

CUE

ART FOUNDATION

Helena Chávez MacGregor

Laboratorio 060

(An essay on Laboratorio 060's solo exhibition curated by Pablo Helguera on view March 13 - April 19, 2008

With a performance of *Ancient Chinese Secret*, (original score by Jeff Morris) and an oral recount of *Frontera. A sketch for the creation of a future society*, Thursday, March 13, 2008)

In Mexico City, everybody knows that if you have an emergency there is no point in dialing 060. Everyone knows that help, if it ever arrives, will come late. Laboratorio 060 emerges from this state of national emergency, being aware that there is no way to produce any final resolution, because time and space are out of joint, and that state, more than being an irreversible moment of chaos, allows the very possibility for something to happen – without notice, or invitation.

Artistic practices in Mexico play an important role in this culture of emergency. But it is contradictory territory: on the one hand, in recent years Mexican art has become increasingly visible on the international scene, receiving validation and recognition from the “center.” On the other hand, the artistic system in Mexico is both fragile and precarious because it has no solid institutions and sometimes misses the specificity of our context in the imitation of hegemonic cultural representations. This contradiction between validation and vulnerability does not necessarily produce a malfunction since it can be used as a creative spur to keep on going free of rigid structures. The territory of this art system is still under construction, and it is in this search for invention that Laboratorio 060 was created to explore new ideas and art practices not based in traditional or established ways of doing things. This group works as a collective and rejects any specific outline that determines their activities: they are curators, artists, activists, philosophers, architects, economists, writers, poets, managers and art historians. They have been lovers, rivals, friends, contenders, allies, but more than anything, they are confabulators. In their multitude of personalities they can assume any role they want to play; they can be outrageous, hilarious, pretentious or even ambiguous. Sometimes they work from inside the establishment; sometimes they court the fringe in their quest to cross borders. In a Janus-faced strategy they go from insiders to outlaws; they do not have a goal to fulfill and no enemies to destroy; just a need to create resonating surfaces. They slide stealthily through territories to contaminate, to overflow, to trigger conflicts and wait – and hope – for something to happen.

Since 2003, the year when they came out of the blue, breaking with the implicit rules that constitute the Mexican hierarchy of curators, this group of “unknowns” has stood for encounter and disagreement. The strategy for their work is based in one simple word: negotiation. This is their program for setting matters in motion, to force the outside and inside into an argument, to crack them open and blur their territories and specifications. Since *Tráfico (Traffic)*, 2004, they have played with the construction of the public sphere, and they know that this space is not based on free participation or common sharing but on the configuration of the civic realm. A public space is thus defined as a place where a particular system of knowledge establishes an implicit law that governs and

parcels out places, activities, behaviors and forms of participation in a common world.

Tráfico was a 47-minute "exhibition" that took place in a traffic jam on one of Mexico City's major freeways, Periférico. In this standstill place, 060, with the participation of street vendors who, instead of hawking their wares to the stuck drivers as they usually do, displayed placards printed with short sentences from political discourses and some photographs by artists like Marco Antonio Cruz or Ernesto Ramirez that played with the so-called national identity.

This action had a double twist: first, the appropriation of the strategies of street vendors, who use public space without permission or regulation in order to survive, creating a floating economy that displaces so-called legitimate economic and social activities; and second, the use of public space to confound expectations – marchers and placards usually denote a publicity campaign or political rally, and this was neither. The "exhibition" was designed as a demonstration of the use of streets that freed public space from its normal meanings.

The most radical negotiation they have made is *Frontera: Esbozo para la creación de una sociedad del futuro* (*Frontier: A sketch for the creation of a future society*), 2006-2007, a project set on the southern border of Mexico and Guatemala. As a form of dislocation, 060 wanted to refocus the spotlight – always on the northern border that separates Mexico from the U.S.A. – toward the border that has been forgotten in the political agenda and connects Mexico in a ghostly way to Guatemala.

For this project, they invited 20 artists to a remote village called Frontera Corozal to create, in the words of 060, "a project that works through the symbolic realm as an act of indirect sabotage, looking to reclaim the (more often than not) tamed spaces of social fantasy and artistic creativeness." *Frontera* was not structured as a usual exhibition for a standard public, but on the contrary looked toward the alteration of conventional roles in the cultural apparatus conceived as a signifier and giver of meanings. To create this research they took off from the idea that "possibility comes only from inside the abyss, from the emptiness of a stand still, from the never-coming of the future: a utopia is here to be shaped as the most radical dream of revolt."

