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http://letraurbana.com/articulos/sacar-el-trabajo-de-la-galeria-y-llevarlo-a-la-calle-para-ver-como-funciona-en-una-situacion-real-otto-berchem/

"Take the work out of the gallery and on to the street"

The trajectory of Otto Berchem, formed in the tradition of the United States and Europe and settled in a tropical country.

By Francine Birbragher-Rozencwaig

During the research prior to the realization of the exhibition Visiones: Fotografía Moderna y Contemporánea (Visions: Modern and Contemporary Photography), which was initially going to be presented at the ArtNexus Space in Bogotá and which, due to the pandemic, ended up becoming a digital exhibition (1), I found a photograph by the artist Otto Berchem. Although I knew the work of this American artist, based in Colombia, the socio-political issue of the image caught my attention and its relationship with the use and creation of written and chromatic codes.

In the context of 2020, where we are witnessing the proliferation of virtual worlds and encoding practices, his work is especially relevant.

In the following interview, the artist makes a chronological journey of his work from its beginnings to its most recent production.

Your practice explores social and visual codes, focusing on the relationships between language, architecture, history, and poetry. The use of "codes" dates back to one of your earliest projects, Men's Room Etiquette (1994), a public intervention in which you posted a list of unwritten rules indicating how men were expected to behave in public toilets. Tell us what led you to do this particular project, and what inspired you to become interested in communication systems within human societies?

I was heavily influenced by several feminist artists who taught me during my final year of my BFA, at Parsons in NY. Until meeting them, my previous education had been focused almost entirely on the formal aspects of making art: something that is important, but without a conceptual framework, can lead to superficial work. After graduating from Parsons I spent a few years in Manhattan, until I left for Scotland, to do my Masters at Edinburgh College of Art. By then I had been steeping myself in texts about male behavior with other males, and was particularly impressed with Ana C Chaves seminal text Minimalism and the Rhetoric of power, where she critiqued the "domineering, sometimes brutal rhetoric" of minimalism.

Men's Room Etiquette was the result of all of those influences. The title led to countless discussions with friends about their experiences in public toilets, and all of the unwritten codes that go with them. The project began as a series of sculptural and installation works, where I employed the aesthetics of minimalism to critique/reveal/expose homosocial codes. The piece that worked best was a series of small plywood panels attached perpendicular to the wall. These were minimal versions of the walls between urinals. Next to each panel was a black dot, painted directly on the wall at various crotch heights. The panels were separated at random distances to evoke how heterosexual men almost instinctively try to "socially distance" themselves from other men when they enter a public toilet.

Around the same time a group of fellow students were busy organizing pop up exhibitions in empty shop spaces in Edinburgh. This eventually led them to curating a large-scale public art show called Aerial '94 during the Edinburgh Festival. I was invited to participate, and later joined to help with the organizing. This was the first time I had ever attempted to do something in outside of a gallery space. When the organizers of Aerial '94 sought permission from the council to do an intervention in the toilets, they explained that I was putting "humorous texts" in the toilets. The council agreed, and I was given the keys to three public toilets in Princess Street Gardens. I installed some wall texts in front of the urinals, as well as plaques with 10 rules of men's Room Etiquette. One of the wall texts, which was at eye level, was "Men begin at an early age on the lifelong habit of surreptitious penis-watching, In public toilets they will always compulsively "check out the opposition."" Long story short: the work was removed within an hour after the toilets opened to the public, and the police spent the morning looking for me. I had learned a valuable lesson: working in a public space is a completely different thing than the safe confines of a gallery.

Your work is based on specific concepts, and for its realization, you use a wide variety of media, including painting, video, public interventions, and other unconventional media. In your early work, you used performance, installation, and video, among others, to develop proposals in which public participation took precedence. I am referring, for example, to Countdown to Lineup (1997) and The Dating Market (2000). Tell us about this first stage of your career and how you became interested in sign systems and their effect on human activity, particularly on the psychological aspect.

