

Special Report.Review:

InteractivA 05

The Postcolonial Dilemma of Integration Vs. Opposition

The biennale InteractivA 05 took place for the third consecutive time in Mérida, Yucatán, Mexico. Raúl Ferrera Balanquet was the executive curator; Lucrezia Cippitelli and Gita Hashemi were the invited curators. Artists from different countries participated contributing works that included installations as well as Internet projects (for a complete list of artists, please see the InteractivA 05 website). This was by far the most ambitious and best organized InteractivA, yet. The biennale not only consisted of an exhibition in three major galleries of the Centro Cultural Olympo in Downtown Mérida, but it also included a series of conferences which took place over nine days, from July 16—25.

Opening night was well attended. It took place on a Thursday evening, when the town was thriving with energy. The three galleries presented work ranging from video installations, online projects, photo installations and book and magazine installations. The inclusion of print publications was quite interesting because visitors were able to view texts that normally are available only in bookstores and news stands. They were quite successfully placed in the same context as visual work. Raquel Herrera Ferrer's (Barcelona, Spain) *Tempus Fugit* and Monica Mayer's (D.F. Mexico) *Rosas Chillantes* were presented on pedestals, while magazines by the collective Bulbo (Tijuana, Mexico) and the collective Guestroom (London, U.K.) were presented as independent installations. It is not possible to go over every single artwork here but it can be said that

what became obvious throughout the exhibition was a diversity of works that made it impossible to categorize the exhibition reductively. To learn more about the artworks and to view some of them, please visit the InteractivA 05 website. Given the ephemeral condition of conferences and performances, I will focus on these events for the rest of this text followed by a critical analysis of the curatorial premise.

The events included conference presentations as well as live performances. Maria Luisa Molina López (Mexico) presented on the history of the border between Mexico and the United States, the repercussions of Chicanismo on Mexican culture and vice versa, and the role of feminism as a powerful tool towards a real autonomy—a “radical individualism.” She reflected upon technology’s role as an important element in the ongoing history of these cultures. She left us with open questions on the role of hybridity today.

Gita Hashemi (Iran/Canada) discussed the implications and problematics of entering the mainstream as an artist (something she is not interested in doing)—she is more interested in creating spaces for activism. Considering alternative forms for exhibition as part of such practice is also a subject of her interest. Currently, she is critical of the role of the United States in the middle-east as an imperial power. In relation to this during a second conference with members from Guestroom, Hashemi explained how she develops alternative publications, something she found herself doing more out of necessity to stay active as an artist/curator/writer.

Hashemi along with Raul Ferrera Balanquet (Cuba, Mexico, U. S.) considered eight ruptures moving towards a “post-technological” future, which include “interactivity” as an intersection between humans and the ecosystem, “connectivity” as a form of communication exposing the fallacy of the digital divide and central networks, “interdisciplinarity” meaning the relationship of disciplines as a variable perspective, “conceptualization” that is the effects of ideas on what is deemed political and natural, “nomadism” as a way of marking new movements of constant action but also as a space for new types of artforms, “spirituality” meaning the belief that art can be very effective when it is embraced along with multiple realities of diverse cultural mythologies, and “ruptural transformation” meaning a state of constant change in close relationship to nature.

Invited curator Lucrezia Cippitelli (Italy) in her first screening presented a series of experimental videos from various artists in Italy, which can be downloaded from the web. The videos ranged from playful to heavy social commentary. Some questions she brought up were on virtual spaces versus real spaces, do people who make videos have real spaces? And how is the web changing the idea of a space in relation to video? She also presented the work of Otolab during a special screening. This work consisted of software used by Djs and VJs that created visuals meant to be experienced along with music in a very specific setting of a dark room with four walls, which was, unfortunately not available at InteractivA, so an image of overlapped animations was projected on a single wall. The work consisted of abstract red and orange shapes that developed on the fly reacting to the sound that played along during the presentation. She also curated in

one of the galleries an installation of a set of abstract videos following the aesthetic of software art, which in this case created images that appear to be random shapes, but structured with specific algorithms; they were presented in DVD format, which made the viewer wonder how a linear narrative can appropriate the aesthetics of digital media. Cippitelli, by presenting works in these different contexts, asks the viewer to reconsider how time-based media is understood differently as a gallery installation, as part of a screening, or as downloadable files available on the Internet.

