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9th Mercosul Biennial | Porto Alegre: curatorial and spatial practices, a dialogue with Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy

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What sets the curatorial practice in a biennial exhibition model today? A question, among many others, raised during the project structuring of the 9th Mercosul Biennial | Porto Alegre, from September 13th to November 10th 2013, under the title, in Portuguese, *Se o Clima for Favorável* (in Spanish, *Si el tiempo lo permite*; in English, *Weather Permitting*), is contained in this interview with art director and general curator of this issue, Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy. The meeting, which took place during the unfolding of the event, shares with the reader the questions generated during the process of construction of a large-scale exhibition event. On one side, curating,¹ and on the other, museography,² considered from the professional activities performed by the ones involved in this conversation during the biennial edition, meet to, through open dialogue, establish an attempt to think critically about the experience of exhibition practices nowadays – amid design and materialization, debate and provocation, curatorial and artistic intentionality, interpretation and public presentation of contemporary art.

MICHELLE SOMMER:

In the context of practice on the 21st century, what is the concept of curatorship in a "biennial" model of exhibition, specifically in a biennial as Mercosul's, now designated Mercosul | Porto Alegre? What are the limitations and potential of this model of exhibition?

SOFÍA HERNÁNDEZ CHONG CUY:

The biennial history is very interesting to a certain extent, but I don't know if it's something that curatorially interests me, historically speaking. The

biennial history has been linked with the history of national representations and, from certain years and some instances, there was a break because there is no longer a concern on thinking art from national representations: an artist or a work can be representative of a culture, at a given moment in time. Also, the selections of works involve not only curatorial or artistic criteria, but also a series of political negotiations. In my experience, in the history of exhibitions, the history of biennials doesn't have that kind of role, because I believe that, in reality, most international contemporary art biennials in which I've been thinking, visiting or analyzing arose in a very particular moment of the 90's. In this context, the socio-economic changes, the opening that was given to the arts and the desire of a place for the arts to be accessible to a larger audience, as well as imagining that the arts can improve a city and provide reverse gentrification issues, through the architecture and urbanism, are important points. But I think that each one is a special case. There are opening biennials: the Berlin Biennial,³ for example, is born from the need of internationalization and visibility in a post Wall of Berlin political movement and the end of the soviet block. Something similar takes place in the Biennial of Johannesburg as well,⁴ with the end of apartheid and the need to give visibility to certain thoughts and not only art projects, but also to create models of coexistence on how an exhibition can present different ideas that were being managed through the years and from political changes. I believe every biennial has a political context in which it presents itself – at least the best ones do.

In the specific case of the Mercosul biennial⁵ it seems very clear to me that there was an interest that Porto Alegre was converted into a cultural capital of a free trade zone, Mercosul. Now, if this actually happened, I don't know. However, it seems to me that if you really wanted that to happen, I believe that the administrative and financial participation would have to have been diversified in Mercosul. In fact, this is a local project in the administrative sense: the administration is local, the management is local, project financing models are also local (national and state). The desire to be a cultural capital is expressed in its name, but I don't think the act of positioning Porto Alegre as central within the Mercosul context happened, precisely because there has not been an administrative diversification and, maybe, for their own benefit. It seems to me that, somehow, the benefits of the project were kept locally and that's fine, because it is not a closed "locally"

1. The curatorial team included Raimundas Malašauskas, Monica Hoff, Bernardo de Souza, Sarah Demeuse, Daniela Pérez, Júlia Rebouças and Dominic Willson.

2. The museography team was formed by Eduardo Saorin and Michelle Sommer (main coordination, museographic project and planning), Alberto Gomez (museographic project), Bruna Bailume de Vasconcelos (executive producer) and Ricardo Curti (museography assistance).

3. The Berlin Biennial was founded in 1996 by Klaus Biesenbach, founder-director of the KW Institute for Contemporary Art. The first Berlin Biennial was held two years after its founding in 1998.

4. The first Johannesburg Biennial was in 1995, a year after the first elections free of the regime of apartheid.

5. The 1st Biennial of Mercosul was held in 1997.

– on the contrary, it is a local benefit, but with regional opening and also very respected internationally. The contributions of the Mercosul biennial are, therefore, widely shared and are not restricted solely to the context of Porto Alegre or Rio Grande do Sul.

