



Dialogue <> *jogo*
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Dear Felipe,

I have been reading your books and research, going through your notes and sketchbooks from years ago, tracing clues 27 years old (or more?) about how the curtains first appeared in your work. Meanwhile, I imagine the places, people, and situations in which, as part of an expansive weaving, each of your pieces has been embroidered.

The engraving started on paper, turned into a mural, and eventually covered the space. Then, from the wall it jumped on to the dividing wall, simultaneously acting as art work and as a museographic device. Later, it came off the standing wall and transformed into a curtain which inhabited the space, acting as a vessel of communication with other works. It became a soft, tactile object, with its mobile, manipulable, movable, and approachable mechanism: from the gallery to the home, from the home to the patio, from the patio to the park.

In your work, I see the curtain as a hinge or interstitial device that is constantly placed (and places us) in an *in between* situation. It separates, while it communicates: inside-outside, frame-window, hidden-revealed, public space-domestic space, gallery-house, work of art-everyday object, abstract game-useful object. It activates dialogues, *de facto*: formal, spatial, plastic, visual, but also concrete, functional, and interpersonal.

In its most concrete form, from its material dimension, it is an embroidered piece of fabric, whether from an industrial or a handcrafted panel. At the same time, from a procedural and collaborative perspective, it is a weaving of relationships, a starter of dialogues, processes, and links, between specific people in particular contexts.

The curtain is the outcome of an abstract and geometric sketch that begins in your notebook (an individual record of studies), and later changes hands, to enter that partly uncontrollable process of interpretation, or as Willy Kautz called it in *La Tallera*, of translation or transcription that becomes “an excuse to talk”.

In the “fine threading” of the embroidery, the curtains

gain geometric rhythm, finding a balance point between stable form and possible variations. But at closer glance, we may notice the complex details, the richness of the context, which inform us of moments of decision (yours and others’) approaching the path of the thread and its play with the structure of the fabric or the panel, or the type of embroideries and stitches, and of the games that are played with the different environments where they are displayed, as well as the games that they play among themselves.

Although seemingly obvious, the curtains already arranged as pieces also play a game between what we see as the outcome and what remains unknown to us about the process behind each one of them. I would like to unravel the details of that collaboration with you, of that dialogue between your role as an artist or individual trigger, and the various groups, cooperatives of embroiderers, communities of weavers, specific people, with knowledge, lives, and contexts, who enter this game with you in each of the series that you have co-created in such diverse places.

In a collaboration, if there is reciprocity, one could imagine the mutual influence between contexts. Thinking of embroidery as a cultural practice that, more than the skill and technical invention it entails, implies the intervention of specific subjectivities that go beyond the execution of a technical production mandate: the dialogue between artistic authorship and craft practice, between gender roles and cultural conventions (the figure of the genius male artist, the artisans, and seamstresses in cooperative), with community identities that reproduce and recreate as they produce.

Each version of the curtains has a different relationship. *The curtain learns*, as you told me. So, in the hopes of unraveling and naming these forms of learning, I have some questions:

What inspires you and what was the inspiration behind each of your curtains, not only during manual production, but during the coexistence and exchange of knowledge and experiences, through the know-how and the lived experience of each of the embroiderers who participated in its preparation?

How are your own experiences at home woven into the domesticity of the curtain? Both with respect to intimacy, solidarity, and collaboration, as well as familiarity and perhaps your role as a father?

How do the playful exercises, group designs, collective workshops, and historical pedagogical experiences that you researched help nourish your exploratory process and your works?

What happens when your curtains participate in a collective situation, private or public, in which they interact not only with space and its architectural readings, but also with bodies and subjectivities, in specific political and spatial dynamics and in different social configurations?

Let's free your curtains from their status as works of art and, with them, let's play a game:

Imagine through a series of sketches (drawings, collages, photographs, napkin drawings), spaces in which your curtains are activated, after being designed specifically for the following hypothetical situations:

To be used somewhere in your son Salvador's school.

In your apartment in New York, which you share with Salvador.

In a pool (filled or empty).

In Ibirapuera Park, in São Paulo or in the Centenario Garden, in the center of Cuernavaca.

In a "FORA, TEMER!" or feminist demonstration.

At the *Ocupa MinC* of the Capanema Palace, which you visited in 2016 in Rio de Janeiro.

At a Brazilian northeastern music festival.

In the "Patio del Colegio", in the center of São Paulo, by day and by night.

In a kindergarten.

So, shall we play?

Warmly,

Sofía O.

Dear Sofía,

I'll start with the game, and then get back to the questions...