In 1995 I moved to Amsterdam, for a two-year residency at the Rijksakedmie van beeldene kunsten. The Rijks is something between a postgraduate program and a residency. At the time there were 60 artists, 30 per year. Half were Dutch, or had been based in the Netherlands. The other half was from all over the world. It was, and remains to be, a paradise for making art. At the Rijks I was able to start working with mediums I had yet to try: video, photography, and participatory/performatic works. The latter, thanks to having a large group of fellow artists around who usually were willing to volunteer, came about organically. As I mentioned, the initial works from Men's Room Etiquette series had circles set at different crotch heights. When I arrived in the Netherlands, I was in a constant state of shock at how tall everyone was.

I started making some pieces about it, but they weren't going anywhere. Then I had an idea of photographing myself next standing next to people, which I did in a photo studio. That series of photos lead to a work called Behind You. With this series, instead of standing next to people, I stand behind them. I presented it as a slide piece, projected life size. They were full figure photos. With tall people, you could barely see me, apart from my shoes, or a bit of my arms. With shorter people you see the top of my head. At the time I liked how humor played part of the work, but the psychological aspect of the work as well. Some of the people were friends, others willing volunteers, and a few agreed reluctantly, because I didn't give them much choice.

That project lead to more interactive, participatory works, from me creating my own talk show (The Otto Berchem Show, 1995), to removing the roof of an apartment occupied by a young couple, and replacing it with a transparent ceiling, so visitors to an exhibition seen from a church tower could witness their daily life (The Glass Ceiling, 1999). That line of work hit its crescendo with The Dating Market, a project I first realized in 2000. The idea was a simple one. At the time I was single, and working out of my apartment. Going shopping at my local supermarket was one of the few reasons why I went out. Occasionally I'd spot I might make eye contact with a fellow shopper, but I'd feel creepy if I started flirting, and found out they were in a relationship. My idea was to make things transparent by creating a special shopping basket, yellow with a flower power motif, made for singles that were looking to meet someone while they were shopping. Together with Ellen de Bruijne Projects, the gallery I was developing the project with, I was able to convince a local family owned supermarket called Lindemann to host the project. Much to my surprise it became a media frenzy. It was all over the national press, and even some international press. People came from all over Amsterdam, and even outside of the city, hoping to find love in the aisles. After a while people didn't even realize it was an art project, they just spoke about the yellow shopping baskets at Lindemann.

Those yellow shopping baskets, with their flower power stickers, were the first time I began working with visual codes as a means to communicate.

Temporary Person Passing Through (2008) and Hobo Paintings (2012), are based on a vocabulary of hieroglyphic symbols developed by Hobos in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States. Can you please describe the works, share with us what inspired you to research this secret coding system, and explain how does it work within your conceptual practice?

I was invited to participate in the 2008 Istanbul Biennial. The concept of the curators, Charles Esche and Vasif Kortun, was to depart from the historic idea of what a biennial is: bringing what's considered the best and most important art from around the world, and presenting it to the locals. Their idea was to invite artists around the world to spend time in Istanbul, and develop a project that would reveal what's special and unique about Istanbul. As the cliché goes: Istanbul is the bridge between Europe and Asia. Istanbullites hate that cliché, but it is true. Even before the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis, Istanbul was a city that refugees and migrants passed through. With that in mind I found myself thinking Hobo signs, which I had first learned about when I was in art school. For those who don't know about them, Hobos were migrant workers who traveled around the mid-west and west of the US. They used a visual code of signs, written with chalk and charcoal on walls, trains, signs, etc. The signs were warnings (Hobos aren't tolerated here), or tips (will feed you for work), or simply directions for other Hobos. I wanted to revive this defunct language, but I didn't want to do it in a decorative or superficial way, I wanted them to convey genuine meaning. In many ways, the project wasn't very different than Men's Room Etiquette.

