

## Minerva Cuevas & TJ Demos

### Conversation

**TJ:** It is a great honour to be here with everyone and with Minerva. We think we can divide the time that we have so that Minerva has a chance to present her most recent work, she's going to show some images then we will speak about them, then if we have some more time she will show us some more images and speak about those as well.

**MC:** The images I have chosen to present are related to concepts and ideas that I thought seemed interesting to mention as part of this conversation. Like moral judgments and value judgments. The example that we are currently seeing is a piece from the Sydney Biennial in Australia, whose title *The Greatness of a Nation (La Grandeza de una Nación)* comes from a quote by Gandhi. Here in Sydney what I did was research the political, social and economic context of Australia, where I came across the kangaroo leather industry. As a fact, the industry does not really exist but is instead managed as a political tool because it's one of the few economic activities that Aborigines still have for survival. So not only is the industry itself segregated from the rest of the country, but the economic activity of the Aborigines as well. What happens is that politicians manipulate the kangaroo leather industry and the Aboriginal activities to obtain votes; therefore the hunting of kangaroos is a political tool that has also reached an economic level. In Australia kangaroos are seen as a plague, but it goes without saying that killing them, or exterminating them in such a quantity is not good. For the production of kangaroo leather, the largest ones have to be killed, and then only the smaller kangaroos are left to reproduce, so obviously the species faces changes. It becomes weaker and because of the climactic conditions in Australia this is not a good situation. What I used here was the skeleton of a kangaroo that is already an extinct species. As part of my research I also learned about the companies that use kangaroo leather to produce sneakers and sports shoes.

The other image I'm showing deals with a particular political campaign in Norway. What interested me was the amount of nuclear bases in the country, especially along the border with Russia. From this research I started to investigate about NATO. What we are looking at here is a design for a poster—a mural—for the political campaign in general. I came across information that deals with NATO's every right and capacity to use nuclear weapons in any circumstance, even if a country is not attacking with

nuclear weapons. They also grant every right to use nuclear technology at any moment, having as a consequence what is known as the "nuclear winter", which affects not only the war zone but also the entire planet. The image I am showing is of one of the designs that were distributed in public places. Right there we see that it's the "National day of Norway," and that's the reason why these men are carrying flags. I selected these images because they point out specific political actors. Such as NATO, the government, and the administration of the United States. I used this photograph to accompany a project that was about making a *voodoo* ritual against the United States administration, I looked specifically for people that could conduct this ritual because I just learned that voodoo had been also used as a political weapon.

Another thing that interested me too was the manipulation of Hollywood movies to portray it as parallel to zombies and black magic; it was a whole political campaign so we would see things as a dangerous mystical-magic, like in a horror movie, rather than as religion. What ended up happening was that a voodoo ritual was organized to curse the United States administration. Obviously I spoke with people who would be doing the ritual, and it turned out that the group of people I worked with ended up becoming my soul mates, and they give therapy with drums among other things. The family is the entity that conducts these rituals in Ghana. They helped me beforehand by commenting on the situation, why we wanted to realize this action and the political reasons behind it. Obviously the principal motive was to re-evaluate voodoo as a political weapon and in turn talk about voodoo as a religion with great importance.

This idea also leads us to other governments, to nationalism, and to our current political position. I'm showing a piece that was presented here in Mexico, 2007, in an exhibition titled *The Revenge of the Elephant*. This image is of a flag with tar. The series with these materials basically began because I was traveling in Yucatán and I was interested in knowing about the meteorite that destroyed dinosaurs, and how the investigation based on this meteorite had disappeared. I soon discovered that it was not an archaeological investigation, but rather an attempt to find oil that led to the discovery of the marks left by the meteorite. From there I thought the best location to study this phenomenon was Ciudad del Carmen in Campeche because that's where the oil rigs are. I got in contact with the researcher at the Oil Institute. She published a book about this subject in which she also talked about the natural tar pits in Mexico City and I found it interesting. We went looking, but found no traces of oil on the beach, so from there I gathered information from the workers themselves. The photos that I used as documentation are of the same workers on the oil rig platforms that are then sold in Ciudad Carmen as postcards. In reality, the workers themselves take the images because they are the only ones authorized to get close

to the platforms. I also did some work related to henequen, which led to slavery, and I believe was the other major export from Mexico before oil.

