

Curtains - Memories of Knowledge Exchange

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For the production of my Curtains, I have worked and collaborated with different people, under different circumstances, and in different contexts. With artist Johanna Unzueta (in many projects). With Myriam, a seamstress in Santiago, Chile. With a group of Chinese workers in a fabric studio in Beijing, China. With Laura and Nancy at *Ecuacortinas*, a family-run upholstery company in Cuenca, Ecuador. With Mrs. Marie and Mrs. Cyrila, two seniors who I taught weekly for about 4 years as part of an Art Program run by the New York City Housing Authority. With Dora, a Mayan woman I met in a market, and with Olga, an expert in natural pigment dyes who was recommended by a friend, in Antigua, Guatemala. With Valentina y Alex, two young designers, members of the design collective Plató, in São Paulo. With the great women of *Associação das Bordadeiras do Jardim Conceição*, an embroidery cooperative in the outskirts of São Paulo. With Alejandra, a friend and Argentinean immigrant based in Queens, New York. With Fayza and Harbia, two middle eastern immigrants in Stavanger, Norway. With the women of all ages and levels of experience from the open workshop, I did in Gothenburg, Sweden. With Marcos and Lucia, a couple of Wixáritari artisans from Zacatecas, Mexico. With Damaris, a seamstress, and Juan Carlos, a painter, both from the town of Sanchez, in the Dominican Republic. From all these people, I have learned. Thanks to all of them the curtains exist and have grown.

Myriam made my first two curtains in 2006 and since then we have worked together occasionally when I am in Santiago, Chile, visiting my family or working for an exhibition. She is the sister of Silvia, who used to work once or twice a week cleaning my mother's house. They live in a working-class neighborhood, with their mother, children, and husbands. I would visit her and spend some time with her family, show photos of New York, my family, exhibitions all around, and finally, explain the project I was working at that moment. While working together I quickly learned to hear and incorporate her knowledge into the work. She has visited a couple of my exhibitions and seen live how her handwork interacts with space, architecture, and the public. A specific style of curtain that we developed together are the curtains with holes. She proposed a technique for the lines using an internal plastic tread, which would make the like thicker, easier to spot/read (each curtain had several holes and lines that would interact with these holes or with the panel). Her family is one run by woman.

Johanna has a strong connection to different handcraft techniques since childhood, such as sewing, embroidery, weaving, painting, dyeing, and so on. Her mother used to take her to a seamstress to get custom made clothes done. She could choose the fabric, style of cut, discuss with her mother and seamstress options, and eventually understand the process of it all. From her I learned the importance of using noble materials, as they behave much better in the production process – cut, fold, basically work with straight lines and edges, natural and 100% cotton is the answer. Another important aspect of working with her was to understand the domestic aspect of textile work, as most of the projects either started or were completed at home. This economy and simplicity of means also became an important aspect of the work. Although I do not produce much work with her nowadays she is always there to help me out with technical issues and support.

In 2014 I was invited to the XII Bienal de Cuenca, in Ecuador. Curators (Jacopo Crivelli Visconti and Manuela Moscoso) suggested I worked with a local studio and they contacted *Ecuacortinas*, a family-run upholstery. Nancy and Laura were in charge and they both were very enthusiastic. The bases of the curtains were made with a mix of dark-toned fabrics (some bought in New York and others in Cuenca) yet all the shapes were made with a very colorful material called *lanilla*, which is used mostly by *Cholas cuencanas*[\[1\]](#) in the creation of their traditional

dresses. This material was suggested to me by Manuela (who is Ecuadorian) and although it was partially synthetic I decided to use it because of its intensity and relationship to the context of the exhibition. One great technical suggestion made by Nancy and Laura was to use an Overlock machine for the *lanilla* made figures instead of folding the edges of the shapes. This allowed for a cleaner and straighter edge. They came to the opening of the exhibition and enjoyed my work as well as the work of my colleagues. They were surprised by the spatial use of fabric and the hard edge geometric shapes made with *lanilla*. The experience was also very important for me as a first step in incorporating local traditions and customs into the work.

Dora is a Mayan woman I met in a market in August 2015 while I was doing a 3-week residency in Antigua Guatemala. She worked in a handcraft market, selling and producing textiles, and as most Mayan women in Guatemala Dora was a specialist in waist loom weaving and embroidery. Olga has a dye studio and a small shop in Antigua where she sold both her own and friend's designs. I produced 6 small curtains (with holes), one was left raw cotton and Olga dyed the other 5 in different intensities of indigo blue – all made using natural pigments made out of *añil*, a local plant that traditionally was used by Mayan people. Dora later embroidered linear drawings I had traced on each curtain. Although she was an expert she had some trouble due to the nature of the dyed cotton, stiffer, she complained. We would regularly meet at the market so she could show me the progress of the work. I tried to visit her house, to see and understand better her surroundings, the way she lived and worked. She agreed but later changed her mind. I have the feeling her family was shy about receiving a stranger. The residency ended with a mostly outdoor exhibition. Olga did come to the opening and saw the work, saw how it interacted with the building, with nature, garden, plants, trees and sunlight, shadows projected, wind blowing, rain falling over the curtains.

