

*What we try to express, sooner or  
Later, someone will try to under-  
stand it. Reloaded*

(text written in two episodes)

Jota Castro

**Brussels, November 2002**

While I'm writing, and while it rains over Brussels —I know it sounds cliché— I listen to the *Amores Perros* soundtrack, and all of a sudden Celia Cruz's' lyrics speak to me: what they say is true:

One who thinks that life isn't fair  
must know that's not how it is  
That life is beautiful, that it must be lived  
one who thinks that one is all alone and that things are bad  
must know that's not how it is  
that in life no one is alone there  
is always someone there

What the singer means is that what we try to express, sooner or later, someone will try to understand it.

In 1995, I was living in Haiti; every so often I would go to Miami to see a friend who was forever agonizing of AIDS. Thousands of people in Haiti were also dying of the same cause. But all the misery I was breathing in could not make me forget that, in the South-American continent's artificial capital, a brilliant Latino faggot (I use these three qualifiers because they depict the character well) was dying alone, leaving behind a body of work that would become an icon of contemporaneity. My friend's name was Felix Gonzalez Torres and his *Candy Pieces* represented rather well in my eyes the whole problematic of the last *fin de siècle*: how do we share? How can wealth be shared? How do we make wealth —our natural resources, or not— last? How do we make the world a fairer place, for equality to be more than merely a country's motto? All this was expressed by a mound of candy that shrank, sometimes quickly and sometimes slowly, depending on individuals' social behavior vis-à-vis the piece, whether they took one, or a few, or many pieces of candy. My wife has one at home. I did not want to take any —I just observed, and one day I told him that his piece was profoundly Western. I had once tried to do the same thing in Haiti, and of course my pile of candy did not last very long. I was called a white moron.

Felix Gonzalez Torres was eminently radical and subversive in his sweetness. He spoke of his fear of loneliness, of his fear of no longer being loved, of being aware that he formed part of a minority and of any intellectual's moral obligation to try to explain his or her time. I am trying to find points in common between Celia Cruz and Gonzalez Torres. He was a Cuban exile and so is she. She is black, he was homosexual: two minorities. Of course, they both form part of my personal Pantheon.

And they both speak of sharing and of making up for a lack.

And that is indeed what it is all about.

I would also like to make up for a lack. I would like to mitigate misery on earth a bit, if this is possible. That is radical —and probably radically stupid. But what if being radical was precisely not being afraid of ridicule?

Every work has a subject.

In my personal case, my subject is my relationship with the society in which I live. The sum of all my lacks has made me an artist, though I became one only six years ago. I remember that when I started, I felt both anguish for not understanding and excitement at realizing that everything had yet to be done. The fact that criticism was incapable of rendering art accessible to everyone, added to the fact that most of my peers could not allay their shortcomings in terms of theoretical discourse, made my new job more than exciting. In order to communicate, you have to arouse someone's curiosity. Thus, a basic methodology had to be established: a rational tool in which information, data, facts and —why not?— such subjective things as anger or empathy are conjoined to create a solid building. The foundation for this construction is observation, which precedes realization, which precedes commitment which, in turn, desperately seeks to simplify in order to garner support. That, in brief, is my vision of the convergence of contemporary art and politics.

Artists have an obligation, owe it to themselves to interpret information—in fact, that is perhaps our last way of being radical, of protesting, simply because power deserves an interpretation by artists to the extent that they are not representative of it. To work on serious—or, better said, annoying— topics, such as Common Agricultural Policy, the behavior of European curators, racism, genetically-modified organisms or the creation of a bank may seem a bit reckless. Nonetheless, it is a wonderful field in which to implement my methodology. If my projects' participatory, interactive nature ties me directly to relational aesthetics, then I demand more than just a participatory relationship between viewers and my work. I want to hit them in the face, I want to provoke doubt, I want to provoke a confrontation. I want to trip up classic modes of communication between the observer and my work. If the concept of "less is more" is still totally interesting from an aesthetic viewpoint, on the level of information, however, we always need more and, most importantly, information that is unrelated to any kind of ideology. Viewers must be forced to compare the information I offer them with the flow of direct and indirect information that they

receive on a daily basis. My pleasure derives from this possible confrontation. And like any kind of pleasure, it is very personal. To be radical is to make a breach, to go out on a limb for others, to face up to the law, to disrepute, to morality and to the dominant ideology — all this so that others can live better, understand better. Even those who do not agree with the changes that you desire.

If this type of messianism can be terribly inhuman when applied by Muslim extremists, it can take the form of an isolated and almost desperate act among artists. The latter are not only faced with the indifference of theoreticians, but most importantly, with the impression that their reflections lack power. An interest in close communication —which is a wonderful concept of the 1990s— has led many artists to merely deal with the influence they have on their immediate surroundings and to ignore their obligation to always consider the greater majority. It is as if the Judeo-Christian idea of finding at least one fair person in order to save the city had become the norm in art.