I recently read a book by Roberto Bolaño where one of the characters is a young writer and a fan of science fiction. He steals books and pores over them day and night. They're starting to form a messy pile on the floor of his apartment, between two mattresses thrown on the ground, against the wall, in the center of the room, leaving only a few "paths" to move around. It's a mess (not unusual in Mexico City). One day he decides to organize his things and creates a set of furniture with the books. Benches, floors, tables, very complex, and rather functional, structures, with openings and windows for seating, to place a plate, drink tea, eat, all while, of course, using a tablecloth to avoid dirtying this "novel" furnishing. His roommate and friends are quite taken aback by this invention. They don't know how to react: should they take this seriously and use this "furniture", or should they be offended at this perverted use of books? Your questions, or rather your suggestions and research, about my curtains make me think of a similar situation: how can we remove them from their role as works of art and insert them into the real world, so that on the one hand, they continue to act as curtain-art and on the other, become something else?

At Salvador's school, I imagine them in the corridors, suspended from a system of wires from which they can be moved every so often, so that every time the children leave their classrooms they are faced with a new labyrinth. It is a medium-sized school with about 300 students, so we would need about 50 curtains for the corridors to be filled. Some could have holes that work as windows, and so the boys and girls could try to guess what's happening on the other side during the commotion of changing classes. I feel like this would add a sense of playfulness and flirtatiousness that is reflective of adolescence, don't you think? I like the idea of creating some confusion between the classes, to break up how formal and intense they are. I also imagine the curtains in the cafeteria, creating spaces for coexistence and interaction. They would get very dirty though, yes.

In our apartment in New York, we already have a small curtain that I had created in Guatemala during a residency in Antigua (Concepción 41). I was working

there with a Mayan embroiderer named Dora, who hand-embroidered drawings on 6 curtains. This was my first project done with hand embroidery. The Mayan women, some of the hardest working people I have met in the world, work very well on the backstrap loom, and combine loom weaving with embroidery in a very complex and beautiful way. I assumed that making lines with cross stitches or other more direct stitches would be quite easy for Dora, but it was in fact a challenge. I think I just took her out of her comfort zone. The base cotton fabric was hand-dyed by local artisans with natural indigo in different intensities. The final product was a series of curtains with a more than usual "hippie" look. But this craftsmanship and material purity seemed to me to be an appropriate way of working with the elements of the place, of Antigua, and of Guatemala, in a short and specific period (only 2 weeks). This curtain is placed next to a window in our apartment, mounted with a metal structure that is attached to the wall with a hinge, so it can keep moving and changing, creating different angles of its play with light.

I've also mused about another way the curtains could be used in my apartment. We live in a very small space with little privacy. For years I've been thinking about making 3 or 4 curtains that separate the rooms, which are semi-open, from the common space, and that can be opened and closed like Japanese doors. I would use intense colored fabric and so, wake up every day to a little bit of color in front of me. Light entering the space would give life to this color. If not here, one day I will create this elsewhere. I want to wake up to color, the color of fabric and the color of the sun bouncing off the fabric.

In Ibirapuera Park, I imagine the curtains hanging from wires across different types of trees at different heights; plush, smooth, tropical, short, and tall trees with thick and thin trunks. They would sway back and forth as a breeze gently caresses them. To resist this swaying, the curtains would need to have holes, preferably in a triangular shape.

Of course, I would like to try out two mounting situations. The first on a plain, with thick grass cut very evenly, with well-spaced trees. Then I would cross wires and hang the curtains. Basically, a planned, calculated park space. The other situation would be in a more closed or dense space and as wild as possible, almost like a forest. There I would hang them in the same way, but since the trees would

be closer to each other, we would have a different experience. In both cases the sun would act as an activating element, especially at sunset. The light touches the curtains and affects, enhances, and illuminates them, literally "turning on" each of their colors. The open space would allow each curtain to be contemplated in relation to the park space, both in its natural and architectural elements. For example, there in the distance is the covered pedestrian space designed by Oscar Niemeyer. Even in the closed space, the sunlight touches and "illuminates" the curtains, despite also having shadows, many shadows, specifically from the trees. Branches, leaves, trunks of different thickness and in different directions and curvatures, are projected on them, confusing the embroidered or sewn geometric drawing with these other shades of gray and black. They also gently sway in the wind, giving us the impression that they breathe and live with nature, without being a part of it. This encounter is more abstract than the one in the open space. The public is immersed in a more unreal space. There are no references other than the natural elements and their intersection with the curtains, their colors, and drawings. The geometry of the curtains is interrupted by the forest. They appear and disappear; awaken and fall back to sleep. They are like an impostor or disguised element, or as a minimal gesture whose function is only to activate other things.

