



Revealing Uncertainty An Interview with Artist Felipe Mujica on the Occasion of his Participation in the 32nd Bienal de São Paulo

by [Kristin Korolowicz](#)



Felipe Mujica, Las universidades desconocidas [The Unknown Universities], 2016. Fabric, thread and embroidered yarn, 30 panels, 295 x 160 cm | 116" x 63" (approx.)/Photo: Felipe Mujica

New York-based Chilean artist Felipe Mujica is best known for creating vibrant fabric panels that operate like modifiable architecture within exhibition spaces. Part functional exhibition design, part sculptural objects for aesthetic contemplation, Mujica's two-dimensional compositions often incorporate geometric abstractions that refer to European and Latin American avant-garde movements of the twentieth century. The artist is interested in the shared desire for a universal visual language that accompanied the ethos of many avant-garde movements at this time, despite their geographic specificity. In many of his installations, these "curtains" hang from stainless-steel suspension devices in the gallery, which allows them to be moved by the public from one side of the exhibition space to the other, redirecting the public's course through the show. Likewise, the social and collaborative dimensions of Mujica's practice find their way not only into the final installation, but are also integral components in the process of making his work. I spoke with the artist about this and other aspects of his project for the Bienal while he was in São Paulo beginning to install his work throughout Oscar Niemeyer and Hélio Uchôa's iconic pavilion.



Meeting with designers Alex Cassimiro and Valentina Soares for Mujica's 'las universidades desconocidas' project in the 32a Bienal de São Paulo. São Paulo, 2016/Photo: Felipe Mujica

Can you begin by explaining your project for the 32nd Bienal?

My project is called *las universidades desconocidas* [The Unknown Universities]. It's comprised of thirty fabric "curtains" that I produced with two collaborative teams from different geographic, social and cultural backgrounds in São Paulo who both work with textiles by profession. Each group that I chose to collaborate with created fifteen curtains. In the first case, I worked with designers and artists Alex Cassimiro and Valentina Soares who have a studio in Plató at Galeria Metropole located in the city center of São Paulo, near Praça Republica.

So are they more of an industrial fabric design studio?

No, it's very low-key. It's a bunch of young designers, artists and architects that share a workspace in the *galeria*. And they have clients and sometimes they share the clients, collaborate or just do their own thing. It's a creative business model.

So when I came in January for research, I liked this particular studio because of the way they collaborate. In juxtaposition to working with them, I also found this super-talented cooperative of women embroiders called *Bodadeiras de Jardim Conceição* [Embroiderers of de Jardim Conceição], who work in an area west of the city, near Osasco. It's about an hour away from the center of the city, more or less. In figuring out my approach to this invitation, I knew I wanted to create work in a more horizontal dialogue with the fabricators. I wanted to build into my project an engagement with the people who live and work in São Paulo. For me the experiences that accompany making the work are very important. I spent a lot of time looking for the right fabric. I went to Rua 25 do Marzo, Bras and Bom Retiro, and ended up buying fabric at Bras, sewing thread at Bom Retiro and yarn at 25 do Marzo. Bras is an amazing neighborhood. Unlike New York or Santiago, maybe Mexico City is a little like this, a lot of fabric here in Brazil is produced locally. Here I've seen many more colors available than anywhere else. Very sophisticated and strange colors; very interesting shades and tones.

Technically, the two sets of curtains were made very differently too. With Alex and Valentina, the panels are made out of fabric over fabric. And with the *Bodadeiras*, it's mostly line design. The same kind of shapes, or same family of shapes, but more linear and done with embroidery. So you can see that technically they are made differently. Maybe from far away they will look more or less the same, but when you get closer you'll see they are made in two very different ways.



Neide Santana Alves de Souza and Célia Mendes, Bodadeiras de Jardim Conceição/Photo: Felipe Mujica

To help frame this interview for the reader, we worked together with your wife and collaborator Johanna Unzueta on *ARQUITECTURA Y AMISTAD*. The itinerant project began in early 2013 with a residency at Beta Local in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and continued throughout the year with three 2-person exhibitions at Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City, Die Ecke Arte Contemporaneo, Santiago de Chile and New Capital, Chicago, IL. In past projects such as this one, you found inspiration in certain color palettes that you associated with a particular place. Has that made its way into this project?