I was put in touch with the director of a day shelter for street children, called the Çamaşırhane (The Laundry). I explained what I wanted to do. He agreed to help and suggested adding some signs specific to Istanbul, along with the original Hobo signs. Through the Çamaşırhane I was put in touch with two "street children," who were in their mid to late teens. They took me around their Istanbul, and showed me where it was safe, where it was dangerous, who to avoid, and who to go to for help or food. After that I started marking/mapping the city with the signs, using stencils, stickers, and chalk. At the same time I created a Hobo dictionary so that the street children who went to the Çamaşırhane could learn them, and later use them. Seeing as I had spent 2 months in Istanbul I also included my own experiences when I went out I the night, marking the city.

For the visitors of the biennial it was an invisible project. I exhibited a series of photographs of the signs throughout the city in all of the venues of the biennial. To echo the way you might see the signs on the street, there was no label next to the photos. They were hung at odd heights, or in a remote corner. There was only one venue with a concentration of photos, where you could find information about the project.

Years later, after moving to Colombia after 20 years in Europe, I revisited the Hobo signs. It made sense to me. Once again I was in unfamiliar territory. Because I was working from home, and with a baby in the house, this time the signs were used in paintings. The paintings were done on raw wood panels, raw canvas, and raw linen to evoke the surfaces that the Hobos wrote on.

In 2011, you had a one-man-show exhibition in Bogota, Colombia, titled Blue Monday, where you presented for the first time works made using your own chromatic code. Your unique "alphabet of colors" is inspired by the writings of Uruguayan Jorge Adoum and Vladimir

Nabokov, as well as by Peter Saville's designs for the first three New Order albums. Can you please explain how did you come up with it, and what is its relationship with the condition of Synesthesia?

A friend had told me about La Magia del Verbo, a text by Jorge Adoum, where he wrote about colors being connected to letters. I was intrigued, so I did some digging and found the text, trying my best to try to read it with my limited Spanish. I then found myself thinking back to a passage from Kabakov's memoir Speak Memory, where he writes about his and his mother's Synesthesia. That brought back memories of Peter Saville's artwork for the early New Order albums, which had always intrigued me because there was no text, only a series of colors that were actually coded letters. All of this led me to research the neurological condition of synesthesia, where people associate colors with letters, or music, or even taste. A condition, I should add, that I do not have. I found a PhD paper online, where they published a chart with the colors associated with each color by a large group of synaesthetes. I used this chart to develop my alphabet. For example, with the letter O, the vast majority of synaesthetes saw white, with R they saw black. I worked my way through the alphabet, choosing the most common color for each letter, sometimes going for the second, or third most common, or even the fourth or fifth most common. Once I had the code, I had a template to work with.

You were born in the United States, but you have lived abroad most of your life. Living in Europe and Latin America as a foreigner has led you to develop a serious interest in political and social issues and particularly with power relations. How do you use your chromatic alphabet to create art with political content? Many of the works are based on photographs taken in the 1970s. How do you select them, and how do you transform them to achieve your goal?

I started using my code just before the Blue Monday show. The initial works resembled Bauhaus color studies, but they were texts. At the time I was working with the text "Forgive me for what I have not done," which was a play off of "Perdona me madre por que lo hecho," a tattoo that a Puerto Rican friend told me about. So the texts I was "writing" with my colors were realted to that. When I arrived in Bogota to do the show, I hadn't worked out exactly what I was going to do. I had vague ideas of making a wall drawing, using the code. That's about it. Well, it turned out that I arrived just before a national strike against a law that was going to change the structure and the tuition rates at the publically funded universities in Colombia. That's when I found myself thinking that I needed to take the work out of the gallery, and on to the street, to see how it works in real situtation. Like I had many times before. My idea was to make a protest banner, using my code, and to take the banner and march with it during the national strike, which was scheduled a week before the opening of the exhibiton.The text that I would paint was enigmatic: FORGIVE.

