

Minerva Cuevas – Interview, Café Tacuba, 28th February 2008 ¹

Carlos P Molina

Translated by **Sebastián Reyes Medina**

Carlos – To start our conversation, why don't you talk to us about your forthcoming projects?

Minerva – Well, right now I'm into making a dissidence map in Mexico City... on the concept of dissidence and its relation with the city, right? I want to find out where the opposition is and what does that do to the city... to register these stages and, in the end, make it open for the spectator...

C – So, is your map a video, with a defined sequence and duration, or is it in fact a graph?

M – Yes, but it will be changing, right now the first version is 15 minutes long, but yes, it comprises a lot more...

C – You were telling me that this idea of mapping the city and its dissidences is someone else's initiative, but now you've turned it into a project of your own...

M – Yes, it comes from an invitation to various artists who would generate cartographies... with José Miguel García Cortés, in Madrid, that's the project's starting point, for Sociedad Estatal para la Acción Cultural Exterior (SEACEX) and Casa de América... and an exhibition of all these videos will arrive to Mexico, because it is a traveling exhibition... but I think mine can grow larger and I hope to keep on adding on to it...

¹ This article is a translation of the original Spanish version of Carlos P Molina, "Entrevista Minerva Cuevas", La Tempestad – Edición Artes, México, Issue No.59 March 2008.

C – And so far this cartography is on dissidence's common, expected places?

M – Yes, I think so far it has places you can recognize... but soon that is lost and it's interesting to see how you stop recognizing it... one the comments I've received so far, because it's a work not publicly shown yet, is that sometimes people don't know what part of the city it is...

C – If someone asked me about a city map and its places of, or for, opposition, I'd tell them "why don't you go to the crossing of Reforma and Insurgentes... there's a bronze indian in there and also some other, less indigenous but way more real people in there, complaining, I don't exactly know why... or why don't we wait for a protest march to pass by? Or we can go to the Zocalo to check if the PRD is protesting there or legitimizing itself... which are the points you mark on the map?"

M – well, for example, I saw a junkyard where there is an industrial waste deposit... and it's called Campo Verde (Green Field) and I thought such an irony was even poetic... in downtown some of the protest places were obvious already, right? That's a situation, but there's another that's being a part of the city, permanently... and not just as a stage, that's its dynamic: peddlers, homeless people, pepenadores²... and they are also a part of the city's face... and I think that... even though, wow, they are ignored, denied... in treating they are not considered as a part of the urban weave...

C – I think that if we are finding these who are the dissidence, that which declares itself opposite and different... that necessarily maps certain normality also, and who yet are or what we are is necessary...

² Pepenadores translates from the Spanish as 'scavengers' or 'rubbish pickers', and denotes people who sometimes live in or near precarious landfill sites and recycle, re-use and resell what is thrown away by others. Pepenadores are informally employed, unionised and can constitute a strong political force in some areas of Mexico City.

M - Of course! And that's the same problem to define what is dissidence, which ones of the manifestations of the city to include and which not to... a concrete example is the sciences lunchroom in UNAM... taken by the students themselves... they work there and manage the place, they lowered the prices and decided the place's structure, right?... they keep a greenhouse even... they grow the vegetables, cook them and sell them, right?... I see that as a very concrete sign of dissidence, right?

C – And in all of these cases, do you arrive there with someone? Someone on the inside that knows the place guides you? I mean, you're not a reporter that watches and registers everything indiscriminately... you don't appropriate that reality or signal it as exotic or anomalous... but, how do you register it? With a handheld camera, or what?

M – No, no, it's more like this, always starting from personal contact... I have someone who works with them and as such was the one who gave me the idea... and there's an empathy, let's say, in a political level and so this person warns me: "there's this and that situation in this zone"... and some are even more evident.

C – And thinking about the Pure Murder mural or the piece that supposes certain interaction with a fake Ronald MacDonald, or your appropriation of a comic in São Paulo, I think they are an effort to talk about conflicts in society from visual devices that leave clear clues on your political beliefs... and that may look like they are not coherent, because it's not about you teaching us on how you think but to expose what you think is necessary to talk about... Would you agree that La Venganza del Elefante works in the same way? But, and particularly the piece made of ice, the melting volcano, I think one of these devices fails, or maybe I just don't understand it. I'd like you to speak more about it ...

