

Lo que nos queda. What's left...What remains?

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When the SITAC Advisory Committee and the Patronato de Arte Contemporáneo (PAC) invited me to direct the 6th International Symposium of Contemporary Art Theory SITAC VI, I wondered what I might be able to add to this impressive and stimulating series of lectures, roundtables, and discussions that has taken place annually in Mexico City since 2002. The non-profit organization PAC is a private initiative founded almost ten years ago by a number of people committed to contemporary arts and its emerging discourses. It includes curators, collectors and writers. Its aim is to bridge the gap between the Mexican contemporary art scene, the ongoing research in the field of art and culture around the globe, and the emerging discourses in the arts and related fields.

What could I possibly contribute (embedded, as I am, in European discourses) that could be of relevance in the Mexican artistic and intellectual milieu? I concluded that the most meaningful thing to do would be to share my own concerns and worries in a moment of economic and cultural globalization that affects the arts and its production and reception in manifold ways. Politicians today often understand the potential of arts and culture as a means of “soft diplomacy,” as part of current city branding agendas (as aptly pointed out in the cartoon *What our village needs now is a biennial!* by the German artist Olav Westphalen), or simply as a new lifestyle. Works of art have been transformed into investments that promise high revenue not only to individual collectors, but increasingly also to corporate portfolios. If the cash flows, who cares that art circulated in secondary markets serves as mere financial speculation or money laundering?

What's left...What remains? to be done by artists and other intellectuals in the artistic field forty years after 1968? And what is left to be done at the location of these symposium series — Mexico City — forty years after the incomprehensible Tlatelolco massacre? To situate SITAC VI in the recently established Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco was a challenge. The Center is part of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), and it is located in the building complex previously occupied by the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The conference part of SITAC VI was to be staged in what had been the foreign ministry's ballroom, and the three *Clinics* in what had been the ministry's international meeting rooms.

The Memorial del 68 was just recently inaugurated in this historic site to commemorate as a “living archive” the tragic events of the night of October 2, 1968. The incidents of that night followed a politically heated summer, casting a dark shadow not only on Mexican history, but marking as well a failure of international politics. Encouraged by the events around the globe that followed the May 1968 protests in Paris, the Mexican students demonstrated for independence and political change. Under pressure to guarantee security during the XIX Olympic

Games, Gustavo Diaz Ordaz, Mexican president from 1964 until 1970 and member of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), ordered the army to occupy the Campus of UNAM to put an end to the ongoing student protests. On September 23rd, UNAM's rector Javier Barros Sierra resigned in protest. Ten days before the opening of Olympic Games, the Mexican military and armed police forces killed a vast number of student demonstrators, members of their families, children and others who happened to be in the vicinity of the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in the district Tlatelolco, in the midst of the modern multistory family housing complexes next to the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Only in 1997 the Mexican Congress put in place a committee to shed light on what exactly had happened the night of the massacre.

Born in 1958, I was too young to understand what happened in May 1968 in Paris, or to understand its implications for Germany in the years to follow. But growing up in Stuttgart, the location of the Stammheim prison where inmates Ulrike Meinhof, Andreas Bader, Gudrun Ensslin and other members of the Bader-Meinhof-group were held, I quickly came to understand that the private is political, and that the political plays a strong role in people's private lives. But what exactly has changed in the past forty years? And what are the self-given mandates of artists and other cultural *acteurs* today? This was my point of departure for SITAC VI. I posed the question *Lo que nos queda. What's left... What remains?* as an invitation to artists, architects, filmmakers and other cultural producers, theoreticians and writers from different geographies and age groups to unfold the complexity of the current state of the arts and to get closer to a possible response to the questions' target. The construction of "living archives" is a method to question one-sided and linear written histories. Another point of reference is Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, published in 1968, in which the author engages the struggle for justice and equality within educational systems and calls for a new pedagogy.

The sixth edition of SITAC aimed to explore the role of cultural institutions and cultural producers at a time when public spaces are disappearing, and when all over the globe public mandates are being transferred to the private sector. While consumption in a globalized art market is overruling criticality, the notion of agency vanishes. *Lo que nos queda. What's left... What remains?* not only questions how Neoliberalism affects cultures in different parts of the world, but it also asks what is left of the 1968 Student Movement and its impact on societies. Last but not least, SITAC VI questions what is left of the Gramscian notion of the artist as an organic intellectual.