So for me the history of the biennial is very interesting, but in reality neither the history of biennials or the thinking on Mercosul were influential for the realization of this project, the 9th Biennial of Mercosul | Porto Alegre. I believe the curatorial form that a biennial project should be addressed (and I observe that also for other curators and artists) is the recognition of the opportunity to make something new and this is the characteristic of biennials: the opportunity to develop a new project, like to test. Of course, that is directly connected to the structure that presents itself and the philosophy of this type of project that is setting up as a platform for many visitors. A biennial project is an opportunity to communicate as much as you can for that public with the possibility of, yet, renewal every two years, which means things are not stalled. A biennial no longer points to what happened in the last two years or what contemporary art means today, through this biennial. I believe that all this no longer applies to the exhibition project of biennials. The biennials aren't rooms that feature the production of the last two years, but occasions to present new exhibition projects, which don't have to necessarily be representative of an era or generation.

MS:

In the process of developing the curatorial project, there was the dilution of specific shows, provided for the original project, to a single exhibition setup, *Portais, previsões e arquipélagos*, which is distributed in four exhibition spaces: Santander Cultural, Rio Grande do Sul Memorial, Art Museum of Rio Grande do Sul (MARGS) and Usina do Gasômetro. How was this process of deconstruction of an exhibition model organized in specific displays for the construction of a single curatorial narrative?

SHCC:

It really a single show couldn't have been done because of space. There wasn't an exhibition space that could accommodate all works of a display such as, for example, *Imagination Machines*,⁶ because

the works were or too big and couldn't be installed, or required a certain kind of climatic condition that did not exist. The Usina do Gasômetro, for example, could spatially harbor all works of *Imagination Machines* if they were new, but each work had specific technical requirements that could not live in the same space due to climatic conditions, which means the works themselves said they could not be there. The moment this was understood, which happened in December 2012, we realized that other things could be done, including good planning. On that occasion, Raimundas Malašauskas, curator at the time, told me not to worry and expand the exhibition, namely: It is better that these works are not all together in the same space, as other provisions and combinations could generate more and various readings of the work. This actually sounded great, because there may be more games in this exercise and more dialogues that, I believe, had not happened yet. My concern, at that time, was that the way the exhibitions were organized seemed very educational and that seemed fine to me. This curatorial didacticism of systematically organizing "*here are the works of Imagination Machines, here are the works of Gravitational Forces, etc.*" could present, in an exhibitional way, more clearly what are the references, which are the collaborative commissioning projects, who are the artists organizing works from the exploitation of three spaces (*underground, undersea, galaxy*). However, I believe the works to be a gate. Maybe not all, but some are talking of volcanic eruptions that, in the case of *Rauschenberg*, would not have been a phenomenological experience if she was inserted in the context of *Imagination Machine*, more industrial or scientific and, thus, the reading of this work would be closed. So I think the experience is much more favorable when there was this explosion and when this systematic organization per process or per theme was not kept, and I believe that, at the end of the day, it is placed in dialogue with a much broader question about control, which was also much debated during the process. The possibility of culturally encircling ourselves of nature involved, to some extent, the question of whether it is possible to control this *natural environment* for social development or if we live with it without having to control it. I think this is one of the points that is introduced with this "explosion".

MS:

The historic return to the past, to the origins of contemporary art, through the reassembly of works and referential exhibitions has been a relatively recent curatorial practice in exhibition events (as shows the reassembly of the exhibition *When Attitudes Become*

6. In the *Imagination Machines* program, six artists were invited to develop projects in collaboration with companies, research centers and Brazilian institutions willing to subsidize creative processes through their technological and intellectual capital. The artists who have integrated the program *Imagination Machines* were Audrey Cottin, Luiz Roque, Lucy Skaer, Bik Van der Pol, Cinthia Marcelle and Daniel Steegmann Mangrané.

Form, 1969, parallel to the Biennial of Venice, 2013). The 9th Biennial of Mercosul | Porto Alegre establishes a “bridge over time” through the artistic proposals of the historical core of the seminal artists Rauschenberg (*Musa de Lama*, 1969-1971), Haas Haacke (*Movement*, 1969) and Tony Smith (*Bat Cave*, 1971), which were developed in commissioning programs in the 60's. How can these historical actions contribute to the legitimacy of new artistic productions proposed specifically for this biennial, also developed in collaborative actions, as the work of Lucy Skaer (*Tradução da resina*, 2013) and Cinthia Marcelle (*Viajante engolido pelo espaço*, 2013), to name a few?

SHCC:

The selection criteria are different. In the case of Haacke, Smith or Rauschenberg the points of departure, or the selection criteria for each of these works are completely different, and I don't consider them as part of a historical core.

