

## Never use the word “I” except in letters<sup>i</sup>

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This is a biography of a series of collaborations between artists who attended art school in Santiago de Chile in the mid 90s and then emigrated to New York while maintaining strong ties to their friends and colleagues who had stayed behind in the place that would be alternately disparaged and longed for. (A secondary narrative about leaving home and the nostalgia this incurs is the unwritten part of this biography). The story begins with an anecdote that has been told countless times in artist talks and other informal presentations, often used to elicit laughter due to its almost unbelievable quality. In early 1996, Felipe Mujica and Diego Fernández were traveling through Europe and while in Cologne, they made a round of the galleries. One of the most important ones happened to be closed for installation, but they went in anyway to observe Mark Dion as he worked on his show, and then proceeded to ply the gallery assistant for information about other galleries. The gallerist himself happened to be in his office eavesdropping on the conversation and, presumably impressed by their shameless naïveté, he emerged and demanded to know who they were and if they intended to show him their work. A friendship developed and once the artists had returned to Chile, they began sending updated portfolios to him every six months. By August 1997, they’d been offered an exhibition (the worst month to show but they didn’t care) and they spent that summer in Cologne – along with their close friend José Luis Villablanca who tagged along on the trip – complaining to those who asked, about the lack of a scene back home, to which the gallerist once responded: “You have to make your own scene!” As students of some of the pioneers of the ‘80s *avanzada*<sup>ii</sup> (most notably Eugenio Dittborn), they and their peers had received a comprehensive education in the art of DIY arts administration. Perhaps, then, it was the novelty of working with an exhibition space that was both intellectually rigorous *and* economically sustainable – a combination antithetical to the visual arts culture they knew back home, still burdened by a history of political censorship, marginalization, and economic and cultural underdevelopment – that prompted the three of them upon their return to Santiago to form “Fernández, Mujica, and Villablanca Ltd” – aka “Galería Chilena” – a business association of three recent graduates with no money, no physical space, and limited social contacts intent upon single-handedly creating a market for contemporary art in Chile.

Over the next few years, Galería Chilena (‘GCH’ or *galchi*) – the acronym inscribed into a heart, a logo that referred to Chapulín Colorado, the star of a hugely successful Mexican sitcom that depicted a clumsy and cowardly character (a kind of Latin American antihero) perpetually confronted by innumerable obstacles and enemies – organized a series of exhibitions and other events that sought visibility for a generation of artists who had come of age in those post-dictatorial years of political consensus marked by both euphoria and the cultural blandness of globalization’s rapid encroachment. Some first initiatives included: a one week exhibition by Cristóbal Lehyt in a run-down, turn of the century house (that I’d once lived in and left to Villablanca upon returning to the States a few years previously); a two-person exhibition by Juan Céspedes and Rodrigo Galecio, art students who represented the country’s two major (and rival) universities and who had been recruited by GCH in response

to criticisms that the collective was only showing members of their inner circle; “GUAUHAUS,” an exhibition by Johanna Unzueta and Patricia Cepeda that self-consciously attempted to correct the gender inequality perceived by some to be inherent to the collective’s male bonding activities; and finally “Desde el jardín” (From the Garden), an exhibition of a photographic side project (never before seen) of Eduardo Vilches, an art professor and practicing artist and a very influential (and beloved) figure for several generations of young Chilean artists. Almost nothing was ever sold and yet in texts, interviews, and catalogues from those years GCH’s founders continued to insist upon its business, *for-profit* character in a parodic manner that can best be seen in the work that Villablanca began making, in which his role as entrepreneur occupies a central place. In the video *Gran Santiago*, 1998, the artist places a call to a local talk show program, hosted by two middle-aged AM Radio personalities, which aired in the very early morning hours and that presumably nobody watched. Holding the camera in one hand (the videotaped image shows the face of one of the hosts looking out from the television into the eyes of his caller), Villablanca talks to his absent public about the role of Galería Chilena in relation to the emergence in Chile of a new artistic scene. The hosts nod patiently, attempting to politely end the call but unsuccessfully as the caller is both wide-awake and insistent. It is the portrait of an artist alone in his room at 4 o’clock in the morning, wasting his words on deaf ears, conscious of the indifference of those who only pretend to listen, and yet always just a little bit hopeful.

In 1998, I invited Galería Chilena to participate in the first exhibition I ever curated, which took place at the Swiss Institute in New York. In response to my request that they produce some sort of collective work or installation representing their activities as an artist-run initiative, they orchestrated a meeting with then President Eduardo Frei that took place in his office in the Palacio de la Moneda (notorious around the world as the site of Allende’s death.) The result was a photograph of the trio posing alongside the president, blown up to larger than life scale and printed on vinyl along with the words “Galería Chilena Since 1997” – a document of both the artists’ heroic self-image and youthful optimism. If the exhibition failed to herald GCH’s hoped for triumph in New York, center of the art world, or to make a ripple in my own career advancement, this piece became an important and much celebrated reference for Chilean art in the ‘90s because it exemplified so perfectly a particular moment in a collective history and its concomitant mood. Within a few years both Mujica – along with his wife Johanna Unzueta – and Fernández had moved to New York and GCH was forced into an indefinite hiatus that was only broken for occasional projects including: “To Be Political It Has To Look Nice,” curated by Pablo León de la Barra at apexart in 2003; “Condoros,” 2004, a group exhibition that took place in Galería Metropolitana (Santiago) and 24/7 (London) in which Chilean artists were asked to make paintings that utilized both the color scheme and conceptual significance of the Chilean comic “Condorito”; and “EiEi,” 2005: an international gathering of independent art initiatives in Valparaiso, organized by another Chilean collective, Hoffmann’s House who had been influenced by GCH but was already more strategically thinking about how to preserve its own legacy.