I think this is a good stopping point to begin discussing the work a little bit.

**TJ:** Good then, there's a lot of material that you've shown us as well as many intersecting connections. Different geographies: Haiti, Ghana, and Norway. You spoke of ecology and morality. There is a lot that we can begin to speak with. About your reference to Gandhi and morality, how do you introduce it to your own work?

**MC:** When we did these installations and when making this work you end up being judge. At a certain point in the research you have to filter the information and sustain your own political ideologies, you have to see what is the visual information and which references will be used. In occasions the references are included with moral judgment for example in the case of the Australian government. I asked myself if it was my responsibility to decide if these moral judgments were right or wrong, and in turn it led to a lot of internal conflict. I had conversations afterwards and I realized that the observer and the spectator are ultimately the final filter and they decide the visual, they decide what they are seeing and capture the information of the work.

**TJ:** Much of your work deals with catastrophic crises, which I think is linked to the ones addressed in this SITAC edition. I am convinced that today, it is really important to speak and discuss these issues, for example, ecological catastrophes. The implosion that we are now seeing has everything to do with environmental degradation, oil pollution, and etcetera. Do you think these things are creating moral responses in viewers? In your opinion, is your work mobilizing people in order to introduce a barrier of containment against disasters?

**MC:** No, I believe that there are specific references for specific information. For example when I was talking about the industry; throughout the exhibition I tried to create an essay. The judgment about these pieces wasn't obvious or evident, and the focus of the exhibition was ecological and of course, ecology never divides the natural environment from its social issues. Ecology is interacting with the entire planet. Highlighting that the social conditions are the ones that are creating not only the social crises but the environmental crises as well. If you take this as groundwork it will be easier to see that noise, pollution and everything that is related to environmental issues is not the problem. In fact the problems lies in production, industry, and ultimately in Capitalism. Everything else is a symptomatic, or a final manifestation of the problem. It is very common to research environmental issues and realize these underlying issues that exist such as political issues that are there.

**TJ:** Of course the theory of social ecology is also there, but for example, these social and moral concerns which you link to Gandhi, the development of a moral,

personal and ethical commitment that can be translated and is not opposed to politics. You talk about Gandhi and his link with morality, and I think that this link and the process of decolonization that existed in Gandhi's era as well as the resistance against the British Empire can also be compared with the resistance to corporations, and I think that Murray can clarify this. That is to say, the link of activism carries resistance to certain forms of Capitalism.

**MC:** Yes, I think that in the end this is just a way in which I work. I work with specific sites. It's not just about working with environmental issues but I will filter them through my reference, and these are my references. Of course my morality is there but that does not mean that my work is a moral judgment.

**TJ:** Yes, in respect to the samples that you are showing here—the kangaroo just reminded me of a dinosaur—you showed us that slide, that's the suggestion. Just as the dinosaurs went extinct, now we are facing the extinction of various species because of this ecological crisis. However, if we were to enter this installation you also have the logos of various corporations mounted. Can we talk a little bit about why these corporate logos and corporate advertising are there and how it plays into your work?

**MC:** There is an important notion... They are like hooks. I say this because I was not interested in the corporation per se, but rather the symbolism. What the corporation represents and what happens in some of the work is that the logos of the companies already carry a positive or negative image as part of their design, and this is what I tried to exploit further still. That is to say, what people see and the code that is implanted in the brain and immediately recognized in the logo. And how you can send a message through the very minimal information about the corporation, the business and the company. What is it that these minimal messages send to the brain? It is difficult to document if we do not look at a logo or an image because at times it refers to, or criticizes corporate practices and at other times it only uses the brand as a visual channel. For example, I don't know if you saw the alteration I made of Evian water changed to Egalité. I think that there is a good example of manipulating by using the brand and the visual information that does not speak for the company. It is not always the case to speak of a company.

**TJ:** And why don't we speak to the company more specifically?

**MC:** I think that in different contexts it does. For example, the 'Del Monte Corporation'. What happened with this company? Generally these types of logos do not simply manipulate an image but are also used in campaigns then are reproduced like objects, paintings, and decals. The Del Monte Corporation uses very small decals in order to stick them to the fruit in supermarkets. This practice is being disseminated in different ways.

