools and the faculty,

and not just delegated to people who are big activists and really involved and who sacrifice their lives, earning a precarious living in a cooperative, and then someone comes and gives you a pat on the back and says, “You’re very important.”

Is it possible to transform a political reality through culture?

Xapo: I suppose so – that’s why we do what we do. Yes, I think so. Culture is very broad, it’s not just what we’re working on at the critical level. There are many people who make culture without such an explicit declaration, culture that is high quality and transformative in other fields. We’re specialized in the denunciation of impunity, of abuse, of corruption and of torture, but on other levels, culture is made that’s also very transformative, very necessary yet without this radical message of denunciation.

Xavi: Backing up a little, the question is whether culture can transform reality, if it has that ability. I would correct the affirmation a little and would say that culture forms reality. It’s said that our cultural reality, which is ultimately reality itself, is completely shaped by culture. In that sense, I don’t know if the logic is to change reality through denouncing it, but rather that culture must be reappropriated in order to be able to make a more just reality. So, I think that a denunciation is something preliminary, it’s something necessary, something that must be shouted loudly in urgent times – like when they took an eye from Roger Español, for example, a few months ago. We have to shout with rage and give space for people to be loud. But later there’s work that must be more stable that must be done by agents like us, which is to make a kind of culture that can shape our reality -- the kind of culture that’s now considered “sub-culture” (that ugly word that implies being below culture) but that one day ends up being hegemonic, meaning that we can one day shape a different reality, one with more just principles: feminist principles, anti-racist principles and principles with the goal of cultivating a critical consciousness that right now is totally nonexistent. Therefore, I think that they’re two different things. I mean, political resistance has to be part of it too, but it’s not only cultural work that we’re doing all the time. We have to invent a new, better world in a healthy, creative way and let this work end up shaping reality.

How is the work of Metromuster disseminated beyond the activist circle?

Xapo: This is one of Metromuster’s challenges, especially with work relating to 15M, to go beyond the margins of activism, to transcend them. We did that with *Ciutat Morta*, in which in some way, more or less intuitively, we came up with a mechanism within our reach because it didn’t require an economic investment or a force beyond our personal work. I’m referring to generating communities from the start of the project and not only when it was finished. Xavi explained it before, this whole process ends up generating a bigger and bigger community. And it’s the community itself that is the spokesperson for the project. When we got to premiere *Ciutat Morta* on TV, we had already been making so much noise that we already had a complaint asking that movie not be released, because of the effect it provoked and because of the community behind it that wouldn’t quiet down. It wasn’t just the two of us anymore, rather it was a big community that spread the news of the film’s broadcast on television, and it had a record independent audience. That’s important when we don’t have the economic capacity to finance a publicity campaign, but it’s much more interesting because, as Xavi said earlier, the documentary is the excuse; the political campaign already is assembled and there are many politically aware people who are going to spread this project and this idea.

Have you had problems with the kind of work you're doing?

Xapo: First of all, with *Ciutat Morta*, they threw us out of the institution where we had a job documenting popular festivals; later we returned but, as we said before, we're independent for that reason-- we're able to criticize and continue living off other means. I think there's a risk because we know that if we criticize those who have hired us then they can fire us or search our homes or do any other dirty trick through the institution. However, it has not given us any problems other than an occasional unpleasant experience.

Xavi: Yes, I believe that someday this will have to be charted on a graph. The moment you're a little bit problematic, they reject you everywhere, and that's a problem (and in fact for a long time with the audio-visual commissions, we wanted to be anonymous and never sign things because the consequences that it could have were real). So, if you're a growing problem, they throw you out of places, they don't want you, nobody wants to collaborate with you, you have lots of problems; however, once you're very problematic, the tables turn and they prefer to have you at their side rather than against them. I think that that's where we're at right now because, for example, TV3, which always deeply hated us, suddenly wants to collaborate with us on lots of stuff. The issue of grants has been going rather well lately, although we have not given up a millimeter of our radical proposals or our vision about what to tell and how to do it. I believe that, thinking about repression, visibility and having a presence and defending what you do in a very clear way and having support makes it all calmer. And it's now been a while since we've been afraid, but we used to be.

How do you work on the type of issues that you do in a country where a Gag Law exists?

