

Interviews

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Gilda Mantilla / Raimond Chaves

N.E.M. Tell us about your contribution to the “Actos de edición / Acts of Editing” project

G.M. / R.CH. In 2006, on a trip that took us from Lima to the triple border between Colombia, Peru and Brazil, we knew the Biblioteca Amazónica de Iquitos (Iquitos Amazon Library). On this journey, we spent our time drawing, creating a privileged inventory of everything that passed before our eyes. Finding this library in the Peruvian Amazon, as well as the one that belongs to the Banco de la República in Leticia, Colombia, gave us a deeper understanding of the background, while also enabling us to draw tons of things that could not be seen at a glance. Moreover, the Amazon Library has a very peculiar history that makes it particularly interesting. The library belongs to the Centro de Estudios Teológicos de la Amazonía (CETA,

Centre for Technological Studies of the Amazon), in other words, it belongs to the Augustinian Order. Its origins, history and ideological orientation are the result of the process that certain progressive sectors of the Latin American Church began as of 1968 and which would culminate by giving rise to Liberation Theology, among other things. At that time, the Augustinians of Iquitos, who had been there since the start of the 20th century and who to this day continue to hold the local apostolic vicariate and direct a school, as well as other institutions, decided to become a people; and above all, they decided to be Amazons. Not only would this influence the bias and content of the Library and the focus of all the editorial work of the CETA, which includes several collections of books, periodical publications and at some point even forays into the local television; it also led to alliances with Indian movements and environmental protests. The Library has a very assorted collection of books, journals, periodicals, local photography collections, Amazon film and others, most of which were produced in that very region and by Amazonian authors. Our work for *Actos de edición / Acts of Editing* is based on our reading of all of these circumstances, as foreigners. We were surprised and intrigued by the notion of a library in a city that can only be accessed by means of a river or plane. A library in the jungle at a time that seems to be that of the song of the swan of the book as we know it. A library about the jungle at a particularly complex time for the Peruvian Amazon, when the state has decided to auction off the air, water, land and subsoil to the highest bidder. (In fact, at the time that I wrote this, the government had just passed a law on the free import of genetically modified seeds.) A city that in the most recent years has become the centre of renewed debates on the countless ways to declare oneself Amazonian, a discussion in which the images of a young generation of local painters mark the guidelines. A library that depends on a sector of the Church that breaks away from the traditional alliance between evangelization and colonialism; and which moreover is a sector that has declared itself progressive and which acts accordingly, in a country where the left wing oscillates between dispersion and evaporation. All of this in a broader milieu that suffered and grew thanks to the rubber “fever”, the “bonanza” of the coca, the comings and goings of smuggled goods, at the mercy of the apathy of Lima’s centralism and in a word, the rhythm of colonial processes. Over a five-month period, we made several visits to the

Amazon Library –which currently operates intermittently– and to the library of the governmental Institute of Peruvian Amazon Research –also located in Iquitos and which shares similar funding with the former, despite its more technical approach. At each visit, led by chance and the coincidence, we spent our time scanning a vast number of documents, in hopes of getting lost in them, the way one gets lost in the jungle. With no attempt or aspiration to be comprehensive or to cover everything and aware of what we were leaving out, we chose to zoom in on the minuscule and anecdotic details, venturing out to that which has been forgotten and buried on the fringes of official history. Making all of those “dormant fossils” in the consulted writings come to life in a Warburg-like style. Selecting the fragments of many “pasts” to beg for the aid of the present.

With all of that heritage, we are working on a kind of brief essays and/or audiovisual commentaries –which at the same time can be read as a whole– in video format. At first we thought that by shedding light on photographic reproductions, headlines, paragraphs, fragments, illustrations, drawings, news, slogans, graphics, etc., we could read the context in a “new” or “different” way, forcing our strange position. Perhaps an attempt to overcome the colonial-anti-colonial dichotomy and the stances that mark and pierce the consulted archives, which also condition us. To see if it was possible to speak, as the bolero says, of “what could have been and was not”. We may have set our sights a bit too high, and so for the moment, rather than jumping to conclusions the work is allowing us to verbalize questions such as:

- How does a context survive in its archives?
- How can we see in the images of the past something that is more than the reaffirmation of a set of preconceived ideas?
- What is it that eludes our preconceived and conventional idea of the past?
- What is it that we “do not see” in an archive, a library or a newspaper library?
- How can be described the reading and understanding of an unknown context through these devices.
- What –inevitable– processes of manipulation do we set in motion?
- How can we critically approach an archive that in turn presents itself as critical?
- Are there any other options beyond the dilemma that entails having to choose between image and territory,

between memory and future?