**TJ:** I think that this is also important. You use different spaces for exhibitions, you spread and disseminate, and you use galleries and museums. Tell us about this.

**MC:** Frankly, it's not my decision. I simply accept the invitations that I receive to give talks, like this one for example. Even though it's not my decision it becomes part of my context, and not just the cultural space where one presents the work, but I also take into account whom the public will be at the exhibition. The Sao Paolo Biennial is one example. The Brazilian context is very complex and interesting. I had the opportunity to do something outside in a public space, or within your exhibition space. I think that the biennial had one million visitors and it was more important and the better strategy was to be inside the space of a museum. It was more convenient than being outdoors where doing something outside on the streets could be lost, because this does happen, sometimes things are lost when you are dealing with ephemeral objects.

**TJ:** I have another question in respect to ethics. I am being led to something that Murray Bookchin said in regards to social ecology. He said that ultimately the resistance to the ecological crisis in which we are in can't be made from ethical principles and morals but that people connect themselves with bigger social movements.

**MC:** And it's more than social movements, therein lies the root of the problem. It's the Capitalist problem, which brings us to see that the real problems and their roots lie within Capitalism.

**TJ:** Is there a connection between your talk and your communication with the social movements in that they can communicate and project to other political areas?

**MC:** In my case it's very simple. I probably project my political direction, yes, absolutely. The thing is I take it as a foundation, it is the system that creates these problems and that I am a political actor. Outside of being a lawyer or doctor, I think that has the same type of motivation, a political motivation in respect to my work, projects and activities. Recently I read a quote from Einstein, and he said precisely that social problems form part of the capitalist economy. He was conducting an analysis through other filters of information but somehow ended up saying the same thing.

**TJ:** Perhaps you could present some more work and afterwards we can continue our conversation.

**MC:** This poster is in Lithuanian as part of an exhibition that I had at the Kurimanzutto Gallery. The quote deals with the concept of democracy. Basically it says that it is a violent action when a man imposes his will on many men, which would basically be a dictatorship or an authoritarian state, however, it is also violent and aggressive when many men impose their will on a sovereign man. This becomes paralleled with democracy, and this brings me to speak on some concepts such as of democracy that is filtering the political and economic decisions in the world. Concepts such as

progress, development, globalization and infrastructure are used but it looks like they are beginning to lose their meaning. The concept of development or of progress, in the end looks like the opposite of what it is. It is repression, environmental crisis or environmental destruction. I think it's interesting to analyze what part of the political discourse is handling these terms and what they really mean or hide as well. By analyzing these concepts I arrived at the concept of society: what is society? This piece is called Social Entomology, (Entomología Social). In this piece what we see are basically small microscopic samples of insects and are also projected with microscopic projectors. There is also audio as part of the installation it is like a concert of insects in which the sound in the beginning is savage and disparate but there is a moment where it becomes a rhythm, so from the chaos comes order. Surprisingly it sounds a little like samba but it then becomes lost again and returns to regenerate this supposed chaos in the sound, and once again returns to the wild. The installation in itself also talks about the individual and I almost personally arrive at the conclusion of the impossibility of the individual. There comes a moment where we realize that everything is constituted on society. We are also a society of cells, there is a human society. There are distinct societies and ecologies on the planet that, in the end, form one thing. The planets are part of the universe that is another society, and it looks impossible to arrive at the idea of the individual and this reinforces the concept of a social ecology. Basically the idea that we are all dependent on everything and when generating violent situations or that of exploitation, is not just necessarily towards the other. These things come back and I think that it's what is happening with the political, social and ecological crisis it is only one situation. I think it's ok if we stop here and continue discussing a bit.

**TJ:** Could you tell us what is on the table in this installation?

**MC:** The installation is about insect societies; it includes very primitive drawings from an early stage. It is my collection of microscopic plates with different segments of the insects. It can be a wing; it can be an eye, the eye of a spider. There where also some of poetic expression, for example, the powder which was taken from a butterfly wing which also carries its own tag and for me contains certain poetic aspect because it references what science signifies from a century ago or possibly even dates that are earlier. I think that it had to do with human curiosity or this desire for more knowledge. These microscopic images exist for this reason, so we can use these objects of yesterday: microscopes, plates, etc. If we were to use modern equipment the scientific investigation of this moment is guided by industry and there could be other types of equipment that would try to profit. I think that there is a big difference in antiquated science. Perhaps I am becoming a bit of a romantic, but I believe in not

profiting from science and in protecting the relationship between the curiosity of the human being and trying to understand the world.