Xapo: The Gag Law does not affect us, although in any moment we can receive a complaint for something. The truth is that with *Ciutat Morta*, we had a fine of ninety thousand euros that we managed to avoid through tricking the person who made the complaint in negotiations. We made him believe that *Ciutat Morta* had two copies, a blue and a red, and that one of them included five minutes where this person came on and the other didn't. We were negotiating until the last day, and in the end they signed an agreement that they weren't going to file a complaint if we didn't put out the copy that included this person. What they didn't know was that we were already going to take out those five minutes. We're always at the edge and without even knowing it because of the arbitrariness of the Gag Law. At any moment they can accuse you of having taken a photo that you didn't actually take, or writing a tweet, or mentioning someone in ... The Gag Law leads to great arbitrariness and impunity for those who hold the power, but we've been playing this game for a long time and we know that if someone tries to censure or report us, it's almost better for us.

How has the reception of your work on television and in cinemas been?

Xavi: Well, with television, we talked about before how with TV3 we're gone from being a principle enemy to being an ally. Now, in just in a couple of weeks, we'll also premiere a documentary with TV3 that they bought from us, and later is *Idrissa*, the big project that we're working on that TV3 has already pre-purchased. So, I think that it's kind of what I was telling you before, that they prefer to have us on their side instead of against them because we're also very good at campaigning through our networks, and they know it can all turn against them. With cinema... the problem with this country is

that the distribution of films is controlled by a few distributors that distribute through pack system which is difficult for producers like us to enter. Also, people going to the cinema are looking for a type of film with a spectacularism that we don't offer, and so we aspire to a type of cinematographic distribution to small theaters– art houses – which are also flourishing and it's very beautiful because they exist all over the country as well as the rest of Europe. They're presenting a type of programming that is very focused on the subsequent debate that can be generated. That's something that we have always valued because cinema should be an excuse to meet up with lots of people and talk. The truth is that there's a surprisingly large amount of cinemas that have closed and that have been taken over by the workers (just yesterday we were at CineBaix here in Prat, and also there are the Zoco Cinemas in Madrid or the Numax Cinema in Galicia, CineCiutat in Mallorca). There are more and more projects of this kind, and it's rediscovering a certain audience who is rediscovering cinema as a collective space. I think that this is our future and one that we have to bet on.

Metromuster believes in the free distribution of its work. Where are we able to find your work?

Xapo: It's all online, we're always committed to open licencing and, of course, we strategically reserve time to be able to be at festivals or in cinemas, but our work always ends up online. And also, thanks to our network, this community that we are always talking about, someone always volunteers to help when it isn't economically possible for us to translate the subtitles of movies, and we try to have the movies up on the web in four or five languages. It's very interesting because, apart from the collaboration, there's an absolute respect for the license. That is to say, we released *Ciutat Morta* in 2013 and while we started to circulate DVDs in order to finance the showings until 2015 when it would be broadcasted on television, nobody posted it on the internet. So, the "Creative Commons" license was respected when we asked that it not be made public until we were able to show it at a series of festivals that would amplify our voice and get it onto television. We thought that an "open license" means people take works for free, but in fact it's the reverse, it's copyrighting that provokes pirating because they are prohibiting you from it, and therefore, when there is free distribution it doesn't become a problem.

How does archive material get obtained in this country?

Xavi: It's completely pirated. In the era of the culture of remix, we do what the majority of young creators do and recycle material from the internet. We do this too, we've always done it. Like Xapo says, lately it's been a problem because when your work has the most impact and has to go through more official channels like public television, well obviously they ask if you have the rights over this material. We sometimes protect ourselves with what's called "the right to cite," which is based on a legal battle that Godard won many years ago when he wanted to do a series of documentaries about the story of cinema in which he said, "If I don't show examples of cinema this story can't be told," and nobody has the economic ability to purchase rights to 500 Hollywood films. Thanks to this case, a jurisprudence was created which is still in use today, and it's precarious and susceptible to interpretation, but if what I'm doing has the intention of explaining something in a pedagogical sense, I can protect myself with this right. It's tolerated as long as short fragments are used, sometimes if it's a recording of something that's on television then it's tolerated more, etc. In practice, we've never had any problems and we hope to not have any. But yes, in the end we try to take precautions because we also know that we have enemies,

and getting legal help is extremely expensive and most of the time unaffordable.

