

Talking to an artist who has the same interests in art as you do is always alluring. Given that the following paragraphs could have been fragments of conversations that happened over several years, it would seem like the moment to try to put them in order had somehow been prearranged. So when Julie Rodrigues Widholm asked me to interview Stefan Brüggemann about Programa Art Center — the space that Iñaki Bonillas and Brüggemann co directed from 2000 to 2004 — I felt that the time had come to clear up the differences among our generally common interests.

In the years we both lived in Mexico City, these same interests led us not only to work collaboratively but also to combine our efforts to present specific artists in Mexico, organizing exhibitions that allowed us to share our concerns with colleagues. The following exchange took place over email during the last three weeks of 2006 from various places outside Mexico, which explains why the following accounts may seem distant geographically and temporally.

Stefan Brüggemann: When did you move to Mexico City and why?

Mario García Torres: I think it was in 1999. I was in Monterrey, where I'd organized some shows, written a few articles for the newspaper, and had just left my job at the Museum of Monterrey, telling them I wanted to spend more time on my own work. The art scene there didn't correspond to my interests, so I decided to try to show and write about the work of artists who interested me while working on my own practice. That was when Osvaldo Sánchez offered me

a job as a curator at the Carrillo Gil Museum of Art. I had already attended a few conferences by curators organized at the museum, so the job seemed interesting.

SB: I met Harald Szeemann at the Carrillo Gil Museum.

MGT: When I got to the museum, organizing these curators' visits, including Szeemann to be exact, became part of my job. I followed through with the entire pre-established program. A few months earlier I had taken part in a show at Art Deposit: a group show of Monterrey artists that very few people probably saw. That was the beginning of my affair with Mexico City. You were involved in Art Deposit, but I don't think that's where we met.

SB: I opened my first space Art Deposit in 1996 on Tabasco Street in the Roma neighborhood in a building dating from the turn of the twentieth century. There was talk of alternative spaces back then, and the motive behind opening the space was the climate of apathy I experienced over my years at the National Center of the Arts (CNA). Among the teachers, the exception was Alberto Gutiérrez Chong, who had a vision about the use of so-called alternative media, which led to a new way of making work. Many artists who were showing at that time had studied abroad at universities in the United States and Europe. I didn't identify with their ideas. There weren't any interesting spaces in which to show our work at the time, so I convinced Edgar Orlaineta, whom I'd met at the CNA,

that we should open a space to show our work, get out of the school environment, and deal with the real world. That's how Art Deposit arose; Ulises Mora joined us about six months later.

MGT: What distinguished Art Deposit from other spaces at the time?

SB: We were experimenting then, we did two shows per month, and we paid the rent by selling liquor. We showed work by Eduardo Abaroa, SEMEFO, and Santiago Sierra to mention only a few. That's where I met Santiago Sierra. He burned the entire gallery, and my work *Opening Titles* was on the only wall he left untouched. I put the information about the exhibition on that wall as a piece.

MGT: What kind of impact did Art Deposit have on the Mexico City scene? How did you select the artists you showed there?

SB: I picked the artists intuitively, but the exhibition that best represents my idea of how shows should be done was *Opening*, the one I just mentioned, with Santiago Sierra, where we went from having a white gallery to burning it and only leaving one wall untouched. It's important to note that Art Deposits public was people our own age who were studying in other media at the university and grew up with the work; I think in a way it left a mark on them, and some of them still go to the shows of the artists we presented.

MGT: Do you think that this was perceived as a different way of putting on shows in Mexico City, maybe compared to other spaces?

SB: Absolutely, the aesthetic was different: not figurative, but rather conceptual and minimal.

MGT: I'm not sure when Pierre Raine opened the BF.15 Gallery in Monterrey, but I think that that aesthetic had some bearing on Pierre's commercial program. Some of the artists you mention showed there along with local ones. BF.15's program was very important for Monterrey. SEMEFO and Santiago Sierra showed there, and later Iñaki Bonillas and yourself. Pierre's gallery was also very different from those that existed in Mexico City at the time, and even now there aren't any working in that specific vein.

SB: Yes, but those spaces showed those artists several years after I did.

MGT: It might have been later; in any case, I think it was very much in the same aesthetic spirit that you mention. (Editor's note: according to Pierre Raine, BF.15 existed from 1997 to 2001.)

SB: At that time, my work was undergoing a transition, from painting words to applying them to the wall using a digital process, with vinyl lettering, and viewing the exhibition as a piece.

MGT: When did you become interested in “conceptual art”?

