

Virgina Pérez-Ratton

My intervention today will focus on presenting, in this Symposium's *Chronicles* section, the project TEOR/ÉTica, headquartered in San José, Costa Rica, which inscribes itself within a series of initiatives in Central America that have marked the development and dissemination of art in the region since 1995.¹

Aimed at examining the relations between art, theory, aesthetics and ethics, TEOR/ÉTica has set itself the conscious task of dealing with the constant interaction between the artistic and the political.

Precedents

The 1990s in Central America have been characterized by a return to peace after almost thirty years of dictatorships, wars, guerrillas, counterinsurgencies and military occupation as well as exoduses and migrations in every direction, all this spiced up with earthquakes, droughts, hurricanes and floods- all the natural disasters a region could face. However, this return to peace has not been particularly peaceful, hopes of democratization are vanishing, and we have been facing our very precarious insertion into global processes, which have had differing effects and repercussions in each country. One of the most negative effects has been that our respective governments have indulged in a very convenient interpretation of what globalization and state reform means. As you may imagine, this translates itself as important funding cuts in the cultural sector (as well as in other vulnerable sectors such as health, education and the environment). Here I am talking above all about Costa Rica, the only country in the region that, for several decades, had gone to great lengths to create an infrastructure in all of these fields, in an effort whose scope kept growing until the mid-1980s. In the rest of the countries, this construction had not even begun due to dictatorships in the country's history, 0.60% of the total national budget, when in 1971, the year the Ministry of Culture was created, this figure was around 1%, equal to the percentage that France spends on culture.

However the state of Costa Rica has not at any time implemented strategies to foster awareness or a sense of civic duty in the private sector- a concept we now call civil society- not even incentives such as tax breaks, to make up for the funding shortages resulting from the state's famous cutbacks, which were altogether very badly planned.² But there is also dead weight in the traditional cultural sector, above all in theater and literature, hindering attempts at reconfiguring cultural management and production in order to guarantee the sector's survival. In

other Central-American countries there are not even policies to this effect and institutionalization is minimal. However, since the State has never played a leading role in cultural production, it seems almost natural for groups to form independently and do things on their own, rather than waste their time seeking official support. Moreover, the reconstruction of ruined economies, demilitarization and the relative fulfillment of peace treaties have been the state's main priorities, while culture is not seen as part of the process of development.

These conditions- indeed very diverse in each of the region's seven countries (Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama)- have led various groups in the area, in the late 1990s, to formulate and propose alternatives within the contemporary visual arts to this officialdom, to the lack of funds, topicality and critical capacity. These initiatives have taken the form of autonomous projects, many of which do not even have a permanent space of their own, almost all of them small-scale, private, non-profit and independent. Undeniably, their influence is leading to changes in the sector of the arts in general- above all in the visual arts, where the scope of purely visual has broadened to include performative and interdisciplinary actions and activities, thus intersecting with some of the projects organized by musicians, dancers and choreographers and, to a lesser extent, by the youngest generation of poets (in Costa Rica and Guatemala).

These projects distinguish themselves for their interest in working on a regional level and in seeking international distribution, rather than engaging in the traditional navel-gazing local glories have been accustomed to. They are also looking at communities and groups that had received little recognition in the field of cultural politics except as tourist attractions, and have helped blur boundaries between disciplines. But above all, each one of these projects, within the bounds of its own possibilities, seeks to foster critical thinking, practically nonexistent for decades.

TEOR/ÉTica: General introduction

It is within the context of these projects that TEOR/ÉTica inscribes itself. It was founded in 1999 by people associated from 1994 to 1998 with the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design along with Paulo Herkenhoff, curator of the Sao Paulo Biennial and the current assistant curator at MoMA. It was posited as an alternative to the official venture, not opposed to it but rather parallel, willing to assume its risks openly and fully as it is based on total and absolute freedom of action. It also sought to establish itself as complementary option to officialdom; however, it has been difficult for it to achieve this twofold goal. It seems the situation is not yet ripe enough for people to understand TEOR/ÉTica's scope and the need to build links between the state and independent projects, and anything coming from the private sector is still greeted with suspicion. This obviously reflects a contradiction, at a time when the active participation of civil society is being advocated.

