

After Artist Statements

By **Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy**

The following is an excerpt of a longer essay included in “Let’s Walk Together,” published on the occasion of Mario García Torres’ eponymous survey exhibition curated by Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy, which took place last year at Museo Tamayo in Mexico City.

“Nothing happens twice,” says the narrator of *Tea* (1391), a film by Mario García Torres. This is one of several works by the artist that include a narrative voice-over, but the first one where his voice is actually featured. And it makes sense. *Tea* is Mario’s most personal film to date, a work that recounts his coming to terms with art making. Much of it is shot in and around Monclova, Coahuila, where Mario was born and raised. In this hour-long film, the outskirts of that city’s desert valley and its neighboring mountains are traversed or viewed at a distance. This is northern Mexico. It’s a mostly unoccupied region with acres void of built environment and where the song of cicadas and the sound of wind are pronounced. Coahuila is an immense state, rich in prehistoric vestiges beneath its soil. There, the sky seems further away and broader in scope than if seen from any other place. Mario’s narration makes a point about this, that sensation of isolation and distance. But instead of doing so by expounding on the pictured landscape featured in the film, he references Monclova’s art museum.

Founded in 1977, the Museo Pape took as its task the bringing of other works to Monclova through a program of temporary exhibitions. Its well-meaning aspirations—of cosmopolitanism, imaginably—were manifest in other ways. To begin, this wasn’t the typical state-run rural museum. It was a cultural institution created by an affluent immigrant who, decades back, had settled in the relatively small city that is Monclova. This benefactor was Suzanne Lou Pape, one of few female aviators traveling by plane for adventure prior to the establishment of the airline industry. She was a fashion designer in her native France before moving to Mexico with her American husband, Harold R. Pape, who passed away in 1975 and who since the forties had headed the city’s privately owned main industrial complex, Altos Hornos de México. That’s the museum’s background,

abridged. Perhaps a more palpable sign of Museo Pape’s modern aspirations was its building. Its cylindrical-shaped multi-story edifice differed notably from the block-form architectural conventions in Monclova.

This museum was a school for Mario as it was for the general public, to the effect that the institution gave them access to a material culture that wasn’t being produced locally. And yet, as the artist states in *Tea*, this made it seem as if art always happened to be created in faraway places, that the museumgoers were just its distant spectators. The histories of art elucidated in their displays were not precisely anchored in the realities there. Nonetheless, Museo Pape altruistically introduced Monclova to the notion and infrastructure of an art system. For Mario, its exhibitions did not solely consider things plainly isolated from their original context or far from his. They were occasions to draw connections between the objects on display and their makers, and amongst the people, motivations and manners that brought them to the museum. These wonderings were the impetus for *Tea*. This is also what in general gave him the impetus to consider the histories that institutions apparently endorse, and to seek out the stories they ostensibly omit.

It wasn’t at Museo Pape but at Monclova’s artist-run space Puerta Morada where Mario began exhibiting his first artworks. These were primarily works on paper, painted or printed with a reduced palette of subdued earth tones, geometric compositions, and grainy surfaces. He was in his late teens and by then already exploring structures, at least pictorially, content to be part of an arts community but likewise eager to trace and learn from other contexts. In 1994, Mario moved to Monterrey, the rich and bustling capital city in Nuevo Leon, which is Coahuila’s neighboring state in northern Mexico. He would go there to study art without anticipating relocating back to his hometown. By then, Monclova had begun experiencing a population decrease that went in tandem with a declining economy, which has since precipitously worsened. This is due in part to technical and bureaucratic changes within Altos Hornos de México, the driving force of Monclova’s economy for most of the twentieth century. In part, it also a result of the crime and insecurity related to narcotic trafficking and the corresponding War on Drugs.