In 2016 I was invited to the *32a Bienal de São Paulo*. Curator Jochen Volz also suggested I worked with a local studio. My projects now seemed to be growing with each new appearance. At my first site visit, one week in early 2016, I visited about 5 fabric studios... from these I immediately felt close in spirit to Alex and Valentina, who were part of the collective studio Plató, located in store inside a commercial mall from, I believe, the 1980's (which was being retaken by several designers and artists as studio/store spaces). Following the recommendation of Renato Imbrosi, an expert in Brazilian traditional and contemporary textile work, I also met with a group of woman from the *Associação das Bordadeiras do Jardim Conceição*, an embroidery cooperative in Osasco, about 1 hour away from the center of São Paulo. I was taken away by the high quality of their work and also impressed by the sense of community that had been created around the situation of gathering and working together. Not only they produced high-end designs that were sold and promoted in different events around São Paulo and Brazil – which provided all a steady and necessary income – the cooperative also improved their self-esteem, creating a profound sense of community and long term friendships between the women. By both studios, my ideas and working methods were well received and adopted. Although coming from different social and cultural backgrounds both groups of people shared the notion of community built around work, they even shared similar ideas around color and materials. I purchased fabric and also yarn and thread yet following my interest in an open production method I asked them to choose the color combinations for each Curtain. In the case of the embroidery pieces, I also asked the women to suggest stitch styles, thickness, and so on. For about 5 weeks I would visit both studios frequently, almost every day yet with the group of embroiders the exchange on knowledge was stronger and surprising. As mentioned before I had done the embroidery project in Antigua Guatemala this experience was much larger in scale. The women of the *Associação das Bordadeiras do Jardim Conceição* was also very friendly and happy to share the experience and time with me, we worked long-hours side by side, me cutting and tracing the designs of each curtain, to be later sewn, them embroidering and chatting. Later on, they taught me some basic stitches and I worked with them. We ate together, sometimes at the studio, sometimes in the local market. They asked me about Chile, my family, New York, my art, my intentions with the Curtains, the ideas behind it all. Almost at the end

of the production stage, one afternoon, Renato and Cristina came (the people who contacted me with the *Associação* and who worked as agents for the women in São Paulo), and we did a small ending party. I took some Chilean wine, they had some delicious *coxinhas de frango*^[2]. We raised our glasses and toasted to our new friendship and to hard work. I had told them already that they were all invited to the official opening of the Bienal, which is why at one point the women ask me, how to dress for such occasion? They say Renato wants us to use an *Associação* T-Shirt, they say they think its boring, they say we want to go chic, Felipe how do we go? In an official T-Shirt or chic? I answer chic of course! And if Renato wants to use a T-Shirt he can do it himself! They all laugh and toast some more, they are very happy to attend such an event, and in style. Finally, the opening arrives, all the women attend, and it is the first time they visit the Bienal, the first time they are inside the *Pavilhão da Bienal*. I spend about 4-5 hours with them, touring them around the show, explaining as best as I could the works that caught their attention. During the exhibition, and as part of the education program of the biennial, the *bordadeiras* conducted a couple of embroidery workshops open to all public. The following year I returned to São Paulo to produce work for a local gallery (Casa Triangulo), I worked on a new family of curtains^[3] with the same women from the *Associação*. We were all happy to work together again and one more time they all visited the exhibition during the opening. Both at the Bienal as at the gallery show most women took selfies with their creations.

In early 2017 I was invited to a one-week residency in Stavanger, a city in the south of Norway. The residency ended with an outdoor group exhibition in the land surrounding a vacant greenhouse. As the time for production was short I decided to produce only 4 small curtains. The host organization contacted a local Integration School and 2 women offered to work with me, Habria and Faiza, migrants from Syria and Palestine. Because I don't speak Arabic and only Faiza spoke basic English we communicated mostly using Google Translate, which is how the title of the project was decided, in a conversation with Faiza she commented: *So We Faced With The Problems of Conversation*. Even though it only took 2 sessions in 2 days to produce the curtains the experience of trying to communicate with people from such a different history, culture, and context (both escaping from war and conflicted countries) was enormously satisfying. I believe the manual labor, embroidering together, helped us understand and get to know each other, even if it was in a way somehow superficially. They did not come to the opening but asked me to send images via email which I did. It rained all week but luckily enough the sun came out the morning we had to install. I found a beautiful spot in the woods and hang all 4 curtains. The sun projected tree shadows all over them. The sun touched them and made their colors brighter and in a way more alive. The wind blew them. The drawings made embroidering together with Habria and Faiza tended to blend and in a way disappear among the natural elements. They thanked me via email for the images and for the work done.