Among the few documents and other ephemera that bear testimony to the brief and intense history of GCH, was a low-budget photocopied catalogue produced for the apexart exhibition, consisting of a series of email conversations that took place between three friends struggling to bridge the geographic (and psychological) distance that separated them and to preclude

the possibility of erasure from a fragile history of their own making. Villablanca made several attempts to join his friends in New York – one of these entailed a stopover in Bogotá, Colombia where he exhibited in the space I ran there but was then distracted by a life-changing experience with yagé and returned to Santiago with a renewed commitment to the strong sense of localism with which he'd always distinguished himself from the others. Meanwhile, In New York, the number of Chilean transplants grew and as is the natural order of things, a tight-knit community began to grow, based more on previous friendships and economic necessity- job resources were shared as were professional contacts, etc. – than on a sense of shared cultural identity, which goes without saying and cannot be superficially imposed onto readings of the works subsequently produced by these artists as Chileans in New York. Titles of the group exhibitions that took place after 2001 attest to the self-consciousness of the attempt to preserve aspects of a local, shared history without allowing that history to become watered down and manipulated into a series of clichés or markers of difference as a means of promotion in a competitive, first-world context. They included: “Sudamerican Rockers” – the name of a song by *Los Prisioneros*, an obtuse reference for anyone who grew up outside of Latin America in the '80s/'90s; “Arte Argentino Contemporáneo” – a recognition that even in Latin America, there is much confusion regarding other countries of the region (Chileans mistake Colombians for Venezuelans while Mexicans tend to lump together anyone from the Southern Cone, and then nobody really knows anything about Paraguay and so on...) – “Algunas Bestias”: (a poem by Pablo Neruda, perhaps the best known 20<sup>th</sup> century figure known outside Chile); and “Be Marginal, Be a Hero,” – a phrase appropriated from Helio Oiticica, whose own life career so elegantly traversed cultural precariousness and international stardom.

In 2004, Felipe Mujica approached me about doing a solo exhibition at my project space, La Rebeca, in Bogotá and I suggested that we organize a three-person exhibition including Unzueta (whose work I'd been admiring from afar for several years) and Juan Céspedes – an artist I'd been introduced to many years before during a studio visit organized by GCH and had worked with several times since then. Among the many great things about this experience – it was a reunion of four old friends living and working and having a good time despite the torrential rain outside, and there was even a new baby boy on his first trip abroad – was the way the different artists' works in the exhibition related to one another. Unzueta's sculptural fence made from felt divided her room from that of Céspedes and co-existed quite happily with a playful wall drawing he'd made just to the right, depicting a girl blowing a bubble with her chewing gum –a pink balloon cleverly attached to the wall – while snippets of FM radio, television, CDs, old records, etc. drifted down from the low-fi sound sculpture Mujica had installed above in the attic, filling the space with what became something like the exhibition's soundtrack. It was around this time that he also began doing minimal, abstract wall paintings that, over the next few years, would develop into a series of painted wooden panels and then, finally, curtains, which functioned as individual pieces but also as part of the exhibition design itself. Set or hung in a space alongside other works, these fragile walls at times divide the space in an elegant, and yet pragmatic, manner and other times impose themselves onto the uninterrupted, airy openness typically desired in a contemporary art space. Neither objects nor precisely two-dimensional, they quietly hover behind, next to, or around the other pieces in the exhibition alternately blending into an abstract background of color and geometry and then loudly affirming their autonomy, depending on the viewer's

perspective. Although he continued to develop other lines of work – including drawings and prints based on motifs borrowed from art history but also books, business cards and street flyers among other things – it was with these pieces that he'd found a way to incorporate this tradition of collaboration into the very structure of his work, which, in turn, demanded that the collaboration continue so that the work enjoy its full functionality.

