

Marginally successful: A brief account of two artist-run spaces

There is a contradiction implicit in the idea of the alternative or artist-run space as a phenomenon specific to developed countries or contexts in which a highly organized, sophisticated cultural infrastructure is clearly not lacking. One might argue that the very modus operandi of this kind of space—rejection or critique of both the institutional structure and the art market with their respective (often overlapping) processes of legitimation, a spontaneous manner of operating based on immediate material conditions along with a desire to adapt to (and make the most of) limited resources, and perhaps most importantly the mapping out of a self-defined position or space of marginality (in the positive sense of the term)—would find its natural habitat in a ‘marginal’ context characterized by the presence of dysfunctional institutions and the absence of a real art market. In other words, what is an alternative way of working in one context might be a necessary manner of operating in another. And yet the history of alternative spaces in Latin America is a very short one and difficult to research because it is a history that is fragmented, largely undocumented, and too often forgotten as many of these initiatives have fallen victim to a selective amnesia product of territorial alliances and interests typical to cultural contexts in which there are so few opportunities. This paper will treat two specific cases from the nineties: La Panadería—an artist-run space in Mexico that holds an originary aura and is often looked to as *the* model for alternative spaces in Latin America—and Galería Chilena: a lesser known artist-run nomadic, commercial gallery that moved around Santiago over the course of several years, organizing exhibitions in borrowed spaces.

To have a discussion about alternative spaces in Latin America it is useful to situate them within a broader history of the formation of artist-run initiatives on an international scope and to point to congruencies existent in other, sometimes radically different contexts. AA Bronson has written a very telling history of the emergence of artist-run centers in Canada. Overshadowed by the massive influence of U.S. media culture, Canadian artists found themselves in a position subservient to the dominance of a centralized, New York based art circuit. This coupled with the absence of venues in which to show their work and thereby gain exposure even on a solely national level, necessitated that they take matters into their own hands, forming small, overlapping circuits of artists working around precariously funded publications, workshops, and spaces. As AA Bronson points out, perhaps most significant to this phenomena was how it contributed to the self-projection of the artists themselves—in other words, to what extent these activities would be productive of a space of visibility that would move their practices beyond the isolated spaces of individual artist studios. Still to the present day, so much of how we think about art is influenced by a romanticized image of the artist removed from his/her context, engaged in an elite activity that is misunderstood or quite simply ignored. If we can point to one unifying feature of contemporary art it is the desire to break with this myth, to reinsert artistic practices into our everyday lives, to demonstrate that the making of art is a job like any other. And to do this it is necessary that artists have access to media channels because media culture—TV, radio, magazines—is perhaps the most important and far-reaching element of contemporary life. As the author describes it, “we forgot that we ourselves were real artists, because we had not seen ourselves in the media.”¹

La Panadería has often been written about as something that burst upon the local Mexican art scene in a highly spontaneous manner, created by artists fed up with the lack of any space in which to show their work. Appropriating a defunct bakery—rumor has it that the baker had been killed by a group of punks after refusing to turn over a very ostentatious ring he sported on a daily basis— Okon and Calderón along with a group of artists with whom they shared artistic and social affinities, set about creating a self-sufficient structure that would operate and show work based on their own criteria which to a great extent reacted to what they felt to be the limitations of more conventional institutions. The location and design of the space—a converted street level storefront with large windows facing onto a busy pedestrian corner in the colonia of Condesa, would allow La Panadería to maintain a close relationship to the neighborhood itself, integrating its activities into the daily lives of Condesa's residents. To this end certain markers of the building's original function—the name itself along with the oven—remained. Such elements reflected their desire to insert La Panadería into a broader social context, drawing in a wide spectrum of individuals, specifically young people who would not have otherwise attended art exhibitions.

