

Email Q&A to Johanna Unzueta and Felipe Mujica By Chelsea Culp and Ben Foch from New Capital, Chicago.

Tell us a bit about how your artistic collaboration began, the original working process, and how it has evolved? Could you also tell us about your experience /history with artist run galleries? And their impact/relevance on your work?

Felipe: We met in art school in 1996... although we had met before and had some friends in common we actually started dating in March 1996, so we have a long history together. I was finishing Art school and Johanna still had a couple of years so maybe our first 'artistic' collaborations could be when I – all the sudden – became her cameraman. Johanna was working on some sculpture projects that involved her taking her corrugated cardboard made furniture pieces outside the school and I followed her. Also drove for her around... So I was sort of the boyfriend/artist assistant... Around this time – actually before - I had taken a special class by artist Eugenio Dittborn, *Puesta en escena*, which basically consisted in pushing the students out to the real world... All exercises were commissions (sent in a poetic form via Fax) to be mostly executed outside the protected space of the university, he also made us work in groups of 3-2 artists, forcing us to collaborate, to learn to develop group projects, to develop our negotiation skills. The whole course was about surviving basically, making your own way in the local incomplete art scene, in an underdeveloped and far from perfect cultural, social and political environment. The final exam consisted that each student had to find a temporary exhibition space outside the art school... and do all the work related to setting up a show: convince the owners of the space to use it, prepare the space, plan and produce the installation, design an invitation card and promote the show, we even had to have an opening cocktail (mostly just beer and cheap snacks). This, plus a series of self produced group exhibitions, and a trip to Germany in the summer of 97, was the base for Galería Chilena... which was the artist run space I founded with Diego and Joe, 2 good friends and colleagues from art school. Galería Chilena then was sort of the "professionalization" of these short but intense collaborative art school years. It was also a fiction of an art space, as we had no real exhibition space or budget, we mainly had time and good intentions. We did have a studio/office/storage space, which became our HQ. From there we planned our commercial enterprise, which artists we wanted to represent and what spaces in Santiago we could temporarily use as ours. In retrospect these were super interesting and intense years (roughly from 1995-1999). In this context Galería Chilena invited Johanna and Patricia Cepeda (another artist from the "gang") to do their first solo shows, which was also our first "women" show, and yes, after 2-3 shows we had been already criticized for being too boy oriented... So from a 'professional' point of view this was probably our first serious collaboration as artists. The show was titled Guauhaus and it opened in April 1999.

Johanna: From my side there is a big difference as I was not part of that class with Dittborn. I actually learned from it years after... I think I got into collaboration by meeting Felipe. Just by doing things together we realized that it was better to join forces to get things done, especially in a place like Chile in those years. Later moving to New York we sort of found ourselves pretty much alone in this huge art world... so to keep collaborating in this context also became a good and useful way to work. Also I think that even though both Felipe and I have galleries that represent us now to keep working collaboratively is in a way a political gesture, as we are able to maintain certain independence to the art market... it also has allowed us to meet and work with other artists and spaces over the years, such as you from New Capital and other spaces like Message Salon in Zürich or Sezession Wichtelgasse and Saprophyt in Vienna. Also Capacete in Rio de Janeiro or Perros Negros in Mexico City. To be able to make projects with these spaces gives us a freedom that is very rewarding.

We have also struggled with similar issues. Early into our curating we knew we wanted to work with artists whose practices and interests are not easily commodified (absence of dominant historical narrative being one of many factors) but we also didn't want to seek out any particular 'identity' of artist. I think at the time it felt to directed and we wanted to

see where our immediate networks would lead. Through experience we learned that to support underrepresented narratives (including the feminine) it is necessary to intentionally seek these artists, because the art world (like the larger world) has historically been engineered against women's self-expression and those models linger insidiously. Do you think opportunities for young female Chilean artists starting their careers has changed much? In what ways? How does the situation vary from what you see in New York? How was your move to New York and why did you decide to move from Chile?

Felipe: In January 2000 Johanna and I moved to New York... basically because we had Chilean friends here who were just sending great stories about the city and encouraging us to come. At the same time we felt the Chilean art circuit was maybe too small for us, too narrow minded in a way, and also we were very young and wanted to try something new (25). Well once in New York, and after some years of practical adjustments (doing any kind of job but mostly painting and printing decorative work) we started to organize and participate in new projects again. Overall as we live together there is also a day to day collaboration mode... not only we raise a child together, since 2003, we constantly share ideas and criticisms about our individual works, see shows together, discuss them, and so on. There is also a small group of Chilean artists who moved to New York more or less the same period (late 90's early 00's) with whom we maintain a dialogue. Also with other artists with similar interests, from other Latin American countries and also some Europeans and North American artists. In this sense New York is also a very active place, it allows you to broaden your work interests and realize how similar some different contexts can be. I can say that our collaboration projects more than had evolved they fluctuate, depending on the time and space we are in... sometimes they involve more artists, sometimes they happen in Chile or in Europe. Sometimes it's just me and Johanna... setting up a show or us helping each other in the production of a certain piece or exhibition, or helping each other write a grant application, etc. It's very intense but a nice way to get things done.