Well, sort of yes and no. Sometimes when I travel for a project, I've already chosen a particular color palette. For instance, I'm going to make five curtains with these six backgrounds and so on. This is the way I was working, but within the last two or three years, the projects are a little more open. So when I do the designs now, I don't apply a specific color to the background or the shapes. I just design the shapes. The first time I did this, it was in Ecuador for the Cuenca Biennial in 2014. I had a group of background colors and shape colors. In this case, I let the two fabricators that I worked

with, two women that had a small business mostly focused on making and selling tablecloths and textiles for the home, I asked them to chose. It was another way for me to make it a more horizontal process. It's not just me coming in and saying, "hey, can you do this and this." Even if they're simple decisions, there's a more open dialogue. In this case, in Brazil, it's the first time I'm working at such a large scale. Thirty panels is pretty big. But to get back to your question, I think of the colors almost like tools to work with these people.

When I created the designs for the São Paulo project, I started with a notebook and did like a hundred drawings. Each one has a front version, thinking of the fabric over fabric possibility, and they have a back version which is just lines, thinking of the possibilities of embroidery. I only needed thirty of these drawings, but whatever I made a hundred maybe even more. I noticed they became sort of groups or families of different kinds of shapes. So when I install them they will be organized by these families of shapes that developed. As for the color combinations within each panel, I have no idea what's going to happen since it's going to be decided by other people. It's completely out of my control, which is also something I'm interested in.



Portrait of Felipe Mujica with his work at the 32a Bienal de São Paulo. São Paulo, 13/09/2016/Photo: Leo Eloy/ Estúdio Garagem/ Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

How and where will they be installed in Pavilhão Cicillo Matarazzo?

The curator Jochen Volz proposed to me that a large number of panels would be installed on the ground floor in one straight line that crosses the pavilion, which is pretty interesting and defying for me in terms of scale. The rest—we are still figuring that out in relation to other spaces and other works, but the idea so far is to place smaller groups in different locations throughout the building. I'm thinking mostly in relation to the windows, to play with the light and the Ibirapuera Park landscape. There's definitely a utilitarian function to them also, so we plan to have them installed in one of the educational/workshop spaces, which is called Cozinha; here Sofia Olascoaga—one of the co-curators—was also involved. Apart from these different locations, which adds to the curtains a different way of behaving in space, it's important to me that the public can manipulate the curtains. They can touch them, move them and play with them. There's almost an inexhaustible number of formal combinations.

~~THE TITLE OF THIS PROJECT REFERENCES CHILEAN AUTHOR ROBERTO BOLAÑO'S BOOK OF~~
poems “La Universidad Desconocida (The Unknown University).” What’s the significance of this reference in relation to the project?

I’ve been a fan of Bolaño for many years. The first book I read from him was *Los detectives salvajes* [“The Savage Detectives”]. In 2007 I traveled to Mexico City for the first time for a group show and I decided to take this book and start it. My first day there I opened the first page and the first line, sort of an inscription, said: “to Mexicans lost in Mexico.” I loved it. I knew it was a great start. After this book I spent about two or three years only reading Bolaño. I really didn’t read anything else for a long time, not even art stuff. Since then I’ve used phrases and titles from Bolaño and other Latin American writers for my own titles, both works and shows. Before writing stories and novels, Bolaño was a poet, a real starving poet. That’s why a lot of his literature, even though it is obviously narrative, includes many poetic elements, in the way he constructs sentences and paragraphs, in the kaleidoscopic way he builds up stories and novels. He is a poet-writer, which is also particular.

I sort of enjoy the introduction of the poetic in my projects. It directs the work into an unknown zone. We can talk about the curtains and how they work in space and who worked with me and how they were made yet once we add the poetic it all becomes a bit stranger, just a bit, again losing a bit of control. And I kind of like that.

For this particular project for the biennial we were given a deadline for handing in our titles and work credits like homework! I had other ideas and I sent these to my friend Cristobal Lehyt and also to my partner in life Johanna Unzueta. After some feedback from both, Cristobal suggested “The Unknown University,” obviously because he knows my admiration for Bolaño, which we share. After thinking about it a bit more and talking to my friend Carolina Caycedo, who was here in São Paulo as she is also part of the biennial, she suggested *las universidades desconocidas* [The Unknown Universities] and I really liked it. I had to work on it a bit, I even wrote a text about it. Sort of to explain to my self why it worked. The use of the plural sense was a great suggestion by Carolina as it makes the title more open, more feminine as she said. The single version of the title was a bit too determined, too decisive, the ONE THING,

very macho like Latin American writers... . The plural version is more inclusive, has more possibilities with regard to the public, the city, the process of fabrication, the people I worked with, and so on. There can be infinite unknown universities. As you see even the process of deciding the title of the piece was open and horizontal. Maybe I am becoming a hippie artist and I haven't even realized it yet?