I recently did a residency in Stavanger, Norway, which ended with a short exhibition and intervention on the island of Søllyst. I installed 4 small curtains with hand-embroidered drawings done by me and two women who were part of a school for migrants: Fayza Jabari, from Palestine, and Habria Mohammad, from Syria. I installed the work in a small forest on the island and was surprised by how the shadows of the trees were projected on the curtains. It was a special moment.

In fact, I would love to do a third intervention in Ibirapuera Park. Right there, in the Niemeyer marquee, which joins the biennial pavilion with the other adjoining museums and spaces. I would hang a group of about 10 curtains from a point about 50 cm above the ground. These hanging curtains would move on their own, in a circle. Depending on the wind, this rotation could either be stronger or almost imperceptible. The other option would be to hang them from wires that connect the columns to each other. It would be very nice to see people on skates or rollerblades interacting with the curtains, as they

spin around or jump with them, almost like a dance or movement with some timing and coordination. So, my intervention in the park would have three levels: a more urban one, a designed natural one and a wilder natural one.

For a “Fuera, Temer!” march, I would like to make about 20 large curtains in different colors and geometric patterns, about 10 feet by 5 feet. For practical reasons, each curtain would have two long wooden poles on either side, protruding by at least 3 feet from the bottom of each one. This way, protesters could pick them up, move them and walk around with them (basically, they would have pocket folds on the side instead of at the top and bottom where I would normally place them). I would use 10 curtains without intervening, so that their shapes and colors could get lost in the crowd, more posters with slogans, flags, noise, etc. I would let different organizations work on the other 10 curtains with their own slogans or drawings. On the one hand, the shape and color would act as poetic and abstract gestures of resistance, and on the other, the structures themselves would fulfill a practical function. It would be interesting to see that the same element fulfills both these roles simultaneously.

For the occupation of the Ministry of Culture of the Capanema Palace, in Rio de Janeiro, I propose the installation of very colorful semi-transparent curtains in front of the windows. The Palace space was very well organized with tents for sleeping, work and dialogue spaces, recreational spaces (at the entrance there was a kind of improvised stage for music groups and other performances), portable toilets, etc. Instead of using the curtains as architectural elements of spatial organization, I think it would be more interesting, and less invasive, to focus their use on the windows. Although, it does make more sense to maintain the political openness of the space, its transparency, and horizontality, and the use of curtains could interrupt that. I imagine that in the windows they would work as filters for the light, the color, giving a chromatic setting to the meetings, discussions, talks, and speeches that take place inside. I would like to create that filter with the outside, with the view of the city, interrupting the reality out there, or rather modifying it with color.

What inspires you and what was the inspiration behind each of your curtains, not only during manual production, but during the coexistence

and exchange of knowledge and experiences, through the know-how and the lived experience of each of the embroiderers who participated in its preparation?

My curtains are works of collective production; they always were. At the beginning, in 2006, and for several years after, I worked with Johanna, my partner at the time, in a very domestic space and context. The process was quite simple; I had an idea and she helped me execute it, either giving me technical/aesthetic advice or suggesting types of fabric and thread work, etc. That domestic and family environment seemed appropriate for the work, because of the technique used and because of its tradition. Johanna's knowledge remained crucial at the time of producing the work, which from the beginning was open to receiving other people's knowledge. Depending on the project and other circumstances, I also worked in the early days with Myriam, a seamstress from Santiago. She lived in a neighborhood near my mother's house and the production process was always very open with her as well. I would go to her house and spend a couple of hours there, talking about work (getting her advice) as well as about other things: her family, politics, soccer, her other sewing projects, etc. Those moments seemed important to me, since I felt that the curtains became a vehicle to better understand Myriam, and her social and family context. I think that, in return, through those conversations, she understood a little more about my work, about what it was like to be an artist, which obviously broke the stereotypes around what most people understand or believe to be an artist. For me, these were moments or gestures of exchange. Just like with Johanna, the curtains were influenced by Myriam's input in terms of color or types of fabric, and at one point I decided to get her suggestion on types of stitches as well. Thus, the drawing, which was an appropriation of drawings by other artists (I made several series with drawings by Ródchenko, Klee, and Loza, an Argentine modernist painter), contained aesthetic decisions that were not mine, but Myriam's, and had to do with the possibilities offered by the sewing machine and with the knowledge that she had about it. So, I looked at the different stitches as gestural elements. Making an analogy with a drawing made by hand, those different seams appeared to me as equivalent to different intensities of line, from the lightest to the most pronounced (like the looseness of the hand when drawing freehand). I was very impressed by how Myriam executed these different intensities using a sewing machine.