Getting lost in an archive suddenly becomes a way to find a few keys in this regard.

N.E.M. Publications, websites, newspapers, journals, leaflets, almost always self-edited, etc. How do you approach the task of editing / publication within your art work in general? Where do editions fit into the overall structure of the work?

G.M. / R.CH. The editorial work that we have carried out both as a group and separately oscillates between two poles. On one hand, we have what we might refer to as the “subsidiary” editions of a work that requires such accompaniment, like a poster for an exhibition, a set of workshop manuals, flyers announcing presentations, a book that compiles a three-year work process like *Dibujando América* (*Drawing America*), and other similar examples. Other times, the “editing” is the work itself. Such is the case of *Hanguando* in its two versions, as a newspaper poster (Chaves, 2002-2004) and as a *cordel* newspaper (Mantilla and Chaves, 2002-2004 in different towns). Unlike the newspaper poster, where the editing is exclusively Raimond’s work, in the second case the methodologies and limits are the central issue of a proposal that involves both us as promoters and the viewers who complete the task with their contributions and decisions. *Hanguando* was a single-edition street newspaper, made collectively, edited instantaneously, with an open idea of what can or cannot be news and with particular editing criteria by the hand of each of its co-authors. In other words, the end result is the more or less harmonious combination of those diverse decisions. This and other works construe editing as the (re)arrangement of pieces or parts. Like constructing chains of meanings and the crossroads that come up among them. Sometimes this takes place among statements, images and objects, like in the posters; other times it occurs in the simple public compilation of a set of questions or doubts regarding the Lima Museum of Art specifically and art in general (Mantilla and Chaves, *Gabinete de la Curiosidad / Curiosity Cabinet*, 2006) or when hypotheses are offered as to Latin America and the Caribbean and their ability to create images through the annotated reading of a collection of old LP album covers that were purchased at the flea markets (Chaves, *El toque criollo / The Criollo Touch*, 2002-2010).

N.E.M. The “publication” normally presents a public visibility, yet in your works there is a continuous attempt to convert the drawing and even the gaze into a public occurrence, into a collective event. How do you create the contents, how do you edit those public words and images?

G.M. / R.CH. We are going to answer these questions somewhat indirectly. In the field of public work, we both share a somewhat similar background as our point of departure. In the case of Peru there is a need to recover the de-structured, when not annulled, public space, after decades of internal violence, privatising policies and authoritarian governments. Also, a recovery process (uncertain and perhaps too timid) of the option of public meeting and discussion that among other things fostered the emergence, boom and decadence of La Culpable, the Lima-based artists’ circle that we formed part of between 2002 and 2008.

In the case of Barcelona, one of us (Raimond) is marked by the peculiar process that went from the recovery of the public space, regarding both political and festive nature, between the final years of the Franco dictatorship and the current decadence in the hands of “tourisation”, “gentrification”, the presentation of the city as “the world’s greatest shop” (sic) and the fact of converting it into a “film set city”, a process that has taken place between the 1992 Olympic Games and the present day.

In both cases, whether out of the desire to recover it or to confirm its loss, there is a desire to convert the spaces and processes of decision-making (editing) and practices such as drawing, into public and collective phenomena, when such acts are supposedly private or pertain to the artists, or to certain active people as opposed to others who are passive. The game rules suggest that there is something incomplete in the starting point, which makes the invitation to build together necessary and the combined total of knowledge desirable. In those cases, the contents are assorted and contradictory, and therefore the criteria for their commentary and assessment are also different from those usually applied. In retrospect, we might say that one can greatly pine for the town festivals, the summertime open-air film screenings and in general the use and enjoyment of the public space, as is common in the Mediterranean, yet when there is no continued political effort beyond the artistic act, one runs the risk of remaining in the merely symbolic.