The Poetics of Diversity

Documenting the poetry of diversity seen from Central American and Caribbean contemporary art collections

By

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Abstract

"I am permeated, poetically permeated"
Edouard Glissant

To assess the significance of difference and similarities in contemporary art, it is necessary to first have proper methods of documentation and archiving, which are unfortunately lacking in the Central American region. In response to this deficiency, this paper presents particular methods and techniques to document regional collections, opening up the possibility to analyze and reach a better understanding of what is diverse and what is shared within these contemporary art collections.

My work proposes that correlating, accessing, and integrating material from various museums and archives, will set forth new documentation criteria and analytical perspectives considering the poetics of diversity, integrating the cultural landscape of the region as a whole.

Keywords

Central America / Caribbean / Contemporary Art / Design / Visual Communication
Context

The intention of this proposal is to contribute to the broader discussion about diversity documentation from catalogs, collections and archives. For this meeting, we have considered not only the discussion on registration and location of a huge and diverse artistic production, but also the possibility of thinking about new ways of integrating and interacting with that production. Raising the issue of how to document diversity, the central theme of this conference, I find it necessary first to explain briefly, by way of introduction to this proposal, the geographical and historical context of the region where I come from and work.

Central America is an isthmus, comprised of seven small countries, located between two large land masses: North and South America, and between the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. Some would argue that it forms part of the cultural whole that integrates the basin of the Caribbean Sea. This geographic feature is very important to consider when we speak of cultural creation in the region. Cultural aspects overlap: there are fusions and interactions of elements throughout its history, and it is marked by migration from both the north and the south, from Europe, Africa and Asia.
“From afar it seems impossible for countries so close, in such a small region in the world, to have been isolated from each other. The serious deficiencies in the internal communication, obstructs access of artists to the media or relevant events outside the region. A complicated political and military situation not just solved as yet, have led to serious consequences for the Central American emerging artistic development more recently. With such a limited regional contact, the result has been a mutual ignorance of contemporary artistic practices of our own neighbors” (Pérez-Ratton, Virginia, 2013, p.63). Translation made by the author.

An important obstacle is that most private collections are not properly documented. Similar situation can be found in the public collections, as documentation is not integrated, left alone among cultural institutions of the various countries in the region. So, the separation, isolation, and lack of information undermine the possibility of joining the cultural and artistic movements that identify the region. This has been the effort that TEOR/éTica and the legacy of Virginia Pérez-Ratton have sought in their work, to integrate Central American art and artists through constant activities that include: research, exhibitions, seminars, and meetings.

For the most part, Central America and the Caribbean speak about concepts that emerge
from their perceived subordinate status. The question is, how are we meant to read this contemporary heritage? How do we read them through their own cultural signs, and not from imposed art world standards, despite the fact that we see things from external assessment mechanisms. During this event, participants seemed to agree that our own experience of daily life should serve as the foundation to create a contemporary discourse, thereby allowing us to create our own mechanisms for understanding the artwork.

Perhaps, contemporary art must be understood as an ongoing process that never ends, not closed, but open to more possibilities. It involves a constant productive dynamic. We could say that the work in contemporary art and it’s interaction with the public, seeks to be completed, but it will never be finished.

Despite this close relationship between artist and the environment and social dynamics, the language of contemporary art, in its anti-canonical will, remains difficult to read for many audiences. The characteristics of contemporary art, its diversity of languages, media and technological means, may have provided for innovation, but also render it more difficult to read among mainstream or specialized audiences. This may contribute to the fact that often the public does not become interested in contemporary art work. This mismatch becomes critical if the own development of contemporary art, requires the interaction with the public.

This much is due to the small part Art plays in the Education system. Unfortunately, in our region artistic education has many weaknesses. As a result, we still consider the concept of art as painting, sculpture and architecture, when today's artists have chosen other means to communicate their contemporary discourses. The concept of art has expanded, and in our context, we find new bases for Central American and Caribbean artistic languages.