Now about the issue of female (or male) Chilean artists I think once you decide to be an artist (in Chile) it is hard no matter what, and I guess the same applies to New York. In Chile there might be a slightly more traditional situation within what is expected of a "woman" of certain social status.... But luckily the Chilean art world is pretty much a middle-class-progressive-minded-people adventure. Probably 90% of Chilean culture is middle class based, writers, poets, musicians and filmmakers.... So once you seriously decide this is what you want to make a living being female or male is equally hard. Of course Chile is still a "latin-machista" society, in a light way but also heavy handed sometimes (being very homophobic without even knowing it) yet I have the feeling and hope that within the art world there is a certain resistance to this norm. New York is much more complex. There are more gender and cultural background issues and differences. There is not one art world but many parallel ones, but this is the beauty of it actually. If you work hard you eventually find a space and context where you feel comfortable, even if this is a marginal one.

Johanna, you mentioned before feeling a certain freedom when working in collaboration and more independently. Do you ever feel that producing work strictly for distribution by your commercial gallery is a safer more economical path? Any explicit sacrifices? Are your respective dealers supportive? It seems to us that the diversity and exposure could only add to your value, but we've seen it not be encouraged with other artists and their dealers.

Johanna: Of course when you work with a gallery it's a different experience than just working by your self or in collaboration with other artists or independent projects. With a gallery you have to compromise as basically there are commercial concerns involved, he or she must be able to sell your work and one must be able to keep the work good and interesting yet keep it real, in a way... one must come up with a "product", a tangible object. I know my gallerists really respect and like my work, otherwise they would not represent me, but I also know that certain decisions made by them are based on sales, on how much my work is moving around. The big difference with the

independent projects is that these factors are not in play and that is sort of refreshing... I also think that all kind of spaces, even museums and institutions, have their own requirements, to work with an artist there has to be an historical or theoretical context, a cultural “baggage”... which in a way is also a demand. I feel that to work with independent spaces is bit more direct, maybe more equal, especially when working with artist run spaces. For me to work with a gallery is like having job, sort of being in the real world, and to work collaboratively and independently seems more utopian, we work with what we have, which is not much. Now sometimes you can find galleries that are hybrids, they start as project spaces and slowly test a commercial side... these projects are interesting as they mix “both worlds”. I am lucky that the galleries I work with do not interfere with this side of my work... In general I believe that as an artist it is very important to continue working independently and also with galleries and also with museums and institutions. Hopefully one should work in as many different kind of spaces and contexts as possible, as these differences in context allow us to explore different aspects of our work, how it is produced, under what circumstances, and how and by whom it is read, and so on.

What are some specific similarities and differences of the contexts/ interests of the Latin American, European, and American artists you are in conversation with?

Felipe: as we mentioned before we've been able to collaborate with artists and spaces in different countries and what is interesting is that they all respond and react to different contexts, which makes them unique, yet at the same time share basic ideals and might have similar patterns of behavior. In Chile we have serious problems such as lack of real and serious collectors, a moderate and antiquated – and probably too academia oriented – art criticism, no art magazines, museums with collections that are hardly maintained (without going into the problem of a complete lack of institutional vision or program). So when I funded Galería Chilena in 1997 with my friends we were reacting against all these issues, and the model we decided to use was the one we felt most appropriate and feasible (a commercially driven yet critical nomadic space). Even though we share language and/or similar historical backgrounds the situation is very different in Argentina, Brazil or Mexico. They do have museums that seriously collect and they do have magazines that publish criticism etc. Not to mention the historical and international relevance of the *Bienal de São Paulo* or the power play of the Mexican contemporary art scene (with their flagship art fair Maco). Yet there are still independent projects and artist run spaces in those places... the same happens in Vienna, London or even Chicago. So this makes you realize that more than the need to fill a void – or a lack of this or that structure – it seems to be more a matter of creating and working in a system that is based on personal relationships, as Johanna said before, with transparent relationships, as transparent as possible, and with affection.

We also have to put all this into historical context, art history is much more interesting and fun with artist-produced moments and events! Such as Courbet's *Pavilion of Realism*, where he set up a temporary structure next door to the official 1855 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris in protest and reaction to his work being refused by the jury. Or the creation of alternative venues (which are now international institutions) such as *The Vienna Secession*, funded in 1897 by Gustav Klimt and his pals in reaction to the “prevailing conservatism of the Vienna Künstlerhaus with its traditional orientation toward Historicism” (thanks Wikipedia). There are many more historical examples of artist run projects... *The First Brücke Exhibition* (Dresden, 1906), was basically a group of young architects interested in printing which convinced a lamp company to set up an exhibition in their show room; or *First Papers of Surrealism* (New York 1942), where Duchamp collaborated with Andre Breton in installing an exhibition at the Coordinating Council of French Relief Societies, a super interesting show for Duchamp's web like intervention which altered the whole exhibition space, making it sort of impossible to actually see the works. Closer to our days we have the New York-Soho art scene of the 60's and early 70's, or the SIGNALS publication and gallery in London in the 60's. I guess these were people just trying to do interesting projects outside the mainstream of cultural institutions, with lots of love for what they were doing... we definitely strive for that.

