



Curating Now 05



## Oswaldo Sánchez

in conversation with Aislinn Race and Roopesh Sitharan



Research trip. Residency Program at inSite\_05, San Diego/Tijuana. Photograph: Tania Ragasol, 2005

*Aislinn Race (AR): Where did your involvement with art begin, and in what way is your curatorial outlook rooted there?*

Oswaldo Sánchez (OS): My cultural interests were initially centered on literature, mainly poetry. Then I started mixing in my interest in cinema. In Cuba the artistic field at university was very interdisciplinary. By that I mean that people from the ballet, visual arts, and theater surrounded me. I think that my education—as the experience of living daily among those crossing fields—was really enriching and challenging.

I don't think of curating as a career, but more as one type of intellectual activity, as a conscious critical attitude; and within the art scene it is one role out of many that someone like me could play. I feel that the idea of keeping the curator isolated as an intellectual, with one function, has done a lot to canonize the idea of the exhibition as a kind of illustrated essay without any kind of confrontation or engagement

with reality. Curating is about thinking. It's about subversion, and re-editing all the discourses that are given as facts. Curatorial knowledge deconstructs how cultural "truths" are already a given.

*Roopesh Sitharan (RS): How do you feel about the restructuring of inSite\_05, so that for the first time there is an artistic director for the project?*

OS: I think that for inSite it is good. This was a project that, from my perspective, deserved much more coherence in terms of the exchange between art practice and theoretical research. I saw a problem developing, in that there were many people trying to write and think about public domain without really connecting it to the artists who were pursuing the strategies that the critics were thinking about. It seemed like the theoretical field was not generally aware of what was happening in the practical field. Restructuring



inSite was a very good opportunity to have the possibility of creating a network in the area between people and institutions that could develop these strategies.

*RS: So does that mean that you would define your role as the artistic director for inSite\_05 as someone to link the strategies together?*

OS: Part of it is about being consistent, integrating, and relating the practices. But we also want to be sure that we are encouraging artists to engage from a very specific perspective. I wanted to emphasize how art could generate public domain without being reduced to social activism.

*AR: Can you elaborate on what public domain and public arena are in this context?*

OS: The "public arena" or "realm" involves secure, demarcated, and legally bound spaces governed by the city. With public arena, you encounter a lot of legal issues in general; it's about the rights you have to interact in public space. For example, something that is a problem for the artists in inSite is that it is nearly impossible to do some projects in San Diego because there are so many rules, and the public entity is such an abstraction. You cannot do what is not already deemed by the city to be of "public benefit."

I don't think that "public domain" should be disassociated with public arena, but public domain is not about the physical environment; it's about the social. Even so, the term public domain always implies an engagement that examines physical space. The democratic "arena" does not exist anymore in this country, and the public's power is increasingly reduced to the "democratic" act of voting. We can only say, "vote on me," "vote on 67," "vote against..." We don't have critical ways of intervening in physical spaces; they have been domesticated, removed from any experience that could generate public domain.

I think that talking about the public domain is a political practice that offers another way. It is important to develop this idea; it's about trying to redefine and permanently draft the social contract as Rousseau wrote about it.<sup>1</sup> The social contract should be an evolving construction. It's about considering urban identities as being transitory and examining how these fluctuating identities negotiate the boundaries of permission or interaction.

So many times people confuse public domain with the idea of the public arena, which obscures the real issue, which is the importance of the production of the political subject through a public experience. By negotiating public domain I understand the experience of coming together with others who you do not normally make contact with. It's a moment or situation in which a layer of the social contract is exposed that has been avoided or not considered to be as important because its critical potential is risky for the established

order. Public domain is an experience in which the political networking between heterogeneous groups becomes visible and appears as something unusual. It happens when you participate, revealing a power that is in you personally. Sometimes that occurs through violence, but other times it manifests through an interesting experience, like a public event or situation in which something unexpected happens. This might be a small performance that happens in front of you in the street; when somebody comes to you and says or does something unexpected that makes you go, "Oh my god! This guy is crazy, he's bizarre!" At that moment you reconnect in a very particular way to social energy—to what's really the potential of belonging with others to some place or situation. That's why I feel public domain is so powerful. On the contrary, public arena is a domesticated space where we are allowed to do parades and community festivals. It is the accepted framework that legitimates and masks the power relations of control and ownership of city space.