The methodology strategy of contemporary art in Central America is often supported by the creation of metaphors of representation and everyday speech. They develop and recreate the dynamics of society, politics, and the cultural environment of the region. However, most of the time, the larger public, which thrives and lives through the challenges of contemporary life, do not have access to the artworks that are presenting their situation.
The contemporary, diversity and visual thinking

I have based the proposal on theoretical concepts, supported by various authors who discuss contemporary art, diversity, and the role of museums and collections.

Edouard Glissant and his idea of the poetry of diversity presents us with a world where the result is given at the crossroads and cultural mixtures, the common space that produces unpredictable results that increase the cultural capital and boost its production. Through the region’s contemporary art, Glissant has found a rich form of expression. For others it may seem imaginary and fantastic.

On the other hand, Manuel Borja-Villel and his concept of the Molecular Museum and common file, displays a panorama of possibilities when museums, public institutions, and private collections share their archives, generating a dynamic source of knowledge, going beyond a total cumulative of papers, and becoming an “archive of the commons”.

For his part, Augustin Pérez Rubio and his approach around the collectors and the construction of a common heritage, help us rethink collections from its relationship with other collections in a common geographic context to perceive them as a common whole and
integrated.

Claire Bishop and her "Radical Museology" from contemporary museums, brings us to build a much more contemporary and different thinking, which focuses more on the experience in the appreciation of works instead of categories and chronological lines.

Finally, two connoisseurs of visual thinking give us an essential concept in the design and implementation of this proposal, which is the aspect of language and visual perception. Dondis A. Dondis and its approach to image syntax helps us understand the complexity of the elements of visual communication; and Rudolf Arnheim and his theory of art and visual perception, bring us to refer to the approach of visual thinking.

Finally, for purposes of this paper will take as its starting point the concept of file viewed from the position of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (MACBA) in About the Archive (nd) Retrieved on 08/01/2015 of http://www.macba.cat/en/the-archive: “The Archive was created out of the conviction that since the beginning of the last century, and especially from the fifties onwards, artistic production cannot be understood simply through the artwork in itself, and that the document is an element of the language that makes up complex cultural productions such as art. The Archive also aspires to contribute to counterbalancing the lack of attention that documentary holdings have been given in this specific context.”

**Image Sintax**

"How do we see?" and answers: "This simple question covers a whole spectrum of processes, activities, functions, and attitudes. The list is long: perceive, understand, see, observe, discover, recognize, view, browse, read, watch. The connotations are multilateral: from identifying simple objects to the use of symbols and language to conceptualize, from the inductive-deductive thinking. The number of questions motivated for this one, how we see?, gives the key to the complexity of nature and content of visual intelligence” (Dondis, 1992, p.4) (Translation made by the author).

Dondis also relies on the ideas of Gestalt from the position of Arnheim:

“Rudolf Arnheim has done brilliant work using much of the Gestalt theory, developed by Wertheimer, Kohler, and Koffka, the interpretation of the visual arts. It is not limited to study the workings of perception but also investigates the visual quality of individual units and their union strategies throughout a final and complete. In all visual stimuli at all levels of
visual intelligence, meaning not only get in the representational data, environmental information or symbols including language, but also in the compositional forces that exist or coexist with visual factual statement. Any visual event is a form with content, but the content is heavily influenced by the significance of the constituent parts, such as color, tone, texture, size, proportion and their compositional relationships with meaning” (Dondis, 1992, p.19) (Translation made by the author).

A radical museology

Today the tendency of most museums is still framing the art in a historical, geographical context, nationalities, among others. Somehow this view and method of document the art conditions us to think and interpret from these categories. Our proposal points to a perception that is broader, collective and dynamic that does not lead us to a framing but free possibilities of the work of art.

For this proposal is considered that contemporary art can blossom at any place and any time, and may refer a wide range of topics and speeches, without sticking to a specific historical time, as contemporary art gives us the freedom to rethink and understand our world in many ways. Therefore no action to categorize becomes paramount, but open to other meanings and new concepts based on the freedom of diverse thinking.