In the case of Haacke, who is an artist whose work was present from the beginning of the proposal, along with others that I consider gravitational forces more than historical nuclei, the idea was to really analyze the reasons why a group of artists began, at the time, to work on socio-political issues from reflections arising from the atmosphere as one of the main materials. And that the emergence of the atmosphere within the visual arts had happened in a key moment of an idea that had not been thoroughly thought about yet, as were the ecological movements at that time. So, for me, the important thing is to settle in certain works that had begun to incorporate these materials within the visual arts and that the way it was done also preceded directly from a political activity that none of these artists had been involved with until then. Using or incorporating aspects of nature had caused a broader and systemic thinking of how artists could change the world through an institutional critique. To me this point was important. Going on with the case of Hans Haacke, his work is included in a political context, in their practice, which revolutionized the arts too. The works are triggers not only of ideas but also of other potentialities. This is the case of Haacke's work and the work of other artists as David Medalla (*Portões de nuvem*, 1965-2013, and *Máquina de areia*, 1965-2013) and by that, too, the selection of Mira Schendel (*Triângulo de outro*, 1984) and her late work. These artists – some of them alive and others not – lead me to think of different artistic practices that have as common feature the experimentation and how such experimentation is crafted, separately, individually or together, including the

practice of mediation in an institutional context. These artists are selected for their works and how these were developed in spaces and moments of experimentation, not as historical cores, but as something that has existed or exists, where we don't have to invent something new, but rediscover these works. When we talk about historical works, we speak in this direction, as these are works made 40, 50 years ago and are not organized, nor designed or proposed as historical nuclei and yet are still new, and I think that's part of this sense of rediscovery of these works.

In the case of works by Tony Smith and Robert Rauschenberg, the selection criteria of these artists and their works are of another character and they are basically from the analysis of different commissioning programs of the 60's. This is a moment in the arts that, for experimentation, the technology takes a leading role in the artist's studio and in the public institution of the artist. This was a time when many initiatives were developed, which made artists work with new technologies, which were advanced and were related to the effervescent digital culture. We're here talking about visual arts, but at that moment something very similar also happened in literature: many poets and many writers were invited to work in enterprises to the development of new technologies via computer and thus a lot of new poetry developed through this experimentation with machines. Maybe I will enter a new project about literature and new technologies [laughter].

The works of Smith and Rauschenberg were developed within the project *Art & Technology*⁷ which for me has been very influential for over ten years. These are not projects that I started investigating 15 months ago, when the process of this biennial began being thought, but projects that I studied for a long time because of a greater interest in commissioning art, to produce new projects with artists and also in cooperation, in order to understand the criticism and not repeat them. Each of these projects may involve a group of individuals from other disciplines and other specialties or in communities not related directly with art, and from this interaction many things that are as important as the development of art itself occur. There are many things in this kind of work culture where people are aware of their participation as agents of change. Philosophically it is a project that interests me for this instance of seeing something that usually would be seen as a disaster as an opportunity. In the arts, one of the great contradictions is that everyone is a little poor, but all those who are involved in this kind of sponsorship were rich. These

7. *Art & Technology* is a pioneering initiative of the Los Angeles County Museum, LACMA, which gained form in the late 60's in the United States.

contradictions can serve to create intersections that are unusual precisely because there are so many different social classes and different knowledge and, so, I am interested in the study of this model that is generated from a great contradiction.

In the case of Rauschenberg, the project developed into a company that was linked, in that period, with machinery for space exploration. So the artist performed a mass residence project and made a whole series of astronauts and a whole host of space projects to try to understand the interaction with nature a little better. This work – *Musa de Lama*, 1969-1971 – regardless of artistic and institutional issues, was much criticized at that time because it was ugly and was not related to the works that the artist had been doing until then doing that circulated in the market, and also because the moment of development of this work is the moment he decides to leave a huge metropolis – New York – and live isolated in Florida. This change also seems important to me. This particular work is selected here not only because it comes from the *Art & Technology* program, but also because at that time he had created together with (the engineer) Billy Klüver and other artists, the E.A.T. initiative (Experiments in Art and Technology),⁸ which is the most recognized project because it causes artists to work with engineers, scientists and people in the industrial world, and one of the things very little known from E.A.T. is that the programs that performed were cultural management programs. These cultural management programs were permanent acquisition of arts programs that were being destroyed at this moment, because they were not collected. When the E.A.T. creates a program as part of its management program, it works in conjunction with Pontus Hultén, then Director of the Moderna Museet (Stockholm). He is a central figure in curatorship of contemporary art, primarily by taking on a key role in how a museum could be a cultural centre and soon after this initiative he assumes the direction of the Centre Pompidou in Paris (1974-1981). At that time, he was very involved in the arts and was a close friend of Rauschenberg, and also very close to Billy Klüver. The project of Klüver and E.A.T., from these issues, includes a program of acquisition of thirty experimental works of art and one of these works is the work of Rauschenberg. If this work exists it is precisely because of this management project and not only for the production that the E.A.T. performed at this time. This work brings together a number of features that are directly related to the curatorial

research of this biennial, more than anything, in the case of *Imagination Machines*, is a work that can, within a context of commissioning as *Art & Technology*, and a project management represents an intersection between two major initiatives for commissioning, production, art management and collaboration in his time.