While I was preparing the banner, I started researching images of protest. In 2011 that wasn't very difficult to do, what with the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. I found myself gravitated to images of past protests: ones that I either grew up with, either directly, or their legacy was so strong that they simmered for years. I'm thinking of the Civil Rights protests, Anti Vietnam protests, Women's Rights, and seeing as I was making a show in Latin America, it was important to include protests from there. I initially chose to focus specifically on protest related to US intervention in Latin America. After collecting a series of images of past protests, I printed them and began to paint over the original texts on the banners and placards, replacing their text with mine.

These were initially created as studies for future banners/paintings. I had planned on documenting my banner during the strike, and showing photos at the exhibition. In the end, by the the time I arrived with the banner, the ESMAD (Colombian Riot Police) started gassing us, so I never managed to take the photos.

Some of the most lyrical works you have created are the Pennant Pieces. You used streamer pennants associated with festive celebrations, painted with colors that, in Thailand, where the show took place, have a corresponding day of the week. In your piece, you altered the meaning of the colors to spell the title of the exhibition: You Are Not Alone. It is improbable that any passerby could have been able to interpret the meaning of the installation. That leads me to my next question: How does the viewer understand your work unless you provide a decoding system, and how important it is for you to convey the message?

It's a good question. And trust me, you're not the only one who has asked. Like Temporary Person Passing Through, if you don't know the meaning, you won't understand. You can say the same about art in general. Take a renaissance painting, one of the peasant proverbs by Pieter Breugel for example. They're full of meanings, and illustrated proverbs, but if you don't know them, you still have a beautiful painting to look at. Well, with my work, I embrace visual pleasure when possible. I hope to seduce the eye. After that, if the viewer is interested in doing the work, there's more to work with. I haven't hidden the alphabet. I actually made a video in 2013, called Alfabeto, where a woman wearing a balaclava reads a text. It evokes the televised statements made by guerillas. Instead of reading a demand, the woman reads aloud a series of colors: Rojo claro, Azul Turko, Amarilo Claro... She's doing the A, B, Cs of my alphabet. Therefore, the meanings are not always obvious, but I've left the key out in the open. Alternatively, sometimes the title of the work is the text in the piece, like they are with the Pennant pieces.

Revolver was the title of an exhibition you presented at Ellen de Bruijne Projects, in Amsterdam, in 2013. Inspired by your experience of living in Colombia, the show had a strong political content. Its title alluded, on the one hand, it the guns used to aid revolutions, and on the other, it referred to the cyclical nature of revolt. What are the aesthetic connotations of past revolutionary historical moments, and what role do these play in your work?

After 17 years of living in Amsterdam, moving to Bogota was – to say the least – an adjustment. In Amsterdam, you leave your apartment to go to the supermarket, and maybe the most unexpected thing that happens to you is that you get a flat tire. In Bogota, once you leave the apartment, who knows? Along with that, politics and protests are part of daily life here.

The starting point of the show was a work I initially conceived of in 2011. I had an idea of creating a Maypole piece. The maypole would be a performative sculpture. The performative aspect would be people winding, and unwinding the maypole. Once again I employed my alphabet, with the ribbons of the maypole spelling the text "We Are The Revolution," after Josef Beuys iconic 1972 print "La Rivoluzione siamo Noi." The idea being that, like most revolutions, diverse groups of people work together for a common cause, which would be evoked by the winding together of the ribbons. Then, like most revolutions, things unwind, and split apart once that common cause has been achieved, which would be evoked by the unwinding.

I came across a text by Guy Debord that read "All revolutions go down in history, yet history does not fill up; the rivers of revolution return from whence they came, only to flow again" and then I had my conceptual structure for the show.

In the video Revolver (Universidad Nacional), included in the exhibition mentioned above, a celebratory activity such as throwing confetti becomes a political act. In it, colored papers are seen being thrown out of a window of a white, modernist building. Can you please expand on this piece and tell us how, through it, you analyze the nature of historical rebellions, revolts, and revolutions?