Haha, I guess with all of this uncertainty maybe channeling a little Kumbaya, hippie dippie-ness is the way to go. Actually, someone told me that local newspapers in São Paulo have nicknamed this edition “the hippie bienal.” Have you heard anything about that?

Well, some of the artists also joked a bit about the hippie vibe of the show. Because it's there, it's really there. But the show also balances out this “feeling” with several other topics and ways of working, more related to geometric abstraction or pop culture, even technology and media. Music, sound and dance have a big role in the biennial and this is refreshing, also different degrees of participation, both in the creation of the work and in regards to the public. Overall yes there is a certain hippie feel to the show but if you look closely at all of the works, you can see different juxtapositions and this makes the show more interesting, as conflict is right there, as it is in the outside world.

I've noticed over the past two or three years, the number of collaborators involved in your projects has steadily grown into working with communities. You explained that you aim for a more open dialogue in the production of your work and less control over the final outcome of a project. Can you outline how your approach to collaboration has shifted over the course of your artistic practice? What motivates your desire to relinquish creative control? Is this something that simply needed to happen because more people are involved, or is there a social, aesthetic, or political aspiration behind this shift?

Collaboration has always been a part of my practice, even from my art school days when I used to organize shows with friends. For instance, I founded the artist-run space Galeria Chilena in 1997 with my friends Diego Fernández and Joe Villablanca. In relation to the curtains there was always collaboration involved, yet at a smaller scale making them with Johanna. There was always a dialogue with her about what type of fabric to use or stitches, and so on. She would also give me opinions about color. She was always there from the beginning; just me and her in a domestic setting.

And maybe what's happened recently is that I've just been able to show this work in different contexts, different places. Johanna's not always there, so I find other people to work with and from this process of working with other people, this process changed, it grew.



Valentina Soares/Photo: Felipe Mujica

Maybe working at a steadily larger scale has shifted your practice. You have the same way of working, but it had to adapt.

Yes. It's a way to socialize the work, which could be read as a political gesture. It's a subtle one but it's there. Just like the openness in the use of the curtains in space, both by handing control over to curators and also to the public. So you see it's not only in the fabrication, it's also in how the curtains work in space, in relation to the institution and to the viewers. Aesthetically, it's more interesting for me to let others decide color combinations or what stitches will be used, in this case both machine-made or handmade. I really learn from their input and I feel lucky to be able to compare how different groups of people in different places can have similar aesthetic guidelines:

blue against orange, yellow against black, black and white, pink against light blue, and so on. It's like there is something bigger than us controlling our color tastes; weird, right?

In this case, for São Paulo, I was interested in working with two different groups, from different social and economical backgrounds, which live in the city through two also very different geographical experiences. So it's not only relinquishing control to others, it's working with communities that work with fabric and share many interests and processes even though they might have never met each other. This project intends to also do that, join communities that may have never met. I include myself in this process by bringing the *bordadeiras* to the biennial, having them see the show, inviting them to do a workshop in the education program. Hopefully put them in touch with Valentina and Alex and maybe in the future they can collaborate on some project. That would be great.

In the end it's a balancing act, a search for a precise equilibrium between what I want or am interested in and what others can add to the project. For example, the fabricators decide color combinations of each curtain yet later during installation I decide how certain curtains (with their specific color situations) can dialogue between each other and with space, so here I sort of regain a bit of control. This also relates to the ambiguity of the curtains... they are several things at the same time, drawings in space, paintings/not paintings, architecture, curtains, walls, decorations, divisions, for some they are flags—not for me—and so on. They can mean different things depending on where and how they are placed, and in relation to what. This ambiguity is also part of the process of fabrication. As I mentioned before, I propose something yet I am open for this something to be affected by others. I release control and later I get it back. Sort of like a constant zooming in and out.



Teresinha Mendes of Bordadeiras do Jardim Conceição/Photo: Felipe Mujica

In terms of working with communities, sometimes it can be problematic when an artist comes to an unfamiliar town to participate in a large-scale international exhibition like this, chooses to deliver an idea and uses labor from the community to realize their idea, identifying that rather one-way process as a collaboration. But opening up the authorship of the work and creative decisions in the way in which you're approaching this project makes it more of a give and take, a two-way process, a dialogue with the people you're working with.

In both cases I went to their studios and spent significant time with them in their work environment (the neighborhood, the people they work with). I learned from these two different social contexts.