Maria Benjamin and Ruth Höflich from Guestroom explained how they go about developing an alternative publication in the U.K. Guestroom is an artist run journal that considers the idea of publishing as a form of exhibition. Each contributor is given free reign to decide how to present their material. It is important for them that this activity works independently of the current gallery system. Guestroom takes advantage of emerging technologies to make each print issue challenging not only in the process of publication but also in terms of creating alternative spaces to reflect upon works of art.

Raquel Herrera Ferrer presented her book *Tempus Fugit*, which considers narratives created with new technologies. She chose a set of artists who are not necessarily part of the usual art circles but whose work she found quite relevant for her arguments. Her writing was influenced by Baudrillard as well as Umberto Eco, and Janet Murray. Some of the questions which drove her research include, what is interactivity? What is it for? What is the relationship between media and space, and navigational space in new media?

Heidi Figueroa presented on how cell-phones are affecting the way people understand their physical space in Puerto Rico. Notions of being here or being there become complex when people are able to use technology that apparently brings them closer, but which makes them more dependent on highly developed devices to constantly feel in touch with others. Developing a dependency and even a fetish on such devices were some of the aspects of this social phenomenon that she was critical of.

Susan Lord and Janine Marchessault presented on Translocality and art. Their research currently focuses on how artists are using new technologies to communicate across localities and how new technology is being used to create exhibitions in different spaces online and offline. A series of case studies are being gathered, many of which focus on works around globalization and the role of the Internet to bring about change.

Fuss, a collective based in Germany and Spain, was represented by Timo Daum. He presented “Ambientador” an interface created in Macromedia Flash, which allows the user to create music and graphics on the fly. “Ambientador” consists of a radar like interface where the user drops selections in the form of small dots. When the radar needle come across the dots, sounds and graphics are emitted. The user can keep adding or deleting material as she/he desires. During the presentation, the graphics that were combined according to the sound selections were meant to be seen on a separate screen, unfortunately due to the limitations of InteractivA, the work was presented in one screen. The work can be used in different contexts including raves or more experimental events. And it is also available online for download.

Zedik Arte Joven (Mexico) performed sonic poetry. They are a group of young performers who created soundscapes with their voices, and bodies. They interacted with the audience sometimes instructing them to clap or make abstract sounds on the verge of creating words. The concept was to develop new forms of meaning that become open-ended as the audience struggles to understand a possible narrative.

Monica Mayers (Mexico) presented her book *Rosas Chillantes* (Crying Roses). The book is a history of feminist women artists in Mexico City. The book is in an indirect way an intimate reflection of a movement that was received with much animosity by the Mexican Culture when it was first introduced. She traces three stages of this movement with the aim that the next generation reflects on Mexican feminist history.

Amelia Farfán Góngora who is a teacher in the town of Valladolid lectured on the role that new technologies have in the educational system currently in place in the rural areas of Mexico. She presented the problems the teacher faces when the material that is meant to be presented via a Television feed is not available because of technical difficulties just minutes before class is about to start. The teacher is often left not knowing exactly what her role is from day to day.

Verónica Garcia Rodriguez presented the art of a young generation of local artists, many who develop work that is textually based, but which takes different forms in the public arena, as murals or posters or other types of wall installations that people notice as they

move through the space. Many of the works are playful critiques of pronounced class difference.

Stephanie Max and Allan Schindler presented a set of abstract videos they created together. The animated graphics were all done with analog and digital processes and were synchronized to experimental music. It is crucial for both Max and Schindler that their compositions and sounds are made from scratch and with open source software when computer technology is used.

There were also video screenings throughout the week. Balanquet hosted a screening of Bulbo's video documentaries from Tijuana that focused on the everyday life of taco stand workers, rudo (rude) wrestler stars and hip hop rappers performing in Spanglish, or Spanish; these were groups which exposed the richness that makes Tijuana a city on the U.S./Mexico border, a rich place full of cultural contradictions. He also hosted a series of videos from Cuba with heavy social commentary on the state of being human as well as the role of media in defining how people relate. There was a special sound and video performance by Mr. Tamale, a collaborative consisting of Antonio Mendoza and Alberto Miyares in which I also participated. It consisted of sounds created by Miyares with samplers and a bass, while Mendoza projected remixed images ranging from hardcore porn videos to horror films like *The Shining*. This particular performance was four hours long. I was invited to play with them and I performed with a set of conga drums.