**TJ:** But this exhibition, is it a vitrine, is it glass, is it a table, or...?

**MC:** It's a combination. The table is actually a series of tables and some are vitrines. These illustrations of insects are already antiquated. There are beautiful books, one of which is illustrated by Covarrubias. Here there are special glasses that amplify the images. There are also some objects that deal with the use of insecticides and books that deal with plagues. We are not just looking at the beautiful aspects of insect societies but what also has to do with industry, not only because I wanted to create a reference to insecticides but because this is another industry with chemical weapons that also deals with everyday products.

**TJ:** What you present is really interesting; I am really fascinated by it. It really is a magnificent exhibition and it takes us back to the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. Its encyclopedic information and really deals with human curiosity. It also produces specimens, and in the nineteenth century the relationship with death and science becomes more objective, where curiosity about nature was more of an attempt to dominate it. I think there is a relationship in this sense, either literally with the insecticides or a gradual, much less pronounced history. How does one speak about death and the extinction of a species in all the crises that have arisen? For me this is what you have raised in your work.

**MC:** Yes, I arrived at the conclusion that scientific research is a great example of how man wants to control anarchy. I created work for this same exhibition that was only plates, it's called *Colonia*, but it was the diatom lamina, which is a marine fossil. It was a very special plate because I tried to form a flower, a star made of diatoms. There were hundreds and hundreds of them that were changing in this way, yet they were a microscopic ornament. Once again my desire was also to bring order to something that was once wild, and I think the same goes for the music that I produced for the installation. The sound of the crickets, bees, flies...I don't know, in some way I could filter these sounds, passing through a kind of cultural screen, and charge and recognize the musical tones of the human hand. Yes, this is always present in my work. I think that I have other works that are more specific and explicit to the aspects that you mentioned about what we want to control through science, even to the point that we are dressing monkeys and dogs. These experiments are interesting.

**TJ:** Ok, in retrospect, and to take into account some of these themes—nature, converting it into an object, the relationship between the extinction of the species, economic crises, catastrophes, and capitalism—all of this has to do with social ecology. My question is if there is a new terminology that we can use in the political fight?

The disaster, the catastrophes, how do we really arrive at an explanation? Naomi Klein spoke about the capitalism of disaster, are you interested in subjects such as these? I'm not referring to a particular piece, but asking generally, does it interest you?

**MC:** Yes, of course. Why wouldn't it? I try to analyze these aspects following these same guidelines. The problem is that it's not just environmental issues, or catastrophes in and of themselves. The underlying problem, and the fundamental crises... and many people like people in Haiti, for example, living in conditions of extreme and alarming poverty, and because of this there is so much suffering. I'm a bit skeptical of these NGO's and the campaign against AIDS, of what is in fashion, what the trends in the news are telling us. It seems that we begin to learn geography according to where the most recent natural disasters happen, or because a tsunami happened, for example, otherwise, we wouldn't know where these places are, we find out after their destruction. What I reject more is the media coverage of all this. These initiatives somehow deal with the guilt of needing to help others, but they come about after the fact, especially by using money with donations to shake this guilt. Then even after all of this we deny that we are political actors. We are political protagonists. There are catastrophes in every moment and I think that we really only pay attention to the ones broadcasted in the news.

**TJ:** Yes, I think this is an important point. We learn information from the mass media. They love catastrophes because catastrophes help boost ratings, everyone is glued to the television. However, do you have any other deeper commitment? Does your artistic commitment have to be aligned with natural disasters? You have been telling us what you feel but what does this offer as far as artistic expression?

**MC:** I think that when you investigate and you are close to these social issues, of social activism, in some way you protect yourself from the media. They are simply taking advantage and are really creating a farce based on very simple information. I think that staying well informed is a daily practice. We have to keep our feet well planted on the ground.

**TJ:** Would you like to present something else? Should we continue since time is running out or we can open the discussion to the public for questions and answers?