TEOR/ÉTica was conceived from the outset as an organization that would seek out, reflect out, reflect upon, articulate and coordinate discourses which were emerging in one way or another in the field of regional art in Central America, but which needed a catalyst. This dynamic's main goal is to establish networks reaching out from a more united Central America, at once better connected to the world abroad;

it also hopes to rediscover points in common with the Caribbean Islands, in order to reestablish ties which had been lost and could solve the problem of the region's isolation within its own part of the world.

TEOR/ÉTica acts as a receiver and disseminator of information, seeking to foster knowledge and understanding of art, networking both within and outside the Central-American region. Contrary to MESÓTICA II's initial working premise in 1996³, this region no longer considers itself from the point of view of what remains of its colonial legacy, but rather sees itself and including inescapable as a factor of analysis- and so is the growing mobility of our artists.

But let us return to TEOR/ÉTica. It attempted to achieve its goals through four primary fields of activity which can be summed up as follows:

- a) Curatorial projects: local, traveling or international exhibitions, at as well as outside its headquarters, organized internally or through agreements with like-minded institutions.
- b) Periodical and sporadic publications: catalogs, small monographs, memoirs of theoretical events, poetry and music publications.
- c) A contemporary art library and reading room. Organizing theoretical events- from informal bimonthly gatherings to conferences-, training courses, workshops and events such as the Central-American Symposium in the year 2000. Recreational activities such as the *Los Artistas Cocinan* (The Artists Cook) cycle on the nights of the full –moon during the summer.

We also systematically attend or participate in international meetings and conferences.

- d) Assistance to the region's artist archive and slide library available to curators or researchers, assistance in the making and sending of dossiers and, depending on available funding, support is given by publishing brochures, shipping work or sponsoring production.

A small staff takes care of all this: a director (myself) and four assistants of equal rank, plus two general service employees hired by the hour, that is: an administrator, a general coordinator and logistics planner, curatorial and theoretical assistant and one person in charge of documentation, montage, and everything related to the transit and manipulation of artworks. However, anyone on the team can also take up specific work in curatorial or critical practice as part of their on-the-job training.

This briefly and generally sums up the project's operative part. In order to analyze the substantive part, I will now introduce a topic that has always been a great regional concern- visibility, something that is directly associated with the political.

Strategies for Visibility and Presence: Changes since 1995

How to broach this topic of the TEOR/ÉTica project's crucial points, a project which, as I said, seeks to define itself within a political frame of reference in the broad sense of term, rather than adopt a purely artistic mindset.

During these last few years our priority has been intensive action directed at attaining visibility abroad, starting off with our almost total invisibility or at least a distorted visibility and presence. This situation had led to the creation of a stereotype, convenient for both official local exportation and for large centers of power: it allowed them to turn a deaf ear to certain regions like ours, and to avoid the work of having to deal with languages or concepts whose interpretative keys could not be found within the Euro-American mainstream's regular parameters.

However, this negative perception has been changing- to a large extent if not completely. Various organizations' systematic and constant work for the last few years has led to real increase in our visibility and presence: from Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, traveling shows of local work, the aforesaid MESÓTICA II, as well as locally-organized shows including international artists contributed to the initial dissemination of local work and the progressive creation of a sense of a *Place*, i.e. the construction of a formerly non-existent mental space. Galleries like Jacobo Karpio and Sol del Río have managed to place Central-American artwork in international collections- private, corporate and those of museums. Publication like *Talingo*, (Panama) or *Artefacto* (Nicaragua) have received awards for their work and been recently mentioned in renowned magazines like *Third Text*⁴. In 1998 the Sao Paulo Biennial opened a special space for the Central-American and Caribbean region, appointing a regional curator to present a project⁵. Gerardo Mosquera and Panamanian Adrienne Samos, director of *Talingo*, are curating an exhibition in Panama City, featuring artists from Central-American region in addition to renowned figures such as Cildo Mireles and Francis Alÿs.