SB: In 1994, when I painted a word on a canvas after seeing a piece by On Kawara.

MGT: It seems to me that, at that time, you, Iñaki, and maybe Santiago Sierra shared certain tautological interests on the one hand, and on the other, you all rejected the idea of working toward the purpose of creating objects. Was that what really attracted you to that kind of practice?

SB: One of the things we discussed was getting rid of the surrealist object and making concrete work. I’ve always had an interest in the mental.

MGT: What kind of information did you have access to at the time? For me, in northern Mexico, that sort of information was really very scarce. But sometimes I feel like so-called conceptual works were rediscovered simultaneously around the world, essentially in the early 1990s. There are probably a lot more people who know about them now than when they were first shown in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was also in the 1990s that a series of initiatives emerged

reclaiming this sort of practice outside of the European and American mainstream.

SB: The information always came from books, and I had the catalogue of the exhibition about conceptual art organized in Paris, *L'art conceptuel, une perspective* (Museum of Modern Art, Paris 1989). What about you?

MGT: I don't know. I guess it was while I was still studying. It seemed to me that things could be said in a simpler, more direct manner. That was my naive idea of conceptual art. I developed an interest for that sort of practice more as a reaction to what was around me. It was when I found some information about it at the University of Monterrey library, where I spent many hours looking at the same texts over and over again in a few magazines.

SB: What was your first project in Mexico City?

MGT: I'd been hired at the Carrillo Gil to organize electronic media presentations. Net.Art was defining itself in those years, and I was interested in those discussions, so I invited Olia Lialina to present a project. I think that only a tiny part of the museum's public even realized it existed.

SB: What did it consist of?

MGT: It was a project that only existed on the Internet and dealt with clarifying the fact that a digital object implied a kind of property. It was called *Will-n-testament* or something like that. It was a written will stating to which of her heirs she left such and such a piece, who she left her email address to, etc. It was just a webpage with links to her various works.

SB: I think that was when, in 1998 Pedro Reyes, who was then a curator at the museum, invited me to do a project. I did an installation on the roof of the museum titled *Parking Lot*, which was exactly that, designed according to specifications to work. I was interested in making the museum disappear, in taking it to an urban topographic level. The idea was that when you took aerial photographs as a record of the city, the building became a parking lot. I think that kind of practice — finding different spaces to present a show outside the museum —was interesting. It was making work with spaces instead of objects.

MGT: The shows I organized in Monterrey were like that: in a motel, in bars, and in the newspaper. Have you looked for a picture of that piece recently now that American satellites have photographed practically the whole world?

SB: Yes, I have documentation of the 2000 Mexico City cadastral survey.

MGT: And is the parking lot still there?

SB: I'm sure it is. It must be rather dilapidated.

MGT: How did your Art Deposit work turn into Programa?

SB: They were two totally different projects. After closing Art Deposit, I went to London, and I opened Programa three years later. When I opened Programa, I saw there was apathy in Mexico. How many curators weren't doing anything, just talking? And I also saw that 1980s neo-Mexicanism hadn't gone out of style: it had turned into a 1990s neo-neo-Mexicanism, and today it's still somewhat the same old Mexican cliché: folklore, violence, pollution, mystery, etc. I think Mexico is more than that.

MGT: Do you think some people were still trying to define what is "Mexican" then? I don't see it that way. There were quite a few artists working against that over the entire 1990s. Or do you think that, despite the fact that the media had changed, Mexican identity was still being exploited ideologically?

SB: There's nothing wrong with thinking about national identity, but in my mind you shouldn't think of it in terms of the national identity the world wants and create clichés for export. I think Mexico has changed a lot and so has its identity. In the late 1990s, a few artists, including myself, started making different work. I was always interested in conceptual practices and in applying

them to a distinct, atemporal context in order to see how that misunderstanding was a creative act.

MGT: There were some initiatives during the 1990s in Mexico — mainly texts by artists who tried to relate their work to the practice of performance artists in the 1970s — but to a certain point they were ineffectual. For some reason, there's a need in Mexico to create genealogies, even in terms of so-called alternative spaces. When you read texts written by artists, they often mention their love-hate relationship with the alternative space that preceded them. How do you handle this?

SB: I bear no hatred to the past or future. I believe references are rhizomatic.