M – Well, first, I think that more than sharing an intention, my whole work shares... a research strategy and it is the same more or less... but the main difference is that some pieces have a very clear context... i.e., in São Paulo, I was worried about the general situation of the indigenous people in general and how to connect it with a wider idea of civilization, right? And also to involve graphic elements from comics, right? That interests me even as an ideological weapon... and, I tell you, this responds to the context... those elements that made part of the mural referred to Brazil undoubtedly, definitely... with the DelMonte case, it was a more borderline solution, it's a virtual study on the corporation, on the company but speaking about the region, right? What interested me was their acting on Central America and the exploitation of its resources, but also the political ties, which are the strongest and more terrible... and this kind of investigations are like La Venganza del Elefante in terms of strategy or study... what happens is that it's an individual show where I'm given the chance to generate a series of works... and so I developed a personal study of social ecology... I had included references to ecology long before but until now I have the chance to have various pieces that talk about a single thing, so it becomes difficult if you disconnect them from each other, and if that mental map becomes individual pieces... I mean, I had references to social ecology before but here they are all connected... it's difficult if you separate them... because, in the case of the Izta' sculpture... it's an ice sculpture that relates to a research on natural chapopoter³... it's information I found on the origins of the oil industry in Mexico... it's connected on the level of reference with global warming... but also to the history of the studies by Ezequiel Ordóñez... And I was interested in including as part of this mental map how the commercial extraction of petroleum was made possible... so I found very interesting the relation between this geologist, the discovery and the development of the industry.

C – So, La venganza del Elefante would be the closest approach to your method

³ Chapopoter³ are puddles of tar that form around points where oil flows naturally from the earth and which became a focus for commercial exploitation by the oil industry in Mexico.

that we have ...

M – I think that the show is really proof that comparing different results of my work in visual terms becomes irrelevant, right? Because, in the end, my project and my intention as an artist is not to generate visual products but to share my research and, in the end, I'm making an intellectual exercise, right? From each research and the result would be, let's say, inconstant, right? I mean, I'm not an artist recognized by certain execution or given elements as something visual... I'm not interested at all to paint something, right? but I think that we're facing a vice or custom of the mediatic to judge everything from its looks, from the first visual provocation that an artist gives you... and I'm always a bit surprised, that comment, right? That my work looks very different... I'd expect them to see the undertones, the research...

C – Of course! That way, neither the ice nor the video nor the photographs require you to stop on it... you ask us to go beyond the shape to the background...

M – Yes, yes, it's an intellectual exercise... and I think that also the other thing to consider is the space where this is shown and that at the end of the day it always has had much importance when I ask myself what it is that I want to say... so, at the São Paulo Biennial, in strategic terms, it is more important to be able to show the content to all those persons and inside the museum than to make an intervention in any place in the city... I think that I had to take advantage of the showcase that the biennial is to reach a bigger audience ...

C – Speaking again of your method, I understand that you will participate in a project named UnitedNationsPlaza⁴, this is some sort of traveling show, workshop forum, wide curatorial thing, the brains behind it being Anton Vidokle, and in this event that will be open during all of March, organized by PAC in

⁴ See project website: <http://unitednationsplaza.org/>

Mexico, among others... Vidokle⁵ tries the logic of relational aesthetics there... to orchestrate projects without knowing what will come from them, and to expect a lot more from concerted interactions rather than the plastic results... you, at least in the United Nations program already available in the internet, will offer a kind of productive workshop, very specific, and only for a few... I mean, yours is not one of the events considered to be open for all audiences... and the way it is described, sort of an approximation to the research methodology for art projects workshop, everything would indicate that starting from solutions that you have tried in your own work, you'll end up teaching to a chosen few how to work like Minerva Cuevas...