The magazine *ATLANTICA* devotes its next issue entirely to the region, in a joint editorial project with TEOR/ÉTica. After I was asked to be a jury member of the recent Venice Biennial, TEOR/ÉTica invited Harald Szeemann to visit Costa Rica, and as a result of the research he did at the project's documentation center, six Central-American artists were featured in the last Biennial. Two of them won awards in the emerging artist category and one of them is currently participating in the show *Urgent Painting* at the Paris Museum of Modern Art, co-curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Laurence Bossé⁶. In the same way, smaller-scale projects like *Mujeres en el Arte* (Women in the Arts) in a country as hard-hit as Honduras, or the Guatemalan projects, have managed to attract the attention of international art specialists and professionals.

All this work undertaken by the independent sector- in addition to the projects generated by the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design until 1998- has not garnered equivalent local support, and official channels still persist in legitimizing proposals that have no aesthetic or conceptual connection with today's world, perpetuating the notion that our cultural production is exotic, "light", redundant and somewhat unprofessional. But we can see that in spite of these drawbacks, the possibility has been sketched out for people to really become aware of our production and context.

A Moment of Reflection

All of the aforesaid seems extremely positive and it is- we must consider that few regions have managed to achieve cohesion as Central America has, little by little, by sharing information and assisting colleagues in their projects. But it is clear that solidarity is stronger in times of need than in times of plenty, when individual interests begin to confront each other and power struggles come into play. So in spite of this progress, or perhaps because of it, it seems like the right time to examine achievements and results, since we cannot continue to consider this visibility as a goal per se when it must be based, rather, on the following concerns: why and to what extent do we plan or wish to carry on with this strategy for visibility/presence? What are this process' consequences as far as we are concerned? Does it really mean something locally? How does it help create better conditions for the work of artists within the region itself? How do we stay inscribed within the international arena while remaining connected to our own artists remain mobile without condemning them to becoming pariahs-ending up rootless, neither here or there, without a real sense of belonging anywhere? How do we avoid a "coyote"- like curatorial practice? ⁷

It is obvious we need to keep a measure of control over this phenomenon, or at least try to have an effect on it with a purposeful, challenging attitude. One of the reasons is that the apparent openness and possibilities for inclusion that global processes to offer, but which after a cursory review appear to more or less follow the course planned through free trade agreements, make us run the risk of being accomplices to the game of tokenization, i.e. the facile adoption by centers of power of certain local figures as paradigmatic, not only within art making but also- and maybe even more so- within curatorial practice. To these centers of power, this dynamic resolves in a trivial manner the issue of our real inclusion and presence within international systems of circulation, in a mirage that only a few are able to see.

On a local level, taking the initial effort of dissemination- absolutely necessary as a starting point- too far and focusing only on visibility leads us to avoid thinking about the intrinsic- an essential condition if we are to truly know ourselves. The danger of losing control over this visibility-production action or of depending solely on international presence as a goal might lead to our being coopted by centers in order for us to function within their own parameters. Thus, the aforesaid projects might lose sight of their reason for being and forget their initial premise which not only seeks conditions of equality and respect for our art production, conditions of understanding, recognition and legitimization on an international level in some way (something that, unfortunately, fuels recognition on the level of local), at least the way I see it. And this is nothing new: the Havana Biennial, among others, has already given us several lessons-; it also seeks or must seek to decentralize traditional structures by creating and consolidating our own centers, our own systems of legitimization and validation, and by establishing a horizontal dialogue amongst ourselves, which might subvert the vertical relationships of the past. Here, yet again, the consolidation of the concept of *Place*, in *our time*, is indispensable⁸.

The Central-American region is often considered “backward”, as if a great dead weight hindered our “progress”. I think this supposed backwardness is an advantage we must make the most of in view of the crisis in art institutions, more and more perceptible internationally, due to their excessive development as well as decadence in certain sectors, and also due to the state apparatus’ indifference or undue interference in other places. For these reasons the moment we find ourselves in is a pregnant one, since it might allow us to achieve a unique development based on what we have, starting with our own selves, on what can be built with the means within our reach, making the most of what there is and not regretting what we lack. This in no way implies bovine resignation in the face of unacceptable situations, but rather the strength to change them or propose alternatives. These autonomous projects open new possibilities, by adopting an openness to the global and being aware of what lies outside, as well as committing themselves to manifesting their presence- but all this must be based in a first instance on one’s own context and knowledge of oneself, starting from one’s own place and time and reaching outwards.