This sort of space, unprecedented in its context, was then initially bound to a rebellious, independent attitude which actively sought out confrontation with an established system of exhibiting art that had turned a blind eye to the multiple, eclectic subcultures specific to Mexico City. La Panadería became noted for its willingness to embrace such marginalized practices by exhibiting the works of extremely young artists showing primarily video, photography, and installation, organizing concerts and parties—reflecting and producing more of a social dynamic and a way of life than merely adhering to a static, rigid set of paradigms dictating what art should be about. One might argue that already inscribed into the formation of an artist-run space is a critique of the institutional apparatus of art, which tends to flatten out even the most critical, polemical sort of practices, domesticating them into mere objects of consumption. And in its spontaneous manner of operating (often too precarious in economic terms), La Panadería actively sought to offer a generation of young artists an alternative to what its organizers believed to be the stagnant museum culture of Mexico City.

And yet, as is often pointed out in Mexico—and not well known outside of it—is that the Panadería group possessed a certain set of characteristics that made it alternative but at the same time more exclusionary in its behavior than less critical accounts of this story would like to admit. For the most part, the organizers of the space were men—upper middle class, self-assured, and bright whose transgressive, fuck-you attitude was effective in challenging art establishment values but equally effective in alienating those individuals who might have collaborated in the project but simply could not fit in with the cool crowd. Perhaps most significant, and more problematic, was the fact that this desire to break with a dominant value system associated with traditional Catholic morality present at very level of Mexican society, became translated into a highly masculinist, even misogynistic subject position whose visual repertoire consisted of titty shots, guns, monster trucks and other bad boy, bad taste instances of cultural slumming. In their obsession with and appropriation of low culture, the Panadería group sought to break with accepted norms of behavior appropriate to their social class by appropriating, and making visible, an entire subculture of extreme machismo that evidently exists in Mexico but that had never really been treated on the level of 'high' culture.

But while the satirical nature of this 'making visible' does indicate the presence of at least some level of criticality, the end result in so many cases was the reinforcement of the worst kind of traditional gender roles that proved to be damaging to a space that prided itself on being so inclusive—but damaging perhaps only within its immediate context.

The image of La Panadería projected outside of Mexico in the art media, primarily in the U.S. and Canada, presented an uncritical, heroic, and at times overly enthusiastic image of it, and indeed, of the Mexican art scene in general. Here AA Bronson's words ring so true: so many images of Mexican artists and their work published in mainstream magazines like *Artforum*, *Art News*, *Paper*, and *Poliester* in the mid to late 90s, legitimated and consolidated this scene both inside the country and out. Here we can point to yet another instance of cultural slumming—but one that is far more unsettling in its political connotations. All throughout the 90s (and still today, to some extent), art criticism about Mexico trafficked in a set of tired, narcissistic clichés about the chaotic, overwhelming (i.e. exotic, glamorous, and exciting) experience of living in an overpopulated and violent metropolis like Mexico City. Miguel Calderón's gun-toting prehistoric to low rider urban, gang banger character from his amazing photographic intervention piece *Historia Artificial* in many ways embodied that romanticized image of our North American *other*: poor, dangerous, different and yet ever so enticing. Mexico's geographic proximity to the U.S., as well as its economic power in relation to the rest of Latin America, and perhaps most importantly, its influence on the level of the mass media, had always granted it a privileged position within the U.S. imaginary. There so many instances in which Mexico quite simply stands in for the entire continent, so many instances of conflating Mexican and Latin American art. This, however, is a whole other issue and subject of a similar but different discussion. Of concern here is the packaging and consumption of Mexico, which produced so many 'booms' of Mexican art and culture throughout the 90s and into the early 21st century—the last perhaps best illustrated by the reception of "Amores Perros," a film that perfectly exemplified everything the U.S. found sexy about Mexico City. Such extensive interest in Mexico, at best, betrays a sense of redundancy and exhaustion felt toward dominant cultural practices and concomitantly the need to revitalize such practices with an outward gaze—i.e. a continuation (albeit in veiled form) of the modernist "desire for a redemptive originality"ⁱⁱⁱ —and at worst an increasingly global, de-centered market that must constantly accommodate itself according to the dictates of novelty, endlessly engaged in the cycle of producing and satisfying new demands.