The next year Mujica began to organize a series of group exhibitions, the first of them with Unzueta and Fernández that included both collaborative and individual works exhibited at message salon in Zürich and planet 22 in Geneva, followed by an exhibition for Christian Nagel at the Miami Design District (parallel to Art Basel Miami), appropriately titled "Trapped by Mutual Affection." The Swiss shows included works made collaboratively by the three spanning the media of performance, installation, and video while in Miami greater emphasis was placed on individual objects, with Fernández's paintings and collages with images copied or extracted during his daily habit of perusing the New York Post and Unzueta's hand-sewn felt sculptures of industrial buildings inspired by Bernd and Hilla Becher's typological studies scattered among, or directly mounted onto, a group of Mujica's wooden panels, some painted but others left bare in order to comply with a strictly utilitarian function. In 2007, several invitations and self-organized projects including another art fair, a residency and shows in two artist-run spaces, were consolidated (for practical and economic reasons) into what became fondly known as the 'Tour Latino.' This series of projects included the participation of Cristóbal Lehyt who, in Mexico City, recreated an installation he had originally made in La Panadería – a historical Mexican project space I'd briefly directly in the early 00s – along with newer work consisting of large format photographs of drawings made while in trance. In Rio de Janeiro, the artists did a month-long residency at Capacete, where between artist talks, requisite meetings with the Chilean bureaucracy funding their stay in Brazil and a few (but not many because it was winter) trips to the beach, they prepared an exhibition at A Gentil Carioca, entitled "Linea de Hormigas," (Line of Ants). Unzueta showed a new body of work consisting of sculptures that mimicked architectural elements of the exhibition space itself – for example, a water pipe or an awning – in a bright shade of red that alluded to a broader conceptual interest in the history of labor and which also related formally to a video Lehyt had installed in the bathroom of abstract red shapes that looked like something between specimens in a laboratory and painterly blotches. Precariously perched in front of a large and heavy wall painting by Fernández based on an account given by Kippenberger in a 1991 German publication, was a group of fragile looking sculptures made from cheap wooden sticks wrapped in and attached together with black insulation tape. They had been devised, at the last minute, by Lehyt and Mujica in recognition of the two-dimensionality of the exhibition and the need for some sort of sculptural element to break its homogeneity. Minimal and elegant but also flimsy and ephemeral they provided a timely, but temporal solution and as a modular structure would be appropriated by Mujica and utilized in several exhibitions afterwards as a means of organizing space and surrounding works in a dialogic manner.

These collaborations continued in the following years with revolving participants –the involvement of new friends or the departure of/reunion with old ones, for example the inclusion of Basque artist Itziar Okariz in a 2008 group exhibition at Thrust Projects, a small, commercial gallery (now closed) on the Bowery in New York. Okariz's work – filled with references to local Basque culture – has a certain conceptual resonance to that of the

Chileans insofar as it must constantly negotiate a series of potential misreadings imposed by the failure of a global spectator to differentiate between diverse sites of geographic periphery. (I imagine that Okariz must bear being identified as a “Spanish” artist just as any Latin American artist must accept the inevitable disappearance of references to his/her particular country. Take, for example, Roberta Smith’s blunder in her *New York Times* review of Juan Céspedes when referred to him as a Mexican artist. Not even the fact-checkers caught the error, but of course nobody really cared anyway.) At Sezession Wichtelgasse, an artist-run space in Vienna, Lehyt, Mujica, and Unzueta mounted an austere and elegant exhibition of sculpture, photography and video in muted colors and with a formal coherence that connected their work visually despite the artists’ divergent conceptual points of departure: from Lehyt’s more overtly political interests in Chilean history to Unzueta’s insistence on the social significance of personal biography to Mujica’s comparative analysis of the visual tropes of modernism and popular culture.

And so what began with particular urgency in a specific place nearly two decades ago has developed into a simple means to pursue self-organized and independent activities alongside more commercial or institutional ones amidst a multitude of ‘scenes’ and possible protagonists. In a situation with greater possibilities, collaborative practice between artists (as opposed to collaborative works made with non-artists which is another issue altogether) doesn’t have the same function it has in another, more limited situation so that there’s a range of possible motives – an avowal of the possibility of disinterested networking or a more efficient way to access public funds or even just a simple gesture of solidarity, as in: wanting to work with and support people you like and respect beyond the parameters of meditated careerism. The writing of this text signals a more concerted effort by Felipe Mujica – the initiator of many of these projects, including this catalogue – to reflect upon this question with a document (in the form of a catalogue) that will accompany forthcoming group exhibitions in London, Cologne, and Vienna. If the art world tends to promote both an individualistic culture of art stardom and a false sense of collectivity within artificially constructed local ‘scenes’, then wanting to preserve a shared history or a collective identity – be it a history in constant flux or an identity that is open and malleable – within self-organized initiatives in a broad range of venues, seems to be a quiet act of defiance, subdued but substantial.

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<sup>i</sup> In his essay “A Berlin Chronicle,” Walter Benjamin wrote: “If I write better German than most writers of my generation, it is thanks largely to twenty years’ observance of one little rule: never use the word “I” except in letters.” *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Ed. Peter Demetz, Trans. Edmund Jephcott. New York: Schocken Books, 1986.

<sup>ii</sup> A term coined by French born, Chilean critic and art historian Nelly Richard to refer to a seminal group of conceptual artists and writers active in the late ‘70s/early ‘80s including Carlos Leppe, Eugenio Dittborn, Lotty Rosenfeld, Diamela Eltit, and Raul Zurita among others. For further reading see: *Margins and Institutions: Art in Chile Since 1973*, Melbourne: *Art & Text*, 1986.