**MC:** I wanted to talk a little bit about borders and the concept of nations. This is the state of Texas and it's a work that I made last year. I was invited to go to Marfa and to produce a work in exactly this part of the state of Texas, which is right along the border with Mexico. What we are looking at is the landscape that is very close to the Rio Bravo. I went with a group of assistants who helped me move forward with two jobs, and I'll only speak about one of them. Thinking about the border I wanted to take into account the possibility of constructing a bridge, and not necessarily a physical bridge, but a conceptual one. Using mobile phones to keep ourselves connected,

for example, as a form of a conceptual bridge since you can connect between both countries. On the border we have AT&T in the United States, and Telmex in Mexico and one has to have good aim to capture the signal. I also started thinking about the idea of working in the political aspects of marches, protests, etc. in this region. I think that if one works from south to north it is the most political act that we can conceive. With this idea of constructing a bridge I had the notion to provoking a kind of accident so that there would really be a reason to cross the river between the United States and Mexico. What we ultimately decided to do was to paint rocks that I could then use to go jump the Rio Bravo. I was marking the rocks with a type of lime and made a dotted line. In the end the idea of really constructing a bridge was achieved, by creating these footprints and I was able to cross the border from Mexico to the United States then from the United States to Mexico. What was important to me was the moment that I realized there wasn't really a border, and that all of the fear and the terror that existed actually came from the media. The "border" between the two countries is part of the imaginary politics that we carry with us through this zone. It's very scary for one to cross, but in reality there is no sign that says, "you are crossing, this is the border," nothing tangible exists. Of course there are police patrols present in those routes, but the desert of Chihuahua is also huge and is really pretty. It's liberating to cross the river; at that moment you understand that it's impossible to have a tangible and physical border between two countries. Then I found out about the consequences of building a wall between two countries in this case, the United States and Mexico. The political consequences are minimal in comparison to the environmental consequences because some migratory species that go from the United States to Mexico stop their migration and these species might change and become extinct quickly. So, it frees you to cross in this way. It was an excellent experience.

They wanted me to propose something that could have an impact on the community, or a positive result, which I said was impossible. I explained the reasons that I thought an art project would not solve a problem of such a magnitude, like the trash problem in Mexico City. They insisted, saying that what they were looking for was a more creative approach. No one knew about this possibility to decompose plastic bags using bacteria, so rather than taking four thousand years to decompose it could take less than three months. It was really interesting for me to perform this experiment. I was collaborating with geologists and a chemical engineer at UNAM to find the most suitable Mexican bacteria for achieving faster decomposition of the plastic bags. We went to these huge dumps and when I was there I was like, "Wow, I'm standing on top of tons of garbage."

**TJ:** Where is this?

**MC:** This is in the periphery of the State of Mexico. When I was there I said, "this is what capitalism means," the texture, and the abstractions make it clear. All this waste is what we are producing, and to be there with the people that live there in the trash, it was like being on another planet, another world. It wasn't the third world but rather the sixth world, I think. It really had an impact on me.

**TJ:** Then your job consists of photographs, or was there an installation?

**MC:** After all these experiments we stumbled upon some friends that study bacteria and they could accelerate the decomposition of plastic bags. We did experiments in the laboratory with these bacteria and this is what got to the installation. This was the result of all of this. It was interesting to discover these blue colors, greens, yellow-greens, pieces, plastic fragments, all these was preserved because green does not disappear or fade in the sun. These are samples of what was in the landfill.

**TJ:** We've been given a note saying that it's time for questions. Does anyone in the audience have any questions?

**PARTICIPANT:** Minerva, apologies for such basic questions. Have you ever exhibited one of your installations more than once? Not just in a specific and thought-out location? This question is also in relation to another: who documents the actions and processes that you then go on to use as documentation? Thirdly, do you control the museology of each of your installations in each location? How much weight does the aesthetic presentation of your work carry?

**MC:** Well, it's very rare that I exhibit the same project in two different places because generally they are for specific contexts and normally I am invited to develop new projects. Who takes the photos? Generally I take my own documentation apart from that the museum that hosts the exhibitions and take their own documentation. Thirdly, the visual part of the work, I think, is fundamental for me, to maintain the projects as an aesthetic exercise...in fact, I feel that my work in itself is not just the installation, but the research that is behind it as well as the intellectual exercises that generates all these clues or references that are included in the exhibition. In the end, the visual part, or the formal solution is the entrance. It's a way of provoking the intellectual exercise and all the questions, and permeating each work with our own conceptual and political filters. It is basic that the work has an optimal formal solution. I don't remember if there was anything else.