To start the symposium with the screening of films by filmmakers/artists Isaac Julien and Amar Kanwar was a conscious decision. *Territories* from 1984 was the first work of the British artist, and a milestone in the development of a black independent film aesthetic considering images of Carnival, Black Diaspora culture in Britain. Reworking footage of the 1976 Notting Hill Gate riots, Julien created a powerful audio-visual montage reviewing these documents adding a poetic and personal response centering on the image of a black gay couple. Kanwar's *A Night of Prophecy* was filmed — to quote the filmmaker — in several diverse territories of India (Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Nagaland, Kashmir) and features the music and poetry of tragedy and protest performed by regional artists. The sources of anger and sorrow vary from inescapable caste-bound poverty to the loss of loved ones as a result of tribal and religious fighting."

To break out of the format of formal presentations, SITAC advisor, curator and writer Guillermo Santamarina suggested introducing the format of Clinics. The Clinics were held under the direction of Santamarina, who was then Director of the Museo Experimental El Eco. Three Clinic sections were lead by artist Andrea Ferreyra, education curator of the Museo Tamayo Jorge Manguía and researcher Daniel Garza Usabiaga. They included as interlocutors symposium speakers Vangelis Vlahos, Lee Weng Choy, Carles Guerra and Nomedá and Gediminas Urbonas. The Clinics took place over three consecutive mornings in the format of closed workshop sessions for a limited group of pre-registered participants. In this way, they offered a more participatory and intimate venue, and were an extension of the SITAC symposium, which attracts up to 800 listeners a day.

Geographer and social theorist David Harvey opened the symposium *Lo que nos queda. What's left...What remains?* with the keynote "The Right to the City" exploring another kind of collective right. Today there is a revival of interest in Henri Lefebvre's ideas on the topic as these were articulated in relation to the movement of 1968 in France. At the same time, there are various social movements around the world reclaiming the need for a public sphere. The feminist urban researcher and activist Yvonne P. Doderer contributed with "Fragments to Culture, Arts and Intellectuals in the Era of the Unleashed Capitalism", focusing on the political dimension of culture as memory and on the ambivalences of art and artistic production in times of unleashed capitalism. She challenged Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectual by approaching his concept from a feminist-materialist background. Media theorist and Laclau specialist Oliver Marchart addressed in his paper "The Artistic Function" that this demand for a public sphere (in a political sense) has more to do with the freedom to act politically. Reflecting upon "What about public art is public?" and "What about political art is political?", he explores artistic practices for which it is more important to be connected to political practices than to art institutions. He claimed that the artistic function lies precisely in the organization of such public sphere. In "Lives and Institutions. Three Histories" writer and sometimes curator Santiago García Navarro weaves facts and references into a narrative fabric, a poetic fiction. In his text, he unpacks that history can turn out as retro-speculation, and the fabrication of a story can be more revealing than so called facts.

The presentations on the first day served as a point of entry to the main topic of SITAC VI from the perspective of theoreticians committed to critical studies. The second day was moderated by Mexico based Senegalese museologist Ery Camara and focused on *What's left out?* The contributions by artists and investigations by cultural *acteurs* shed light on what had been hidden. These practitioners are re-evaluating archives, opening closed doors and un-wrapping what seems to have been forgotten. *What's left out?* Intended to question the "authority" of those writing history. By showing performances, film essays, and using poetry as a language, this day engaged with how histor(ies) can be told differently and in an open-ended non-linear manner. *The Little Museum* by Amar Kanwar is more a reproachful piece of protest poetry than an academic paper and was intended by the filmmaker to serve as a presentation from the Indian subcontinent about the image that lies between sorrow and resistance. Performance art and video pioneer Joan Jonas emerged in the late '60s and early '70s

as one of the most important female artists. In restaging early and recent works, she continues to find new layers of meanings in themes and questions of gender and identity that have fueled her art for over thirty years. Presenting early and very recent work, Jonas states that performance is a transitory form or medium that one cannot really experience except as a witness to the actual physical act. She points to the very important fact that what remains are her notes, her memories, the objects she uses, her drawings — translated into another form, as a memory of the temporal performance. Through such performative acts we realize that all experience becomes memories and forces us to rethink the traditional static form of a monument, versus the more active role that a “memorial” can offer to its viewers. Architect Srdjan Jovanovic Weiss and curator and art historian Katherine Carl of NAO (Normal Architecture Office), and the School of Missing Studies introduced the co-authored participatory project the *Lost Highway Expedition*. The *Lost Highway Expedition* took place during August 2006 through the emerging capitals of the Western Balkans, traveling to Ljubljana, Zagreb, Novi Sad, Belgrade, Skopje, Prishtina, Tirana, Podgorica, and Sarajevo. The expedition searched for positive aspects of Balkanization and explored the emerging distinctions of each new capital city along the highway. Almost 300 architects, artists, writers, curators from around Europe, the Western Balkans, and North and South America participated along the route with partner organizations in each city in activities ranging from discussions, public art actions, guided tours, visits to archives, and picnics. The Athens based artist Vangelis Vlahos presented *1981 (Allagi)*, an archival project that tries to examine a specific period of political and social transition in Greece. *1981 (Allagi)* is based on a newspaper archive of “Eleftheros Kosmos” (Free World), the official mouthpiece of the colonels’ regime (1967-1974), found in 2006 in a flea market in Athens. Vlahos project attempts to approach the multifaceted notion of change (*Allagi*), and to examine the social impact of this concept today. It also addresses the time that has been seen — socially and politically — as the end of the transition period after the Junta in Greece. Mexican fashion designer Carla Fernández spoke about her practice as Founder of FLORA, a mobile workshop/ fashion-laboratory that travels through Mexico visiting indigenous communities and co-ops of women who create handmade textiles. Flora has developed a unique pedagogy in which workshop participants communicate through design.

