

## **Email Interview with Johanna Unzueta and Felipe Mujica**

**By Chelsea Culp and Ben Foch from NEW CAPITAL, Chicago**

**Tell us a bit about how your artistic collaboration began—your original working process— and how it has evolved. Could you also tell us about your experience with artist-run galleries and the impact this has had on your work?**

**Felipe:** We met in art school in 1996 . . . actually, we had met before and had some friends in common, but it was in March 1996 that we actually became a couple, so we have a long history together. I was finishing art school and Johanna still had a couple of years to go, so I would say that our first “artistic” collaborations were when I spontaneously became her cameraman. Johanna was working on some sculptural projects that required her to move these furniture pieces made of corrugated cardboard to different places around the city. So I would help her and drive her around . . . I was kind of like the boyfriend/artist assistant. Around this time I had just taken a seminar with Eugenio Dittborn called *Puesta en escena*, in which he strongly encouraged students to engage with the real world. All of our assignments were sent to us by fax and we were to execute them outside of the university. He also made us work in groups of two to three artists, so that we would learn to collaborate and negotiate while working on group projects. The whole course was basically about surviving as an artist in a scene that offered little infrastructure given the cultural, social, and political challenges faced by the country as a whole. For the final exam each student had to find a temporary exhibition space outside of the university and to do all the work related to putting together an exhibition—from convincing the owners of the space to loan it, to preparing the physical space, to planning and producing the actual work, to designing an invitation card and promoting the show. We even had to have an opening reception. This experience, along with a series of self-produced group exhibitions and a trip to Cologne in the summer of 1997, was the basis for *Galería Chilena*, the artist-run space I founded with Diego and José Luis, two good friends and classmates from art school. *Galería Chilena* was something like the “professionalization” of these short, intense collaborations during our art school years. It was also a fiction of an art space, as we had no real exhibition space or budget. What we did have was time and good intentions, as well as a studio/office/storage space that became our headquarters. We met regularly there to decide which artists we wanted to represent and which spaces in Santiago we could acquire as temporary exhibition venues. In retrospect these were very interesting and intense years (roughly 1995–99). We eventually invited Johanna and Patricia Cepeda (another artist from our group of friends) to have their first public exhibition, and this became our first “women’s show.” (After only a couple of shows we had been already criticized for being too boy-oriented.) So from a “professional” point of view this was probably our first serious collaboration as artists. The show was titled “*Guauhaus*” and it opened in April 1999.

**Johanna:** My early development was very different, as I did not take that class with Dittborn. I actually learned about it many years later. I think I became interested in the idea of collaboration after meeting Felipe. Just by doing things together we realized that it was better to join forces to get things done, especially given what Chile was like at that time. After moving to New York a few years later, we found ourselves pretty much alone in this huge art world, so continuing to collaborate in this context seemed like a very good and useful way to work. Also, although both Felipe and I have gallery representation, we find that working collaboratively allows us to maintain a certain level of independence from the art market. In this way it is a political gesture . . . and it has also allowed us to meet and work with other artists and spaces over the years, like Message Salon in Zürich, Sezession Wichtelgasse and Saprophyt in Vienna, Capacete in Rio de Janeiro, and Perros Negros in Mexico City. To be able to do projects with these spaces gives us a freedom that is very rewarding.

**We have also confronted similar issues. Early on we knew we wanted to work with artists whose practices and interests are not easily commodified or do not fit into a dominant historical narrative, but we also didn't want to seek out and promote any particular artistic identity. At the time it felt too forced, rather, we wanted to see where our immediate networks would lead. Through experience we learned that in order to support underrepresented narratives, for example women artists, it is necessary to intentionally look for them, because the art world (like the world at large) has historically been engineered to exclude female perspectives, and these exclusionary models still linger. Do you think the situation for emerging female Chilean artists has changed much over the years? If so, how? How does the situation vary from what you see in New York? Why did you decide to move from Chile to New York?**

**Felipe:** In January 2000 Johanna and I moved to New York . . . basically because we had Chilean friends here who were saying great things about the city and encouraging us to come. At the same time we felt that the Chilean art circuit was maybe too small for us—too narrow-minded in a way—and as we were very young (twenty-five), we had the energy to try something new. After some years of practical adjustments (like having day jobs that involved painting and printing decorative work), we started to organize and participate in new projects again. Our daily life is one big collaboration: not only have we been raising a child together since 2003, but we constantly share ideas and critiques regarding our individual work, see shows together, discuss them, and so on. We are part of a small group of Chilean artists who moved to New York more or less around the same time (late '90s/early 2000s), but we also maintain a broader dialogue with other artists— from Latin America, Europe, and North America— whose interests we share. In this sense, New York is a very active place; it allows you to broaden your conceptual interests while recognizing the similarities between different contexts. I would say that our collaborative projects have fluctuated more than evolved, depending on when and where we are working . . . sometimes they involve more artists, sometimes they take place in

Chile or in Europe. Sometimes it's just me and Johanna putting together a show or helping each other in the production of a specific piece or exhibition, or helping each other write a grant application. It's very intense but it's also a nice way to get things done.

