

Conversation between Vijai Patchineelam and Luiz Camillo Osorio.

This conversation came out of a proposal of Vijai's to insert an artist into the administration of museums, an artist acting as an artist, without specifically producing a work. This idea is now part of his doctoral project which brings together two Belgian institutions, the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Antwerp and the University of Antwerp. These interrogations were begun at the time of his exhibition project at MAM-Rio, in 2015, where he appropriated/restaged an exhibition by Carlos Zilio, held in the Experimental Room of that same museum in 1977. Doubts about the role of the artist in contemporary society and the search for less conventional outcomes have taken him in unusual directions since then. This is a conversation in progress that is currently taking a reflective, technical pause before it duly resumes its course.

Vijai Patchineelam - As you know I have been looking to employ artists for some time, in the role of artists, within the administrative area of art institutions. This idea came to me when I spent a year at the Jan Van Eyck Academy, in Holland. I decided to give up the individual studio they gave me there and, together with other colleagues, we decided to open an informal, collective kitchen. For the free access of artists, curators, designers and employees of the institution. This happened because the collective kitchen that existed in the academy building had been replaced by a commercial café after a major renovation which this the building and the institution underwent, following deep cuts to the culture budget of the Dutch government. In 2011, the Dutch government announced a cut of approximately 70% to the culture budget. Institutions like the Jan Van Eyck Academy, Des Ateliers and Rijksakademie, suffered directly and had to become self-sufficient by 2013.

At the time, the director who took office to implement the reforms, indicated that he was opposed to the informal kitchen and tried, through his employees, to dissuade me from the idea and to shut down the kitchen. I kept the kitchen open, ignoring the requests for its closure, asserting that there was nothing written in the contract I had signed with the institution that prohibited having kitchen equipment in the studio. I

was very familiar with the contract because there was an item that prohibited having a bed, mattress and sofa, which, to the institution, indicated that the studio was being used as a residence. That wasn't allowed. At the end of my one year stay at the academy, and following eight months of the informal kitchen's being in operation, I had to dismantle it and leave. The following year, a new item was added to the contract that prohibited any kitchen equipment inside the studios. Only last year a kitchen was installed by the institution following requests from the participants who came there subsequently.

Camillo, I'm going to leap directly to the question here, without explaining how and why that experience led me to the proposal that I have been seeking. I'd now like to turn the tables a bit, and take advantage of your experience working within arts institutions like MAM-Rio, and put you in the position of the person seeking to realize this proposal, otherwise I'll just keep going and trying to justify my proposal. Like I was selling Bibles...

How would you justify the creation of a permanent, paid position, without pre-established tasks, for hiring artists within an art institution?

Luiz Camillo Osorio – This answer will not only take into account my experience as a curator of MAM-Rio but also my interest in thinking about the training of artists and new forms of institutional intervention concerning art, in view of the crisis and the transformation of museums and universities. On the one hand, there is a feeling that these institutions are anachronistic, that the teaching practices, the academic disciplines, the expository models and the ways of producing and experiencing art are currently tied to the past, which is to say, they create the impression that they do not respond to the wishes and changes of our time. On the other hand, it is a relief that there are still universities and museums, and that these institutions have been able to house multidisciplinary and even undisciplined experiments. We would be much worse off if there were not some form of institutional support, enabling projects, communication and the free circulation of ideas and critical thinking. If museums are conservative institutions, this is because preserving works and keeping us connected to

traditions is an essential part of their mission. Notwithstanding this conservative function, museums have demonstrated, at least since *Os Domingos da Criação* (MAM-Rio/1971) and *Information* (MoMA-New1970), enormous conspiratorial potential, incorporating criticism and transforming themselves as a result of it.

A possibility of the artist being incorporated into the museums, acting as a “(dis)functional frame” in the administrative area, is an interesting proposition which is difficult to implement. This incorporation could be seen as a performative act whose product is institutional displacement itself, redefining functions and organizational charts. Along with this, we mustn't forget that institutions must function well and everyone should be expected to assume responsibility. Several questions arise here: what kind of contract would be made? Would it be a kind of residency with a fixed period to happen, through a proposal submitted to the institution? How would you evaluate the performance of the artist in the administration of the museum without restricting his freedom of interference? Your proposal is clearly closely related to a type of work that functions at a kind of intersection between institutional criticism and critical institutionalities, which is to say, involving artists that insert themselves critically into institutions and institutions willing to act critically. A combination that is not at all simple, but is highly peculiar.

Rereading your question and my attempted answer, it gives the impression that I am using the current institutional model and its practices of governance to evaluate this possibility of the artist's acting in the administration of museums; this takes the gloss of some of the daring in your proposal. However, in order for it to be made feasible by you, it is important that it involves some kind of institutional negotiation, which implies addressing the minimum expectations of the institutions, their corporate processes and their terms of conduct. This cannot be an easy task.