Moderated by Osvaldo Sánchez, Director of the Museo de Arte Moderno in Mexico City, SITAC VI's last day closed posing the question *What remains (to be done)?* In January 2008 at an all time high of global (art) markets, the competition for funding between privately established and publicly run art institutions created a crucial impact on how institutions operate. Of course such a development has a critical impact on what kind of art is produced and what is collected, by whom and for whom. But what could be a critical role of the arts today? What are the mandates of cultural *acteurs* and producers today? What is the role of public art institutions? Whose voice and (his)stories do they represent? What remains (to be done)? There is an increasing need and desire to reconstitute a space for political criticism and public discourse. In his closing keynote, John Beverley, Professor of Latin American Literature and Cultural Studies, addressed “A Neo-Conservative Spin from Latin America's Cultural Critics”, which provoked a heated discussion. Beverley stated that Latin American cultural criticism is

currently facing a neoconservative turn, which according to Beverly comes — oddly enough — from the position of the traditional field of the “Left” that defends the “aesthetic value.” Today there is an opposition between avant-garde aesthetics and populist politics, between the artist and the working subject. Beverly pointed out that this form of action estranged itself from newly emerging subordinate and popular political subjects. He questioned the usual explanation that the case of Latin American is one of a super-structural reflex of the effects of globalization and the new social movements of artistic and literary intellectuals who try to re-territorialize a form of cultural authority that was eroded by the hegemony of Neo-Liberalism. The Spanish artist Carles Guerra, who pursues a parallel practice as curator and critic, talked about “forms of participation we are dreaming of”. He stated that “we no longer decide whether we are participants or not. The bio-political condition of cultural production makes us feel like a captive audience” and that “we do participate, whether we like it or not.” He raised the question if we — as cultural *actuers* — should resist the actual forms of participation that we are offered through cultural means. Lithuanian artists Gediminas and Nomeda Urbonas, who have shared a partnered practice for the past 15 years, were studying the transformation of society in a transitional period of change in a post-Soviet setting. Their response to the question of what could be done is *Pro-test Lab*, an action to save an important piece of community architecture the Lietuva Cinema in Vilnius. Venezuelan Gabriela Rangel, based in NYC as Director of Visual Arts at the Americas Society, focused on “’68, a model kit” introducing how she approaches through her exhibition and publication projects a one sided (art)history adding other (art)histories to the art historical canon that is mainly “written” by European and North American (art)institutions. Lee Weng Choy is a writer, curator and Artistic Co-Director of the alternative art center Substation in Singapore. In his presentation, Choy questioned “Crisis and Convening: or, what is it that we want from art conferences?” He confessed that such conference presentations are in themselves something of a re-enactment. He pointed out “Panic Buttons” and “Rites and Reflexion,” referring to actions and mechanisms that are ritualized and institutionalized. As Choy states: “Rites maintain or sustain a *status quo*, but need not be intentionally conservative. Rites also refer, for instance, to the university as an institution of liberal values”. He concluded introducing the responsibility of the intellectual to attempt to perform something that goes beyond *rites*: “the term *reflexion* signifies the possibilities of intellectual activism—the task and agency of the critical imagination.”

To serve as the first director of SITAC to come from outside Latin America was a privilege and I would like to thank everyone at PAC for this invitation. This event would not have happened without the help and contribution of many. Therefore I want to thank all the institutional, corporate and private supporters of SITAC VI, especially Eugenio López Alonso, Honorary Chairman of PAC, for their generous support. My deep gratitude goes to Aimeé Labarrere de Servitje and Roberto Servitje for their unprecedented generosity. I would like to personally thank the SITAC advisory board, Ery Camara, Osvaldo Sánchez, Guillermo Santamarina and Patricia Sloane, for their trust, friendship and ongoing support all the way through, particularly when the event location had to changed at the last minute due to the unexpected large number of attendees. The audience that made the effort to join for three days the presentations

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