

SEZESSION WICHTELGASSE



Sunset from the
Empire State Building
Observatory

19. September 2008, 19 Uhr, Wichtelgasse 12, 1160 Wien

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SUNSET FROM THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING OBSERVATORY?

While researching about your work on the Internet I came across a lot of text where your Latin American background is highlighted and some of your titles you use refer to other Latin American Artists, musicians or writers (Be marginal be a hero). Do you identify yourself with the label Latin American Artist? To what extent is this intentional from your side and to what extent is this a projection from the outside (New Exoticism)?

Cristóbal: You identify with being Latin American the same way an Austrian can identify with being European, it is always changing and is never stable, but creates a source of context in which to maneuver. Projection from the outside would be anything that anybody not from Latin America might have, the same way we could project our own views on what it means to be European. We are exotic to you and you are exotic to us, the difference is that maybe, in general, we know more about you than you about us.

Felipe: Although we avoid using the term I think we do identify as “Latin American” artists, but not in the same way it is projected into us. This means that we work from this context but we do not exploit it. In USA and Europe this categorization seems unavoidable (from “their” side) as an initial reading of our works, as sort of open door where people can assume what to expect. Each of us is just worried about making good work that circulates in interesting circuits, to create dialogues and encounters.

I personally take the production of my work as lo-fi as possible and for me this refers to both a political decision and also as a product of the limitations we experienced as “young” artists in Chile. As our “scene” was an incomplete one from an early stage we learned to work with lots of limitations, and I think this was very productive in a way, because you concentrate on the important things. Basically all artists reflect their cultural and socio economic and political contexts. In our case it is a bit more confusing because we currently live in New York and this gives our works a second context, which is in itself multicultural and central (as a center of power).

Most of the times that we have used titles that refer to other Latin American artists or writers or themes this is done in a honest *homage* way but also as



Hector A. Hernández,
“Cuestionan Cliché Latinoamericano”
Diario Excelsor, Nov. 5
2007, Mexico DF

irony and critique. We recently did a show in Mexico titled “Algunas Bestias” which is the title of a poem by Pablo Neruda. He is one of the important poets of Latin America and he also has a strong presence in Mexico because he was an Ambassador and cultural figure with strong ties to the local cultural scene (in the 60’s). So the use of his title has to do with the preconceived idea Mexican’s may have with Chile, through Neruda, but this is just a bate because once they see the show they realize it has nothing to do with Neruda or with what he represents.

Johanna: I do not brand or promote my work as Latin American, I just do my work. But people expect things from Latin American artists and therefore they expect something specific from me. But the truth is that I do not follow up this reading, I prefer they take my work from its meanings and intentions, which I understand are more universal.

Being artists from a country that not so long ago had a dictatorship, do you feel that you have a different approach to art and the art market than artist from countries without this experience and do you consider your work as being political? Is there such thing as political art or is art as Lehyt stated, “Reduced to insults”?

Cristóbal: Latin American conceptualism was always political. It was a way to resist normative ideologies, we are part of that tradition. The inequalities and social relations in Chile are very marked and very present, we grew up in the concentrated spectacle -to borrow Debord’s definition- that made it urgent to make works that address the that reality. We grew up that way and now we are trying to redefine where to locate the meaning of the work, now that the spectacle is everywhere and it is diffused, like in Europe perhaps? So you come up with different strategies, all contextual and permeable.

Felipe: I think we do have a different approach to the art market but not because of the dictatorship. Pinochet and all he represents affected our lives but in a very personal and direct manner long before art had any importance to us.

If we have a political view on things it is on every aspect of life and not only



Cristóbal Lehyt
Untitled (part of the series
El Norte), 2003

art. In this case our work reflects this history but not directly.

In general I think my work relates to a history of political art but through conceptualism. And this could have a “Latin American” twist due to the economic structure and strategies of the work.

Johanna: I always say my work is not political but social. And this does have to do with my roots, where I come from, the neighborhood I grew up in, which was basically a working class area in Santiago. So my work is related to my personal history and also to the history of labor. For me political art is something more direct, and sometimes I think a lot of political art, specially in Chile, take advantage of the recent history, the dictatorship, etc, as a way to give deepness or importance to the work. I prefer to keep on a day to day basis, which I am more in touch with.

How did it come about that you moved to New York?

Cristóbal: To have access to more information. To learn to change the scale of the works, to do Contemporary Art and not just Chilean Contemporary Art.

Felipe: The Chilean art circuit seemed too small and hyper-concentrated in itself. Even before finishing art school I had the chance to travel to Europe and I witnessed different and diverse-dynamic scenes. I wanted to learn and experience art directly without having to study a MA or something like that so just being in NY looked like a good idea. Also New York has this in between state where you immediately feel part of it, the “change” is less dramatic than Europe.

Johanna: For professional reasons. Art.

You have founded an artist-run space (Galeria Chilena) and you have been exhibiting in artist-run spaces such as ours. From your experiences do you find there is a difference between artist-run spaces in Chile or maybe Latin America in general to similar spaces in New York?

Cristóbal: In every place there are huge differences, too many to list, the main

connection is the attempt to open up spaces of dialogue that are not determined by established power structures, mostly dictated by the market. It is a common goal of alternative spaces, in my experience, to create temporary spaces of dialogue that are not completely codified and easy to digest. Maybe the differences have to do with choices, in some places you can choose to do an alternative space, in others there is no choice but to do it.

Felipe: Although each artist run space has its particular context to which it is reacting I do think there is lots in common. The sense of working in a less established and less controlled environment is generally parallel to working in a more creative and interesting one. Artist run spaces start maybe for similar reasons but they evolve differently, more or less, depending on the artists intentions and the establishment they are situated in. In some cases they become more commercial in some cases more institutional. The difference with spaces in contexts like Chile is that they mostly stay in the same level because there is no growth space. In NY most artists run galleries become the borderline of the art market, where experimentation is expected yet in the process they feed the market with “young hot blood”.