On the other hand, Monterrey was one

of the country’s major industrial hubs, and remains so. In the nineties, the city was also experiencing the emergence of a culture industry. Several artistic initiatives were founded then, including the university art program Mario attended and a new, private museum devoted to contemporary art. Much could be said of this museum, commonly known as MARCO, which opened in a monumental building designed by architect Ricardo Legorreta. Suffice it to say here that at the time it was a national precursor to an international wave of new museum design, and it held an annual exhibition that culminated in granting the World’s highest cash-prize awarded to a living artist. It was also this museum that presented, in 1994, an exhibition surveying the work of Julio Galan, an artist originally from Coahuila whose richly colored, intricate paintings expressed the inner realms of his identity and sexuality, primarily through self-portraiture.

However impressive, that museum’s architecture and even its Galan exhibition were untimely, considering the broader cultural environment in the country. The build-up to the 1993 presidential elections in Mexico had incited debate and mobilized a critical mass against political corruption and social inequality ensuing from the expanding neoliberal policies implemented since the 1980s. Mistrust of institutions—and of their commitment to private over public interests—was assumed. Then, the alleged fraud of the electoral process catalyzed more mobilization. Probably the most mediated civil resistance to state and corporate interests was the 1994 Zapatista uprising in the southern state of Chiapas. There were certainly other subtler ways, if less discernibly revolutionary, in which criticality and resistance were manifested. In the field of visual arts, for example, an exploration and weaving of social fabrics gained momentum, providing an alternative to the currency the fine arts had gained—whether in the art market or the collective unconscious—in picturing personal emotions or representing public consensus.

Much has been written about Mexico’s nineties art scene, so no need to elaborate. What is worth noting here, however, are the changing subject positions emerging in the art field during this time. The artists with most visibility, at least within the fiercer art circuits, practiced a form of cultural anthropology. Conveying personal emotions appeared irrelevant, viewed as a form of

egotism, escapism or submissiveness to a canon. Subjecting to analysis the motions of society, often in the urban realm, whether in its built structures, however informal, or through class distinctions, or quite simply in its very materiality, was what was being advocated in the arts. In Mexico City, the curator Cuauhtémoc Medina saw this aesthetic attitude as one that articulated the artists “refined sensibility by demonstrating their ability to process what the economic and political elite, with their modernist pretensions, considered repulsive.” The role of the artist being championed was that of a critic exposing the paradoxes of modernization.

The nineties also saw the rise of the independent curator, who accompanied or worked closely with living artists in order to develop their work. Through writing and exhibition making, they gave local and international visibility to artistic communities whose work was largely process-based, certainly not readily available, and ultimately theoretically driven. They made sense of it. Several independent initiatives, such as the art collective Temistocles or the artist-run space La Panadería, were more than platforms. They occasioned communal exchange and discourse. So much more was happening: an international forum on art theory was launched, taking place within the auspices of a popular international art fair in the city of Guadalajara, Jalisco; inSITE, a bi-national nonprofit focused on

installation art, commissioned artists of the Americas to create site-specific work on the US/MX border; and *Poliester*, a bilingual magazine devoted to contemporary art, began to circulate. And more, but not much, was happening in Monterrey.

In 2000, Mario moved to Mexico City to work as full-time curator—of new media specifically—at Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, all the while continuing to make art. Under the direction of Osvaldo Sanchez, this public museum had turned its attention to artists emerging in the nineties, consistently showcasing their work. This was institutionally unique, in that his curatorial team included a group of young people, including several artists, who were not all trained as art historians nor came with the habitual profile or aspirations of the cultural bureaucrat. It was during this time when Mario’s already incipient interest in exhibition formats and histories grew, when his attention to the make-up of art institutions widened. It was also when the activities of corresponding and collaborating, required for developing projects at the museum, became integral to his artistic process. His practice began expanding beyond the confines of a studio, his ideas materializing in project-based work.

One of several projects Mario developed then was *Abastecedora de Galerias* (2001–2002), which took the form of a company providing self-styled products for exhibition display, products that mostly cit-

ed artworks by others. He would also develop and patent the typography for an alphabet hinted at—though unavailable and unregistered—in the once iconic logo of Mexico’s ministry of education. The logo design originally consisted of the three-letter acronym SEP, standing for Secretaría de Educación Pública. For both of these projects, the artist collaborated with the Galería de Arte Mexicano, who did more than simply provide space to exhibit iterations of these projects. Their involvement was also to bear witness to the company’s notary registration and to act as an accomplice in his legal patenting of the typography. Central to these two projects is an inquiry on authorship, for they specifically used existing sources attributed to other makers, and claimed the authority to confer or share their rights of use.