On the work of Tony Smith – *Bat Cave*, 1971 – the criteria are still others. This work is considered one of the most successful works of *Art & Technology* for different reasons. Among them, because the material with which the artist wasn't used to working: the cardboard, and for being a project that was not presented as a documentation project (which is how most of the projects from the 60's designs are presented in function, especially for their financial limitations) but as of creation. The construction of this project for this edition of the biennial involved many people and dialogue, where the artistic intention was the main one. The artistic intent can be studied from the correspondence that can be understood and thus negotiated with those responsible for protecting assets. This is a completely different experience for a biennial model and in this sense I want to think a little more about it, for its developing in many steps, from the management in order to carry out the partnership with the cellulose company (Irani), a broad interpretation through research and analysis of letters and documents (by the curator, executive production and museography) and how lucky we all were that Tony Smith's daughter is also an artist (Kiki Smith). I believe that there was a concern by her that the works were materialized and not only present in the form of documentation. Although I like documentation exhibitions a lot, it seems to me that it is for a very specialized audience, so I am very reticent to excessive documentation in an exhibition space.

That said, each work then had a very distinct selection criteria for being in this biennial and this is why I didn't consider them part of a historical core. Presenting them in a biennial context meant a series of negotiations. For Hans Haacke, for example, from the *Circulation* series, I had considered three possibilities of work, an already much seen in recent months and finally, in a conversation with the artist, we chose this one (*Circulation*, 1969). In the case of Tony Smith, we depended on a conversation with the artist's family, sponsors and partners, as well as some interaction with the biennial's architecture team, which is a very broad research. And Rauschenberg, finally, was a very difficult process and after many refusals, the curatorial argument in attempts to release the final loan, was that it was the proposal of *Art & Technology* that the works were appreciated by a wider audience and it was our responsibility to

8. THE E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology) was founded in 1967 by the engineers Billy Klüver and Fred Waldhauer and artists Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman.

bring that to this work, which is one of the five most important works of the artist who was one of the more experimental and important artists of the United States. Rauschenberg also created a foundation⁹ that remains active and offers scholarships and experiments in the arts, that being part of his philosophy.

In the second part of that question, in the works of Lucy Skaer (*Tradução da resina*, 2013) and Cinthia Marcelle (*Viajante engolido pelo espaço*, 2013), for example, these works are also important didactically within the negotiation process. The idea was that, if we wanted to do an *Imagination Machines* project, so it wouldn't be thought as a collaborative project where the artist would go to the company and do a sculpture to put on a square, or that the artist would have to do a marketing campaign, it was important to present both to the institution and to the companies and research centers those works that had been held historically in collaborative processes. And these works are not restricted to discussions of the 60's: the work of Cao Fei (*Whose utopia?*, 2006) and Allan McCollum (*Event: Petrified Lightning from Central Florida*, 1997-1998) are works that were carried out for ten, fifteen years. The idea was that they were works which presented new opportunities for collaboration and went out of the box when thinking that the new materializations, commissioned through this program *Imagination Machines*, could be totally unexpected works. The important thing was to be open to that level of experimentation without a level of concrete determination *a priori* of what the project would be. It was also important for the guest artists to share the historical experiences and documents so that they too could imagine possibilities. The relationship between the works of Cinthia Marcelle and Lucy Skaer are quite different and are related to the time that we had to carry out these projects. Rauschenberg, Tony Smith and Allan McCollum work for at least two years of experimentation and creation before displaying anything and we had very little time: we had less than a year whereas much of that time is negotiation, i.e. There is no experimentation from the beginning. And not all cases happened like this, but the idea was that, yes, we could do something without focusing on the success or failure at this point, the situation was to do something with the circumstances and opportunities presented and not let the opportunity pass by. And the curatorial positioning was clear to the artists: If you don't like the end result, you don't have to display it. Not everything that the artist produces has a life, some productions work and some do not.

9. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation was created in 1990 (see <http://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org>).

MS:

The historic return to the past, to the origins of contemporary art, also leads to discussion to the indication of a time of transition in curatorial practice. From the curatorial practice model of the curator-author (inaugurated by Harald Szeemann, in 1969) to a model of, currently, curatorial practice established in a diluted or shared authorship (observed in Documenta 12, 2007, and in the curatorial speech prior to the 31st Biennial of São Paulo), it is possible to observe the replacement of "curator" for "artistic direction". The 9th Biennial of Mercosul | Porto Alegre follows this trend. Although the models keep occurring in a concurrency scheme, what does the authorial dilution mean to the contemporary curatorial practice?

