



Ronald Moran Installation view of Home Sweet Home, 2004 Prometheus Foundation, Lucca, Italy

Performing El Salvador

Contemporary Art: A Social and Political Gauge **BY CLAIRE BREUKEL AND MARIO CADER-FRECH**

ON MARCH 9, 2014, CRACK RODRÍGUEZ WALKED into a ballot station, penned his vote on a voting card, tore it in half, deposited one half into the ballot box and then proceeded to eat its remainder. A hand-held camera documented the artist chewing the ballot while carrying a copy of the exhibition catalogue, *Landings: New Art and Ideas from the Caribbean and Central America 2000–2010*. In only a few hours this video went viral.

At a time when El Salvador's leading political parties, the FMLN or "the left" and ARENA or "the right," were going head to head in a second round of closely tied elections, many Salvadorans felt disillusioned by the lack of an alternative voting choice. Reflecting these feelings of frustration and disempowerment, Crack Rodríguez's action suggested the alternative option of protest. What the artist did not expect, however, was the ardent reaction of the current FMLN government, or the degree to which his artwork would enter daily discussion. The artist was arrested and later released on house arrest, and his life was threatened, thus forcing him to go into hiding until the elections were over. Simultaneously his action made headline news and became a topic of "mainstream" dinner conversation. As a result, his action made positive strides for contemporary art within the consciousness of Salvadorans that had up to then little experience of it, and the performance has arguably come to embody the general dissatisfaction with the political situation in El Salvador.

However, in addition to key political concerns, the action also raised interesting questions about the artist. How did Crack Rodríguez come to build such a significant series of provocative performance works (used as evidence in his defense)—not having, at that time, ever traveled outside of the country?



Crack Rodríguez eats a voting card.

Rodríguez had met international visiting artists such as the TM Sisters, Susan Lee Chun, Bert Rodríguez, New York-based Salvadoran diaspora artist Irvin Morazán, and saw Kalup Linzy perform as part of the *Transcultura* project initiated by Rebecca Dávila and curated by

Performative works by Salvadoran artists include Alexia Miranda's recontextualization of domestic activities, Mauricio Esquivel's dedication to gym workouts to change the look and shape of his body, the durational experiences of Ernesto Bautista's poetry placed on transport trucks that traverse the landscape between the country's borders, as well as the Andy Warholesque transformative self-portraits by the artist known as Nadie (which means "nobody"). When asked about the experience curating *Transcultura* during an interview for the publication *Y.E.S. Collect Contemporary El Salvador*, Alanna Heiss comments: "When exhibitions include artists from dissimilar political and artistic backgrounds, there is sometimes a remarkable discovery between the artists themselves, and such an exhibition lives long past the show and in the works and minds of the artists themselves."

Renowned artist Ronald Moran uses cotton wool to wrap potentially violent domestic objects, entire kitchens, and bedrooms; Abigail Reyes embroiders words and texts found in newspapers; Danny Zavaleta writes an instruction manual of gang symbols used to communicate on the streets; Melissa Guevara's tattoo on the back of her neck and resulting photographic series proclaims "I Am Still Alive."

Alanna Heiss and Alanna Lockward. These performance-based artists visited San Salvador as part of the MARTE Contemporary program at the Museum of Art of El Salvador (MARTE). Their work has had an impact on the production of many Salvadoran contemporary artists who also came to see performance as a viable medium and outlet for expression.

Yet Crack Rodríguez also observed elements of the performative within the politics and social interaction of the everyday. El Salvador's culture is inherently ritualistic as well as social. That is, its predominantly Catholic society is also a society that has been involved in and witnessed public political protests throughout its twelve-year-long civil war



Simón Vega
Third World Sputnik, 2013
Installation at ILLA Pavilion
at the 2013 Venice Biennale

and up to today. In addition, informal traders and market places are “on the street,” providing a platform for social interaction and cultural expression. Having an acute awareness of his surroundings, Rodríguez uses public spaces as the

platform upon which he can play with interactions and push up against social norms and political tendencies.

His use of his environment is not an isolated example. Salvadoran artist Simón Vega used discarded materials to

recreate a life-size Russian Sputnik for the 2013 Venice Biennale, a work inspired by the makeshift and improvisational approach to building informal housing in El Salvador. In his ongoing “Far Away Brother Style” series, shown at the 2011

Venice Biennale, Walterio Iraheta documents homes built with remittances from relatives now living and working in the United States, photographing eclectic architecture that speaks to aspirations of wealth within a socially complex phenomenon of migration (see the article by Sarah Lynn Lopez with illustrations by Iraheta on p. 90).