Claire Bishop, art historian of the Department of Art History at the CUNY Graduate Center of the City of New York, refers us to a kind of more contemporary museology. According to Bishop,

“Today, however, a more radical model of the museum is taking shape: more experimental, less architecturally determined, and offering a more politicized engagement with our historical moment.” (Bishop. 2013. p.6) “Time and value turn out to be crucial categories at stake in formulating a notion of what I will call a dialectical contemporaneity, because it does not designate a style or period of the works themselves so much as an approach to them.” (Bishop. 2013. p.9) “(...) the attempt to periodize contemporary art is dysfunctional, unable to accommodate global diversity. (...) the contemporary refers less to style or period than to an assertion of the present” (Bishop, 2013. p.18).

Our proposal, although linked to museums, collections and archives, is looking to get out the schema of the museum and is positioned in the digital and technological level. Therefore, it is not necessary to have a specific space and time context, it can happen anywhere,
anytime. This feature makes it non-attendance and multi-temporal.

To Bishop,

“These discursive approaches seem to fall into one of two camps: either contemporaneity denotes stasis (i.e., it is a continuation of postmodernism’s post-historical deadlock) or it reflects a break with postmodernism by asserting a plural and disjunctive relationship to temporality.” (Bishop. 2013. p.19) “Rather than simply claim that many or all times are present in each historical object, we need to ask why certain temporalities appear in particular works of art at specific historical moments.” (Bishop. 2013. p.23) “The idea that artist might help us glimpse the contours of a project for rethinking our world is surely one of the reasons why contemporary art, despite its near total imbrication in the market, continues to rouse such passionate interest and concern.” (Bishop. 2013. p.23) “Where do museums fit into this? My argument is that museums with a historical collection have become the most fruitful testing ground for a non-presential, multi-temporal contemporaneity” (Bishop. 2013. p.23).

As we will see, in the method of our proposal, which we call it from now on, “ArtBoard”, the fundamental process is precisely juxtaposing visually, as a collage, art, documentary material, photographs, texts and other visual elements that drive a communications dynamic. As we will expand later, ArtBoarding allows access to a digital space where we can freely interact with historical diversity. ArtBoarding will link the files and works on the historical diversity, without emphasizing in periodization and artistic styles, but a great freedom of associations and perceptions, without time and space set. Our ArtBoarding rethink contemporary artworks from in terms of specific relationships to history, to link files and collections, as a methodology.

As "The Blossom Process" we can see how this same problem is thought to problematize the transformation of a collection into a Documentation Center, where files and works begin to connect and synchronize from a relationship with space and dynamic, designed as a networking. For Bishop, “Culture becomes a primary means for visualizing alternatives; rather than thinking of the museum collection as a storehouse of treasures, it can be reimagined as an archive of the commons” (Bishop. 2013. p.56).

“They work to connect current artistic practice to a broader field of visual experience, much as Benjamin’s own Arcades Project sought to reflect in Paris, capital of the nineteenth century, by juxtaposing texts, cartoons, prints, photographs, works of art, artifacts, and architecture in poetic constellations. This present-minded approach to history produces an
understanding of today with sightlines on the future, and reimagines the museum as an active, historical agent that speaks in the name not of national pride or hegemony but of creative questioning and dissent. It suggests a spectator no longer focused on the auratic contemplation of individual works, but one who is aware of being presented with arguments and positions to read or contest. Finally, it defetishizes objects by continually juxtaposing works of art with documentary materials, copies, and reconstructions. The contemporary becomes less a question of periodization or discourse than a method or practice, potentially applicable to all historical periods” (Bishop. 2013. p.59).

The molecular museum and archive of the commons

Manuel Borja-Villel is an art historian and since 2008 is director of the Reina Sofia Museum. To Borja, the possibility of building a file of the commons that draws on the efforts that each institution has done over the years, is one of his main ideas. For him the concept of “molecular museum” is an alternative that takes away from the insistence by museums in separate categories works in a collection. According to this author in an interview by Saenz, G., & Guerrero, I., November 2014, taken on 01.08.2015 in http://www.nacion.com/ocio/artes/Manuel-Borja-Villel, this term “refers to another mode of collecting and raise the story from the idea of a collection of the commons” (Translation made by the author).