There, it has been said: to be radical is to confront one's time, ruthlessly.

Certain *Hardcore* participants, myself included, ascribe to this notion: not being only angry young artists, not trying to merely teach a lesson, not being considered radical simply because we are different or peripheral. If we are radical it is because we want to embody the possibility of contributing from the perspective of culture to this new political project.

#### **Brussels, February 2004**

I get back to work on this text fifteen months later and recognize myself very well in what I have written. I also see the changes that have taken place in me due to the sudden, relative exposure my work has received in the media.

A first observation: in my humble opinion, subversion and resistance in contemporary art are the same thing. It is about making art-work that attempts to embody a certain ethics, without thinking too much about the market, and without courting the milieu too much.

Evidently, I have found that there is something special among so-called subversive artists right now: many of the most interesting come from what I call the Extreme Occident and are natives of places where there is no clearly defined market for their work. This somehow relates them directly to the concept of non-traditional export goods, facing them with the notion of quotas. This last notion is interesting because it goes much further than the path taken by Jean Hubert Martin's much too famous and oft-commented exhibition *Les magiciens de la terre* — a kind of standard yardstick for art from else-where and a dictionary of good manners to deal with the art of *those people*.

In art as in everyday life, society moves faster than established notions tell us, and that is what has happened with this standard value. At the end of the twentieth century, European society became fearful of losing certain privileges that had made it feel like it had been at the forefront of social progress (loss of social privileges, fear of immigration and delocalization, loss of the Nation-State's power and of retirement funds). This fear has become a political factor that determines whether parties win or lose elections, that energizes or ruins markets; it also led to the creation of a niche for a few artists who figured out that they could make use of it. They understood that every domain of Western life was dominated by this fear. September nth indelibly tattooed it onto the global society in which we live, signing the death warrant of the very conservative rhetoric of univer-salisms.

Hence the exhibition of socio-economic phenomena, the circumscribing of small zones of free will, has destabilized contemporary Western art thinkers who have sought a way of justifying this kind of art practice through references. Santiago Sierra, Minerva Cuevas, Alain Delercq, Sislej Xhafa and I have been directly associated with the 1970s. This is a very facile, simplistic way of reducing us ideologically to a kind of *Hans Haacke Fan Club* disregarding even the fact that we share neither Mr. Haacke's ideology nor his sense of guilt. This banal analysis of our ideological strengths and weaknesses seems to ignore what the fall of the Berlin wall has brought about: the end of blocks... Our collective political awareness takes this historical development into account and is a reaction to the idea according to which there remains but a single possibility of

development for every-one. Without falling prey to alter-globalists' fundamentalism, our times lend themselves to making the most of what we have, so why not play with fire? Visual artists who are interested in subversion are often criticized for showing their work in museums or institutions. It is often viewed as proof that the artist has been reclaimed by the system. This is much too simple and much too moral. These people do not conceive that dealing with institutions means dealing with confrontation. One must attack culture's foundations and, in Europe, these are the cultural institutions. If we can dare to show things that upset, revolt or provoke discussion without hiding behind an aesthetic armor, then we might be able to make things evolve. The common practice of criticizing '*committed*' artists for the '*technical shortcomings*' of their work is above all a way to avoid discussing their pieces' underlying ideas. On the one hand, even thirty years ago, the society in which we live could convene a sociologist, an anthropologist, an economist and an investor in the same space in order to figure out how to justify a new yogurt, a new car or any kind of new tendency. On the other, the vast majority of the art milieu still refuses to allow someone —especially an artist— to justify a work of art on the basis of economic, political or social principles.

We still become ecstatic when Hans Ulrich Obrist convenes a few artists along with scientists, sociologists and other representatives of civil society... while Coca Cola has done the same thing for decades to find out consumers' opinions about its bottles' packaging changes — and no one bats an eyelash. With all the respect I owe to the work of curators like Hans Ulrich Obrist, it seems to me that what has become acceptable in art is for artists to mimic the society in which they live. We mimic ethics committees. We mimic "good Negroes." We mimic the conscientious European. We mimic an America that does not exist. We mimic commitment. We mimic anger, sexuality, difference, an interest in the other —that's acceptable! — but when I try to express an amoral idea nowadays without shielding myself with protective references or hiding behind my ethnicity so as to elicit empathy, that is when I become dangerous and an object of criticism —but also recognizable. And yet, many people tell me that this idea is unfounded, that *Documenta XI* dealt with it and brushed it aside, that this show was the

proof of the recent globalization of the art world and its international manifestations, and that I should be thrilled.