Since developing *Abastecedora de Galerias* and *SEP Unlimited* (2003), Mario has consistently examined the politics of authorship. This becomes more evident in later work involving the collection and reinterpretation of existing materials, as well as the appropriation or reenactment of artworks created by others. What is worth emphasizing now in these two projects is their connection to conceptualism of the sixties and seventies. While most interpretations of Mario’s work aptly draw such association, they do so particularly in relation to the protagonism he gives in many of his works to so-called conceptual artists,



Mario Garcia Torres' *Tea, 1391* (Iranian calendar) will be screened at the Cinematek in Brussels on the 20th of April (7 pm). (film still)

such as the American artist Robert Barry or the Italian artist Alighiero Boetti. At times, the connection has been drawn with regard to the documentary character of his work. This is fairly apt, too. As is the case with much of conceptual art, and also mindfully done by Mario, documentation would make explicit the existence of a work—or an iteration of it—that was perhaps unseen or made visually apparent only in a gallery or museum display.

But when considering Mario's early projects, more pertinent is the connection drawn to conceptual art that specifically expanded on the non-retinal and literalist Duchampian readymade. The art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh deciphered this as an aesthetics of administration, which set the stage for art as institutional critique. He argued that, without visual qualities or manual labor, let alone evidence of artistic competence, "the traditional criteria of aesthetic judgment becomes on the one hand a matter of linguistic convention and on the other the function of both a legal contract and an institutional discourse (a discourse of power rather than taste)." Indeed, *Abastecedora de Galerías and SEP Unlimited* stressed the perceptual withdrawal occasioned by the readymade. The projects made use of existing sources, whether a painting or a type face, to circulate these in different forms to be experienced spatially instead of visually, to work with the invisible but ever present connections between the authorities enabling their materialization.

The institutional relations these projects drew—and inherently required, then purposefully recorded—in their very process, trumped dominant modernist claims of art's autonomy and of aesthetic self-sufficiency. The artist's Museo de Arte in the desert valley of Sacramento in Coahuila took this idea further. Founded by Mario in 2004, the project consisted of designating a vacant plot of land as an art museum. Literally a museum without walls, nothing is to be seen at such a place, that is, nothing other than a natural landscape. Yet, unlike most artist museums founded in the last five decades around the world, the Museo de Arte in Sacramento wouldn't be occupied with organizing and physically housing a collection or exhibitions, whether as an art installation or institution, or in imitating museological conventions and rituals, say, as an artistic practice or in the shape of an artwork. While he demarcated the perimeter of his museum on a topographic map of Sacramento's surrounding desert region and drafted its mission statement on a page, the speech act itself would be the project's primary form of content. And as a departing point to imagine art—art

essentially being a proposition, if anything, and an analytic one at best.

It all sounds fine, even fun, maybe. However, despite the fact that Mario was immersed in Mexico City's arts community, or perhaps precisely because of it, was there much interest in his projects. In a cultural context, as well as a field of production, where visual art dominated, and still does, these early projects were perhaps too immaterial to be regarded. Perhaps they were also silently dismissed because of how, in their presumed self-referentiality, they seemed to expand on a genealogy set by Western art history, rather than more directly addressing the prevailing pictorial lineage of national art, or sharing the more common structure of feeling denoting its ideological ruptures. In short, Mario's work appeared to have no particular use value in the dominant if competing discourse; it was expository in its critique but not exemplary for the cultural context. Something like a desert experienced in the urban realm. No less perplexing might have been Mario's artistic practice, and still may be for some, which hasn't complied with the strictures of an artist as an image or object maker, nor with conventional research methods, output, or presumed objectivity of an art historian, critic or curator.