With Alex and Valentina, I know a lot of designers, artists and people like this. It's a familiar context to me, but with the *bordadeiras* it was an unfamiliar cultural context. It was a slower process to build trust with them. I think it's the first time they worked with an artist and they were super-excited. It was more intense or more new to work

with them. I'd carpool with them to work, but the traffic is horrible here, so we had to leave at ten and get back at four to avoid it. One day I wanted to go by bus and they all thought that was a stupid idea. I took the metro and I took the bus by myself. I wanted to travel through São Paulo the same way they would travel to work, and it was super easy. Everyone was kind of surprised I did it.

Why?

Because it's a longer trip and I was told it could be dangerous.

Was it?

No, no. Maybe if I went at night, but during the day it was fine. Some people might think it's a stupid or small gesture, but it was important to me. I wanted to have a better understanding of their day-to-day reality. When I finally got to the *bordadeiras* studio, I embroidered with them for like five hours. They actually taught me how to embroider. They taught me a few types of stitches and were laughing at me the whole time, but in a cute way of course, actually enjoying having me there, as a "student." Culturally, Brazil is a pretty *machista* environment, so I think they were laughing because they've never seen a man try to embroider. For example one of the women, an older woman, told me that she couldn't go to the opening because her husband doesn't allow her travel alone to the city. She was very honest about it.



Since your experience of a place is integral to making your work, do you have any thoughts or reflections on the character and use of public spaces in São Paulo? I'm interested to hear about your experience in São Paulo in contrast to other places you've lived and worked in like New York or Santiago.

It's been fun exploring different neighborhoods to find fabric and to meet people. I had to go to one neighborhood for thread and another for yarn and then go trek out to visit the *bordadeiras*. I think I've learned to navigate pretty well through São Paulo.

Even though it's huge, I think it's a humane city. For instance, New York is much more aggressive, the way people walk on the street, the way people interact with each other. Here, people are calmer, friendlier and more relaxed. One of the more notable things in São Paulo is that there's a dynamic use of public space. For a massive, concrete city, they use public space in many different ways. With *pichação* (graffiti), for instance, it's an invasion or occupation of public space, but the way it exists here is unlike any other city I've seen. There's also this thing that most people who haven't been to São Paulo don't know, they passed a law here in the mid-2000s stating that any and all public advertisements are forbidden. It's a city with no public advertisements; no Coca-Cola signs, no Pepsi signs, which is amazing. All you see is the architecture and in some areas buildings overtaken by *pichação*. The *pichação* then has become a visual occupation of public space, which in a way has taken the place that advertisement normally uses. It's mostly groups of young people. It's very elegant and delicate the way they spray the paint, at least I see it that way. You can see their astute decisions like if a wall is pink, they'll use a blue spray-paint. Or if it's green they use yellow. Yet most of it is black over white or light backgrounds. I think it's a messy kind of elegance. Also they're really respectful of each other's work. I only saw once a *pichação* painted over another one.

Even the way people party or drink on the street is different than New York. People can be wasted here in the street and nobody really gets aggressive. There aren't very

many police officers in the streets either. I think the way people use the street here is pretty strong and very consistent, it's not just one event or a music festival in the summer, it happens every week or almost every day. I haven't seen anything like this before.

That sounds wonderful. In the States, people aren't encouraged to occupy public space. It's criminalized as loitering.

I went to a samba party in an Italian immigrant neighborhood. It happens every Friday. I've been there on a Friday night and there's like 300 people drinking and dancing. No authorities stop and interrupt. Another example is I went to this school of samba in January and the security guards' t-shirts just said the word *Armonia* [harmony], which I found super sweet and telling of the cultural context. Of course I know the police here can be brutal and discriminate against mostly poor people on the outskirts of the city; I'm just telling my experience in the center area of São Paulo.



Your work is indebted to the legacies of modernism in both Europe and Latin America. Within the context of the São Paulo Bienal, the geometric formalism of your compositions and attention to space/architecture recall the work of concrete and neo-concrete artists in the mid-twentieth century. In your own words, how does your project tap into or engage with Brazil's specific relationship to modernism?