Now about the issue of female Chilean artists, I think once you decide to be an artist (in Chile) it is difficult no matter what, and I guess the same applies to New York. In Chile there might be slightly more traditional expectations for women of a certain social class. But luckily the Chilean art world is fairly democratic and progressive; most cultural producers in Chile—visual artists, writers, poets, musicians, and filmmakers—are not part of an economic elite but are from more modest backgrounds. I don't think that gender is such a big factor. Of course Chile is still, in some ways, a *machista* society. Sometimes it can be light and funny (for example, the Chilean form of cat-calling is usually poetic/romantic rather than sexualized/aggressive), while other manifestations are more problematic (Chile might be more homophobic than many other Latin cultures). New York is much more complex: there is so much diversity in term of cultural values. There is not one art world but many parallel ones, and this is the beauty of it actually. If you work hard you eventually find a space and context where you feel comfortable, even if it is marginal.

**Johanna, you mentioned before that you felt a certain freedom when working collaboratively and more independently. Do you ever feel that producing work for your commercial gallery is a safer, more economically viable path? Do you feel you make explicit sacrifices? Are your respective dealers supportive? It seems to us that working outside of a commercial circuit greatly benefits your work, but we've seen instances in which certain dealers do not encourage it.**

**Johanna:** Of course when you work with a gallery it's a different experience than just working by yourself or in collaboration with other artists or independent projects. With a gallery you have to compromise, as there are commercial motives involved: the dealer must be able to sell your work, but you must be able to protect the quality of your work while conceiving it as a product or tangible object. I know my gallerists really like and respect my work—otherwise they wouldn't represent me—but I also know they must make certain decisions based on sales, on how successfully my work appeals to potential buyers. The big difference with the independent projects is that these factors are not at play, and that can be really refreshing. I also think that every kind of space has some sort of agenda, for example museums and institutions usually require that the work they exhibit fit into some sort of theoretical or historical framework. I feel that working with independent spaces is a bit more direct— perhaps more democratic— especially artist-run spaces. Working with a gallery is like having a job (like being in the real world!), while working collaboratively and independently seems more utopian—we work with what we have, which is not much. Now sometimes you can find galleries that are hybrids: they start off as project spaces and slowly begin to experiment with selling work. These projects are

interesting because they try to be the best of both worlds. I am lucky that the galleries I work with do not interfere with my noncommercial practice. I really think that artists benefit from working with all kinds of venues—independent spaces, commercial galleries, museums, and institutions. The possibility of experiencing such different working conditions allows us, as artists, to explore different aspects of our work—how it is produced and under what circumstances, how and by whom it is read, and so on.

**What are some specific similarities and differences between the contexts and interests of the Latin American, European, and American artists you are in conversation with?**

**Felipe:** As we mentioned before, we've had the opportunity to collaborate with artists and spaces in various countries, and what is interesting is that while there are significant cultural differences that make every situation unique, there are also basic ideals and patterns of behavior that are shared across cultural divides. In Chile we have major problems: there are no serious collectors, the local art discourse is far too academic, there are no print art magazines, the museum collections are barely maintained while their regular programming lacks vision or focus. Galería Chilena attempted to respond to all of these issues, and the model we decided upon was the one we felt to be most appropriate and feasible: a commercial yet critical, nomadic space. Even though we share the same language and similar historical backgrounds with places like Argentina, Brazil, or Mexico, each situation is also very different. In these countries there are museums with serious collections and magazines that publish art criticism. In Brazil there is the São Paulo Bienal while the contemporary art scene in Mexico is incredibly dynamic—Zona Maco has become one of the leading international art fairs. Yet there are still independent projects and artist run-spaces in all of these places, and the same can be said for Vienna, London, and Chicago. So this makes you consider that perhaps more than the need to address a specific problem, such projects are more about creating and working within a system based on personal, transparent relationships, as Johanna said before, and doing so with affection.