It is somewhat ironic then that a project so set against art world conventions so quickly became assimilated into its entire mechanism by ultimately fulfilling a representative function in relation to the very art scene from which it sought to differentiate itself. Does this mean that La Panadería should be written off as another failed attempt to create a space of experimentation and critique? Is it just further proof of the homogenizing and assimilating capacity of an advanced stage of cultural industry? Not at all. Rather, the case of La Panadería raises what is perhaps a rhetorical question in relation to the development and fate of any self-described alternative space. It was due in great part to attitudes and positions like those held by the organizers of La Panadería, that the landscape of Mexican art underwent such radical changes during the 90s. From a stuffy, conservative environment dominated by Neo-Mexicanismo—a school of commercial painting marked by a return to iconographic and vernacular sources dressed up in the parodic garb of

postmodernist jargon—Mexico grew to become a thoroughly contemporary cultural terrain, filled with viable exhibition venues, which included traditionally modernist art museums like the Museo Carrillo Gil and the Museo Rufino Tamayo both of which underwent enormous processes of transition during those years in order to accommodate this new generation of artists. Also new to this period was the appearance of state-sponsored funding possibilities for emerging, non-commercial artists no longer subject to the construction of nationalistic identities (which had been the case previously), and the creation of the Jumex collection which began buying works of very young Mexican artists alongside works by established international figures like Dan Graham and Mike Kelley.

By 1999 La Panadería had become a permanent fixture in the Mexican art scene and, as some would say, an institution. Museums and galleries had begun to use the space as a sort of screen to filter out the best and brightest of a new generation of artists. Gone were the days of funding exhibitions exclusively on beer and tequila sales at openings. In its final years, La Panadería could virtually count on receiving support from any foreign foundation or governmental agency just by asking. Directors had come and gone and many friendships had broken up in the process making for a space that people either loved or hated. And so began the polemic among its founding members, close friends and individuals brought in from outside, myself included, regarding the space's future. In the midst of this very changed context, what should La Panadería's new function be? Some argued that the natural evolution of such a space would be its ultimate inclusion into the mainstream while others, particularly those nostalgic for those early years, argued that it was necessary to keep that original spirit of rebelliousness alive. Between these two extreme positions there were many others that tried to imagine a space at once spontaneous and historical, intellectually challenging but that at the same time didn't take itself too seriously. Not surprisingly the question of what to do now? remained an open one and was never quite resolved. In September 2002, La Panadería shut its doors forever, but not without leaving an enormous legacy behind.

Galería Chilena was founded on December 13, 1997 on the occasion of a 24 hour exhibition of works by Cristóbal Lehyt held on the upper floor of a nondescript house in the residential neighborhood of Providencia. Founded by three local artists between the ages of 24 and 27— Diego Fernández, Felipe Mujica and Joe Villablanca— Galería Chilena, like La Panadería before it, arose in response to a local scene crippled by a lack of viable exhibition spaces for emerging artists. One of the first significant acts of the group was the printing of a low-budget, four color flyer documenting this first exhibition but more importantly serving almost as a kind of heroic manifesto (albeit a highly self-conscious one) which clearly stated the goals of the gallery while critiquing the specific situation that had made its existence necessary. In Chile there was a strong tradition of non-commercial, critical art practice, most notably the so-called 'escena de avanzada'—a group of politicized artists and writers who, during the 80s, actively sought to work against the military dictatorship and was thus initially relinquished to a space of relative marginality and invisibility. Later they could become part of the academic establishment, thus influencing (sometimes too dogmatically) an entire generation of young artists. The case of Galería Chilena, then, is unique in that its organizers did in fact recognize the existence of non-commercial, non-profit spaces dedicated to artistic experimentation but very rightly pointed out the fact that such spaces were state-run institutions and would thus always be

subject to political interests and ideologies. In 1997 the political mood was marked by the relatively recent model of neo-liberalism along with what has been termed, the culture of consensus (still going strong today): the implementation of progressive, liberal policies that have attempted to quickly develop the country while simultaneously burying—and not adequately dealing with—its past. And although Chile is so often touted as the most developed, stable, or even ‘civilized’ country in Latin America, there is a great deal of internal discussion about the long-term effects of the radical change that has taken place in a country that has gone from oppressive dictatorship to ‘nearly first world’ in a span of less than 15 years.