It is precisely the ease with which his work and artistic practice crosses and resists defined categories that makes their appreciation a rich experience and, more relevantly, that also makes them of this time, that is, of being contemporary in their boundary-defying nature and characteristic fluidity. Mario has also been comfortable moving from one place to another, literally, and, like many artists, for seeking out communities with shared artistic affinities. A major move happened in 2004. He relocated to Los Angeles, California, where he lived until 2010 (the year he returned back to Mexico City, his current home base). During the first couple of years there, he was enrolled in the graduate art program of CalArts, a school known to be a hub of art as institutional critique and for discussions of identity politics. This was also the place where other Mexican artists had recently studied, one being Rubén Ortiz Torres, whose artistic practice early on had a particular impact on Mario's own approach to art making.

While living in Monterrey, Mario attended a seminar by Ortiz Torres where the older artist introduced the cultures surrounding his work. Beyond stating intent, explaining technique or offering a formal analysis of his artwork, Ortiz Torres historically framed his images and collaborative projects—where these came from, how

they came about. By showing and discussing work made by other artists along with his own, he acknowledged the types of art that had inspired his work and likened his own contributions as constituting for each of these a field of knowledge. For example, a body of work by Ortiz Torres exploring modern Mayan-inspired theme parks juxtaposed with photographs of archeological sites taken over a century earlier by Désiré Charney in a French expedition to Mesoamerica followed an analysis of image making, class and travel.

Regardless of the aesthetic contrasts between Mario's projects and Ortiz Torres's work, they share the role of the artist that is in theory and practice analogous. The type of presentation given by Ortiz Torres structurally addressed the substance of originality and cultural access. It exploded these, so to say: originality and access were to be regarded less as visible traits and distinctive qualities in a work than problems to discursively deliberate on. The most influential aspects of his talk were, in part, the very exercise he put in motion, which by all means could be considered didactic, and in part the fact he was simply articulate. This was not an expression of being wordy, but worldly, of defying artistic and even geopolitical insularity by the undoing of an artwork's material discreetness. Mario remembers how plainly and clearly Ortiz Torres spoke, how his speech was far from the usually lyrical or explicitly political jargon.

In the short-run, this last part may have caused the most lasting impression on Mario, for here was an artist only a few years older than him whose personal narrative encompassed the matter, references and arguments to comprehensively elucidate on his own work. Ortiz Torres's "discipline" needed no critic to contextualize it. Mario would eventually take this lesson a step further. Whereas Ortiz Torres's statements could serve to expound on his artwork, Mario would incorporate his accounts about the work into the work itself. It was during his time in Los Angeles when Mario's literalist attitude changed. He dropped the act out of speech act. He literally wrote and enacted it, this time creating inter-dependences between image and text. His work would enfold context, unfold it through experience.

The catalogue will be launched during Independent, the new art fair in Brussels (19/04-23/04) where Jan Mot will present works by Mario Garcia Torres. More information to follow.

1. <http://www.garcia-torres.com>
 2. <http://www.garcia-torres.com>

Agenda

Francis Alj's

The Fabiola Project, Menil Collection, Houston (US), - 13/05/18 (solo); *MACBA Collection 31*, MACBA, Barcelona (ES), 17/06 - 18/06; *Una historia de negociaci3n*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (CA), 01/12 - 09/04 (solo); *Francis Alj's: Ciudad Juarez Projects*, ASU Art Museum, Arizona State University, Tempe (US), 21/01 - 27/05 (solo); *Without an Ending There is no Beginning*, Jan Mot, Brussels, 17/03 - 22/04 (solo); *Francis Alj's*, Cinematek, Brussels, 23/03 (screening); *My City, My Studio / My City, My Life*, Kathmandu Triennale, Kathmandu, 24/03 - 09/04; *The Absent Museum*, WIELS, Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, 20/04 - 13/08; *Archaic*, National Pavilion of Iraq, 57th Venice Biennale, Venice (IT), 13/05 - 26/11; *Action!*, Kunsthaus Z3rich, Zurich (CH), 23/06 - 30/07