In this position, Borja opposes to think the museum as “this great theological narrative with default and homogenizing discourse that claims to be universal, but it ends up being in Europe or the United States”; believing that “In those speeches, there is no otherness; on the contrary, diversity is considered provincial. The structure of mediation is the “white cube’, transparency and immediacy, and the experience of the public are based on the tour. This structure promotes a disembodied experience in which you can do virtually anything because everything is forbidden” (Translation made by the author).

In this approach, the artworks can be accessed from anywhere and, at the same time, the museum tour can be done in any way. This contributes greatly to our ArtBoarding emphasis in the sense that it seeks to address the issue of works of art from the thinking and visual perception and not from speeches and pre-established categories. Borja, in the "museum of the commons" do not work neither more enlightened. So it is not enlightened despotism: rather it is a common task in which several people bring various topics and ways of thinking. Goes on to say in his interview that, “Therefore, the result includes the role of artists, the contribution of certain types of ideas, and, ultimately, fundamental role of the groups that
are around the museum. The public is an active agent”. (Translation made by the author)

Borja believes that, "The idea of the archive has become a rhetoric figure: should use quotation marks. The file is not that comprised forty thousand papers then nobody reads. Thus it can also mean memory loss". Here we agree with the position of Arnheim in their criticism of unseen works with active minds arranged in museums.

The common heritage

Augustin Pérez, artistic director of the Museum of Latin American Art of Buenos Aires (MALBA), says that the concept of collecting must be rethought from a partnership with the museum collections and the aspiration to build a common heritage. His approach around collecting and building a common heritage helps us to rethink the collections from its relations with other collections in a common geographic context to perceive them as a common whole and integrated.

Art and Visual Perception

For Arnheim, the perception of the elements of visual language is essential to understand and read the visual statement of the work that we can not lose sight. For him it is critical that we arranged the works in museums from an inactive mind. He stresses the importance of linking or associating the elements of visual language in a work of art to read the contents.

Visual thinking allows us to go beyond verbal communication of ideas to give us the other way of communication -visual communication. For the uninitiated public, the moment when they are facing a work of contemporary art can be stressful and uncomfortable, where a gap occurs instead of giving an approach. Unfortunately at this point we develop fears and insecurities at the moment to interpret the contents we see in the works, where maybe we create mental blocks that hinder the communication of ideas and thoughts.

This is important to consider another kind of thinking and communication that relies more on visual to break the mental blocks that does not allow us to communicate verbally. To the visual language of art is best respond to language and visual thinking art itself. ArtBoarding focuses to give more emphasis to the image than the text, in order to develop a visual and mental exercise to link concepts, while creating new concepts interactively. ArtBoarding
makes possible to develop a reading of the works of contemporary art from the categories and documentation that museums and archives have developed, but looking to go beyond that through visual thinking.

According to Rudolf Arnheim: “if you want to access the presence of a piece of art, is very important in the first place, view it as a whole... Before we identify any single element, the total composition makes a statement that we should not lose. We seek a theme, a key to which all refer... “ (Arnheim, 1984, p. 21) (Translation made by the author). Then, we can be firmly guided by the structure of an integral concept.

ArtBoard

Spontaneity of informal exchange

My proposal is a documentation tool for capturing views of the public to interact with contemporary artworks, in a software application. It is conceived from the connection of an existing network of databases and archives of collections. This connection aims to link the existing documented collections, in databases and archives. The purpose is to socialize the contents of files and databases that have been documented over the years. A network of connections between archives and collections will allow build a mapping of key content access and understanding of the artworks.

This tool is designed from the Mood board that is a visual tool, which can be both physical and digital. The mood board is a kind of collage consisting of collecting images, texts and textures related to a design theme as a reference point for the customer. The mood boards are often used by professionals to interpret the design to be obtained. In it we can visualize things that inspire us and that also relate to a topic they are displayed. The mood board is visually capture any thought, idea, themes, impressions or feelings that are difficult to communicate verbally. This way of thinking and visual communication can break down barriers in the communication of ideas, whether they are by language, technicalities, among others.