I'd like to take this opportunity to cite a passage that should interest you from a text by Jesus Carillo, who, for many years, was the coordinator of the public projects of the Reina Sofia Museum, in which he discusses an analogous theme, to which he gave the name *Institutional Conspiracies* – which is so necessary in our time of controls and censorship. According to him:

“somehow, the etymological meaning of conspiracy, *conspiratio*, breathing together, or even the more general sense of «plotting» was suddenly recovered. We were not conspiring within our inadequate institution in order to make it work, we were conspiring with others from our inadequate institution in order to open up the conceptual, imaginary and political space for a different kind of institution to emerge”.
(file:///C:/Users/Samsung/Desktop/Conspiratorial_institutions_.pdf.pdf).

Are we willing, or rather, are we able to create museums where artists and employees can breathe together?

Having cited this passage, I will now ask you some questions: what was that experience like there in Belgium, working in the administration of BOZAR in Brussels? What other examples do you have of similar experiences? How does this relate to your doctoral project in Antwerp? What is the role of the artist at the university? Does art in its traditional formats no longer interest you?

V. P. – Regarding BOZAR, I worked there for three months as an intern in the *international policy* department, at the Latin America and Iran table. I was not an employee; I went through a contract between the Academy and BOZAR, where they redrafted a contract for Master’s students who needed to spend a period as an intern in order to graduate. Before starting this doctorate, a friend convinced me to develop this research project within the Academy, because, according to him, it would be good to have an institution behind me when I wanted to get into another, in order to avoid a situation where I was simply ignored or dismissed.

Before BOZAR, in 2016, I had already done something for a shorter period and informally, in São Paulo. At the time, I knew someone who worked on the curatorial team of MASP. I was invited to spend a week inside the open office which the team of curators, programmers and, if I’m not mistaken, educators, shared. No one knew the reason for my little internship; on the first day I was introduced only as an artist who would spend a week using a corner of one of the shared tables. During this week I talked to some of the employees. I was present at small meetings with the educators; it was a kind of introduction to new employees, to the library and night courses on the

history of art. I spent most of my time there sitting at this table. I quickly understood that the point of the experience there was to better understand some of the project's intentions within that workspace in an art institution. And not to convince those who worked there about my project. A sort of self-reflection of my body sitting there, as an artist, in a place where artists generally don't spend a lot of time, except perhaps at a meeting about an exhibition to be held or in another role, like several of the people there were. Educators, curators, among others with training in art, but now in a pre-established role within that institution.

During that week, I read brochures from the exhibitions on show, a book recently published on the project of adapting the easels of Lina Bo Bardi, a criticism of this revival of Lina's exhibition project by the new director of Masp. I received, from one of the educators, a stack of drawings made by children in a workshop with the artist Rivane Neuenschwander. In this pile I found the drawings that were not selected for the small exhibition of this work, organized near one of the museum's cafes. I found it quite funny that even children's drawings somehow undergo a kind of curating. I also quickly understood that the work done in this open office was not so different from mine; almost everything was done on keyboards in front of a computer screen. What concerned me was that, not being able to spend more time there, it would be difficult to understand what was being done there by each employee. So I decided to do this internship at BOZAR, to understand the day-to-day work of this type of institution. For the project it is important that the artist enter there not to perform an artistic intervention and nail the tables to the ceiling or such. But to have an artist, in his role as an artist, working in the administrative area of the institution. Which requires a longer commitment.

Returning to the experience at MASP, in addition to making notes on some ideas about how to accomplish this task, I read the book *The squirrels of Pavlov*, by the artist Laura Erber, which tells the story of a Romanian artist between residencies in Europe. It is a book that also contains a large dose of self-reflection about the figure of the artist today and the instrumentalization of his/her practice. And it made me think about how I would be regarded by my office colleagues who, while they worked, saw me reading and taking notes. This freedom, unlike that which led me to organize and maintain the

kitchen, made me think about the responsibility you mentioned. Years later, I had to confront this situation when I was at BOZAR. When they asked me to perform a certain task, that I did not necessarily agree with, but which needed to be done, I did it.

L.C.O. – It's interesting, the combination of these comings and goings of yours at the institutions, mixing residencies and museums, interfering in practices (when creating an alternative kitchen) or just listening to the internal rhythms and observing the institutional workings. I find it curious that you mention the fact of the artist being there as an artist, but without hanging chairs from the ceiling. Being there, without exactly knowing how, that's what interests you. I understand. The not knowing exactly how has to do with the novelty of the proposal, its experimental dimension. Moreover, you're going to have to do something based on this, even without knowing how, either as a doctoral thesis, or as an artist's book, or as a set of notes and subsequent institutional interferences. Something's going to have to happen so that it doesn't end with this exchange of ours and in the realm of the hypothetical.