Well, getting back to your question about the aesthetic connotations of past movements. I had been living in Bogota for almost a year by the time I had my show at Ellen de Bruijne projects. During that time I continued my research of past protests. The M-19 movement in Colombia, and how they consciously, or unconsciously, embraced the tropes of contemporary art with their actions particularly fascinated me. For example they announced themselves via ads in newspapers, which was ad art from the 60s; their first action was to steal Bolivar's sword and spurs, which was a perfomative act; they followed that by digging a tunnel underneath a military base to steal 5000 small arms, which was like land art.

That research led me to one of the key works in the show. A video titled Revolver (Universidad Nacional), which is a video, documenting an action that took place at the National University in Bogota. The UNal is one of my favorite places in the city. It is one of the few places where Modernism arrived, and has yet to be torn down. It has also been the incubator of dissent for years: where guerillas (or terrorists depending on your political persuasion) have studied, or taught as is the case of Camilo Torres, one of the founders of the ELN. The video documents papers being thrown from a window. The papers are colored, the colors spelling the word REVOLVER with my alphabet. They float in the air, falling to the ground, a swirl of air pulling them into a vortex in a corner.

The previous topic leads to an installation you titled Impenetrable. With it, you take on the tradition of "Penetrables" proposed by the late artists Jesús Rafael Soto and Hélio Oiticica, who tried to make art a living and shareable experience. Your work, on the other hand, is based on a series of flags created by changing the acronyms and symbols representing movements, parties, or dissatisfied groups, and replacing them with the colors from your chromatic alphabet. Although the viewer can walk around the flags and even see through the holes, it is improbable that he or she may be able to interpret the multiple layers of the piece. Can you elaborate and share what the issues you are addressing both from the formal/art history perspective and the political/historical ones are?

Inpenetrable is the result of years of a particular facination and a problem I had to solve.

The fascination was with the Romanian flag, during their revolution in 1989. For me, along with the images of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Romanian flag with the hole in the center, where the communist coat of arms was cut, is one of the indelible images of the end of the cold war. That tricolor, with the hole in the center, stuck with me for years. I later learned that Hungarians did the same, during the 1956 uprising.

I first worked with that motif when la Ene, a small independent space in Buenas Aires, had an open call for artists to design a flag. My proposal was simple: I used my colors code to creat a square flag with four checks. The casual observer saw four colors: violet blue; light blue; bright red; and green. Those colors spell the word FLAG. In the center, the space of meaning, was a hole.

The problem I had to solve is a common one with artists living in South America. We're spread over vast distances, live in a region with protectionist import duties, and lack public support networks for the arts. Therefore, when we have a show abroad, we generally have to make work that we can transport ourselves, which becomes part of the process. I had a solo show in

Brazil, at Pilar Gallery in Sao Paulo. Therefore I had to figure out how to make a solo show in two large rooms, that I could transport with my checked in luggage. At the same time, my work has a political edge, and in Brazil that can be problematic. Of course there are political artists there (Cildo Meireles for example), but in general my reading of Brazilian art is that there's a preference for beauty over overt politics. That's my not terribly educated take. That was the problem: how to make a work that I could travel with, that was political in nature, but not overtly so. That's where the inspiration from Oiticica – an artist who was both extremely aesthetic and politcial – came from. My idea was to reinterpt flags from leftist and guerilla movements from Latin America. I took the abbriveiation of the movement, and translated it to my alphabet. The design of the flag was taken from the basic design of the flag it represented. If the flag had horizontal stripes, my colors would be horizontal, if they were vertical, they'd be vertical. If there was a crest, isignia, or letters on the flag, I would cut a hole here they were. For example, the flag of M19 was a horizontal tricolor of Blue, White, and Red with an M 1 9 sewn or painted on it. My interpretation was a single panel of Carmine red, signifying the M, and two wholes where 19 would be. The flag for FARC is the Colombian horizontal tricolor, with a crest that is shape of Colombia, with the "FARC-EP", two guns, and a book. My flag was a horizontal quadricolor of violet blue, bright red, black, and yellow, with a hole in the center.