We can see a similar example in the case of the public who visit any exhibition of contemporary art. The curatorial script is to generate connections and dialogue among the various discourses of artists, exercise may seem to create a mood board. For the mood board, we exercise visual thinking to communicate through images, which interpret in an
easy and simple way. For the ArtBoard the result would be a visual mapping of connections between archives and works of art from the collections of contemporary art museums. As if they were curators, the public will have a tool that enables them to interact and associate themselves the contents of the works and create links with new meanings.

According to Garner y McDonagh-Philp,

“Their use has much in common with the strategies for lateral thinking propounded by Edward Debono three decades ago: Lateral thinking is ... concerned with breaking out of the concept prison old old ideas. This leads to changes in attitude and approach; to looking in a different way at things which have always been looked at in the same way. Liberation from old ideas and the stimulation of new ones are twin aspects of lateral thinking” (Garner, S. & McDonagh-Philp, D. 2001. p. 3).

“Mood boards need not be expensive or time consuming to construct. They usually consist of a collection of found and/or made images fixed to a board for the purpose of presentation. Sometimes found objects or constructions are integrated so that the mood board becomes three dimensional. Photographs, images from magazines or the internet, samples of fabrics of color swatches, drawings, industrial and natural objects such as wire and leaves, and abstract graphic experiments in texture, color or form are commonly juxtaposed on an A3, A2 or A1 sheet of card or foam board. The collections of images and objects aim to represent emotion, feelings or mood evoked by the original design brief or the brief as it develops” (Garner, S. & McDonagh-Philp, D. 2001. p. 3).

Artboard provide us the opportunity to visually translate a concept that is difficult to communicate verbally, creating a full and complete picture of what each of us play in a work of art. Molding a new concept or meaning and providing fluid communication of ideas, breaking the barriers of verbal language. As mentioned above, ArtBoarding can link files and artworks on the historical diversity, without emphasizing in periodization and artistic styles, but a great freedom of associations and perceptions, without time and space set.

So, why a tool like the Artboard? Because it is a tool inspired by the mood board that allows you to interact with the public and at the same time facilitates the concepts and images to make their own interpretation of the artwork. The audience will feel empowered by their reflections and interpretations. Our tool involves visual thinking, visual perception and visual reasoning. The interpretation of a work would never be the same. Interaction and spontaneity of the public will conclude the work.
The Code of Artboard = Visual aspects_Title_Content_Archive_Meaning

The Artboard format would be digital, because it dominates the media and its advantages in terms of handling, accessibility, understanding, socialization, and it would be composed of a link code. Moreover, this proposal is essential to not associate the sharing and interaction to a specific spatial and physical context, or to a specific museum or architectural context, but rather is comprehensive without limits. So virtually you can access knowledge and interaction that is not dependent on a town.

This tool is characterized by the association of independent texts or content through the code to create hypertext where information is not only seen from a point of view, but from multiple entries in order to complete the meaning and all possible associations and interpretations. It can become so dynamic that it allows great extent and also an almost unlimited range where we believe that everything is possible and our opinions are possible and valuable. The code will allow you to have variety of data sources and simultaneously drive from the choice of an artist, artwork or specific metaphor, but associated with a variety of data and information.

Understanding how coding work of art is the central point in this proposal, in order to facilitate the interpretation of the user. In this case, the variables to decode a work of art would be the same variables of computer code link. The variables to implement the code would be the data contained in the technical data bases, photography, register and cataloging; keywords as metaphors of representation; documentary and archival material. Allowing multiple ways to approach the artwork, multiple ways to interpret the work, the connections are extended. And boosting local issues but with relational scope and current connection, Artboard gives us the possibility of creating an area without borders, where we stay connected, related and tuned through art.
I have chosen the Guatemalan artist, Benvenuto Chavajay, to give a general demonstration of the application of the variables in this proposal. Benvenuto offers a wide contemporary production concept, metaphors and meanings related to the historical past and the present continuous of his location. In this selecting works we can glimpse that these concepts are empathetic with other realities, not only in the region but in other parts of the world.