SHCC:

I didn't realize these connections, but maybe you have noticed: not only I've selected artists and works of art, but I've been directly involved in the communication, marketing campaigns, etc. For me Szeemann is also inspiration, but in reality my greatest inspirations are other types of curation that has been known as "*new institutionalism*", which is directly linked to how a curator, somehow, tries, besides proposing exhibition projects, to change structures of where these projects or artistic exhibitions are presented, produced and apprehended. In this context, Charles Escher¹⁰ is part of this culture as well as Maria Lind,¹¹ among others, which are people who have changed structurally a situation for which in part take a kind of exhibition design and another for another more integrated working and thinking about the arts, more political in that sense. So I guess the theme "artistic direction" helps thinking that there is something beyond the exhibition. I'm just wondering ... maybe it has something to do with the salary issue, as with most things [laughs]: the curator has a salary, the Director has another, so that means that maybe they're paying me better [laughs].

10. Charles Esche is Director of the Van Abbemuseum, Museum of modern and contemporary art in Eindhoven, Netherlands, and curator of the 31st biennial of São Paulo. With experience in museological institutions, he also became a member of the curatorial team of the Istanbul biennial, in 2005, of the Riwaq Biennial of Palestine, in 2007 and 2009, and the Gwangju biennial in South Korea, in 2002. As a writer and editor, in 1999 he was co-founder of the art journal *Afterall*, published by the University of the Arts London. Recently he became co-editor of the series named *Exhibitions Histories*, commissioned by Afterall Books.

11. Maria Lind is director of Tensta Konsthall, independent curator and writer interested in exploring formats and methodologies connected with contemporary art institutions. She was director of the Center for Curatorial Studies Bard College from 2008 to 2010. Before that, she was director of IASPI in Stockholm (2005-2007) and director of Kunstverein Munich (2002-2004). From 1997 to 2001 she was curator of Moderna Museet, in Stockholm, and in 1998 was co-curator of Manifesta 2. Lind was a Walter Hopps Award winner. A collection of her essays was published by Sternberg Press in 2010: *Selected Maria Lind Writing*.

I use the term curatorship with great pride, although I know that there are many banal curatorial projects. You can designate yourself as curator not being one, actually. There are also a lot of people that say they are art critics and actually don't make criticism as such. *I take very lightly when the terms are used with the meaning to be able to argue for.* I believe in curatorship as a way of thought, realization, management and communication, and I try to take it with full responsibility as all the projects I do.

MS:

The curatorial text present in the catalog informs that the criteria for selection of artists were the artist and intellectual figure as a collaborator, a mediator, an outsider. How is the curatorial interpretation of the intent of the artist given, from the original context of proposition of your work, your interpretation and integration to the curatorial narrative of the 9th Biennial of Mercosul | Porto Alegre?

SHCC:

The interpretation is the intention of the work of art. In other words, the intention is manifested in the work of art, sometimes more present than in other times, and it looks to me like the works that are selected are those that strongly meet this intentionality. That is, what the artist wanted to do communicates in his work: several times the artists tried to make announcements of works that I didn't take. And in some cases they were sad, but I've always been quite clear saying that the work was not communicating what he (the artist) stated that the work meant. And that's how the curatorship covers the intentionality: through viewing, listening and engaging in dialogue with the artist and with the idea proposed for its implementation. This is the role that I believe that the curator has regarding intentionality. But for me it is also very important that the artist also recognizes that there is a curatorial intentionality and that there is a curatorial interpretation, and that this may be something that the artist admits or resists, but there should also be this kind of respect so that there is a real collaboration. In this sense: the curator who works with the artist and their work is not a slave of that intentionality and when you put things in balance (artistic and curatorial intentionalities), we have the best point of dialogue. I believe this environment breeds trust, and this environment of trust, both curatorially as museographically on how these works must be positioned, the artist participates because he is always included in the discussions on the ideas for the spaces. Maybe you can answer this question better than I can, can't you [laughs]?