On the final night, subRosa presented an eloquent analysis on how body parts are being sold around the world. They were careful to debunk myths of the human body and familiarized the audience with the politics of body parts in the global black market. Their presentation consisted of a methodology that combines feminism and transnationality among other critical disciplines to develop new forms of criticism and resistance against the abuse of individuals, especially women.

Besides these presentations there were others I unfortunately was not able to attend. One thing that became obvious in the presentations I was able to attend is how diverse the participants were, yet how they all held together with a common bond, that of a critical position geared towards alternative forms of interpretation and presentation of work.

The biennale was well received; a local and a national newspaper reviewed the exhibit. Many of the participants, including myself, are writing or have written about it for online publications. This is a great thing because it shows how the motivations behind InteractivA—that of crossing over and creating alternative spaces and reevaluating options for working creatively—were and are actually being put into practice even as the Biennale came down.

Common themes that were brought forward over and over again during the conference crossing over spaces, creating alternative spaces, and questioning the establishment. In a way, these concepts are explicit in the curatorial statement in the catalog of the exhibition (available online) but the notions were even more present during the actual events. Many

of the discussions that took place during and after the presentations and performances entertained the possibilities of alternatives for producing outside of a mainstream, as it can be noted in the above descriptions. And it is truly great that these activities took place in a town like Merida, a place with a rich history, which includes an unfortunate colonial period. Merida was the perfect place to have discussions on the possibilities for art in the twenty-first century; it is a place where plurality can be celebrated and embraced. After all, Mexico has experienced or is still experiencing an important period of reflection. This is true when we consider books like Guillermo Bonfil Batalla's *Mexico Profundo*, in which he argues that there is a denial of a major part of Mexican History; that is, the history of the Indians that lived in the Americas before the colonizers arrived, and who are still living as part of contemporary communities. He explains that by denying the History of indigenous people, Mexico is missing the opportunity to become a truly unique nation. He argues that the country is founded on an imaginary Mexico created to push it to become a "Western nation."¹ His book spurred a new way of thinking about Mexican culture.² Admittedly, this happened or is happening mainly in intellectual circles. In the second edition Batalla explains that the book was written in a time when "there [was] an intellectual space favorable to pluralism,"³ and dogmatism was at a low. The book was written in the mid 1980s a time that was known as a postmodern

¹ Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *México Profundo* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1996), 65-66.

² This comment is made based on the conference "Mexico in the Nineties" which I attended at UCSD during the Spring quarter of 2005. Various intellectuals from Mexico City presented on Mexican culture and its current influence in the arts. The book was heavily mentioned.

³ Batalla, xiii.

period; a time when little narratives took the center of discourse and metanarratives became the thing to fight against.⁴

Western thought is a particular metanarrative that has been heavily criticized by postcolonialism. Technology is considered by many an extension of Western thought and something that must be resisted or at least be critical of. This is the case with Balanquet. He considered *InteractivA 05* a space where people could move towards a “post-technological” period, when the fetish for the machine would no longer exist, and the current models would be no more.⁵ In his curatorial statement he contextualizes all of the participants as struggling with the inequalities that emerging technologies bring about in particular localities.⁶ Balanquet’s position actually resonated in every presentation, given that he would introduce everyone. Like most curators, Balanquet has a vision, an agenda that came into conflict with some of the works that he selected.

One of the questions that arise when reading the curatorial statement is, why is technology bad? According to Balanquet it is because of its connection with Western thought. This he makes very explicit in his catalogue essay where he explains that new technologies are the extension of the colonizer. He writes:

It is not important how attractive emerging technologies and media arts are, the variables of our hybrid culture lead to an interactive system that

⁴ Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). This book explicitly defines the development of metanarratives and their move toward specialization which lead to little narratives.

⁵ Raul Moarquech Ferrera-Balanquet, “El Futuro Postecnológico de Arte Actual comenzó Ayer,” *Arte Nuevo InteractivA 05* (Merida: Ayuntamiento de Merida, 2005), 5.

⁶ Ferrera-Balanquet, 8.

existed long before the industrial revolution, that was supported with slaves in the Atlantic and the Eurocentric invasion of the whole planet. These variables open a system of knowledge “Data knowledge” which cannot be captured by the digital networks of information that drive colonial power.⁷

This premise imposes on everyone participating in the exhibition a specific struggle against colonialism. In fact, the colonial struggle that is extended to the participants is related to Mexico, given that Balanquet repeatedly cites the history of Mesoamerica specific to that region as well as Cuba, his country of birth. However the summary of conferences and performances provided above show that while it might be true that many participants share a notion of resistance, it is not true that they can be easily contextualized within the post-colonial struggle as understood in Mexico and other parts of Latin America. At the end of the essay he allows other types of struggles to take place. Unfortunately, there is no room for convergence or integration in his argument; instead he promotes a separation from that which is “Western.” This ambiguously excludes those participants with a Western Heritage, even when they identify with the colonial struggle that Balanquet so fervently promotes.