MGT: I'm not sure if it's due to the artists or historians and curators who are sometimes entrusted with outlining these things, but there seems to be a rather premature urgency in Mexico to historicize recent years of contemporary art practice (something often done by artists themselves), as if an artist's alleged relationships or influences might disappear. Or this phenomenon might have to do with a need to capitalize on something that we used to do almost as a game. On the other hand, the right setting for promoting the kind of practice you mention only began to exist in Mexico a few years ago. And Programa might have contributed to this in some way. In recent years, there have been retrospectives of Mexicans like Ulises Carrión and Marcos Kurtycz, but also of

figures from the international mainstream like Lawrence Weiner, Fred Sandback, Bas Jan Ader, to mention only a few. When did you start working on Programa?

SB: All those shows you mention happened after Programa had opened. Programa opened in 2000 with a show called *Photographic Enterprise* with Daniel PXumm, Juergen Teller, Thomas Demand, and Rirkrit Tiravanija. In 2001, we had a show titled *White Noise, White Silence* with Ceal Floyer, Martin Creed, Maurizio Cattelan, Iñaki Bonillas, Gonzalo Lebrija, Fernando Ortega, and myself. I think that show introduced a different kind of practice related to the idea of the conceptual, seen from a current perspective. And it happened before all the shows you just mentioned.

MGT: How much interest do you think *White Noise, White Silence* sparked? Do you think it reached a wide, general audience and paved the way for these practices to have broader appeal?

SB: It was very important; in my case — which is the one I can better respond to you about — I showed the neon piece *THIS IS NOT SUPPOSED TO BE HERE* (2001); and some of our work started defining itself as it was shown to a broader audience; dialogues were established between artists and the public.

MGT: How was Programa run? How many of the shows were curated by its directors and how many by guest curators?

SB: All the shows were organized by different curators, and they worked very closely with us. Very intense work teams were formed, as in the case of *Purple Lounge/Purple Stars*, curated by Elein Fleiss, Olivier Zahm, and Pablo León de la Barra, which was a very complex show where various environments were created inside the exhibition hall; *DATA*, which you curated in collaboration with Celeste magazine, published by Vanesa Fernández and Aldo Chaparro; *Sala/Moulène* curated by Corinne Diserens, a show in which Jean-Luc Moulène's photographs were shown in Mexico for the first time. He uses photography to study everyday natural and cultural behavior and how it is redefined by industrial development.

MGT: What about the local scene? Do you think these exhibitions had any specific impact?

SB: You can see the result from the shows that Mexico City museums staged afterward, the ones you just mentioned. And most important, a lot of emerging artists saw the shows when they were young and still going to university, and now you can begin to see the correspondence in their work.

MGT: What I was referring to was that there was a series of factors and agents, among which Programa undoubtedly played an important role, that definitely helped spark a series of changes in the local art scene over several years. The fact that the kind of work you mention met with a difficult reception in Mexico was undoubtedly one factor, as it seemed that when curators and audiences came from abroad, this type of work didn't necessarily fulfill their expectations. It seems to me that a lot of these people came with a preconceived idea of what Mexico City was like and the kind of art that was made there.

SB: Absolutely. That wasn't the work that Mexico was exporting or what curators wanted to take with them.

MGT: Someone else whose work was recently shown at the Tamayo Museum of Contemporary Art is David Lamelas. I think Lamelas is important from that point of view since he's a Latin American artist who knew how to negotiate that cultural baggage vis-à-vis the mainstream from the outset. Before we start defining genealogies, I feel it's more important to point out when this kind of practice became possible and how it came to be received in Mexico. For some time, at least in my mind, practices like yours, Iñaki's, or Santiago Sierra's were perceived as adopting foreign models. Maybe because the critics were too busy looking for a formula to internationalize Mexican contemporary art on different terms. But this wasn't only the state's project: it seems that it constituted a

collective agreement that was reached without ever being discussed, something like an unspoken social contract. It seems like all the efforts were directed at bringing curators and organizing shows that included a mixture of Mexican and foreign artists. Though this is still going on, it doesn't seem like it's much of an effort anymore. It's more like an everyday thing.

SB: When I codirected Programa, my idea was to invite national and international curators and artists, but it was always very clear to me that relationships should be established based on ideas and not, as in other cases, on territory, setting, or a notion of exoticism. I'm interested in a relationship of ideas, and these ideas can be close to you or remote, but talking about territory as representation leads to generalizations, and that's a mediocre way of making art. What do you think of the idea of territory in art?

MGT: I've persistently tried to negate any relationship between my work and my nationality. I'm not interested in my work being read from that perspective because it's totally irrelevant. I'm not interested in negating my nationality, but I don't think there's any argument that could lead my practice to be viewed from that perspective.

SB: I'd like to know why you made the work with three boarding passes in your name, to Xy to three different destinations at the same time.