It seems to me that, somehow, the installation process was a point where there was a lot of dialogue among us all (curator, museography, artists) and suggestions have been taken on many occasions, considering the issues and techniques that were also defining spaces. This same process that happened between us (curatorship and museography) was something that happened because both consider intentionality in a level of trust and mutual respect for artistic proposals. I remember, for example, the final conversations during the assembly process of Tony Smith, that is a crucial point of this whole¹² relationship: It's like imagining, too, the original proposition in the intention of the artist and the possible and necessary adaptations, which were the concerns at that moment and what are the concerns now, that can be, even, radically others, because this is not an exclusive pavilion of *Art & Technology*. Another job that I remember was the definition of location of Sara Ramo's work (*Armação do remoto ou deslembração vertebrada*, 2013) inside the Usina do Gasômetro,¹³ where it can be seen from the window, as well as issues of location of subtitles, interference of light with the spatially contiguous work of Koenraad Dedobbeleer (*Conhecimento acumulado em uma corrida frenética contra a morte, que a morte deve ganhar*, 2013), etc. We had a series of disagreements between curatorial and artist team in the installation process of this work, but during finalization we were all happy. When we propose things, we propose wanting to believe it's for the best, and also the curators and members of a team

12. Between 1969 and 1971, Tony Smith worked with the *Container Corporation of America* to develop a sculptural work performed in cardboard and known as *Bat Cave*. The cardboard, ephemeral material with little durability, gives lightness and softness to the sculpture, with a texture and particular color, similar to a wasp's nest. The work of historical reconstruction, designed in more than 4000 units of cardboard, was possible due to the collaboration of Tony Smith Estate, Lippincott LCC, Celulose Irani s.a. and the 9th Mercosul biennial | Porto Alegre. According to the conception of the artist, it was essential that the pieces of cardboard were individually armed and that these elements formed a structure when united with each other, without the use of fasteners, using only glue. That is, there is no structure, except the components that make up the form. In relation to the light, the artist specified that he wanted it to be introduced in a similar way to the 19th century sceneries. His intention was that even with the changes that were necessary to deal with the situation, depending on the amount of visitors, it was possible to maintain several open access points. During the Assembly of the work in this edition of the biennial, long talks were held hoping to, from the intent of the artist, consider the necessary adjustments for the work assembly in the ground floor and illuminated by the skylight on the top of MARGS.

13. The artist Sara Ramo, inspired by the childhood memories of the possibility of a graveyard of dinosaurs, has proposed an imaginary exploration space, a playground that gets body and shape through dinosaur figures of naïf features. During the process of reading the works and spatialization of the same ones in the places designated for that edition of the biennial, there was the possibility of allocation of the work in the external area, contiguous to the Usina do Gasômetro. Technical and security issues made impossible the permanence of work in public space so, finally, the work was installed in the ground floor of the site.

project of this size are so focused on certain things that we need to remember the big picture. The site specific deploys curatorial issues, artistic and philosophical, but in a project of this scale the concerns cannot be geared exclusively to a single work, as this may cause it to lose the connection with the remainder, which is not interesting. These things arise: there's an artistic intentionality, but there is also a curatorial intentionality and both need to be made compatible.

MS:

In the exhibition context, curatorial interpretation of artistic proposals is linguistics, the word in general writing, and establishes a relationship between artist-curator-spectator. How much of textual information about the context must be made available to the spectator? How can you reverse the logic of the tutoring system in curatorial practice to enable the building a subjective narrative on the part of the spectator?

SHCC:

I believe that each exhibition model is variable and depends on the demands. In a biennial such as that one the audience is very broad, very diverse and only a very small fragment is a specialized audience in the arts, and the vast majority are very young students. It seems to me that what should be considered is the inclusion of different types of voices; we shouldn't just think about the amount of information that is presented, but in different modalities of what information you can narrate. So, for example, the fact sheets in this exhibition are all made very different, because the authors are very distinct. All the curators wrote the fact sheets and the process to rewrite, expand or reduce the fact sheets was a collective writing process, whereas the public, in some places, could better appreciate the work by having a historical context alongside or would question the work if it was presented a philosophical context or, still, could better enjoy a work if they were informed of the materials used in it. Then *there is not a right way*, but there are many ways in which you can work with the text and the information in the sense of how much information will really enhance the reading of a work, whereas the public may decide not to read anything, which is always an option. What I really insisted on was the title of the works. When an artist presented a title that seemed not to contribute to the work or when the title wasn't as good as the work, I'd ask them to rethink it. And in the case of artists who reported in a generic way the technique of his work, I wondered: what is it? Define it. There is

a whole layer of informations designed and they are not free. Just as the design of an exhibitor is thought, perimeter, volume, floating items, etc, the fact sheets are also addressed in this manner.

MS:

Considering the exhibition spaces of the 9th Biennial of Mercosul (Santander Cultural, Rio Grande do Sul Memorial, MARGS and the Usina do Gasômetro), was there a concern about the structure of a narrative that was simultaneously spatial or the starting point was the autonomy of the expository route?