*AR: Are you saying that something unexpected can't take place in the public arena? I see it happen, almost mysteriously or at random, because we exist in time and space with each other.*

OS: Yes, it can happen in the public arena, but that doesn't mean that the public arena necessarily produces a political opportunity to renegotiate what "public" means. I think that the public arena generally is occupied by authorized activities, planned, accepted, or promoted by those who control city life and are interested in representing a domesticated political consensus. And we can change this situation if we understand that the arena is only a framework, physical or virtual.

*RS: It seems like your idea of the public arena excludes the personal, but your use of the public domain brings some of the private into the public. Can you expand on this?*

OS: For me, that is because the private is so politically strong. The reason why the public domain is very powerful is because that experience goes back to you in a personal way; you are empowered as a person. That's important because it foregrounds what is different about how we understand the relationship between artwork and its audiences. We always think about audiences consuming art, or consuming ideology. This starts to enter into another really hard area to discuss—social activism, or at least using art as social activism. Somebody might be doing that but not producing public domain. Many artists are doing things that serve the community but are not involving the political energy that is inside the community.

*RS: In your curatorial statement for inSite\_05, you said that in the creation of a public domain the audience becomes a co-producer in certain instances. So how do you think the role of the artist has shifted because of this?*

OS: Despite the current state of the art world today, I still think that art has preserved much of its critical potential. If you go back to the 1930s, during which many of the intellectuals from Europe moved to America, you see people like Herbert Bayer designing exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.<sup>2</sup> Check out the display of those exhibitions and you will see a split between the ways modernity at its beginnings prioritized a commitment to subvert, in contrast to a traditional museological context. With the increasing cult of the art object in the white cube and major art institutions' insatiable impulse to collect work, the role of art as a symbolic commodity or status symbol has become dominant. The idea of consuming art as a brief and glamorous white cube "experience" seems to have superseded the role of art as a transgressive attitude that impacts on daily reality.

The idea of art and artists as commodity has sparked a reaction in some artists now that makes them engage with more invisible, low-key, specific actions. This is a much more humble approach; it is another kind of poetic and ethical commitment. These artistic strategies take on the form of a fable where you just throw something out there—a signal or a seed—within the social flow and watch it grow, little by little over time. Have you seen *Stalker*, that movie by Tarkovsky?<sup>3</sup> It's about somebody who works as something resembling a *coyote* or *pollero*, leading and guiding people through a mined border landscape by throwing amulets to test the possible next steps.<sup>4</sup> This is a kind of parody of what I'm talking about. Someone guides another into the middle of a place, where even that person who is guiding may never have been before, and they throw signs that are like "hope," or the possibility of becoming somebody else, having been enlightened by another way of understanding. I think this strategy, even if it appears to be very contemporary, has resonated within other artistic moments. It's not a new shift at all.

RS: But I think that objects still need to exist because, if it were all about how an audience becomes a co-producer, it would be hard for the artists to survive.

OS: No, I think that the perpetuation of the object is not only for survival. I'm a fetishist, and I really believe in art

objects in terms of how they can embody specific knowledge as if they are intellectual jewels. But there are choices in our lifetime that are not only related to art practice; by that I mean political engagement and social responsibility. From that perspective some art practices are questioning the state of art today. Reality has become so complex that people have started discovering a lot of new possibilities for intervening with their personal lives in the context of the social fabric through art making.

1 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, tr. Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 148: "Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole." Rousseau outlines his vision of a free state in his 1762 treatise, *The Social Contract, or Principles of Political Thought*. Loosely defined, the social contract is a tacit agreement formed

between society and the individual wherein the individual agrees to abide by society's laws in return for protection of his or her natural rights.

2 Herbert Bayer was born in Austria. He was a Bauhaus member from 1921–28. In 1938 he immigrated to New York.

3 *Stalker* (1979) was directed by Andrei Tarkovsky. Screenwriters Arkadi Strugatsky and Boris Strugatsky based the film on their novel *The Roadside Picnic*.

4 *Pollero* or *coyote* are terms for people who illegally guide people over the U.S.-Mexican border.