

Garage Talk 2

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In conversation with:

Chris Ferreria, Hans Fjellestad, Mauryc Gomulicki, Javier Téllez, and Itzel Martínez del Cañizo

Moderated by: Joshua Decter

Michael Krichman *Co-executive director, inSite_05/* As always I want to begin by thanking our hosts for today, Eloisa and Chris Haudenschild. Thank you very much for making these Garage Talks series possible, and many other events....

Joshua Decter *Interlocutor/* Today, the focus of our second Garage Talk will be on issues of audience and publics. This is a topic of vital importance that, I believe, has been a concern of *inSite* since its inception in the early 1990s. The projects developed by all of the artists gathered here today, in one way or another, invoke the question of audience and public. For example, Javier Téllez's and Mauryc Gomulicki's projects reflect upon the question of "event-driven" strategies, in relation to the problematics of spectacle. I would like us to consider distinctions between the event and the spectacle (as distinct modes/languages of practice), and to focus upon what constitutes audience, public interaction, and networks of communication that may, or may not be, generated by these situations. Some questions that I would like the panelists to consider: What are the multiple audiences for *inSite*, and how are audiences created/constructed over the four-month span of the exhibition, perhaps in response to the durational unfolding of distinct artist's projects throughout this period? If this framework is operating to possibly generate new definitions of "public art," obliterating certain conventions and producing new knowledge, do we imagine that new audiences are also being generated—or new conditions of relation between publics, art, and producer? Or, are we somehow just preaching to the converted, and not necessarily constructing new moments of interaction? These are issues pertinent for *inSite*, and also reflect the preoccupation of organizers and artists in other global situations. I recall that during the first Garage Talk, Paul Ramírez Jonas compellingly refused to discuss his *Interventions* project because he claimed that the audience gathered that morning in August were actually not the appropriate receivers for his project. This was not a gratuitous gesture to refuse communication, but rather, I think, a smart tactical move that generated a very engaging and productive discussion on the complexities of audience.

Chris Ferreria *Interventions artist/* My project is called *Some Kindly Monster*. Essentially it's a vehicle, which has been modified in divergent ways by two different groups that I invited to participate in the project. In a sense, I am borrowing from the practice of the "exquisite corpse," where you take a blank canvas and different artists contribute their creative talents to it and it unfolds into this weird, funky thing that somehow holds itself together as one body. I borrowed from the language of cars—the car-body becomes almost like a corpse that is somehow beautified, but still quite scary, almost like a monstrous body. At the same time there's something quite beautiful and sublime about it. The project also refers to the cultural practice in the Philippines of using a figurine, which is invested with spiritual and religious power, called the "Santo Ninyo." I wanted to overlap that cultural practice with the exquisite corpse idea and relate that to the car cultures that exist within Southern California. I invited two groups to participate in the project: "Team Hybrid," a Southern California Asian import car crew; I also invited one particular individual, José Ramón García, who is a retired mechanic and truck



driver. He has worked on customizing big trucks—18-wheelers—and modifying hot-rods as well as motorcycles. I wanted to somehow connect these two communities—two car cultures that wouldn't tend to intersect on a personal level. All these individuals are really quite unique in the sense that they brought with them specific narratives that are somehow inline with their particular communities but at the same time they also disrupted the stereotype of that community. Scott Dean was the point person for Team Hybrid. Normally you would think he would be Asian American, but he was a Caucasian. That disrupted that sense of who you would expect to see involved in an Asian import crew. José is a Boricua; he is a Puerto Rican. I thought that was interesting in terms of the Latino narrative of identity, which is very Mexico-US based. I think in response to the question about how collaborators become audiences and audiences become collaborators for myself this was an exercise in letting go of control of the project.

I needed to figure out a way of being the mediator of the project. I needed to create a structure within which people could work collaboratively and invest themselves in the project. I see the audience more as the co-creators of the project itself.

Hans Fjellestad *Curator of Ellipsis/* When you do this kind of event-based collective performance you generate a lot of adrenaline and enthusiasm. We were still celebrating six hours ago in Tijuana so please bear with me as my vocabulary slowly returns. The project last night was called *Ellipsis* and it referred to the double-center nature of the region, but more importantly to the relationship between audience and performer and the relationship between the space of the event, the history of the space, and the audience and the performer. It dealt with the various layers of interaction that are generated during this kind of complex temporal event. I am a filmmaker and a musician, and maybe that is why I was selected for this experiment. I say "experiment" because the initial idea was to create a spectacle with a different kind of logic than you would expect to see at, for example, the Super Bowl half-time