M – Really? I'm not so sure of that because this invitation was a little informal, in fact, I have no idea about what is expected from me... what I could really commit to was to give a lecture on the kind of research I do for my work ...

C – United Nations Plaza, as a project, involves persons like Rikrit Tiravanija, Hans Ulbrich Orst, Liam Gillick, Eduardo Abaroa, Vidokle himself, producers that have been involved since the nineties with this tendency, in outline, known as relational aesthetics... but what interests me is, no matter our opinion on the work of every one of them, what is said of these great curatorial projects, which maybe the only characteristic of all of the relational aesthetics, is that they end up becoming not a show but a critical evaluation of the state of the question in the contemporary arts, not a simple intellectual exercise, but in a thing closely related to the show business, entertainment and commercial fairs ...that is why it occurs to me to ask if it doesn't worry you, given that what you expect from people that come to your work is that they start thinking and turn to a similar attitude in ideological terms... because what happens in these large events is not the discussion on the curatorship, or what does the staging of that corpus of work argue, but just the social pages for another opening night...

⁵ i.e. Anton Vidokle author of the project.

M – But taking advantage of the publicity channels, everything that is obtained from that show situation, it is different from falling on the vices of relational aesthetics, more so, you should reconsider your question, because I don't really support using that term, even less related to my work... I think it is unnecessary, so it creates a whole problem for me to be able to answer to the critics or to embrace a term I don't feel is valid...

C - Why?

M – I don't see an extra term for a practice necessary; it is a category which also fails precisely in generalizing them and assuming that every one will have a social impact... I'm certain what the purpose of my work is, having an impact, and working from social dynamics as references for my research... but I think that all categories do is to isolate you in a huge sphere, I think it becomes something else and fails, right? I really don't see the need for it, I still think of it as Conceptual Art and I don't think a new category is necessary...

C – When you take part in collective curatorial projects or shows where there is more than one person and not just your work, as in Ljubljana or Amsterdam... besides the syntaxis with other creations there, there is a title that predicates and adjectivizes, those coordinates of a given curatorial discourse, do they worry you? Do you mind who do you end up working with? Or do you prefer your work to be looked at individually?

M – Well, yes and no... because there are successful curatorships and when you try to mix artists, right? Let's say, works you wouldn't expect to be together, well it's difficult, right? I think that tendency comes from the nineties... they mixed works that had references to social and political themes... but it was counterproductive because it raised the problem of setting out the work to be read in a single level... using similar graphic elements, a logo maybe... and them talking about different things, they had another intention, maybe just an alteration

by the mere graphic design, and maybe it could be, as in my case, a research on economics in Turkey, and if I make graphs but with a different intention...

C – I find what you are saying interesting in relation to my professional training. I'm an art historian and I was taught to find formal coincidence, be that in colors, techniques or motifs that an artist uses and there you find the starting point for their discourse ...

M - Really?

C – Yes... and you seem to say that if I use that approach with your work I'm not going to get anywhere... because you don't recognize such coincidences in your body of work... and you tell me to follow the breadcrumb trail to your discourse and not to follow its form ...

M – Yes, and as such, it is conceptual... formal or visual results are not to be read... it cannot only be from the visual point ...

C – A little frivolous question: Imagine a rich person traveling from Miami to Kurimanzutto recommended by his financial assistant because MC's are on the rise... what would be the last object that the gallery would sell?

M – Are you asking about the value of my work, how much does it cost?

C – No, no... I'm asking, if a client enquires, what would Gabriel or Mónica offer?

M – Look, the gallery is aware of the nature of the projects and how they bind themselves to the context... the impact of society even though they will not stop being a commercial gallery... it is an assumption I find very strange because even though my work has a resolute aesthetic support, even nice if you want to call it like that, the problem is that its contents overcome the visual situation and I

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think they are not meant to be decorative... I still feel like I'm not a commercial artist and I don't create my pieces with an intention of selling them... I don't see a conflict in it, the situation of production and economy of the pieces must be resolved... it's something linked to the profession of the artist, and like when a doctor is linked to private clinics or hospitals, I am linked to the gallery... that's why I don't see a problem ...