Could you talk about your (collaborative and solo) practice's relationship to modernism? to minimalism? to performance? to social space?

Johanna: When I think about my practice and its history, I always remember I have been very focused, even I could say obsessed, about the economy of the materials I use to produce my work. When I produce a sculpture or project I try to use and enjoy the entire piece of material I have, and in those days (last year at the art school) I was working with cardboard and very much motivated to do work with simple forms, to capture the formal idea about the object with the minimal of means. I have always been a believer that minimal gestures can make a big difference in the entire work and the world. To economize any resource or exploit them (I am talking in a terms of sustainable economy) is a way to see life. Maybe at that time I wasn't so conscious about this term, but I have always believed "less is more". It is maybe a political action or as I say a social response, incorporated in my work. In this sense my work maybe is not visually – formally connected to modernism or minimalism yet it is connected through an economy of means, in my working process.

When I think about my videos these involve "performance", but I prefer to call them "actions" as they do not involve a direct public or viewers. I make actions starting from objects, in the beginning with cardboard but about 10 years ago with felt. Here I also practice the same equation as I do when I make the object, in general I don't edit any of these, I film and when I do this, I am always conscious this is the way it should be watched. Basically the viewer can get the entire idea, the location, the space, the surrounding area, some times the Landscape, the important thing is to introduce the object (created in felt), as a new character in this stage, to question how important is the object and how important it is the landscape. The object now has a history of its own, or trail. And talking about the action, this is what I do with the objects, most of the times I use or wear them as sculpture-costume or *props*, this depends on the object and my intentions. Most of times these actions are very simple and not logical at all. Actions such as pouring water in to a canister made out of felt and hand sawn. The water comes from a river, which is the background for the scene, and the same water will be running in a second out of the "can". This also is a way to determine how long the video will be. Another important aspect is that most the films are filmed in 8mm so each one is no longer than 3 minutes. So many times this is also part of the equation.

Felipe: Modernism is a very important reference both in my solo and my collaborative work, not only because of the works created and ideas promoted but also because of the historical and social aspect of it all. And by social I mean in the micro and macro level. As I see it modernism was a bunch of local/small groups formed around ideas that formal and material experimentation was connected to - and at the same time promoted - the notion of social change, broadly "new forms for the new world", that varied in intentions depending on the context... and these ideals where promoted through personal and social connections to a wider/global context. Without any of the communication possibilities we have today in those days artists had to travel and meet in person with other artists, which we still do today yet in a different pace I guess. These travels meant personal and cultural exchanges... transmission and fluctuation and mutation of ideas. This happened between Russia and Europe, within north and south Europe, within west and east Europe, between Europe and United States (before and after the 2 wars), between Europe and Latin America, an so on. In some occasions by personal choice and in others forced by migration due to war and persecution. This history is common knowledge yet it still amazes me that not many historians had gone into the personal aspect of all of this (human relationships). Maybe it is because it is too hard to scientifically measure without it becoming gossip of just side stories. In relation to my practice then all these matters are important, from the formal to the ideals they promoted to the social notion of collaboration. We wouldn't have *isms* is it wasn't for artists becoming friends with others and setting up "agendas"... work codes, manifestos!

Minimalism I see as the American extension of modernism, chronologically and technologically. It is interesting because technology became bolder and more accessible to artists, who in return used this same technology to create works. Yet for me it is a complicated thing also... as on the one hand it represents a sort of marriage between industry and art (which is interesting from a labor and work ethic point of view) yet every time I see a Judd or Serra I have a sort of itch... an uncomfortable feeling. As sculptures where build industrially they either look perfect, glossy, hard edged, or just became bigger and bigger... my wired feeling then has to do with a certain complacency with Capitalism. Are these works really challenging? Do they really extend and develop modernist ideals (in a local context)? Or are they just sculptures at the service of a capitalist industry (back in the day) and a capitalist market (nowadays)? I respect this generation of artists ... they also collaborated, made fun projects with others, yet there is something about how the work is read today that makes me wonder how constructed is it all. In this sense I am much more drawn to European and Russian Modernism, for both its "hand" crafted making and look and its political and social program; and to the Latin American extensions of modernism, for the same reasons yet as they where done under very different circumstances the results are different too (just one example, Helio Oiticica's Parangolés).

Performance and social space are probably what I have worked mostly with Galería Chilena, and later organizing exhibitions and events in collaboration with other artists and curators. As more things one does more one learns about these things... GCH was a constant performance, disguising our selves as "gallerists", as "entrepreneurs"... Every opening created a tighter and more intricate social space, which is what Santiago needed in those days I think. Maybe this is a bit lost now, or more dispersed and difficult to grasp, as one moves around... geographically it's harder but again The Internet and all these communication tools help. I guess it's a different kind of social space. We just have to be careful to keep it honest and transparent. And keep it going.