There Are No More Exotic Countries in Latin America (2018), is the title of the series of 20 curtains, which were made collectively by a group of volunteers for the group exhibition Shout Fire!, curated by Mariangela Mendez-Prenke at Röda Sten Konsthall in Gothenburg, Sweden, during the summer of 2018 (Mariangela and her team tried to find a local studio or group of people to work with yet nobody seemed interested in – or able to understand – my work process). The fabrication of the curtains was planned as an open workshop where mostly women, of different ages and levels of embroidery expertise, worked daily side by side with me fabricating the pieces. As some participants had more experience than others, the making of the curtains also became a horizontal and collective teaching/learning experience. Each day, for about 2 weeks, textile knowledge and personal histories were exchanged, at moments interrupted by Fika, the Swedish traditional coffee break. In this sense, the curtains gently adapted to the context of their production. Geometric designs meant to interact and confront the grand-scale industrial space of Röda Sten where handmade by a short-lived improvised community. As a final touch, the day of the opening the sun came out and blasted-in thought the large windows, reaching and altering the colors of each curtain. Another important factor is the relationship of this working process with the theme of the

exhibition. *Shout Fire!* intended to show art practices with strategies related to collectivity and participation, and in extension art practices that explored new ways of thinking politically and socially.

Parallel to the experience in Sweden I was working on another series of 20 curtains for the XIII Bienal FEMSA, in Zacatecas, Mexico. Working simultaneously in both projects it was interesting to see the different relationship each context had to handcraft and specifically to textile work, being Mexico a country where indigenous people are an integral part of society and culture, therefore a place where hand made fabrics – and people using them – are visible, present, and vibrant. Curator Daniel Garza-Usabiaga invited all artists to visit Zacatecas in groups of 4-5 and I was able to visit in February 2018. Besides touring local artisan studios (ceramic, stonework, jewelry) we visited all venues of the biennial. One of these was the Museo Zacatecano, which had 2 rooms dedicated to art and design from the Wixáritari people (also known as Huicholes). Their cosmology seemed rich and complex yet I was hugely impressed by the boldness and style in the use of color, from small to medium to large scale representations of fables there was one formal element that was constantly used: graduations of colors to delineate forms, both abstract/decorative or representational. Following the recommendation of Julieta Medina, the director of the museum, I met Lucía Carbajal Aguilar and Marcos García López, 2 Wixáritari artisans. I explained my work, my intentions, and my interest in working together. I also asked them to use this “color strategy”, so that each set lines in each Curtain would have a gradation of 3-4 colors, which should be of their selection. They agreed and prepared 2 samples, one hand-embroidered made by Lucia, and one made by Marcos with *chaquiras* (plastic beads). The samples were beautiful and made with so much dedication and care, the deal was sealed. After this first meeting, we stayed in touch via WhatsApp. I sent all the fabric backgrounds by mail, with drawings traced, and they started working right away. Later in October, before the opening of the biennial, they invited me to visit their home, which is also their studio. I met their daughter Tutu (flower in Wixáritari) and we spent a couple of hours looking at other projects they had and listened to Huichol music. The experience with Lucia and Marcos was enormously rewarding and I believe for both sides. My Curtains gained so much with their unique use of color and I hope they saw a new way of applying for their work, their knowledge, and traditions, with architecture and space, concerning the interaction with the public, and so on. Besides this, I also worked with the studio Zarapes Ruelas in Guadalupe, where 6 curtains were produced with weaving on table looms. In June 2019 I returned to Zacatecas to work again with Lucia and Marcos on another project, this time we produced 10 curtains yet in a smaller size range, for gallery shows and fairs I have upcoming. Our relationship has grown and I am looking forward to continuing working with them.

[1] *Cholas cuencanas* are the countryside woman from the Region of Cuenca, Ecuador. They are considered *mestizos*, people of mixed race, both biologically and culturally, from American aboriginal and Spanish colonizers (Wikipedia).

[2] A popular street food, savory dough shaped into a drumstick around a creamy chicken salad filling then battered and fried.

[3] Curator Emiliano Valdés proposed this way of defining groups of Curtains in the text he wrote for my exhibition *Estamos más unidos por lo invisible que por lo visible* at Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín (October 10 – November 12, 2018). The notion of *family* relates to the domestic aspect of designating the pieces as Curtains.