

The artist as creator of realities

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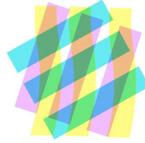
It is clear that in our modern history we have not stopped having viral outbreaks, some turned into epidemics or pandemics. We will surely suffer some or some more. Fortunately, the high contagion capacity of COVID-19 is not linked to high lethality. An Ebola or that unknown and lethal HIV from the 80s, would have carried half of the world population if it had the contagion capacity of COVID-19. And a virus of very high lethality and contagion capacity, which is technically possible, would be a great challenge for health services, economic dynamics, political systems, the design of cities, but above all, the urban dynamics and social networks.

Le Corbusier and the Rationalists concentrated on designing residences and cities that were more hygienic, delving into concepts of space and ventilation. The five pillars of Le Corbusier focus on these, and the entire cities developed during those years, especially in Latin America, attest to this. Sectors like Higienópolis in Sao Paulo is a perfect illustration of this idea. These concepts have been maintained since then and in some way have made evident the enormous deficiencies that in that sense, many European and Spanish homes have.

When I arrived in Madrid and being Latin American, there were two things that called my attention, among other things: the extensive and deep social dynamics among its inhabitants and the limited role of housing within them. In Caracas, as well as in Buenos Aires, Bogota, Rio de Janeiro or Mexico DF, two cities coexist simultaneously. I speak of the coexistence of the formal city—in which many of its residences remain under the ventilation and lighting guidelines of the precepts of the rationalists—and the informal city, made up of shanties or favelas where these precepts evidently have no possibility of existence and in which overcrowding together with the deep sense of community of its inhabitants are the keys to understanding these enclaves.

In Madrid there is no informal city as such, and although there are small informal sectors, they are not an important part of the city. However, within the residential district in the greater central or historical area, we can find many homes without sufficient guarantees of lighting, ventilation and space.

In Latin America both the street and the house are celebrated. When you want to entertain someone or simply show them that they have your sympathy, you quickly invite them to your house. In Madrid when that happens, the meeting place is the street, a restaurant or a cocktail bar. It is rarely the house or perhaps infrequently. However,

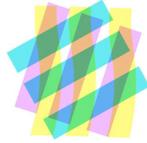


the impossibility of living on the street due to the confinement has stripped us and has put into evidence the quality of our spaces.

Many of the inhabitants of this city have come close to collapsing upon being confined in homes that do not meet the minimum lighting principles and ventilation that the rationalists advocated, or perhaps poorly distributed or scarce spaces for all members of the family. Therefore, our own house has not become not only the meeting place with the other, but probably neither works for ourselves, or at least to keep us healthy physically and mentally. I think that today more than ever, with the proven possibilities of a new epidemic, we will rethink about renting or acquiring a home in unsuitable conditions.

Bridging gaps, in the majority of cases, shanties or favelas lack all the minimum conditions for habitability. However, it is compensated by a committed community and social fabric. Families are usually large and relationships with neighbors tend to be long-lived, deep, and dependent. At the same time, its relations with the formal city, commerce, municipal policies or national authorities or authorities or power are usually carried out by the community and not individually. Obviously, this type of relationship exists because they are vulnerable communities and they need the group network, with very defined, almost tribal parameters, to be able to deal with problems that affect everyone. In this way, these networks or social dynamics strengthen, from the moral to the physical point of view, those same underprivileged or disadvantaged communities. It is the great lesson that the informal communities that are considered marginal have left us, and in turn, the great lesson of COVID-19 for those highly individualized cities such as in Spain or Europe: that we can only overcome pandemics if we use community strategies where we all participate. The daily applause, the reports of those who go without a mask in your street or the use of WhatsApp for communication within small groups are quick examples of it. At the end of the day, the city is nothing more than a high-density space where the individual is able to weave or build relationships.

A successful city is not one that maintains a very high GDP but one that can accommodate and answer the questions of its citizens. A successful city is one that is built and confronted day by day by its inhabitants. The role of the rulers is to offer more and better opportunities, jobs, homes, public spaces, etc. However, public policies can only be successful if they are fostered by an organized society that challenges its own space, its own policies and the way these policies are managed. The pandemic we are experiencing gives us the opportunity to observe and measure ourselves as a society, in how we can manage ourselves to be able to demand assertive policies and offer a relationship based on solidarity and collaboration with our neighbors or with the different networks or communities to which we belong. A mature relationship with our rulers or with power is based on a continuous interpellation of the system and the way they manage that system.



Therefore, talking about cities or their homes is only feasible if we can ask the right questions to ourselves, our neighbors or our rulers. Questions that lead us to reflection and action and that have the capacity to generate responses which are nothing more than changes, or to strengthen positions that finally allow us to define ourselves as a society. And that's where the role of the artist seems fundamental to me.

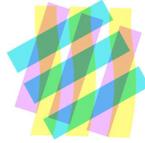
Artists do not design cities, health systems or political parties. Artists do not have the ability to generate changes from one day to the next, as if we were activists or a tide of agitators. But we can imagine spaces and imagine dynamics that can help, encourage or rethink cities and towns, relationships between its parts that help build it. Generally the artist has focused on generating spaces for inclusion, reflection, vindication, reappropriation or memory, among other topics.

Throughout Latin America we have had extensive and profound experiences of artists who challenge power and community. From the Brazilian experiences of the Theater of the Oppressed, which sought to recreate with actors unfair situations that occurred in certain places such as hospitals or police centers, up to the poetic actions of Lygia Pape with her magnetized spaces, or the famous action Divisor, which creatively appropriates the urban space through huge hollowed-out fabrics where the participants poke their heads, seizing and rethinking the public space, not mentioning Tucumán Arde's denunciations of the very poor conditions of sugar workers imposed by the dictatorship of Onganía... and a very long etcetera that in one way or another —from political activism to the sensory or the poetic— have led artists to rethink the relationships of the individual with the community, with institutions, with power; of the individual with his history, with his political self or with his sensory space.