In the end I made 19 flags for the original installation, with flags from movements from almost all of Latin America and the Caribbean. For good measure I also included my interpretation of the Black Panthers flag. The installation was a nod to Oiticica's Grande Núcleo. Where Oiticica's Grande Núcleo was hung on a grid, mine was looser: flags hung at various angles, and heights. As a nod to geography, the first flags that the viewer encountered were from the northern countries, the farther back, the more southern.

The title was both a play on penetrables, and the fact my code is unknown to most viewers, therefore the full meaning is impenetrable.

More recently, your interest in the study of codes and ways of classification has led to a new series inspired by the botanical expedition done in Colombia by Jose Celestino Mutis in the 18th and 19th centuries, which generated an inventory of the tropical flora of the country. Can you please explain your new project?

Tropical Buren is a series of paintings that were conceived on a trip to the family home of friends in Santa Marta, a city on the Caribbean coast of Colombia. Every morning we ate outside. One morning, as the sun rose, we were blinded. I looked on, as our host lowered

white and yellow striped screen, to shield us from the sun. Once it was completely down, I noticed the silhouette of vines blocking the light of the stripes. I took a photo, and thought to myself 'Tropical Buren," as in Daniel Buren, the French conceptual artist who has been using the simple motif of vertical stripes for years. Voila! It was, in many ways, the perfect fusion of where I came from, and where I was: an artist from the US, who lived for many years in Europe, trained in the northern US/Western European tradition, living in a tropical country with different traditions. I started studying the flora of Colombia, which lead me to Mutis, and the documentation of his expeditions. This resulted in a series of paintings, where I echo Buren's 8.7 wide stripes. The difference being that my stripes cover the silhouettes of flora found primarily in Colombia.

The first series of this body of work dates back to 2016. Over the past few months, during the Covid quarantine in Bogota, I have revisited the project. When the streets of Bogota were empty, and the air so clear that people could see the Nevado del Tolima, a volcano that's +/- 240km by car for the first time in 30 years from Bogota, the two constants on the streets were people who work for Rappi, a food delivery service, and people selling Eucalyptus. The streets full of Day-Glo orange Rappiteros, mostly Venezuelans who have no choice but to work. They do the shopping and deliver food for those who don't want to venture outside. The people selling eucalyptus climb the Cerros Orientales, trim the trees, and then sell the eucalyptus to people who boil or toast the leaves to cleanse the air in their apartments. The shades of Eucalyptus green coupled with the Day-Glo orange are the elements of my new "Pandemia Burens." This time the stripes feel more like bars.

With the proliferation of virtual worlds and "coding" practices, do you see your work going in that direction?

While it would make sense to explore those platforms, I don't see myself taking that leap any time soon. In fact, with some of my recent work, I've been looking more to archaic technologies for inspiration. I'm referring to Divisions of labor, a recent project that was the result of a residency in Trujillo, Peru. During the residency I researched the Moche, a pre Columbian culture that existed from +/-200AD until +/-800AD. I was particularly intrigued by the adobe bricks that they used to build their Huacas (temples). The Huacas were made from adobe bricks, and with each Huaca, archeologists have discovered that the bricks came from 100-200 different sources. The evidence for this being that the adobes have Makers Marks on them. One theory is that adobes were form of tax, and the marks denote the village where they came from. Along with that project, after a recent residency at Altos de Chavon, DR with the Caribbean Art Initiative, I have begun to research the sellos (body stamps) used by the Taino people. Perhaps one day soon, I'll go back to the future.

Notes: (1) Exposición digital Visiones: Fotografía Moderna y Contemporánea
https://www.artnexus.com/en/fundacion-artnexus-exhibition