In 2014 I was invited to the Cuenca Biennial in Ecuador, and the curatorial team there suggested I work with a local workshop. This opened the curtains even more, both by the fact of “leaving home” and by the production process itself. I worked with Laura Paucar and Nancy Arévalo, two seamstresses who were part of a family sewing and upholstery business (*Ecuacortinas*). Unlike my previous projects, the color combinations were decided by them, and I decided on the colors of the backgrounds and figures. It was also the first time that I did many more designs than necessary. I made 25 drawings like this, and together we decided which ones to use and with what colors. Given the type of fabric that we used, they also suggested some technical modifications to the process that worked very well. In 2016, the idea of working collectively was even more significant and radical. For the 32nd São Paulo Biennial, I worked with two workshops: one located in the center of the city and basically made up of two young designers (Alex Cassimiro and Valentina Soares) and the other, on the outskirts of São Paulo, consisting of a cooperative of embroiderers (*Associação de Bordadeiras do Jardim Conceição*). The project is the largest I have done so far—30 curtains—while also being the most participatory. Obviously the social and geographical particularities of each group were also a factor to consider. It seemed valuable to me to be able to work with two groups from completely different realities in São Paulo who, however, considered weaving as an element of social cohesion and community creation.

How are your own experiences at home woven into the domesticity of the curtain? Both with respect to intimacy, solidarity, and collaboration, as well as familiarity and perhaps your role as a father?

As I mentioned before, it always seemed appropriate to me to make the curtains at home. From the beginning it intrigued me that just as I produced them, at home, and perhaps with Salvador hanging around (when I made the first one, he was only 3 years old), a woman or a grandmother or an uncle could be also working on a home project, mending pants, embroidering a tablecloth or a bedspread, etc. That use of domestic techniques caught my attention, since I felt that to do this work it was not necessary to have knowledge of artistic techniques, but more importantly, you needed knowledge of sewing and dressmaking, which is more open.

The fact that sewing and embroidery techniques are basically embedded in the domestic DNA really strikes me. Today, that also depends on the context. For example, it may be a less visible or less common activity in New York, where most people buy clothes or products made in China or India, which are easily replaceable. But if you travel to Mexico, Brazil, or even certain neighborhoods here in NY, you can find a whole world of home textile knowledge and applications. In short, the domestic condition of work is central to me, both from my own experience of production, and by projecting those same domestic conditions onto the broader social or extra-artistic field.

Regarding your question about my role as a father, it's strange, because the familiarity of the curtains, their production, is something that fluctuates; sometimes they are totally homemade and at others, they are produced in other spaces, in different contexts, by other people. There is a certain familiarity in the technique, but this is diversifying or changing depending on where the project is carried out. My role as father, as “author”, also fluctuates, I think. Sometimes it's a more participatory role, sometimes more distant, both inside my house (the domestic space) and outside of it.

How do the playful exercises, group designs, collective workshops, and historical pedagogical experiences that you researched help nourish your exploratory process and your works?

The game is a fundamental part of my work. It forms the core and is at the beginning of everything. The first thing I do for each curtain project is to make a series of drawings and studies. These can be made by hand, with a ruler, on grid paper or with collage, by gluing pieces and shapes of colored paper. I have also done some in computer programs, but most of them are done by hand. Each series or group starts with the creation of a grid, which can be defined or open, and on this grid, I experiment, and am literally playing, with different combinations of shapes and colors.

The first work where I understood the importance of the play was *Tetris* (1996), made for the Advanced Engraving Workshop - I, with Professor Eduardo Vilches at the PUC School of Art. For 12 consecutive weeks, I installed 6 modules – 45 x 45 cm black self-adhesive vinyl squares – in 2 groups of 3, moving 2

modules per week. Forming two figures based on a vertical symmetry, I was also alternating lines and angles, which I was moving along the same wall during the 3 months that the exercise lasted. The work sought to create a space from a slow movement or a slow movement that would occupy a space where the multiple formal possibilities, both for the figures and their relationship with architecture, were subject to the social-academic structure of the course, i.e., subject to the notion of “weekly delivery”. Just like in Tetris, the video game, my version had very clear rules and very simple goals: to create different figures that move in two-dimensional space. An important point that I emphasized in the weekly reviews was that the work sought to “expand the formal factors and relationships of the artwork towards the social, towards the university as a teaching structure”. In the end, *Tetris*, my work, was a conceptual game.

Since then, I have been exploring and experimenting with different materials and surfaces, gradually producing increasingly architectural and spatial work. Once I discovered the possibility of working with fabric thanks to the first curtain (which was produced in March 2006 for an exhibition at *Galería Metropolitana* in Santiago de Chile), the mechanism of the game was adapted and incorporated into the structure of the work. By collaborating with others, I try to infect them with the playful aspects of my work. For me, it is important that both the people who manufacture, collaborate, and oversee the exhibition space, as well as the public, converse and learn from the work through a play-based experience.