We also have to put all of this into historical context: art history is much more interesting and fun when it is filled with artist-produced actions and events! There are so many examples, like Courbet's "Pavilion of Realism," where he set up a temporary structure next door to the official 1855 "Exposition Universelle" in Paris to show his work, which had been rejected by the jury. There were also many alternative venues (that have since become international institutions) such as The Vienna Secession, founded in 1897 by Gustav Klimt and his friends in reaction to the ". . . prevailing conservatism of the Vienna Künstlerhaus with its traditional orientation toward Historicism." (Thanks, *Wikipedia*.) There are many more historical examples of artist-run projects: "Brücke" (Dresden, 1906), was the first exhibition by a group of young printmakers who convinced a lamp company to host their work in its showroom, or Duchamp and Breton's "First Papers of Surrealism" (New York, 1942), which benefited the Coordinating

Council of French Relief Societies. Duchamp's weblike intervention altered the entire exhibition space, making it almost impossible to actually see the works. More recent instances include the activities of New York's Soho art scene in the '60s and early '70s, or the SIGNALS publication and gallery in London around the same time. I guess these were people just trying to do interesting projects outside mainstream cultural institutions, with lots of love for what they were doing. We can definitely relate to this.

**Could you talk about the relationship between both your collaborative and solo practice and modernism, minimalism, performance, and social space?**

**Johanna:** When I think about my practice and its history, I always remember I have been very interested in—even slightly obsessed with—the economy of materials I use to make work. When I produce a sculpture or project I attempt to utilize every single inch of the material I have at my disposal. During my last year at art school, I used cardboard to make very simple forms, in order to capture a formal idea with minimal means. I have always strongly believed that minimal gestures can make a big difference in the work and how it functions in the world. How you utilize resources reflects a particular viewpoint. Although at the time I wasn't familiar with this saying, I think I have always believed that "less is more." In this sense, a political gesture, or what I like to think of as a social response, is incorporated in my work. So while my work is not visually or formally connected to modernism or minimalism, it is related through the economy of means of my working process.

My videos always involve "performance," but I prefer to call them "actions" as there is no live audience. My actions always begin with objects—initially made out of cardboard but about ten years ago I began to use felt. Here I work in the same manner as when I make the object: I generally do not edit but, rather, film them in the way I think they should be watched. The viewer, then, can get a sense of the entire idea—the location, the space, the surrounding area or landscape. The important thing is to introduce the object (created in felt), as a new character on this stage and to question the significance of the object as well as the landscape it inhabits. The object now has a history or trail of its own. And in the actions, I am usually either wearing the object as a sculptural costume or using it as a prop, depending on the object and my intentions. Most of the time the action is very simple and not very logical. For example, in one video I pour water into a hand-sewn canister made out of felt. The source of the water is the river seen in the background. Obviously the water leaks out of the "can," and this determines the length of the video. Another important point is that most of the films are shot in Super 8, so they never exceed three minutes.

**Felipe:** Modernism is a very important reference in my solo and collaborative work, both formally and conceptually. The way I see it, modernism consisted of many small groups of local

artists who shared a desire for formal and material experimentation while engaging with the idea of social change— of making new forms for the new world—and varied according to each individual context. Ideas were promoted through personal and social connections and diffused within a broader international context, but without any of the possibilities of instant communication that we have today. In those days artists had to physically travel and meet with other artists in person, which we still do today, of course, just at a faster pace. Many of these trips were made by choice, while others were the result of forced migration due to war and persecution. This history is common knowledge, yet it still amazes me that few historians have examined the personal aspect of all of this social interaction: perhaps these kinds of anecdotes are dismissed as mere gossip. But then we wouldn't have so many -isms if it weren't for artists becoming friends, exchanging ideas, and then articulating them through collective actions, statements, and manifestos!

Minimalism is like the American extension of modernism. It's interesting that as technology developed it became more accessible to artists in the production of their works. Personally I find this marriage between industry and art complicated: it is interesting from the point of view of labor and production, yet every time I see a Judd or Serra I get a nagging, uncomfortable feeling. Industrial sculptures often seem a little too glossy, sleek, or massive, and it makes me wonder if they reflect a secret complicity with capitalism. Are these works really challenging? Do they really extend and develop modernist ideals (in a local context)? Or are they just sculptures that reinforced a capitalist mentality at the time of their production and continue to do so today as precious commodities in an inflated art market? I respect this generation of artists: they also collaborated on fun projects, yet there is something about how the work is read today that makes me question its motives. In this sense I am much more drawn to European, especially Russian, variants of modernism, for both their handcrafted technique and aesthetic and their political and social agendas. In Latin America, works that address the modernist legacy are similarly utopian and modest in terms of material—Helio Oiticica's parangolés are a good example.

GCH was a constant performance: we played the roles of gallerists and entrepreneurs. Every opening created a tighter, more intricate social space, which I think is exactly what Santiago needed at that time. Today, as artists move around more and more, the art world can seem much more fragmented, although obviously the Internet can help foster a different kind of social space or community. We just have to be careful to keep it honest and transparent . . . and to keep things going.