Johanna: I was not a founder of galeria chilena but I did participate in an exhibition and was an artist “represented” by GCH. But I do believe there is a big difference between artists run spaces in Latin America and similar projects in NY and Europe, where these can access or benefit from other institutions or the market. In Chile most artists run spaces disappear or simply remain independent.

In one of your earlier emails you pointed out that collaborations could be problematic (every “band” has it’s internal problems). You as a group of artist have been closely linked to each other for a very long time, you often exhibit together and you even have a homepage (www.lanubeloca.org) together. How did this evolve and in what respect do you influence each other? Do you consider yourself as an artist group?

Cristóbal: We are connected by a common education and context at first, then



Galeria Chilena se reúne con Eduardo Frei Ruiz Tagle, Palacio de La Moneda, Santiago de Chile, October 1998

by friendship and now by dialogue. The works are connected by some common sensibilities, certain affinities, they are slow to surface but they are there. We don't make collective decisions on each others work, but we talk, that is enough sometimes.

Felipe: I don't think we are an artist group. We never set common goals or aims. Lanubeloca.org works a place of encounter of different projects that also collaborate and cross feed each other. Our first link is a common history and background and later our close experience living in NY. Working together has evolved with years of friendship and in different degrees. We constantly talk about our works and projects, so the opinion of the others is important, but also each of us works differently and we respect that difference. I think it is this distance and dynamic is what makes the whole situation interesting. The problematic part of this is to keep a healthy balance between friendship and work.

Johanna: I think we work as a group but in the sense of promotion. Our works are different but in a way we gain strength when we work together, there are more possibilities of exhibiting abroad, etc. Also we do exchange opinions and critical thoughts so in a way we are always collaborating. So there is a practical side and an artistic side, which keeps us together.

To what extent would you compare the situation of fine artists in Santiago de Chile with fine artists in Vienna, both being cities secluded in regard to the hubs of fine art such as Berlin or New York? Should Sezession Wichtelgasse move to Santiago de Chile or New York?

Cristóbal: I don't know how to answer that. It is always better to have a connection to your context and not follow the logic of markets, but it is also good to be in a place where you can talk to different kinds of people, where you are challenged. So NY is like that, Santiago isn't, I don't know about Vienna.

Felipe: I think it is hard to compare Santiago to Vienna. Each has a very different history and although they are both not art center as Berlin or New

York, Vienna does have a institutional and commercial art structure that is far developed compared to Santiago. So even though you (Vienna artists) are not located in the “center” you do enjoy and benefit from a developed art environment, you have good museums, institutions, kunsthallen, critics, magazines, collectors, curators, etc. All these exist in Chile but in a much smaller degree and less professionalized.

I think each artist run space reacts against or towards its specific context and there is no reason to change that context or place. What I do think should happen is more collaboration between artist run spaces, which I personally have been committed to in the last years. Sezession Wichtelgasse should be invited to Chile to organize a show, not move there. Or to NY. Etc. For me this show with you is a first step for future collaborations.



Felipe Mujica
Modell, 2007

You often use textiles. To what extent do you see yourself here in line with a certain folkloristic tradition? Do you differentiate between a masculine and a feminine approach, textiles often being associated with conventional crafting carried out by women? Do you use textiles and fabrics in a banner like style to “stage” the exhibition space like in a theater?

Felipe: When I use fabric it is because of its economy, material, productive and conceptual. It is a material that opens up, uses and occupies space in a very fragile way. For me there is not much a relationship to folklore but more a relationship to a state of mind.

When I use fabric panels these divided and organize space and also are references to modernist painting as well as to the decorative, they are curtains. They also do work as stages, for my own work and for the work of others. I like this possibility of making something functional and generous, generous because it allows a more active reading between the works and this makes an exhibition more dynamic, I think. They are the opposite of Richard Serra, which for me has become the symbol of *mega-capitalism* and *mega-machismo* in art.

Johanna: My work is very handcrafted but it is also done in a very systematic way. I work in a fine line in between the handmade and the produced. So I am interested in certain folkloristic ideas but my work always turns these

ideas around. I assemble pieces, planes, almost like building / constructing something. It becomes architectural in a way, and in this sense it escapes folklore. In relation to this I intend to build pieces that relate and question history as well as personal and sensorial aspects. And I think this has nothing to do with gender, it's just a matter of sensibility.

You use titles in Spanish and English (sometimes translated from Spanish), how is your relationship to language, do you “think” in Spanish, but work in “English” or is the transition so to say more fluent?

Cristóbal: I work in Spanish and think in Spanish and I translate what needs to be read into whatever language is necessary, German, Swedish, English, whatever...

Felipe: My first culture is Spanish but I did grow up in London, and now live in New York. So language for me sometimes works fluently, I do work in Spanish mostly but some titles for example are thought in English, not translated. I do dream in both languages but I feel closer, in sensitivity, to Spanish.

Johanna: I use both languages on my titles but I take it very playfully. I try to think just how would it sound better and how would it related to its context better.

Have you ever been to the Empire State Building Observatory?

Cristóbal: Yes, many times, it is always worth a visit.

Felipe: Yes, about 2-3 times. Mostly with family that visits us. It is an amazing view, almost mystical, you sort of understand NY a bit better every time you are there.

Johanna: I have been there twice. But now I have a friend who works on the 72 floor and I visit her a lot. The view is amazing.



Johanna Unzueta
Untitled (part of the series
Boxes) 2005