Also problematic to Galería Chilena’s organizers was the very idea that all artistic practice must be grouped into two opposing categories: commercial (i.e. uninteresting, uncritical and ethically questionable) or experimental (interesting, critical, but economically unviable). Drawing upon the example of Christian Nagel Gallery (where Felipe and Diego had recently exhibited), Galería Chilena wanted to make it known to all young artists that it could be possible to think about art making in professional terms—as an actual career—without having to sell out to bourgeois, money-laundering galleries. And so seminal to its self-presentation was Galería Chilena’s insistence upon its business, *for-profit* character which is articulated over and over again in texts, interviews, and catalogues from those years and which is quite different from the conventional attitude, held by alternative spaces, that tends to shun all commercial activity. However, it should be pointed out that the term utilized by the group in Spanish “empresarial” has a double meaning that becomes very telling in this story. While *empresa* typically refers to a business enterprise, it can also mean “an arduous and difficult action that requires a great deal of initiative and energy.” As part of its carefully constructed public image (directed toward the media and, as was hoped by the gallery’s founders, future generations of Chilean artists), Galería Chilena had come up with a clever logo: the initials GCH, pronounced “Galchi,” inscribed into a heart. To any Latin American or any individual who has spent some time in Spanish speaking countries, the reference is clear: el Chapulín Colorado—a popular TV character from the Mexican sitcom of the same name that aired all over the Spanish speaking world from 1970-1979 and can still be seen today in syndication. Invented by Roberto Gomez Bolaños, who also played him, el Chapulín Colorado was invented as the Latin American antithesis of Superman—clumsy, dumb, and cowardly el Capulín did not possess the characteristics typical of superheroes. However, as it was pointed out in the final episode of the series, el Chapulín’s heroism consisted precisely in the fact that he was able to overcome his cowardice and confront all of the obstacles and enemies that came his way.

And so GCH seemed to consciously embody a whole set of contradictions that its organizers desired to productively put to use—a collective of recent graduates with no money, no physical space, and limited social contacts intent upon single-handedly creating a market for contemporary art in Chile. Perhaps the least of their problems was recruiting interesting young artists to participate in the project—Chile was, at that time at least, home to a relatively cohesive art scene which had been theorized by a prior generation of critics schooled in post-structuralist methodologies. Most notable was Galería Chilena’s decision in 1998 to

visit local art schools in order to “discover” new talents. The resulting exhibition presented the work of Juan Céspedes, an artist who went on to show his work in several prestigious venues outside of Chile and that today can be counted among the limited success stories of this narrative: his work is exceptional *and* sells. Joe Villablanca, perhaps the most over-the-top member of the group, in an interview published in August 1998, stated that in just six months of operation, GCH had already changed the historical course of the visual arts in that country forever. During those years, Villablanca’s dedication to his new role of entrepreneur came to occupy a central place in his artwork. In 1998, Galería Chilena was invited to exhibit, as a gallery, in Galería Posada del Corregidor, one of those municipal, non-profit art spaces against which GCH so explicitly sought to set itself apart. The very invitation was unprecedented in that Posada del Corregidor was not inviting the gallery to curate a show of its artists but rather was inviting Galería Chilena as a group of artists and entrepreneurs. The invitation could have been interpreted in many different ways. Fernández, Mujica and Villablanca accepted the invitation, describing it in the catalogue produced for the exhibition as an opportunity to present “a commercial gallery ...as an art object, in order to show the legitimating role of publicity and the art market within a local context.” At the same time, they claimed, and rightly so, that as individual artists they never would have been invited to show in this particular space. The very legitimating mechanism that they had thoroughly exploited and thus made explicit successfully gained them entry into a space that would otherwise have been closed to them at that time. And like everything GCH has ever said about itself, the tone of the catalogue text was both extremely cynical and at the same time euphorically heroic. In it they stated: “we are utilizing the official status of Galería Posada del Corregidor to publicly celebrate our business activities.”