MGT: I can tell you I made that piece for two specific reasons. On the one hand, I was interested in exploring nonvisual forms of documentation, and a plane ticket seemed interesting in that legally, it's an irrevocable record of where you are at a certain time. On the other hand, I wanted to refer to how common my name is in our country.

SB: I'm interested in the disappearance of the artist. It also makes me think of Christian Jankowski's videos at Programa, where he turns the museum director into a poodle, the public into sheep, and himself into a dove in a magic act.

MGT: Those projects by Christian are interesting because in some way they manage to reconceive the art object and also the art system's other agents as entities that are sometimes hard to define. In that sense, many of my activities have also been defined by a kind of visual ambiguity. I feel that, up to a point in Mexico, a broad segment of the public prefers or relates more readily to forms and styles that are easily identifiable than to more abstract and ambiguous processes.

SB: Abstract and ambiguous processes interest me because they allow experimentation and freedom and don't limit you to a definite style; on the contrary, they question each creative act. How would you describe your visual ambiguity?

MGT: In 2002, I was invited to New York as an artist for the first time, and instead of presenting my work at a conference like they'd asked me to, I proposed to do a performance lasting the whole time I was there, which was to stop talking every time I entered an art space. When someone was surprised by my attitude, I handed him or her a small card that read "I can't talk in museums and galleries" and that had the address of the Americas Society, where the group show I was in was being held. I wanted this intervention to be almost invisible, and at the same time, I wanted to create some sort of intrigue about the show I had been invited to. I also made a piece at the time at la Torre de los Vientos (The Tower of Winds) titled Mario García's Opening Has Been Postponed. For specific circumstances, I did a project that consisted only in announcing that my show had been postponed, like the title says, over email, and to broadcast that same message in Morse code from an airport light at the top of the tower. There never was an opening, and that was the show. What interested me was not to define my practice, rejecting the definition of a style in a way, which in Mexico, at least a few years ago, was hard to do.

SB: In my work the idea of dispersion is important, how to reveal multiple points of access and exit.

MGT: How was Programa formed?

SB: Programa was founded by Iñaki Bonilla and myself as a nonprofit association, financed by corporate sponsorships. We did it because in Mexico, at the time, institutions were apathetic, and we thought it was important to establish a dialogue between the public and artists and present a different way of producing culture. In a way, it functioned as institutional criticism, but it wasn't merely critical and also managed to introduce a model for producing culture implying another kind of freedom.

MGT: But wasn't it the municipal government that gave you the space?

SB: The municipal government was just one sponsor.

MGT: What do you think distinguished Programa from other artist-run spaces in Mexico City? Looking back now, do you think it was really that different from, say, La Panadería?

SB: La Panadería, as far as I know, was sponsored by its directors' families and depended on a few grants. Programa sought out companies to involve them in the project. To me this association was important because I think that private enterprise must take responsibility for its country's culture, so artists and cultural organizations don't always have to depend on the public sector.

MGT: I feel it's very important to define the way each space is founded, but I'm not entirely sure whether, in the case of Programa and La Panadería, this is something that influences or is rejected by their programs.

SB: No, I think that each space had its own specific interests and rejected different ways of producing culture, of how culture inserts itself in reality.

MGT: What motivated you to do these kinds of shows in Mexico City? Was it a personal interest, or do you think that somehow it was an intervention in the city's cultural fabric?

SB: Both. On the one hand, I was interested in conceptual and minimalist strategies, in how they insert themselves or can be discovered in Mexican culture. These strategies insert themselves as a series of misunderstandings, and that's where the creative act and act of negotiation with the environment takes place.

MGT: What do you mean by misunderstanding? You've already mentioned it a couple of times. Are you referring to the adoption of systems created outside this context?

SB: Yes, I'm interested in seeing how this adaptation or readaptation of an economic, social, or aesthetic model creates a series of misunderstandings that function to communicate. It's a little like what happened with modernism:

European modernism is different from Latin American modernism. At Programa, the idea of the international was very important in order to include local practice in an international debate beyond any notion of exoticism, and then produce ideas. From Mexico looking outward, it reminds me of the idea of the non-place, like airports for example.

MGT: Historically, during the 1990s, there was a series of individuals in Mexico who fought against a very deeply rooted, traditional vision of art and managed to change that mindset. I think Programa subsequently managed to open the crack a little more for less object-based practices.

SB: Those ideas from the 1990s you're talking about were ultimately like a kind of late neo-Mexicanism. At Programa, even the way the materials of representation were used had to do with a media-saturated, industrial world — a world that rejected the acceleration of economic, political, and social ideas.