Xapo: And, then there's another issue, which is when we use archives from our equals (people who live off of audiovisual work), obviously we try to economically compensate them or ask for permission, or collaborate with them in another way. In the case of *Ciutat morta*, we used a ton of archives from TV3, which is public television, and we did it consciously, precisely because we believe that material from public television needs to be public and free. We, as producers and as a business, never try to profit once a piece is finished, rather we're looking for the work that we do during production to be well paid. Once the movie is released, we don't seek to exploit the work in a lucrative way. We believe that public television, which is financed by all of us and everything that they've done has already been paid for, can obviously hold onto the images for a month or two so that they can sell them to other channels, but after some time has passed, which shouldn't be more than 6 months, all of the material from public television should be made to be publicly accessible, accessible to all and free. Whenever we've asked for materials, TV3 has asked us for 1000 euros per minute. But we believe that something that we've already paid for shouldn't have to be paid for a second time. That's why the material of *Ciutat morta* was searched. We wanted them to tell us that we hadn't paid for those images so that we could start a campaign that the material of public television should be public.

Is Metromuster a political project? If so, what kind of politics are we talking about?

Xavi: We're based in the assumption that everything we do is political. There's this idea that we think is wrong, which is that politics are done in the parliament, in institutions, in political parties. For us, any day to day act is political; our way of being in the world is political, and from that point of view, everything that is done here has a political intention. In our case, it's not something accidental; from the moment we walked through that door, we've had the intention that whatever happens here will have a political impact. Going back to the previous question about why we're a cooperative, well, we always think that before we can change the world, we must change ourselves and that starts with the way we relate to one another. In that sense, everything that is done in Metromuster is political.

How do you maintain hope as a driving force in your work?

Xapo: I suppose that one day leads to the next -- and when you're focused on a case, a complaint, for example, in the case of *Idrissa*, we have been involved at a personal level with the family and with a lot of people that are behind the report filed against the CIES (Centers of Internment of Foreigners). This pushes you to commit personally, which goes beyond the committing through work or political intention, and that makes you keep going.

And, how do you deal with helplessness?

Xavi: Helplessness is a lot more than what one imagines. I think that this isn't for everyone. You have to really be prepared to deal with failure because we live in a world in which you don't win, and that's something that we've known for a while. But we can, at least, establish precedents that perhaps in a couple of generations will be picked up, similar to the way we're continuing with the work that other people started hundreds of years ago. So we have to be prepared for that and take care of each other and assume that we haven't come here to win.

What does it mean for Metromuster to grow in a non-capitalistic way?

Xapo: We're working on knowing what growth actually means. Surely growth means building a stable structure that will allow us to not risk so much in our economic precariousness and to keep the project going for a long time. It's a balance between making a more or less solid structure that can take on large quantities of work and ensuring that this work doesn't make the structure grow. It's a very delicate equilibrium.

From Metromuster's perspective, what are pending unresolved issues in our current model of society?

Xavi: For me, it's very clearly about visual analysis. I think that we're in a society that is based more and more on visual stimuli, yet doesn't educate children to analyze or to be critical of them. We're very vulnerable, and we will become even more vulnerable, and thus easier to manipulate. So for me an urgent issue is the critical analysis of the visual and audiovisual reality and having a critical spirit in general. We need to stop teaching kids content that they can find on Wikipedia and instead ignite their curiosity, which to me is the base of all activism. Awaken curiosity in people that later causes them to express their own disagreement or nonconformity if they see that things aren't going well. The first thing that they must do is to look beyond what they see on a screen, and that means analyzing and being critical.

Xapo: For me, it's organization. I mean, we live in a liberal world in which even we ourselves can be seen as an example of entrepreneurs, and it's completely the opposite. We are what we are because we're around people who are organized and we mutually support each other. It's important to break the myth that anyone can be whatever they want, because it's a lie; in reality, it's just sugar-coating the liberal society that makes you believe that "you can be someone" when in reality, you'll just be another person. We need to break away from individualism in our society that tells us that an individual can get anywhere. In reality, when we transform society is when we organize ourselves as a group- we become super strong, and then that's when we scare people.

