

## Nicolás Dumit Estévez Interviews Maris Bustamante

**NDE:** Thank you Maris for agreeing to participate in this interview. Your work is of great relevance to artists from the new generation.

My first curiosity is about the degree of freedom to create that one could sense in the Mexican capital of the 80s. This is a period that precedes the hyper-commercialization of art and the artistic that is prevalent today.

**MB:** Within humanity there are always limits to thinking and making freely, and additionally Mexico is a very conservative country. In post-colonial Mexico, structures are organized so as not to give permission, because people will then liberate themselves. In the 70s and 80s, making and talking about experimentation and especially about change used to provoked scorn and dismissal from almost all of one's colleagues and institutions.

**NDE:** In an interview with Sol Henaro, in part of her publication, you discuss how you and *No Grupo* remained aware of artistic terms and impositions coming from outside. My understanding is that you, meaning you and *No Grupo*, used to reflect on your art practices as artists working within a very specific context and realities. What can you add to this, particularly in reference to the globalization of artistic practice?

**MB:** Our political frame of action was the legacy of 1968 within a Latin American context, and to artistically negotiate the enormous baggage of the traditional, logical, object-oriented culture with its continuous, historical experience over at least seven hundred years, with the exception of a very few ruptures.

We worked from our own geographic location to recuperate popular urban culture itself. But we did not want to fall prey to mannerisms or hollow superficialities. We were interested in recognizing ourselves as belonging to the left, but not in an orthodox or pamphleteering way, and our work clearly reflected this awareness. We were not at all interested in falling into the trap of making sensational work with a tabloid-like content. We accepted the challenge to produce a contemporary body of work attuned to its time.

Economic globalization has been a disaster at a hemispheric level because of the free flow of products. This globalization does not include

the possibility of a wide and free circulation of people and ideas. Those who profited from economic treaties were Others, both here and there.

On the other hand, the exponential growth of technology has supported us, allowing us to interrelate in an instantaneous and efficient way. This has allowed for disruptions of the absolute influence that traditional spokespersons for the System used to exercise. Thank to this we can see with clarity that schools and universities have become lazy. Those who become artists do so in spite of the systems.

**NDE:** What is your relationship to performance art, an artistic form that is in vogue, and that is not exempted from having a connection to colonialism and imperialism within the arts? The “history” of performance art traces its roots to Europe and the United States.

**MB:** For us, performance art was a platform that we invented and that we ended up locating conceptually to substantially change the artistic system in Mexico. Performance art helped us change how we thought and made art, and to critique many things that were in a deplorable state. There was a great need for drastic changes. We foresaw those changes that today have become commonplace. We foretold them.

From this we developed ideas and concepts through artwork, texts, and essays both through the academy as well as through artistic praxis to defend performance art from Western cultural hegemonies. First Western European, and then Anglo American thought not only appropriated it but also expropriated its platform to claim it as part of their own historical development.

What we did in performance art, installation and *ambientaciones* (which we call non-objectualisms) was to develop them from a Mesoamerican duality, from a very different cosmology. Once this approach became recognized and eventually fashionable, it stopped interesting me because once things become officialized they go down a road of no-return, one of repetition and laziness.

**NDE:** I am intrigued by the attention that your work in general gives to the autochthonous, to the quotidian in Mexico, at the same time that it formulates ideas and images at a sophisticated conceptual level. How do you achieve this dialogue?

**MB:** Our economic situation was always quite precarious, however we decided to work with our own traditional baggage in order to overcome this. When one does this with integrity, the results are clear and potent. We were very poor because we would go from one economic crisis to

the other, because capitalism was already foretelling what it would do with all of us. But we did not allow this to deter us. We were very ambitious, conceptually speaking.

Our decision was to value cultural elements that were in harmony with our intentions. Just like Picasso valued Black art and, during their time, the muralists recognized the value of Pre-Cuauhtémoc art, we decided to work with our immediate heritage: this mega-city that has become more and more complex due to anonymous popular contributions. We decided to recognize this urban popular culture as a way to voluntarily set ourselves apart from the elite bodies that develop and coopt the arts for themselves.

**NDE:** How did you come up with the idea of patenting the taco? You have inspired me to do the same with *el mangú*, a Dominican dish that is made from mashing green plantains into a puree-like consistency.

**MB:** My main idea was that of creating a social performance, and that of offering to the people the possibility of circulating in performatic situations; to pull it out of the galleries and museum, widening the perception of the public. All of this required identifying an element with enough power, content and cultural force. When I found this element, everything else started to unfold. The patent, as with kidnapping, was a resource that conceptualists were already hinting at, and so I thought this was the ideal strategy to get attention and to catch the eye of the non-professional, which is what a proposal of this kind called for.

**NDE:** Do you have any suggestions to share with artists from the younger generations? I am greatly inspired by the space that you, Melquiades and the *No Grupo* opened up to experimentation. This is something that takes effort to replicate in a time where international biennials and art fairs, and amidst the homogenization of the artistic “profession.”

**MB:** All of this paraphernalia is seeking to shed a light on artistic proposals as well as the individuals that produce them. They become class enclosures that attempt to distance the individuals and their proposals from the relevant political “mission” that art has had in the production of knowledge and ideas. I always understood, at least for me, that to be an artist is to do something that has not been done before and that makes a contribution to humanity. If I make art because “I like it” it only indicates a shallowness that has nothing to do with art. All the rest is “televising” art that is, it makes room for it in informal and lazy way, as entertainment. To me, the alternatives in art are to make art or to make pure *manualidades*, handicrafts.

**NDE:** I hope that our next conversation can take place in Mexico City, my favorite megalopolis. Would you be up for getting together for some tacos?

**MB:** We will do so!

This interview is part of *Crossfire*, a project conceived and edited by Nicolás Dumit Estévez for El Museo del Barrio.