show or something like that, where the audience is simply reduced to a consumer, everything is reduced to consumerism. The idea that you would enter a space that is pretty much monopolized by sounds and images that the performers are producing with the goal that the audience would have some kind of meaningful input in that environment is challenging. I am not sure what the likelihood of success was, but the experiment was, I think, very interesting and I am very happy with the way it turned out. During the performance, we tried to design a space, both conceptually and technically, where any image, sound, or visual could be anywhere at any given time. Nothing that you saw on the screen that was generated by the digital artists or that you heard from Damon was prepackaged. None of it was automated or reproduced. Every image that was seen was the result of a decision made by one or more of the artists at the moment of the performance. That's not to say that there wasn't a structure and improvisation. In jazz we often look at open-form improvisation as a spontaneous structure. There's really no such thing as unstructured improvisation. There was a structure to this that was somewhere in between an open form, and maybe a graphic score that went from scene to scene to scene. Within the score there was all kinds of improvised material, but you had a certain kind of narrative. Primarily, I felt my job was to take the collective and the individual statements that were made by the artists I was working with and try to sculpt a narrative that made sense, that had a logic over the entire piece. We realized, of course, that the piece would need to make sense in small chunks. The nature of this kind of a party where there's no recital formality, where the audience is roving, and there is even a bar outside the space, is such that it was important to establish a way of engaging with the piece on different levels. We were trying to ensure there could be ten-minute chunks and then thirty-minute chunks and ninety-minute chunks of the whole that could make sense on their own. Another challenge was to avoid creating visual wallpaper, as you might see at a rave or an electronic music club. There you basically just get break-dancer loops and traffic and things like that, but it doesn't necessarily have any kind of direct relationship to the space itself, to what is happening in the space at the time.

Joshua Decter/ What I noticed was that there was such a division of human activity as you moved from the performance venue to other areas of the Caliente Racetrack. I am wondering what you think about these bifurcated or divided social spaces of engagement or disengagement between different communities, and the relationship between a specialized audience and people who were simply casually going there to bet. How did you go about "bridging" those communities?

Hans Fjellestad/ That is another aspect of the double-centered nature of the performance. Some of the material that Ivan brought into the space referenced Caliente's rumored relationship to drug culture and organized crime, but kind of turned it on its head by also suggesting the innocence of a family account. There were lots of different references to street dogs, relating to the greyhounds at the track. That was a kind of a thread throughout the entire piece. We weren't so concerned about guessing what the audience's experience might be because that didn't seem to be all that useful to us.

Joshua Decter/ I am not sure how much this has to do with your conceptualizing process, but the project was illustrative to me of this radical division socially and culturally between audiences. I am talking about audiences and public transiting literally, moving from one space to the other in very close proximity. We have a kind of avant-garde culture in one situation and a betting culture in another, and they are not even interfacing, they are not interacting. It's not a condition you generated in your piece, but it is so emblematic of these dichotomies and gaps in experience. Primarily, I was thinking that we are trying to propose certain ideas about collectivity, participation, and improvisation, but not necessarily trying to offer solutions to create those kinds of bridges.

Maurycy Gomulicki *Interventions artist/* Even if **inSite** is not a "political" project, it is located in the intensely politicized context of the border. I have always tried to avoid politics as much as I can so I wasn't sure that I was going to fit into the project.

Involving the community was also a very new thing for me. As I started to think about how I could approach the project I started thinking about "common spaces." I am very interested in fantasy and fetish objects as potential activators of reflections and fantasies. I am also interested in different spaces that are related to fantasy and the collective dreaming world. I decided that I would use fantasy as a bridging point because sharing a passion is something that makes us happy and makes us want to live more. I thought about our playground experiences—if we both love fishing we forget about race, we forget about nationality, and so on. The hobby of aerial modeling is very curious because most of the collectors expend a great deal of creative passion and energy collecting the objects of their desire or building models. They invest quite a lot of money on their hobby, which some of them don't have. You can spend half a year building a model plane and it can crash on the first flight. I think that that is very beautiful because it brings the fantasy even more to life. I am very surprised about how often fantasy becomes routine. I also wanted to try to remove people from their routines. That was the most challenging aspect of the project. In this project different things come together: there is the border and then there is the bridge, which is the shared passion for something. There is also the issue of space. For me

the experience of space is very important. There is a kind of natural amphitheater in the Tijuana riverbed, which I feel has a great deal of poetic and dramatic potential. It could be a communal meeting space, but instead it is simply a space, which is abandoned, which is left for forgotten souls. I wanted to activate that space. As for working with the pilots, the first step was to gain their trust. In the case of the Mexican pilots there was a more heightened sense of distrust in the beginning, but once I approached them and they started to believe in the project they became 100 percent involved. In the case of the North American pilots it was easier to establish the first contact, but more difficult to stimulate a real working dynamic. This is the experimental part of the project. You realize how lived reality affects people. The fantasies of both the Mexican and American pilots had a childlike quality—the fantasy of the superhero and the wrestler, and so on. Mexican reality is much more chaotic, which means that one has to be inventive. You need to find creative solutions to resolve problems because often there are no ready-made answers. North