On the other hand, the crisis itself of *institutions/museums* throughout the world offers possibilities for analyzing new ways of working in and organizing spaces moving away from gigantism and spectacle, based on the rejection of the museum as a political and social showcase, contributing to a real rapprochement and more accurate focalization. Rather than simply adopt visibility strategies, imposed systems of circulation and structures of representation that have little to do with our reality, we must have an effect on them in our favor, insofar as it is possible.

All this sounds very stimulating, but we have not broached the prickly topic of financing: projects depend on the raising of private funds, and these usually belong to international foundations, since local contributions are minimal as there is no tradition of it, and as I said before, there are few tax-related incentives. Until now, Hivos and the Príncipe Claus Fund, both from the Netherlands, Christian Aid and other small NGO’s as well as the Rockefeller Foundation have been crucial to our work. This however creates another regime of dependence, since as these autonomous initiatives multiply- with little chance of becoming self-sustaining in the long term- soon foundation funds will not suffice to finance them. This is why the struggle for making the State responsible vis-à-vis cultural production is essential- it must of course be reposted based on our current reality, but it is in no way a moot issue. And in the same way, the private and corporate sector’s participation must be encouraged and supported. Otherwise, we run the risk of being a flash in the pan and that all our efforts will lose steam and the energy will dissipate.

Conclusion

There is still much to do- creating awareness and knowledge about what we are, about art which reflects this and analyzes it critically, but also about the survival of the projects and the exigencies of our responsibilities. Even now the most relevant aspect of regional contemporary art follows a steep course uphill, and has not managed to totally consolidate that legitimizing, internal space that will then be projected outwards.

The legitimizing local initiative is not in museum institutions, if these even exist: it is a validation that unfortunately lies in the hands of many commercial galleries that focus on more sellable art, in the hands of politicians and diplomats who for years have sent, as Cuauhtémoc Medina says “gilded saint statues to international biennials”. And they will continue to do so, if we do not stop them. There is much left to do, and we do well to look ahead.

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¹ E.g. *Colloquia*, from Guatemala, one of whose founders and most active members has been Luis González Palma. Rosina Cazali left *Colloquia* to undertake a one-woman- a regional curatorial project suggestively and ironically entitled *La Curanduría* (literally ‘curing’ or ‘faith-healing’, a wordplay on the term’s similarity with *curaduría*, ‘curating’- tr. note). Belia de Vico gave up the commercial gallery model to open another type of space (i.e. non-profit), *Contexto*, which sponsors actions and performances, assists artists and organizes exhibitions, some of which have traveled internationally. There is also the collective *Casa Bizarra*, focusing on art in public spaces. In Honduras, besides Bonnie de García who, from her gallery *Portales*, has acted as a de-facto, unofficial minister of culture, we should mention Bayardo Blandino and a group of women artists who began the project *Mujeres en las Artes* a few years ago and have organized small-scale meetings and symposia with both Central American and foreign professionals in addition to shows in their own space. The group *Artería*, made up of very young artists, is an offshoot of this space. Regina Aguilar, a well-known Honduran artist, is behind *Fundación San Juancinto*, based in the small mining town of the same name. Training artisans, resorting abandoned buildings to house artists for short-term residences and seeking new options for an isolated community through the manufacture of ceramics, apprenticeship programs in iron buildings to house artists for short-term residences and seeking new options for an isolated community through the manufacture of ceramics, apprenticeship programs in iron forging, glassblowing and other techniques- all this has allowed many youths to find in creative ventures a means of survival. In Nicaragua, a group of artists reacted against the dismantling of the cultural infrastructure during the post-Sandinista period by opening the alternative space *Artefactoría* (very much in keeping with Fluxus ideas), under the direction of Raúl Quintanilla, Patricia Belli and others, and publishing a beautiful, very serious magazine, *Artefacto*. We should also mention Adrienne Samos’ persevering work as the head of the cultural weekly *Talingo*, (winner of a Principe Claus award), the recently-created Arpa Foundation and Mónica Kupfer, director of the Panama Biennial. These are all the projects dealing with the visual arts, but there are also those like *Incorpore* and *Enredate*, devoted to the performing arts, recovering and integrating traditional regional music and dance into a contemporary frame of reference.