**P:** No, but I also wanted to know, when you sell, what do you sell?

**MC:** Well, some museums have bought my work and what I sell is the installation in most cases. I don't know if that answers your question.

**P:** Of course, when you sell an installation, does it also imply the right or possibility to reinstall it? This is what I was referring to before.

**MC:** Yes, it is a very important part of the type of work that I produce. Keeping it as a public work is very important, that it has proper storage conditions, that it can be installed again and be public, it's a privilege. It's very important.

**P:** Good morning, I wanted to know, do you feel that the work of the disaster is more a work of identification as critical to a system, or rather creates new ecologies to move forward? We are transformation and it goes beyond critical journalism?

**MC:** I think that I am entirely too pessimistic. I think that it would be boring to be telling people how they have to live. I am not the kind of person that would do this, nor that could do this. I do think that by defending the way we want to live and being consistent with our position as political actors we basically change our surroundings. Then, I think that one way to go about this would be if each and every one of us is resilient to capitalism and the favors of capitalism. However, it is not pointing out, or criticizing as such. I think that yes, there are elements in which I make references, there are elements in which I exercise a criticism that passes through my professional filter of other references, but in the end it is simply that. Exercising my profession based on my politics and my ethics.

**P:** Minerva, I wanted to ask you, have you ever questioned your references or your political judgments ever?

**MC:** Absolutely, all the time. It was just because of this that I began to think about moral concepts, concepts of progress, and the concept of development. Just to provide another example, I am producing another piece almost permanently that is a video called *Disidencia* (Dissidence), which is an archive of situations that deal with resistance or opposition, or just alternative lifestyles in Mexico City. The project has become a map of recordings of scenes going from the most obvious political events like demonstrations and marches to the documentation of cultural and political projects and other activities like an alternative currency or *underground* project spaces. But when I was developing the project I was confronted with the dilemma that I would be the one deciding what would be considered dissident or wouldn't be, what would be considered too far left and what wouldn't. I wanted to remove myself from an anthropological vision, I wanted to be inconsequential, a nobody who would observe how these situations happen. In reality, however, the idea of registering these situations emerged because I felt a part of them and I wanted to document them. Yes, the process itself is a filter, from the moment that you decide the frame or what part of the video makes it into the final edition. Again, I think that in the moment that it becomes public the final filter continues to be the viewer. It will have a second reading and the public will make their own opinions depending on the references that they have and their own political filters. I don't know if this is clear.

## Panel 3

JULIETA GONZÁLEZ, JOSÉ ROCA, ITALA SCHMELZ AND FELIPE EHRENBERG  
MODERATOR: EDUARDO ABAROA

### The Aesthetic Imagination Before Chaos: From Self-Destructive Art to the Free-Market Diaspora

JULIETA GONZÁLEZ

Let me clarify that these are a series of notes that could serve as a starting point for a more exhaustive research, or possibly even an exhibition (being a curator and not an academic, when I embark on any critical reflection, I cannot help but think in an exhibition content). As notes, and given the brevity of my talk, I will limit myself to the revision of very precise aspects in the works of the artists I have chosen to discuss here.

This reflection has been partially motivated by the emergence of concepts such as chaos, crisis, diaspora, and the problem of the border, amongst others, as instruments of critical evaluation and platforms for curatorial models that have been formulated based on those notions in the past fifteen years to try to give a more specific referential frame to the periphery's production. In a way, these strategies have stemmed as a reaction to what Hal Foster called "the cultural politics of otherness" that modulated a large part of curatorial and artistic practices during the 80's and 90's. At that time, deconstructive thought activated the concept of otherness to legitimate the aesthetic codes of the periphery and thus to facilitate their insertion within a global cultural production. If this phenomenon greatly enabled the integration of Latin American, Asian and African artists into the mainstream of biennials and other international events, it also gave rise to a series of exhibitions that not only constructed an iconography of otherness, but also misrepresented many of the periphery's artistic practices. Nonetheless, I believe that these models, articulated