American reality is very highly developed. There are highly developed patterns and codes that you can appeal to when you need to resolve questions. Because of this, the ability to be spontaneously inventive is much slower. This difference is reflected in the planes. I was expecting to see much more spectacular planes from the North American pilots because they have more financial and technological resources. In fact they were much more shy about creating personalized planes. Mexican reality is like a membrane, which is constantly alive and mutating, so this ability to transform is part of the culture. I enjoyed working with all the pilots because they really gave their body and soul to the project. It was very moving to see the pilots changing over the course of their project, their minds opening, and their ideas changing. I think that everybody who is North American or knows the North American mentality knows that the decision to go into a very chaotic situation is extremely challenging. So I was also very impressed by that. When the unexpected happened yesterday and the river sluice was opened and sewage started flooding through the empty riverbed where we were holding the performance, all the pilots kept calm. They just picked up their planes and moved twenty meters and kept performing.

Joshua Decter/ What has been the relationship between the audience, the spectators, and this very elaborate process of negotiation with these individuals over more than a year? Were you thinking about how that might be communicated or the impossibility of communicating it? Or is it communicated in the artifacts, the planes themselves somehow?

Maurycy Gomulicki/ I believe the relationship is communicated somehow. I was talking with someone yesterday at the event about how art is not able to resolve things but art can comfort you with a sense of beauty. It can make you feel, make you think. I believe that was happening on the day of the event, both for the attending public and the participants. The public could see people from the two countries cohabiting that space. The symbolic potential of people from two nations being there was very striking. I always say that art is an opportunity, not a goal. I think both the audience and the pilots both experienced that. Throughout the process the pilots were interested in their role in an art project. It is not the same as a model airplane event. The artistic aspect of it was not just about the choreography of the planes, but something else. Obviously there are some aspects of the project that we weren't able to realize. For example, I wanted the US pilots to arrive via the US side of the border and the Mexicans pilots from the Mexican side and for each group to never actually cross the border except by means of their planes. But that was impossible for security reasons.

Joshua Decter/ Thank you. I think we can transit here into Javier talking about his project from the inaugural weekend. So Javier, please go ahead.

Javier Téllez *Interventions artist/* I'm fumbling with my English again. I wrote some notes this morning, and basically I have this anxiety about audiences, especially when they are homogeneous, like the one that we have today. We are here trying to locate meaning, trying to produce meaning out of bits and pieces. The artist as anthropologist, the aftermath of a fieldtrip, throwing his thesis in the air at the end. I am being ironic, obviously. The artist as a self-appointed delegate representing a community or a site that is often fictitious. The artist as a missionary or

evangelist of some system of beliefs. The artist as a therapist attempting to cure social sickness through individuals' transcendental experiences. Well, I want to claim today that I cannot add any more lies to the performance. To paraphrase, let's just say—as a famous statement of site-specificity made about the removal of a federal state plaza building—I would say today: to interpret is to destroy. Or perhaps I could instead talk about my experiences with the patients as Joshua suggested. I could talk about how the clamor of the patients and circus games are a more appropriate strategy to explore the relationship between the artist and institution. I guess when I say institution we all know that I'm talking about **inSite** and not about the hospital. My intervention in the traumatic site of the US-Mexico border involved hiring a man to fly over the infictive sky of the frontier. Then the patients wanted to organize a circus in parallel with it. They used David Smith—the human cannonball—as a puppet. They wanted



to talk about another border—that border that affects them in a more direct way, the border that society has built for those who are considered to be affected with so-called pathologies. For them the border was only a metaphor for a world that they have faced in everyday life. The circus and the carnival were a reversal of this perfect order. The upside down of carnival that allows a human being to fly over the border fence. The world upside down where a patient wearing a tiger mask holds a plaque stating that patients are also humans. Social liberation gives the mentally ill and the clown an advantage: the disengagement from social norms. A population that is characterized by its invisibility in the public arena was able to be broadcast globally and to participate in an event that was the fourth most popular news story of the day. The circus is an art that is characterized by difficulty. The theater commonly uses fake props, such as a ball and chain made of cardboard. However, in the case of the circus the weights that the strong man lifts are rarely false. In our circus for **inSite_05** almost everything was fake: the tigers, lions, elephants, and even the lion tamer. It was a parody of circus. But the important elements of this upside down world were real: the patients, the border, and last, but not least, a US citizen named David Smith, risking his life like so many undocumented migrants as they try to cross the border everyday. It was this challenge that made circus what it is—the difficulty of addressing a site that in the real world is a matter of life and death. As the Cuban poet José Lezama Lima has said, “only what is difficult is stimulating,” and that is the motto of this project.