² When José María Figueres’ allegedly social-democratic government (1994-1998) decided to restructure the Ministry, it was obvious that their proposal-drawn up by party bureaucrats under Minister Arnoldo Mora (a former communist) - divested institutions tied to the Central Ministry (the ones that effectively do the work) of much of their power and influence, and gave the bureaucracy most of the power and clout in decision-making. The directors of the twenty-nine institutions rejected this proposal almost unanimously and finally stopped this famous restructuring from being approved. However, little progress has been made since, as many institutions changed directors when the Christian Democrats came into office in 1998; the State’s policies basically

tow the contemporary global line, in step worldwide changes and transformations, and falls to understand the need for flexible, efficient structures. We should note that one part of the cultural milieu countries to expect handouts, thinking only if its utter dependency on a welfare State and helping perpetuate its excessively benevolent, paternalistic- and yet non-functional-system.

³ This exhibition, curated by Ronaldo Castellón and myself, featured twenty artists from five countries formerly belonging to the Captaincy General of Guatemala; it was the first exhibition of contemporary Central-American art and opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design in November 1996. It traveled around Europe in 1997 and 1998, and has had far greater repercussions than we as curators had foreseen.

⁴ *Talingo* is a cultural weekly some twenty pages thick published by Panama's *La Prensa* newspaper, with over 450 issues to its credit. In 2000, *La Prensa* decided to being publishing it bimonthly, and there was such an avalanche of complaints and letters of support that it continued as a weekly, though in a smaller format. *Talingo* has been directed for the past seven years or so by Adrienne Samos, and was awarded a Príncipe Claus Awards in 2001. In issue #38 of Third Text in 1999, Lindsay Jones wrote a very positive article about the Managua-based project and magazine *Artefacto*.

⁵ A regional bilingual catalogue was published of this project, funded by various cultural institutions as well as by Hivos. The essay I wrote entitled "Central America and the Caribbean: a History in Black and White". The show received positive reviews in *Art press* (France), *Art Nexus* (Colombia), among others. The 2002 Sao Paulo Biennial strategically managed to avoid a call for submissions through official channels, giving the new curator a list of ideal candidates; after his appointment, a regional letter was signed by all the curators asking for the biennial's financial support, cautioning that without it the region as a whole would not participate.

⁶ The Costa-Rican artists were painter Federico Herrero, Priscilla Monage-Who showed an installation, *Isolation Chamber*, upholstered with sanity pads- and Jamie Tischer, with photographs selected from the last years. The Guatemalan artists were well-known photographer Luis González Palma, Aníba López, showing documentation of an "act of vandalism", and Regina Galindo, who did a performance. The award winners were Federico Herreo and Aníbal López. Practically nothing about this was published in the local media.

⁷ *Coyotes* help illegal immigrants get over borders in exchange for large sums of money. The curator as *coyote* would help artists get into a non-peripheral country and then leave their own devices, though their adaptation or integration into this new country's systems of circulation maybe very complex. If these artists do manage to integrate, upon their return to the original context they are usually faced with a negative rather than positive reaction, and thus often end up being pariahs.

⁸ In this sense, when I talk about validation or legitimization on a local level, I am specifically referring to our own acknowledgment of our space; in other words, we must create and value mental space, i.e. "Place". Showing in Europe and showing in a neighboring country have never been the same, as it is not valued on the same level. We must begin by raising self-esteem for our own curatorial proposals to achieve recognition internally- the Central American region has the advantage that different contexts exist in a relatively small area, one can easily travel from one country to another and the region's great diversity allows for contrasting experiences. We must make noise and call attention to Central America and convince people to travel there, and we shall see what happens. Rather than continue moving around ourselves, we must encourage people to move off the beaten path.