In a multi-media, collective installation entitled *I want more galleries not more calories*, Villablanca exemplified his new public persona in a series of videos that depict the artist in various related situations. In the first, a scruffy serious artboy sits alone in his room smoking and staring off into space while a voice off camera speaks the artist’s thoughts aloud—his thoughts the same as the catalogue text repeated verbatim. In the next Villablanca, now clothed in a clerical robe, stands behind an impromptu podium delivering an impassioned discourse (in tele-evangelist style) about Galería Chilena to an empty room. Here the speech is a word for word repetition of that very first text printed out the previous year and sent to a select list of curators, artists, and critics in Chile and all over the world—it is the image of the artist repeating the party line to a silent, indifferent audience. The final video, not included in this particular work but presented the following year in a very different context, is entitled *Gran Santiago*. In it the artist places a call to a local talk show program which aired in the very early morning hours and which presumably nobody watched. The show, like the video, is called *Gran Santiago* and is hosted by two middle aged AM Radio personalities. Holding the camera in one hand (the videotaped image shows the face of one of the hosts looking out from the television into the eyes of his caller), Villablanca talks to his silent public about the role of Galería Chilena in relation to the emergence in Chile of a new artistic scene. The hosts nod patiently, attempting to politely end the call but unsuccessfully as the caller is both wide-awake and insistent. It is perhaps this video, which most eloquently articulates the fate of a project which already had the knowledge and acceptance of (and perhaps desire for) its ultimate failure built into it from its very inception: an artist alone and awake in his room at 4 o’clock in the morning, wasting his words on deaf ears, conscious of the

indifference of those who only pretend to listen, and yet always just a little bit hopeful. All of this ambiguity had been incorporated into the project from the very beginning. A constant parody of itself, Galería Chilena simply stated the obvious: that the creation of an informed group of collectors of contemporary art in Chile was simply not possible at this stage of the country's development. But in making explicit this failure, Galería Chilena was effectively articulating a set of negative truths about its immediate context against the spastic, unwarranted optimism that had gripped Chile during the first phase of the post-dictatorship as well as the manner in which the art world must constantly prostitute itself to publicists and buyers in order to have the necessary visibility to be socially relevant. Even their notably effective milking of the local media machine was not enough to gain them international recognition and this is due to the fact that contemporary Chilean art is strongly tied to a localist paradigm which utilizes references not easily comprehensible to the outside, directly interfering with its ability to penetrate international art circuits. Unlike Mexico, Chile has never profited from any sort of international 'boom' and possibility never will. This, it might be argued, is a blessing in disguise.

In 2000, Galería Chilena was temporally suspended when two of its founding members relocated to New York. It appeared again briefly in 2003 producing work for the group show *To be political it has to look nice*, vis a vis a series of email discussions between Mujica and Fernández in New York and Villablanca in Santiago. These emails were later published in a low-budget photocopy catalogue made for the show. At the writing of this text, Galería Chilean's members have just been temporally reunited in Santiago where they are planning a conference and group show to take place later on this year.

Michèle Faguet, Bogotá, 2004

ⁱ AA Bronson, "The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat: Artist-Run Centres as Museums by Artists," in A A Bronson and Peggy Gale (eds.): *Museums by Artists*, (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983).

^{i.i} Mircea Eliade paraphrased in Ian McLean, "The Circumference is Everywhere & the Centre Nowhere: Modernity and the Diasporic Discovery of Columbus as Told by Tzvetan Todorov," *Third Text*, no. 21 (Winter 1992-93), p. 9.