Further Balanquet extends the “post-technological” position to everyone on the exhibition, assuming that they all resist the ideology of technology as an extension of Western thought. This also is not shared by many of the participants. Many of them presented technology as a tool that can be used to create new critical dialogues within the

⁷ Ibid, 7-8.

current power structure and thereby problematize it by turning it into something else: a plurality full of conflicts that cannot be easily defined as this or that. Much of the work showed that the world is changing and that while globalization is prevalent, there are multiple ways of appropriating the very devices used to extend such a movement to actually change it, thus calling something particularly Western or non-Western with strict binary opposition, as the post-technological proposition demands is becoming more difficult to do.

With this in mind we can consider the work presented by Fuss, “Ambientador,” which gives agency to the user to become a DJ/VJ with software that can be constantly customized and improved; here, the participant has the agency to create personal interpretations for expression in a performance, or be a spectator when someone performs for an audience; also we can consider the three part curatorial contribution by Lucrezia Cippitelli which explores and questions time-based media’s rapid change and its effect on the viewer’s notion of uniqueness in time, with material that is created on the fly; this work reconsiders how narratives now can be customized for a specific moment and never repeated—one would wonder if individuality is being reinforced or questioned with some of the pieces. We can also consider Maria Luisa Molina López’s lecture, which left the audience with open questions about the hybrid state of Chicano/a culture and its relation to Mexican culture, and how technology plays, both, a conflictive and a productive role in their ongoing developments. Also, Guestroom explores the possibilities of print as an exhibition space in large part thanks to the efficiency of current technology; Raquel Herrera Ferrer explores new media projects which enrich the possibilities of narratives;

and The Tijuana collective Bulbo takes advantage of technology to develop videos, interactive DVDs and print publications, all exploring the current state of flux of Tijuana. In contrast Amelia Farfán Góngora explains how new technologies while they are great when they work properly are not always beneficial to the classroom if there is no clear understanding how the teacher is to function when TV education is largely non-functional. Heidi Figueroa exposed how new modes of communication while they are certainly bringing people closer with their communities function on cultural codes that must be kept in check so that the devices do not become apprehensive on the psychology of the individual. And subRosa showed how because of new technologies it is easier to support the black market of human body parts, while also explaining that with awareness the same tools can be used to intervene and contest the problem. When acknowledging the complexity of these examples, one realizes that it is possible to use technology productively, regardless of its many problems and shortcomings.

Ultimately, even with this criticism in mind, it is undeniable that InteractivA 05 was an impressive and successful biennale which demonstrated that there is a strong network of emerging artists, writers and curators who will redefine the current paradigms as well as create new paradigms in the near future. The biennale's strength lies in bringing together diverse works and individuals—including some which clearly questioned the exhibition's curatorial premise.

The energy level throughout the nine days was really intense and everyone was eager to exchange ideas and talk about their own local experiences. It was mainly during the dinners when the participants were able to express their ideas.

Given that many of the people were transnational, conversations often moved from the politics of the countries they were born in to the countries in which they currently live or had lived. This was a set of people who were highly aware of global politics.

Balanquet announced that there would be no more InteractivA biennales; that if anything happened it would be in the form of a traveling exhibition. It might be time for InteractivA to hybridize into something else, let's just hope that such hybrid, if it is to keep its current underlying focus on post-colonialism, is more open to understanding notions of post-colonization that deal with possibilities for integration rather than binary division. Considering Balanquet's post-colonial position (even if it appears reductive with some of the work), one can only wish that—within such paradigm—everyone in the future can speak, whether they have been colonized or have colonized, this however is not a reality yet. It is usually one side or the other that takes center stage; admittedly, it is still the colonizer who does most of the time. Changing this is the real struggle in the future. Towards this InteractivA 05, full of rich cultural conflicts, has become the third and perhaps last of the three challenging Biennales in Mérida, Yucatán.

To speak is to fight—

*Jean Francois Lyotard.*⁸

⁸ Lyotard, 10.