Practicality is also a factor in the omnipresence of performance in arts programming in El Salvador. When an international artist is invited to El Salvador, mediums such as video performance don't require timely and expensive transportation of artwork. Most forms of performance require the artist to be present, which also encourages engagement with the local community resulting in a mutual sharing of knowledge. Performance is malleable and therefore responsive to public interaction, which is useful within a context that is often initially unknown by the visiting artist. For Salvadoran artists, performance is immersed in the contemporary realities of the everyday. The performative is omnipresent, and one could go as far as to say that the experience of contemporary art generally in and about El Salvador, is one that is intrinsic with life. Not only are artists inspired by improvisational architecture, many artists use found or everyday inexpensive materials. Renowned artist Ronald Moran uses cotton wool to wrap potentially violent domestic objects, entire kitchens, and bedrooms; Abigail Reyes embroiders words and texts found in newspapers; Danny Zavaleta writes an instruction manual of gang symbols used to communicate on the streets; Melissa Guevara's tattoo on the back of her neck and resulting photographic series proclaim "I Am Still Alive." These works are inarguably integrated with quotidian life, and these contemporary artists reflect a breadth of human experience that touches on religion, culture, politics, class, violence, urban planning, domesticity and more. It is not unusual then that Crack Rodríguez would come to use the voting process to perform an anti-institutional action.



Y.ES cover.

In El Salvador, contemporary art is also a tool that bridges not only artists and the public but also artists with established and prospective local patrons. It is inarguable that a hierarchical class system exists in El Salvador. However, art has effectively brought together different social circles in a neutral, open-minded and peaceful environment. Case in point is the MARTE Contemporary annual event *Hocus Pocus*, an art raffle where artists of all disciplines are invited to donate a work of art to raise funds for the museum program. Patrons buy tickets that guarantee they win an artwork. During the event, tickets are drawn one by one, and the first ticket gets first pick of an artwork, and so on. Patrons vie to claim the artwork they want. This fun and informal setting provides a unique platform where people from different social circles mix and mingle, engage in conversation, get to know each other's points of view and build long-lasting friendships. MARTE Contemporary, as well as programs at the Salarrue National Gallery, Cultural Center of Spain, the curated shows at collective work spaces POINT and SPACE, annual artist-initiated public projects such as ADAPTE, and the newly established exchange initiative Y.ES, provide opportunities to bring together diverse sectors of the Salvadoran community.

However, just as artists working in El Salvador are inspired by their surround-

ings, they also interrogate and are distanced from it. El Salvador, although culturally distinctive, is a space that has been, and still is, greatly denationalized. The Salvadoran civil war and mass migration have ensured a fraught relationship with the notions of unity and national identity. Contemporary art is the vehicle through which to export conversation about what El Salvador is today beyond the boundaries of geography. Today, El Salvador needs to be addressed as a metaphorical space that includes its vast diaspora. In fact, many artists living abroad have made a point to travel "home" to show their work—these include Irvin Morazán and Karlos Carcamo based in New York, RETNA and Beatriz Cortez in Los Angeles, Domingo Castillo in Miami, Victor Portillo in Vienna, Luis Paredes in Denmark, Rafael Díaz and Rodolfo Oviedo Vega in Spain, and many more. Currently the Y.ES program and the work of the Cultural Center of Spain in San Salvador are focused on reestablishing a connection with these artists. The challenge now is to cast a wide net around a vast community that has been historically undefined and largely disconnected. Contemporary art can, in this way, be an agent of reconnection, transformation and peace building. It is also not unpleasant that artists such as Crack Rodríguez have a penchant for humor, satire and play. This makes the process of working together always unexpected in an environment that is historically weighted, politically complex, yet culturally rich and socially engaged.

Mario Cader-Frech is a Salvadoran-born collector and philanthropist. Through the Robert S. Wennett and Mario Cader-Frech foundation, he and his husband have supported Salvadoran contemporary artists for the past two decades.

Claire Breukel, a Miami-based South African-born curator, is the Director and Curator of Y.ES, a Salvadoran exchange program, and co-editor of the book Y.ES Collect Contemporary El Salvador with artist Simón Vega and Mario Cader-Frech. See www.yescontemporary.org