MGT: On the one hand, Programa was one of the agents that helped Mexico be viewed as an art destination rather than as an exotic place. Programa could have been in any city in the world, and that helps us reconceive art-making from our context, in such a way that it doesn't necessarily reject the city's violence or its folkloric aspects, or in the best of cases, how tacky the nostalgic aesthetic of an imperiled Mexican middle class can be — in short, the whole imaginary that often prevails when the country is viewed from abroad. However, it's also

important to take into account that this was precisely what, up to a point, alienated a part of our community that wasn't interested in negotiating art in that way.

SB: I agree, absolutely. That alienation lends power to the proposal and then makes it explode. However, it has to do with the acceleration of communication and constant exchange. If you look at Mexico City from the top of the Latinoamericana Tower, the first thing you notice is that there's no color, an absence of color; but the notion of misunderstanding is easy to understand when you realize how many architectural styles are in a single block or even in a single building. The mixture of all that makes me think of what you get when you mix all the colors of modeling clay: a brown ball, and that interests me. At the FITAC (International Forum on Contemporary Art Theory) you organized, you talked about the idea of reactivating conceptual practice. How do you do that?

MGT: The FITAC had to do with repositioning certain historical processes, analyzing the implications of creating certain works and their recontextualization in social and political history, specifically Mexican history and art history. That's why, besides artists, curators, and critics, I also invited anthropologists, historians, and filmmakers. Some of the guests were associated with more than one of these Welds, like Andrea Fraser, who had taken part in a movie by

historian and critic Olivier Debrouse; Seth Seiglaub, the gallerist and curator who distributed the work of the “hardcore conceptualists” in the late 1960s and who hadn’t been active in the art world for more than a decade (to be exact, since he’d responded to the text Benjamin Buchloch published in the second edition of the catalogue of the Paris show you mentioned); even artists like Jonathan Monk, who rebuilt a series of conceptual works from a personal historical perspective over the last decade, among many others.

SB: That was when Programa held its last show, which was Jonathan Monk’s solo show.

MGT: At that time, I felt that there shouldn’t be such a dramatic dislocation between the negation of historical processes and practices that originated in the 1960s. It seemed to me that there was a specific impasse in Mexico that caused a generalized rejection of historical processes. It was an unnecessary rejection, even when there might still be a need to legitimize other kinds of practice because the referents to neo-Mexicanism had already been exorcized. That’s why I felt that this subject was something that had to be discussed specifically in terms of the Mexican scene. In any case, the event went practically unnoticed and almost became a private conversation. In hindsight, the subject focused on overly specific discussions, which didn’t help in terms of marketing; moreover, though the participants had been key figures in the network and the history of

international art, they weren't immediately recognizable names in the art circuit since they weren't curators or artists who could be useful in the future to capitalize on local art practice. That was the ninth and last forum; maybe someday I'll write a text called I Killed the FITAC.

SB: In my case I've always worked with something I call Twisted Conceptual Pop, which isn't really about historicizing or reactivating, but rather about twisting or folding the conceptual strategies of the 1970s to the point of contradicting them.

MGT: It's important to get back to the fact that for some reason I don't understand, it seems that in our country we are always trying to define ourselves vis-à-vis the foreign. What do you think?

SB: I don't try to relate to the foreign — I try to relate to ideas that can exist anywhere. How would you define yourself vis-à-vis the foreign?

MGT: I think foreign interest in Mexican art over the last few years created a need for artists to draw a line between themselves and the local scene. It forced us to take a stance in terms of how much we wanted to take part in an affair with national representation, one that was being imposed on us. Personally, I'm not interested in that sort of business. In that sense, my work is far from trying to redefine any idea that could be read on the basis of geographical coordinates.

SB: So what is it you're trying to define?

MGT: I'm not trying to define anything. My work is concerned with reconsidering historical processes, many of them related to past art practice, with the intention of referring to current social and political problems. The work I'm going to show in this exhibition is a kind of film treatment — in the form of a series of works — whose pretext is the hotel that Alighiero Boetti opened in Kabul, Afghanistan, in the 1970s. With this, I'm trying to understand the political and cultural transformations of this region of the (Greater) Middle East, mainly those that implicated a continuous series of wars. I'm also interested in reconsidering what Boetti's interests could have been in that region, and the repercussions his work (or his living there) had, not only on the country but in the art world. What are you going to show?

SB: ALL MY IDEAS ARE IMPORTED ALL MY PRODUCTS ARE EXPORTED
(ALL MY EXPLANATIONS ARE RUBBISH)