I have a linguistic issue with the word globalization. I was born in Peru, of mixed blood —the word globalization has been part of my life and history for the past 500 years. It is hard to speak of the globalization of the art world. Has contemporary art become global or have certain individuals (myself included) merely been turned into representatives of globalization? They are in fact nothing but a cultural alibi. Can one really believe that because a Black curator, an Argentine curator and an Indian curator were part of the *Documenta XI* team, it changed anything at all in terms of the situation or interest focused on artists from the Extreme Occident? I do not think so.

The "good foreigner" is a recurrent figure in European culture, and it exists as proof of the West's greatness-assimilation. People like Borges, Senghor or Césaire are archetypes of the assimilation of a culture rather than ruptures. And if globalization is interpreted as a rupture with colonialism, this rupture has not yet taken place in culture.

*Documenta XI* was not the rupture I expected; rather, it confirmed the American university cultural stereotypes: too many kind feelings kill feeling.

I see no perverse effects, indeed, I do not really see any effects at all. If we analyze biennials' emergence in various parts of the world from an economic point of view, we can see that the old adage of creating prestigious events to lend cultural credibility to a nation or a city continues to prosper. For business, we do world fairs, for art, we do biennials. I believe that art, in its assimilation of economic parameters, has always contented itself with nickels and dimes. To build the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is like setting up a big factory to save the local economy. In Bilbao's case, it led to the creation of 4000 jobs. Globalization means that big factories are now set up in the Third World where they are given the best conditions for undisturbed production. Will we someday witness the delocalization of cultural ventures? Technically, it should eventually happen. I quite often compare the boom in the biennial phenomenon with the boom in NBA franchises. When the professional American basketball league realized its market was saturated, it went on a campaign to conquer the world

by globalizing its merchandising. In 1990, after the fall of the wall, everyone tried to show signs of their modernity. For culture, the proof is the biennial. To continue the parallel with the NBA phenomenon, *Franchise Players* are what remain to be found: the Jordans and Malones of contemporary art, stars who can achieve crossover success. I use the NBA as an example with full knowledge of the facts, because it involves Black people and we might in fact one day see artists from all over the world be at the forefront of the market and the avant-garde. If, in political terms, walls have fallen, barriers remain that separate Western artists from the others in many people's eyes, and no biennial so far has managed to change that. To achieve worldwide renown, a Black painter has to use elephant dung, a white artist from South Africa has to find inspiration in the struggle against Apartheid, a female Iranian artist has to rebel against the chauvinism of her culture. Like many people, I believe that living somewhere implies nothing but a geographical choice. I am aware of how Western I am in this way of seeing things. I did not leave Peru for economic reasons, it was an intellectual choice: more problems but also more freedom. Messianism has always been the lifeblood of emigration and many people who live outside their country get the impression that they can help their people with things they learned elsewhere. It is a dangerous feeling, but I would like to turn the issue around. Why can a classical Western artist dream of having an effect everywhere from the outset and why should I, an artist from the Western periphery, focus my ambitions on improving the situation in my country of origin? Should I not have the right to dream of universality from the outset? What I am trying to express addresses everyone and not only my kin. To be subversive is to be exactly where people do not expect you to be, it is to interpret what, in certain people's eyes, does not belong to you.

<sup>1</sup>*Amores Perros*, a film by Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu, 2000.

<sup>2</sup>Celia Cruz, *La vida es un carnaval*, *Amores Perros* soundtrack, Universal, 2000.

<sup>3</sup>*Hardcore*, an exhibition at the Palais de Tokio, Paris, February—May 2003.

<sup>4</sup>Les magiciens de la terre exhibition, Paris, 1989.

<sup>5</sup>H.M. Enzensberger.

## *Spaces and Strategies of Resistance*

Tobias Ostrander

The second discussion panel of SITAC took place on Friday, January 23, 2004 and was titled *Spaces and Strategies of Resistance*. As was stated repeatedly at SITAC, resistance is always time and site-specific; the purpose of this panel was to examine examples of artistic practice that critically define and intervene in "spaces," meaning the physical, temporal, political, cultural and formal structures in which works manifest themselves. Concurrently, the discussion sought to understand the specific "strategies," or methods that each artist has developed through their actions, and how these might translate into alternate cultural contexts or new areas of investigation.

What took place was five presentations that offered a range of perspectives on what resistance means within a contemporary cultural context, and what are its goals and methods. Aspects of global capitalism were cited by the majority of the participating artists as sites to be challenged, particularly capitalism's consolidation and control of the distribution of information and the numbing effect that the mass media has on the public; capitalism and the media's continual absorption of difference in a manner which makes dissent increasingly difficult to foster. Each of the participants called for a reactivation of