Today more than ever, thought and creativity are the starting points that will finally define our spaces, our rights, the way we relate to another and how we negotiate and manage our demands and contributions.

Political action has been the fundamental axis in the handling of the guidelines against the pandemic but it has also been an argument for contagion. Different institutional, economic and political gears have not emerged unscathed from this health crisis. Asking the right questions can illuminate a defense or a questioning and generate an opinion matrix.

Artists such as Regina Galindo in Guatemala or the collective Mujeres Creando in Bolivia have challenged power and how it rules over citizens through street actions that seek to generate immediate effects on the passerby or the viewer. Teresa Margolles creates actions or photographs that denounce systematic violent environments against women, forcing the viewer to position themselves before questions that are both uncomfortable and seductive about death or violence. Santiago Sierra creates actions that question and bare the enormous complicit gear between sectors that generate and support a long chain of abuses from within the social, economic and political spectrum. Tania Bruguera

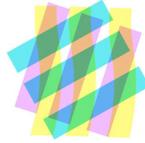


has promoted actions where the inclusion of the spectator is key, under a strategy of reflection, complicity and activism, offering tools to community members to interpellate the authorities and power. Amalia Pica works with color or language through civic participation actions either as celebrations or as a protest, to talk about political history of Argentina. Helio Oiticica sought to create emotional and political connections through interactions of space with the individual in his series Parangoles or in the installation Tropicalia. Aspects related to control or authority are formulated in his spaces.

Obviously, the emotional and political network that is established in the works of these artists, among many others, answer many of the political questions that have been formulated throughout the pandemic. In Venezuela the experience with space and the sensory and emotional formulations through it are demonstrated in the work of many artists, especially in the work of Jesus Soto and Carlos Cruz-Diez. Soto sought to create questions about the notion of space through the experience of the viewer or participant. The work of Cruz-Diez operates in a similar way. He intervened numerous offices or living spaces in the country, where the mood of the individual was manipulated through the questioning and positioning of color. He was interested in creating a better sensory environment for both a worker and a resident. In both Soto and Cruz-Diez the viewer's experience is fundamental for the activation of his works, where space, shape and color offer a relevant place to the individual's sensory and emotional relationships.

Similarly, Ernesto Neto has transformed the sensory experience through his volumes of fabric or nylon with powders or spices, creating a network of complicity between spectators, where physical interaction is a claim. Los Carpinteros have asked questions about political space and the political self through their installations or drawings, that seduce and invite the viewer to be a part of. In this way, questions or reflections are hidden under a seemingly innocuous wrapper that is seductive as it is effective. Carlos Garaicoa also knows seduction very well, and has not only worked on the memory of the urban space of Havana and how memory is activated on the viewer in relation to the street and the city. Furthermore, he has created a network of creation and discussion through his workshop in both Havana and Madrid. Pedro Reyes has reformulated spaces for leisure, healing or thinking under ingenious devices that rethink the function and effectiveness of those spaces. Sol Calero recreates in an exotic way, Venezuelan urban spaces where intense social relationships are woven, such as restaurants, hairdressers or travel agencies. Naufus Ramirez-Figueroa resignifies objects in sculpture, installations and actions where conspiracy theories, childhood fears, and Guatemalan political history are present.

My work on the city of Caracas and other cities seeks to generate questions on the viewer, connecting the history of art or architecture with current social or political urgencies, resignifying the current reality from unsuspected perspectives. For the rest of my projects, I have undertaken them under workshops or creation collective networks where historical concepts or preconceptions are abandoned to be rethought



under transversal optics, after long discussions and group works. Once again, the conclusions are the result of the intellectual and emotional connections of the collaborators as that of the spectators.

Both in my projects, as those of Garaicoa and other artists who work with pieces or actions with the city or open workshops, we seek to generate a level of awareness with the city and its history, which allows us to rethink and discuss other points of view and other survival strategies.

Knowing the history of a city is essential to understand how a pandemic can operate in a space and how we can defend ourselves, emotionally and physically, based on the preparation, disposition and character of its inhabitants. Leandro Erlich formulates questions regarding perception, where reality becomes a mirror of what we believe we see. On the contrary, Tomás Saraceno creates sophisticated sensory and playful devices that rethink the connections of the spectators before the space and before themselves.

In an equally playful way, Adrian Vilar Rojas connects you through sculptures and installations with ghosts as intangible as real that come from childish imaginary. Javier Téllez raises interactions between people in mental hospitals, where reality, illusion and other states of consciousness are elastic and their boundary becomes a trap. A pandemic is a real enemy that sneaks into your space in an equally intangible way. Yet within it, the thoughtlessness or the visceral fears become an enemy to be struck down.

What is really important about this pandemic is not deciding if we are going to make our streets wider or houses with better windows. But to challenge our ability to creation and response to the needs and challenges demanded by our community or to the different forms of social interaction which we have and to which we belong.

Rethinking our social and political scenario through reflection and creativity will give us the tools to be able to solve our emotional, physical and intellectual needs. Reinvent and reinforce our role in the face of our different communities and neighbors is essential to establish a more mature relationship with power, institutions and the State and thus be able to reconfigure and extend our management capacity in the face of surprise problems or invisible enemies such as a pandemic. Unifying reflection, creativity and management is the real great challenge.