Sven Augustijnen

STEP UP! Belgian Dance and Performance on Camera 1970-2000, Argos, Brussels, 28/01 - 19/03; *Post-Peace*, W3rtembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart (DE), 24/02 - 07/05; *How To Live Together*, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, 25/05 - 15/10

Pierre Bismuth

The Multiplier, Frans Masereel center, Kasterlee (BE), 18/11 - 30/04; *Cin3ma mon amour. Film in Art*, Aargauer Kunsthau, Aargau (CH), 22/01 - 17/04; *Du verbe 3 la communication. La collection de Jos3e et Marc Gensollen*, Carr3 d'Art, Mus3e d'art contemporain, N3mes (FR), 03/02 - 18/06

Manon de Boer

Attica, USA 1971 Images and sounds of a rebellion, Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto (CA), 18/01 - 09/04; *The world has never been more transparent*, Shanghai 21st Century Minsheng Museum, Shanghai (CN), 19/03 - 31/07; *The Last Beautiful Pleasure*, Brian Butler/1301 PE, Los Angeles, 27/04 - 24/04 (with Tactica Dean); *Dissonant*, Dag van de Dans, Argos Centre for Art and Media, Brussels, 29/04 (screening)

Rineke Dijkstra

Idiosyncrasy: Anchovies Dream of an Olive, Centro de Artes Visuales Fundaci3n Helga de Alvear, C3ceres (ES), 29/04 - 09/04; *Full Moon*, Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar (NL), 11/09 - 26/03; *Strange and Familiar; Britain as Revealed by*

Conf3rence
Cin3ma du Mus3e 18h30

Mus3e national d'art moderne
Centre Georges Pompidou

lundi 23 mars

Pour un art de soci3t3
Conf3rence de Philippe Thomas

Apr3s Michel Tournereau, qui le citait 3 comparer (in: PUBLIC n 3 - 1985), apr3s l'exposition « Fictionnalisme », qui lui rendait hommage ... Philippe Thomas sort, pour la premi3re fois, de la r3serve dont il semblait avoir fait une obligation... Une prise de parole qui est d3j3 en son 3v3nement.

Thirty years ago, on March 23 1987, **Philippe Thomas** presented a lecture at the Centre Pompidou in Paris which turned out to be completely scripted, including Thomas' smallest gestures and pauses. The audience became aware of this only after the lecture when they received a copy of the book by Daniel Bosser, entitled *Philippe Thomas d3cline son identit3*. In 2013 Occasional Papers published a first English translation.

international Photographers, Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester (UK), 25/11 - 29/05; *Rineke Dijkstra*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 10/12 - 16/07 (solo); *Terrains of the Body*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 18/01 - 16/04; *Digérer le Monde*, Musée départemental d'Art Contemporain Rochechouart, Rochechouart (FR), 25/02 - 11/06

Mario Garcia Torres

+52. *Recent landscapes*, Fundación Calosa, Guanajuato (MX), 29/10 - 15/03; *Du verbe à la communication. La collection de Josée et Marc Gensollen*, Carré d'Art, Musée d'art contemporain, Nîmes (FR), 03/02 - 18/06; *La fiesta fue ayer (y nadie recuerda nada)*, Archivo, Mexico City, 07/02 - 18/03; *WAGSTAFF*, Mostyn, Llandudno (GB), 17/02 - 25/03; *The Last Art College: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1968-1978*, Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge, Alberta (CA), 18/02 - 16/04; Sharjah Biennial 13, Sharjah (AE), 10/03 - 12/06; *Mario Garcia Torres*, Cinematek, Brussels, 20/04 (screening); *Phenomenon (2)*, Anafi (GR), 08/07 - 16/07

Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster

Idiosyncrasy: Anchovies Dream of an Olive, Centro de Artes Visuales Fundación Helga de Alvear, Cécereces (ES), 29/04 - 09/04; *Labor Relations*, Wrocław Contemporary Museum, Wrocław (PL), 10/06 - 27/03; *Ficciones y territorios. Arte para pensar la nueva razón del mundo*, Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid, 25/10 - 13/03; *Opera-House*, Sonneveld House, Rotterdam (NL), 13/11 - 05/07 (solo); *Toujours. El museo come testigo*, Museo Amparo, Puebla (MX), 18/02 - 22/05

Douglas Gordon

Franz West. Artistclub, 21er Haus, Vienna, 14/12 - 23/04; *Cinéma mon amour. Film in Art*, Aargauer Kunsthhaus, Aargau (CH), 22/01 - 17/04; *Safar - 4th édition 21*, 39 Jeddah Arts Initiative, Jeddah (AE), 01/02 - 01/05; *Du verbe à la communication. La collection de Josée et Marc Gensollen*, Carré d'Art, Musée d'art contemporain, Nîmes (FR), 03/02 - 18/06; *Speak: Tania Bruguera, Douglas Gordon, Laure Prouvost and Cally Spooner*, Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London, 02/03 - 21/05; *Mirror Mirror*, Musée de design et d'arts appliqués contemporains, Lausanne (CH), 31/05 - 01/10

Joachim Koester

In the Face of Overwhelming Forces, Camden Arts Centre, London, 28/01 - 26/03 (solo); *Dizziness. Navigating the Unknown*, Kunsthhaus Graz (AU), 10/02 -

21/05; *Maybe this act, this work, this thing*, CPH:DOX 2017, Copenhagen, 16/03 - 26/03 (screening); *Maybe this act, this work, this thing*, STUK Kunstencentrum, Leuven (BE), 30/03 - 28/05 (solo)

David Lamelas

MACBA Collection 31, MACBA, Barcelona (ES), 17/06 - 18/06; *This Way Out of England: Gallery House in Retrospect*, Raven Row, London, 09/02 - 26/03; *Punto de Partida. Colección Isabel y Agustín Coppel*, Fundación Banco Santander, Madrid, 21/02 - 11/06; *A Life of Their Own*, Pacific Standard Time LA/LA Initiative, California State University Long Beach, Long Beach (US), 16/09 - 10/12 (solo)

Sharon Lockhart

Underway, SKMU Sorlandets Kunstmuseum, Kristiansand (NO), 08/10 - 05/03; *Sharon Lockhart, Harold Edgerton, and Alex Katz*, The Artist's Institute, New York City (US), 09/02 - 25/03; *Cinema Mon Amour: Sharon Lockhart*, BAMPFA, Berkeley (US), 15/03 - 17/03 (screening); *Polish Pavilion*, 57th Venice Biennale, Venice (IT), 13/05 - 26/11 (solo)

Tino Sehgal

A Slow Succession with Many Interruptions, SFMOMA, San Francisco (US), 10/12 - 02/04; *Action!*, Kunsthhaus Zürich, Zurich (CH), 23/06 - 30/07

Philippe Thomas

[SIC]. Works from the CAPC Collection, CAPC musée d'art contemporain, Bordeaux (FR), 13/10 - 27/10; *Readymade*, Eva Presenhuber House, Vnà (CH), 28/01 - 19/03; *Greene Naftali*, New York City (US), 20/04 - 20/05

Tris Vonna-Michell

ZEIGEN / The Present Order, Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig (DE), 17/03 - 16/10; *Register*, Courtisane Festival, Ghent (BE), 31/03 (screening); *Punctuations & Perforations*, La Verrière, Brussels, 21/04 - 01/07 (solo)

Ian Wilson

Ian Wilson, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 20/01 - 14/05 (solo); *Du verbe à la communication. La collection de Josée et Marc Gensollen*, Carré d'Art, Musée d'art contemporain, Nîmes (FR), 03/02 - 18/06; *The Transported Man*, Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, East Lansing (US), 29/04 - 22/10

(advertisement)

192

Screening
20/04, 7 pm

MARIO GARCIA TORRES AT CINEMATEK

In the presence of the artist.
With thanks to the Embassy of Mexico.

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