According to María Jose Chavarria, curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MADC) of Costa Rica: “From these “chunches”, Chavajay works from photography, the intervened objects and installation, to enable the development of a speech that is becoming wider but likewise reaffirm part of an indigenous Mayan cultural reality, from a village on the banks of Lake Atitlan in the interior of Guatemala, as is San Pedro la Laguna. Concepts such as modernity / coloniality, are covered from a decolonial perspective that seeks confrontation and evolution of the “colonial power matrix” according to Quijano, or as the artist himself states: heal the colonial wound" from art in the American heartland" (Chavarria, M. & Payeras, J., 2014, p.6) (Translation made by the author)

Understanding the meaning of metaphor as a rhetorical figure of thought through which a reality or concept is expressed through different concept a reality or with those who represented some bearing resemblance (metaphor) (sf) Oxford Dictionaries. On line. Retrieved on 01/08/2015 of http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/es/definicion/espanol/met%C3%A1fora), we can do the exercise to identify the metaphors of representation used in the case of Benvenuto and this selection of works. Also we complement each keyword to go slowly decoding the message and, once done, to interpret and then, associate and create links. Then the works selected for this proposal:
How does the Artboard work from this case?

In the following script we can display an overview of the dynamics of this tool:

1- User selects keyword, that is equal to metaphor of representation. Example: Hybridization

2- Enters interface that displays three fields to enter words. Example: Modernity / Colonization / Indigenous

3- The code links the three words entered and the metaphor selected at the beginning

4- The code displays a mosaic of images and texts related

5- Artboard is ready to interact with the user who drag the images. This is ArtBoarding

6- The code has linked the historical archives, with Guatemalan artist, with works by various state and private collections in different locations, curator text, keyword, metaphor, file documentary museum in Costa Rica.

7- The code generates new keywords and displays images and other associated files, multiplying knowledge.

8- User comments like Twitter style and share with museums and other users on a wall in common like the style of Facebook

9- Museums are labeled

10- ArtBoard has documented the interpretation or visual perception of the public

The Artboard directs us to the museum, the archive and the public and then redirected the public, archives and museums. The artists can see how they are interpreted by the public. In the Artboard these interpretations are documented and simultaneously create new metaphors or keywords that they may see by the artists and museums.
Benvenuto Chavajay

From the "Antropologia" series 'Corn and piercing Object' Variable dimensions 2014 Catalog MADC, San José 2014.

Benvenuto Chavajay


Chuches (Moeblon tak nakun). Catalog MADC, San José 2014.

"The ears made out of buttons are a reference to contemporary hybrid culture: to the "plastic" mentality as my grandparents would call it. Our culture has become plasticized in one way or another. All this plastic has transformed our culture from an anthropological and social point of view, affecting our customs and way of thinking. It is not the same anymore. Changes and transformation resulting from the new and the unfamiliar scare us. The ears are a metaphor of the Popol Vuh, representing the man of corn -now of plastic." B. Ch.
The shared, diverse and visual thinking

The Artboard allows us to document the opinions, reflections, comments, meaning in the development of new discourses and metaphors but from the public. We see contemporary art dynamically generating new poetics, this time from the same public. At the same time, this proposal relies on generating what we mentioned above as shared thinking, visual thinking and diverse thinking, and the possibilities to imagine and create new meanings. The results demonstrate the diversity of interpretations of Central American culture that has the public from the works of contemporary art.

The documentation of contemporary artworks requires an integrated view, where there is an opening to categories that transcend language arts and connect us to the essence of the everyday. Contemporary art can not be analyzed by isolating some of its aspects, it includes contents of our everyday reality.

Art is given in freedom, and it is from these foundations that can arise diversity of content and perceptions, and with them any possible connections. We ourselves are those connections. They are our stories, perceptions, concerns, everyday life which are represented by artists in works of art. We ourselves are those sensitivities. The artworks represent those aspects of everyday life that define us and identify. We must be able to understand and assimilate in a simple way that content.

To achieve this it is essential to have the freedom to enter into communication with these works and react and appreciate beyond an intellectual assessment or calculation, because in the end we are bound by those links that make us human.

When performing ArtBoarding, connections continue to grow and relating; like the roots of a tree; like the blossom. Shared thought to this proposal is the result of the action of sharing in our Artboard, in an online community for public sharing their interpretations, thoughts and ideas and also creating and imagining new meanings and concepts. Doing what we call in this proposal - ArtBoarding.
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