There is an obvious relationship due to the formal aspect my work, both in terms of the geometric abstraction I work with and in terms of the subtleness and fragility of the material [fabric]. Actually some people have given me the compliment, in form of a joke, that my work is “very Brazilian.” Just the other day I was asked a similar question to yours in a talk I did at Casa do Povo, so it is a subject that is present, even more now, here, working for a project at the pavilion of the Bienal. I think there are some differences though, which make my work function or point into other directions. The Brazilian neo-concrete artists—specifically the Rio gang of Clark, Oiticica and Pape—started working with geometric abstraction yet their works, each in their own particular way, developed new ways of thinking and exploring, of interaction and participation. At some point geometric abstraction became a starting point for something else; there was a progression, a transformation. The phenomenological aspect of the early formalism became more complex, more in relationship to the body as a whole, of how that body related to others, sensorially, spatially but also socially and even psychologically. All this also in the context of Brazilian culture as a whole, where movement and sociability—through dance for example—is a very important aspect of how they relate to each other. That is why the “Parangoles” of Oiticica are so amazing, they are both, modernist paintings and a tool to make people—from different social backgrounds—dance and interact. In my opinion that is extremely beautiful. All this just to explain that the main difference with my work is that I still work with geometric abstraction, I have not left it “behind,” it is still an excuse, or a system, to access other interests. From the beginning, even in art school, my intention was to

expand the formal into the social, and I think this is what I am still doing, or trying to do. So yes there is a very strong connection to the history of modernism and its development in Brazil yet there are also important differences. For example the level of interactivity or participation allowed in my work, which I think is more of a halfway thing... I invite the fabricators to work with me in choosing color combinations of each curtain yet there is also a limited amount of colors. I want the process of production to be as open and horizontal as possible yet under certain parameters. Same with the movements of the panels in space; people can touch them and move them, decide different spatial situations and also formal relationships between the curtains, yet again all this limited to a cable that is installed between two columns for example. So there is a certain amount of freedom and interactivity, but it's that, a certain amount. I guess what I am really interested in is how to produce social exchange with a limited number of elements, or possibilities.

The São Paulo Bienal has a very long history of opening in times of great national political tension. What's your impression of the current political climate in Brazil? I'm thinking about the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in particular.

It's a very complex moment now in Brazil. There was a takeover, a pretty well-planned one, a subtle and even elegant *coup d'état*, and all this in a very particular year, the Olympics in Rio, the biennial in São Paulo, although it's clear that the government does not care so much for the biennial and it probably did use the Olympics as a kaleidoscopic mirage to do what they did. And I say elegant and subtle because it did not use force or violent means yet it used the same political structure the people in power feed from and corrupt. Now it's hard for a foreigner to completely understand, I think one needs more time in a place to really learn about it. One thing that we can all agree is that Brazil is so large and so diverse, geographically and culturally, that it's very different from other Latin American countries... It's a much more complex mixture of native culture, European colonization and the African slave history. All this exists in a country that seems to be in a constant conflict between its huge natural resources, the native understanding of how to use these, the immensity and needs of its urban centers and the national and international corporations that

make huge amounts of money here. I don't know if it's this or there are other reasons but I am bit surprised about the passivity of most people, in regards of the situation. I guess it also has to do with a long history of dictatorships in the region... maybe its that each particular region or city or cultural setting has their own set of problems, that are probably more real than whatever happens within the government. People must eat, study, work... and that's also a political fight, or that has become the political fight? Now it has been great to me to spend so much time here. Not only I am slowly understanding Brazil better I have also learned from other artists in the biennial, from its curatorship. There are many works that deal with these issues and it has been great to see these projects evolve. Of course I don't know all of them but the few I've been able to follow have taught me a lot.

Going back to your previous question about the relationship of my work with Brazilian modernism, I think that the biennial will also show other possible connections... for example what about indigenous use of geometric abstraction? Why do we only connect current uses of abstraction to the history of European modernism and its evolution/transformation in Latin America? There are previous histories that have been hidden for too long. This is a great political and historical gesture of this biennial—it's including communities and their particular knowledge into the discussion, it's considering all aspects of contemporary culture, this is not new in Brazil, it has a rich history. For example, MASP is opening a show of Lina Bo Bardi's research into Brazilian popular culture, which I heard is fantastic. I'm looking forward to seeing it. I think this is a great way to open the eyes of much of the art world. Most of the time big shows like this become elitist and self referential. We have to understand that there is much more going on in the world. This makes total sense with the title of the biennial, *Incerteza Viva*... Brazil seems more uncertain than ever, so does most of the world.



Felipe Mujica, Las universidades desconocidas [The Unknown Universities], 2016. Fabric, thread and embroidered yarn, 30 panels, 295 x 160 cm | 116" x 63" (aprox.)/Photo: Felipe Mujica

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