SHCC:

I wish there was more space between the works [laughs], Yes, more. There are a lot of people and what I like is that when a spectator enters the space, there is a reading that can be made: as a macro-vision of something and then a course that you can go back and forth, with freedom. For me it is important that macro vision from a point: *something like look to the landscape*. First look, then go. And in this course, go discovering things: the works, ideas, feelings and everything else. In my conversations with people from Porto Alegre, people with whom I live with daily and who often do not have any direct involvement with art, they report that they don't see the biennial at once: they choose one exhibition space per weekend, for example. That is, our main audience is our local audience and they have defined that the biennial can be seen in parts, they define where they want to go and what they want to see. I like the idea of continuity, actually, although with interruptions with spaces *so called muertos* for thought and contemplation, maybe that's fragmentation, in fact, *I like recurring audiences and create culture*, an event repeated as tradition and that a habit exists precisely because there is a repetition of this habit and succession of repetitions. I like the audience to take these spaces as part of a great project that will come back another time. And I hope they return.

MS:

How can the exhibitional architecture contribute to a curatorial narrative in order to ensure coherence, unity and identity of the speech? What are the main tools for materialization of conceptual moorings in an exhibition, taken from space?

SHCC:

I don't see how you separate them: curating and architecture, although the responsibilities are very distinct. Information and

know-how that the curator brings is distinct from information and know-how that brings the architect, but I think for me it is important to also think about "non-architecture". Each project is different and for this one it was important to think that the architecture was given to a certain extent, as the exhibition spaces were already museums or exhibition spaces, and also the size of the works and the type of journey, the great panorama that we wanted to do from the beginning so the relationship between the works was a little more evident, somehow it was proposed to the architect-museographer to think about how to make that experience sharper, clearer. For that a non-architecture was needed in this sense, thinking that it was not just a matter of cleaning, but removing everything that has been built to be temporary and ended up becoming permanent. And not to cover what seemed a mistake, but to live better with what was present and not think that architecture should be a correction or isolation from space, isolation from the reality of architecture or isolation from the windows and their connections. When we built walls, they were not for putting up the works, but to cover a series of distractions, such as the Usina do Gasômetro's furnaces that were obvious and were always proposing something in there. We proposed to them another view, seen from above, as the work of Hope Ginsburg (*On Resisting the Separation of the Continents*, 2013). Or how to block the distraction of the amount of ads on the terrace, or in what became "our wall of Mauá", on the 4th floor, which prohibits the information on the workshops that take place in the back, by analogy to what happens with the wall of Mauá that blocks the view of the river, which is quite violent. But it is a wall, this one built for this issue of the biennial, that leads to the observation of the Guaíba. So, what are the tools of the architects? I don't know, maybe the best – and I don't know if it's a tool – is to understand how people relate to a space, because in general an architect have a lot of confidence – not all of them – but in my experience the architect is confident about how it is possible to transform a room into a space that transforms people.

In the case of this biennial, I like to think that, in the case of museography in particular, how to present it better despite all the design and conceptualization of museums, we should not forget that the team of museography also solves the technical stuff. And there was a shared desire to see the cultural heritage of buildings in this city that were designated for the biennial, for a better look. I believe that clarity needed for the project was also needed for the very principles of the team.

MS:

It is possible to evaluate new possibilities of spatialization of curatorial narratives in large-scale models? It is possible to speculate on alternative models for the production and exhibition of art?

SHCC:

There is new popping up all the time. I believe there are many! The project of *Ekphrasis*,¹⁴ for example, in the context of this biennial, demonstrates that not everything should be displayed in the exhibition space as a document and that there are other ways to share and have an experience. A model like this looks like a good start for this kind of discussion beyond the physicality of exhibition. I would also add the temporality of this biennial's performances – as the designs of Bik Van der Pol (*Performance – E se a Lua estivesse apenas a um salto de distância*, 2013) – that are transformed every weekend from the interaction with the public, which is how the collaborative processes happen in constant process of change. And it seems to me that the topic of the performance needs to be redefined and may help to better think about the character of an exhibition project.

MS:

Just recently the history of exhibitions has been considered an essential part of art history, especially after the late 60's, when the artist's engagement with the space and site became an essential part of his practice. Taking the ephemeral nature of an exhibition and the permanent nature of the documental records of it, the catalog plays an essential role. The trend to launch it concomitant to the opening of the exhibition has been a constant. What does the deletion of the registration of the event itself do to the construction of the history of exhibitions?