For two years, and in five art productions in the town, curators, artists and habitants lived together in a complex process that threw into question spaces, relations, representations and meanings. If the experience, as an event, of the whole process is lost, it is permissible to ask what was the "curatorial happening" and how can it be evoked and represented? There are some documents – photos, video and a Web page – as a record, but the real track of what happened is hidden in the fragments that remain. There are still the benches that the Mexican collective Tercerounquinto constructed with the villagers in order to have, in the football field, an antagonistic space in which the community could look directly at one another as contenders or adversaries in a strategy for the assumption of problems and ruptures inside them; the model village that the Guatemalan artist Yasmin Hage made in a town named La Técnica as a replica, in the form of a theme park to "encourage" tourism, of the settlements designed to attract the displaced, immigrant civilian and guerrilla populations for their relocation during the Guatemalan civil war.

But perhaps, as most of the pieces vanished like smoke, the process will linger only in the memory of the habitants of Frontera Corozal, remaining as an oral narration that decomposes, changes and transforms to become another story, different from the one that once took place. More than looking at the works of art as objects that represent and stand for an experience, maybe in this susuration we can have a glimpse of the project as a whole. To activate the remaining echoes and to create an aesthetic experience is 060's objective, so to keep this endless *recherche du temps perdu*, for the exhibition at the CUE Art Foundation they will produce, in the words one of

the members, a "scenesphere." In the performance *Frontera, a sketch for the creation of a future society* original version with English subtitles, prepared in collaboration with Edwin Culp, they will stage the project in a way that explores the possibilities and limits of transmission and translation of experience not based in a simple recovery of the past but in the production, in a different medium, of a new one. An experience, as Walter Benjamin once hoped, where past can happen not as a reflection but as an event that opens us to a time to come.

For the CUE exhibition, 060 will also display some photos and videos for *Tráfico* and *Se busca Venus (Searching for Venus)*, 2005, and as a way to continue the search for the limits of the public sphere, they will make an in situ piece for New York City by using a negotiation strategy with the gallery and public radio. In *Radio killed the video star* they will broadcast a composition selected, after a worldwide call for entries, by the curator of the exhibition, Pablo Helguera. In this, 060, who have no musical experience, will perform as "artists" in an action that will upend "the homogeneous process by which entertainment is constructed and disseminated in our image-saturated media world." In the division of functions they will eliminate any possibility of presence and authority. They will try to contaminate, like a virus, the invisible public space to create a signification in between voices.

Laboratorio 060, as a political agenda, will keep moving around the abyss, changing positions and strategies. That is the name of their game: to be unstable, undetermined and always at risk; because they know where danger lurks, possibilities grow.

Quotes are from interviews and correspondence with the author.

Members of Laboratorio 060 are Lourdes Morales, Javier Toscano & Daniela Wolf.

Helena Chávez MacGregor
Mexico City, Mexico, February 2008

This essay was written as part of the **Young Art Critics Mentoring Program**, a partnership between AICA USA (US section of International Association of Art Critics) and CUE Art Foundation, which pairs emerging writers with AICA mentors to produce original essays for loose-leaf insertion into CUE Art Foundation exhibition catalogues. The writer, **Helena Chávez MacGregor**, was born in Mexico in 1979, studied philosophy at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City and won the 2004 Norman Sverlin prize with her thesis "The Art Experience: Walter Benjamin and the Art of Suspicion." She has a Master's Degree in aesthetics and contemporary art theory from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in Spain. While living in Barcelona she participated in seminars at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona with Suely Rolnik, Brian Holmes and Benjamin Buchloh. She is currently working on a Ph.D. in Philosophy at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México with a project on the possibilities of the relationships between aesthetics and politics based in the thought of Jacques Rancière. The aim is to rethink the notion of subjectivation as an aesthetic process and investigate how artistic practices and social movements work on that process. She also writes for art magazines including *Curare* and *Código (Mexico)*, *Lanzallamas (Chile)* and *CasaZine (Netherlands)* about art practices along the lines mentioned above. The mentor, **Annette Grant**, directs the writing program for young art critics for AICA in partner with the CUE Art Foundation. She was a culture editor for *The New York Times* for 30 years, specializing in art, architecture, photography and dance. She also wrote on these subjects for *The New York Times* and other publications, such as *Art & Auction* magazine.

AICA (International Association of Art Critics) was formed in order to revive the critical discourse that had suffered under Fascism and the war, and which was under pressure in nations around the world. It was founded in 1948/1949 in Paris and originally affiliated with UNESCO as an NGO ("non-governmental organization"). At present there are 72 member nations representing more than 4,000 art critics. **AICA USA**, headquartered in New York, is the largest national section, with a membership of over 400 distinguished critics, curators, scholars, and art historians around the country. Please visit www.aicausa.org for further information.

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