Joshua Decter/ One of the issues that came up during the weekend was your relationship with the patients. I am interested in the process of how you worked with patients. Your relationship to David Smith was more of a client dynamic. You hired him to do this. But this was very different in terms of your collaboration with the patients. This raises a number of ethical questions in terms of whether you were utilizing, using, or even exploiting these patients.

Javier Téllez/ Obviously in the case of mental patients, there's a particular history of representation that my work is contesting. Even the confusion about what is the part of the circus is a sort of agenda. I am interested in how the patients could actually auto-gestate the

discourse or organically produce a discourse that would contest the historical discourse of representation of the mentally ill.

Joshua Decter/ Isn't it contested by communicating your working process with these individuals? Isn't the issue whether or not it is communicated to the audience? Isn't this where the ambiguity really lies?

Javier Téllez/ Well, I think the patients' involvement was pretty obvious. Of course partly it's a matter of language. The spectacle was organized in Spanish and the audience and the patients were Spanish speaking. I do feel that if you concentrated on the spectacle you could realize that this wasn't a piece that was orchestrated with them but generated by them. In terms of the placards, the sketches, the speeches, and the music—it was obvious that the patients devised the circus.

Joshua Decter/ Is this ethical question something that the patients and you talked about in terms of the public display of the event?

Javier Téllez/ One thing that is problematic in terms of ethics and the seriously mentally ill is deciding when to deny the capacity of citizens to decide on a certain representation. Being exhibited is making yourself public. We would have to ask ourselves what is the difference between a mental patient being exhibited and someone who is not a mental patient being exhibited. This is related to the question of being citizens in the state today. For me, it's more of a political act for the patients to be in public because they are usually invisible in the public arena.

Joshua Decter/ In a number of these event projects there tends to be a relinquishing of control in terms of media coverage, right? It's interesting to see how things reverberate outwards. They tend to become increasingly simplified. I want to say almost dumbed down. I am curious to see what residues are communicated through the mass media coverage of these kinds of events.

Javier Téllez/ In a way this is a bypass—which incidentally is the title of Osvaldo's [Sánchez] curatorial statement. The intervention goes beyond the event. It travels inside the circuits of distribution of the event. The circuits immediately neutralize the original intention of the event. However, it is very interesting that some of the patients, for instance, were interviewed after the human cannonball was launched. They interviewed David Smith; they interviewed the patients and myself. They gave a voice to these people. They had access to a public arena where they could talk about mental illness in Mexico and the health system. Even if that only lasts a second, it is important. Of course you cannot beat the media, the media is always going to win. The project is both a success and a failure. It's a success because David Smith flew, but it's a failure because he fell into the net. It is a metaphor.

Joshua Decter/ Thank you. Now I would like to hear from Itzel about her film. I would like to hear about your decision to give over the apparatus of representation to the subjects of your film by giving them cameras. I would like to know what you feel the decision to do that means in terms of collaborative practice and the language of documentary filmmaking.

Itzel Martínez del Cañizo *Interventions* artist/ In my video work, I'm principally interested in creating shared experiences while making visual



documents, even more so with this project because the main focus is the individuals who participated with me. I'm interested in using the camera as an active tool that generates communal experiences for the participants and viewers. The camera is a pretext and also a platform, and in some way it is also the element that brings the experience to life. Both in *Que suene la calle* (*Let the Streets of Tijuana be Heard*), and in *Ciudad Recuperación* (*Recovery City*), my main interest has been getting the people involved with the project to actually take it over, to make it completely theirs through the use of the video camera.

In that sense, the creation of the audiovisual work has been as much their responsibility as mine. Because of this exchange between the participants and myself it is not necessarily a creation that is totally under my control. Both during the process of generating the work and the moment when the work is projected, the piece means very different things to the people who have created the work—the co-participants—and the people who view the work. The video work becomes the bridge between one reality and another, between one type of perception and another.