SHCC:

The catalog is only one of many other spaces that exist to publish information or reflection on a curatorial project. The catalog is not exactly the documentation of a process, but a discussion of the reasons why a process existed. Then the editorial project of the 9th biennial was organized considering the release of a publication, in fact, in the original proposal there were three anthological publications to be released prior to the biennial as a material that

14. The *Ekphrasis* project is based on time or in the process, ephemeral or destructible, of almost invisible nature, or too polite to be transported. Part of them were presented in a series of lectures, recitals and performances.

could grant an interested audience, an audience that wanted more information about the thought process around the organization of the proposal, however, the three books could not be completed for reasons of time and we release only one that is “the cloud”¹⁵. Each of the three books were supposedly also a holding of three research spaces (underground, atmosphere and sea) that were being investigated, not only in literal terms, but also as methodologies: the past, the present, the subconscious and the future designed. At the end when we saw that there wasn't money confirmed for the publications and we were running out of time for the actions (questions of copyright, translation, etc.), we decided that it would be only one publication: the cloud. So this publication was set as it was: to launch it before the opening of the event and to serve as a tool to prepare the public, in particular, and also to mediators of the biennial. The second publication that was conceptualized was the website and we faced serious technical problems that we tried to solve along the way, but the website was conceived, from the beginning, as an area that would be for documentation of the project, not the catalog. So it was released with the principle of it to work as a documentation of project processes through interviews, images and also act as a publishing platform for the initiative of *Island Sessions*.¹⁶ The cloud, the website and the catalog are the publications of this biennial, regardless of the educational material Manual for the Curious. The catalog was conceived from the beginning as a space for reflection of ideas about the project more specifically related to the works of art themselves, but never as a documentation of the exhibition. The website was designed for the documentation of the exhibition, precisely because of its flexibility of being constantly fed by new information such as images, interviews with artists, PDF documents, video of artists who were related to the creation of his works, among others. So the catalog to me is not a space that should document a project, if not more than anything, but to present the ideas articulated about the projects, such as an overview on each of them. Also many of the texts, for example, were delivered in April/May and many of the projects changed radically between June, July and August and are not reflected there [in the catalog] directly, but are reflected in the website. So I believe they are different forms of covering what is a catalog and what a

catalog is for, in this case, to present curatorial essays, discussions, to provide information on the selection criteria and the questions that we assume and address in the project, and those that we could not address and are reflected in the catalog. So this catalogue is built from dialogues and reflections, from tests. And also this format, say, *writing style is thought about it in that sense of something that is still alive*. But not for me, the catalog should not necessarily document the exhibition itself.

MS:

The memory of the exhibition itself would then be the website, not considered from an ephemeral platform?

SHCC:

Yes, as a more accessible resource that allows you to have more dynamism and exchanges, more updates, *constant updates*. And this place where you can enter more documents. Also the website is designed including a section – which seems to me is little discussed – but it is very important, which is the download. A section where you can download certain publications in PDFs as you can also download another type of material as the songs (by Mario Garcia Torres), among others. And for each artist's page there are PDFs, images of the works on the site, images and process information, brief introductions and a series of links of artists. I quote a few examples: Edgar Orlanietta did a *powerpoint* as a blogspot about her project that is linked on the website; the access to books by Allan McCollum are there too, the video of Gilda Mantilla and Raimundo Chaves are not on display, but, with her permission of course, is on the website at the *Island Sessions* session. So for me the website is not a vehicle for communication purposes, but is a publication and was designed as such: the design of the website, the editorial team, all of this is organized precisely because it was conceived as a publication. A much more dynamic publication, and we never conceived the catalogue as a documentation of the exhibition, only as a tool to be able to think about the project. And also in this sense, as publication, for example, artists who had proposed artistic practices involving texts, also emphasized not to include this type of crowd in exhibition rooms, but, on the contrary, puts them signed as attachments in the catalog, precisely because this is a space for reading and the rooms are a distinct space. The catalog was never designed as documentation, but the website does.

15. All publications of the 9th Biennial of Mercosul | Porto Alegre are freely available for download at: <http://9bienalmercosul.art.br/pt/downloads>.

16. The *Island Sessions* project consists of a series of discussions that happen in the deserted island popularly known as Ilha do Presídio, in Guaíba, next to Porto Alegre. About the textual production resulting from the project, see: <http://9bienalmercosul.art.br/pt/encontros-na-ilha>.

Sofia Hernandez Chong Cuy: Curator of contemporary art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros collection and member of the research team of the Venice Biennale of 2013. Tamayo Museum Director in the city of Mexico and held positions of curatorship in Art in General and at the Americas Society, both from New York. Worked as an agent for the dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel, 2012, and, since 2009, is a member of the Board of the Kunstverein, in Amsterdam. Her writings on art and culture are regularly published in magazines and catalogs and, often, on her blog www.sideshows.org. A native of Mexicali, resides in New York, despite spending most of her time conducting field research in curatorship in Latin America.

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