While we are having this conversation, an artists' collective – Ruangrupa – from Indonesia, was nominated for the curatorship of the upcoming Documenta de Kassel. I remember the proposal of Jens Hoffman, at the start of the 2000s, "The Next Documenta Should be Curated by an Artist". A big debate took place. I think e-flux has some memory of this. Now it will, indeed, be curated by artists. Will this make a big difference? Your proposal "of the artist as an artist" in the administration of museums could develop and produce a reflective body which could gain institutional materiality.

As I said at the beginning of our conversation, we are experiencing an acute crisis in our art institutions today. They are being democratized and are becoming amusement parks and shopping centers. They are educational spaces and art doesn't really know what to teach. Art seeks to be useful, knowing that its uselessness may be a point of resistance in an increasingly pragmatic and accelerated world. When you speak of the "artist as an artist" you point to a specificity, a condition specific to the artist, which comes from his capacity to make art. In parallel, we are living at a time of profound non-specificity, where art is everywhere and nowhere, in which a state of art without

art demands an ignorance of what art is and an openness to its inserting itself at any time.

In Godard's latest film – *Le Livre d'Image* – he makes one of those inspired statements that seems to me to be pertinent to our conversation. As always, the more enigmatic it seems, the greater it is, prompting an intense desire to repeat it everywhere and thus to seek to understand it. He says: "when a century slowly dissolves into the following century, some individuals transform the means of survival into new means. It is the latter that we call art." Which is to say, when things cease to be merely utilitarian and, from the inside of a state of dilution, open up new forms of perception and transformation of the world, it seems that art has installed itself. In other words, in response to the crisis of the institutions, we need to create an institutional imagination. The artist as an artist is something that would help this movement. That's why he has to be there. That's why he has to know how to be there. So, to conclude this exchange, for now, speak a little more about the next steps of your thesis/project of the artist as artist in the administration of the museum. And comment on this statement by Godard.

V. P. – Regarding the need to do something, I go back to the experience with the informal kitchen. At the end of each year, there is a public moment when the Academy opens its doors and the participants - artists, critics, curators and designers - show what each has been working on in their studios. The curator, who was the director of the academy's artistic program, visits each participant to talk about what they intend to show. When he came to talk to me, at the request of the director of the academy, he asked me when I was going to dismantle the kitchen, clear the space and, then, what I was going to show in my studio. I responded that I was not going to remove anything, that as we would still be working at the Academy during the assembly period and the public show, we needed a kitchen. And that, inside the kitchen, I would show, on TVs, scenes from a video I was working on, and which two years later I showed at MAM-Rio with Marta Mestre and you. So the curator said that he had an idea: if I presented the kitchen in such a way that indicated that it was a work of art, he could convince the director to keep the kitchen running. Once again I rejected the idea. It

seemed like a cheap concession. If I accepted the proposal, that collective experience would lose its force as a statement; besides this, it would be a choice that would somehow betray the good faith of all those who used the kitchen when it was open. In the end, I showed the videos inside the kitchen which operated as normal; we had a big party on the first night of the public event of the academy.

The decisions I made at the time, not to dismantle the kitchen and not to turn it into a work, forced me to rethink my practice as an artist, since this experience would not fit in with the formats in which my previous work was formalized and also with what concerns me now, somehow. I'm not convinced that every experience, even more so when it comes to research, has to be transformed into something like an artist's book. The doctorate has a very clear proposition, to create this position of the artist, as an artist, within the institution. How this might occur is what I've been researching with all these experiences that I've been collecting. The proposition currently functions as a probe; when to implement it will depend on several factors. Of course, I'm documenting every step, little by little, such as our conversation, which is forcing me to articulate some ideas, to describe past experiences and reflect on them. This satisfies me for now. It reminds me of an artist called Louwrien Wijers who worked with what she called "mind sculptures." She considered writing and speech to be like sculpture, working a lot with the format of interviews.

I haven't yet seen this new film by Godard, so it's difficult to comment on it. But that phrase reminds me of an exhibit I saw recently about notions of the term "*dropping-out*" in North American society. In a recording that the artists called an audio-script, a kind of essay is heard where they comment on two other artists who decided to leave the world of art and work in other areas. They spoke about the artist Charlotte Posenenske, who became a sociologist, and Laurie Parsons, who decided to leave the art world to become a social worker. On the audio, referring I think to Laurie Parsons, we heard that she opted for a form of art more focused on self-reflection and self-discovery than self-promotion. I'm increasingly interested in artists who have embarked on radical changes in their careers. In a mixture of conviction and doubt about what the field of art is capable of, I wonder where art is currently to be found and in what direction it seems to be going.

I currently have some projects in development, since getting into a major institution is proving difficult. I have started smaller projects with some collaborators, generally in spaces organized by artists. Nothing that directly addresses what the research is proposing, but which somehow, indirectly, touches on important points to better define this new activity within the institution. In this way I am looking for an institution that wishes to host my proposal.