

A VEHICLE FOR TRANSFORMATION: AN INTERVIEW WITH ARTIST DIEGO PÉREZ GARCÍA *by* ALEXIS SALAS

DIEGO PÉREZ GARCÍA came to Austin in March 2009 for a one-month residency to develop a project with the support of the Mexican Center of LLILAS, the Department of Art and Art History, the Blanton Museum of Art, and the Mexico-Austin Artistic Exchange, a new collaborative effort to forge interdisciplinary learning and cultural exchange between the UT community and emerging international artists. Pérez García was provided with a studio space at the Creative Research Lab, which he used to create a printmaking-based work at Flatbed Press. He will return to Austin to continue work on the project in fall 2009, as well as present it at the Museo Carrillo in Mexico City. Graduate student Alexis Salas and the artist spoke about

his work via e-mail and video conversations after he completed his first stay in Austin. The following is a compilation of their conversations.

AS: Your work seems to operate on a number of levels, vacillating between the playful and the formal, the lyrical and the mechanical, fact and chance. I was particularly drawn to this in relation to how you use names in your artworks. Could you speak a bit about your works involving names, particularly those that invoke Mexican muralist Diego Rivera and the ancient American ruler Nezahualcōyotl?

DPG: Life is too tough to be too serious, but we get consumed with notions such as “time is money” or thinking that we have it all under control. So we have art to breathe, to allow us

to approach life in a simpler way. This said, I consider art to be serious—that is to say—the things that I put forth through art are things that I really mean.

The work about Diego Rivera was a very playful piece, I was trying to make fun of art seriousness, I was trying to make fun of myself, I was trying to make fun of Rivera’s supreme importance. Originally, the idea was to bring life to a completely obscure and mortuary-looking place like the Anahuacalli; to use what was intended and designed to be a painting studio as a painting studio, a place for creation, not for adoration. In the end, that is what museums seem to be: centers for adoration. At the same time, I tried to mock the idea of “artist uniqueness” through that piece, I was going to create “original pieces by Diego Riveras” and people were going to be



Chromogenic print of *La Biblioteca*

able to buy these “last works” by Diego Rivera. But when I ultimately did the piece, I didn’t want to discount the ideas of the participants in the piece, the Diego Riveras making the works. With respect to the work about Nezahualc6yotl, which is both the name of an ancient ruler of Texcoco as well as the name of the municipality Ciudad Nezahualc6yotl adjacent to Mexico City that the ruler inhabited, I was commenting on a stark discrepancy. What has happened to the Nezahualc6yotl area is quite a shame—it is run down, not taken care of, ecologically destroyed. It used to be beautiful, there was a lake, it had rich biodiversity, flora and fauna.

AS: So, are you interested in recovering, or perhaps even recuperating, paradise? You do have a work called *Esquema para una oda tropical*,

Jardineros Modulables I in which the viewer sees, through photographic documentation, a number of pots filled with soil located in a cemented area morphing into the containers of lush plants.

DPG: Yes, I would say that my work has to do with a transformation or morphing. For example, returning to *La Biblioteca de Nezahualc6yotl*, Ciudad Nezahualc6yotl is a very poor area in all senses. The people in Nezahualc6yotl don’t know who the ruler Nezahualc6yotl was. He was a prince dedicated to poetry, to the environment. Using his name in this piece is to reinforce the fact that he is unknown. Nezahualc6yotl also had an incredible library. And so I started collecting books that I find to be important works of international and Mexican literature.

I purchased these books from street vendors who had found them in the trash. Originally, the project was to put the books in the public libraries in Nezahualc6yotl, but then I realized that the problem wasn’t that there were no books in these libraries—there were plenty of books. The problem was that there were no library visitors. So there was no sense in giving the libraries more books if there were no readers. So if it was not recovering paradise, it was at least provoking a sort of nostalgia for what we have lost, a kind of protest for the dislocation of values, values with which I don’t feel identified: a major lake for a garbage dump; literature, thought for cheap mass media entertainment.... And so the transformation or the recuperation of a sort of paradise was dislocated.



Libro de sombras azul III

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AS: From the photographic documentation of La Biblioteca de Nezahualcóyotl, it seems that you built a cart, furnished it with books, and then took it around the Nezahualcóyotl municipality, thus making your own mobile public library, another sort of paradise or utopia.

DPG: But I drove the cart around Nezahualcóyotl a couple of times and was looked at like a madman.

AS: Perhaps the looks could be partially attributed to the fact that you were driving a cart that, while you had turned it into a mobile library, is the kind of cart used to pick up garbage in impoverished communities in Mexico, yes? So your project was also about a sort of transformation of use or a subversion of expectation, right?

DPG: Yes, of course, I had gathered this amazing collection of books from garbage in the community. But it was in a community where there is still not an adequate garbage collection system. And so the piece serves as a sort of commentary that, in light of such inequalities, the great works of our culture will end up at the garbage dump.

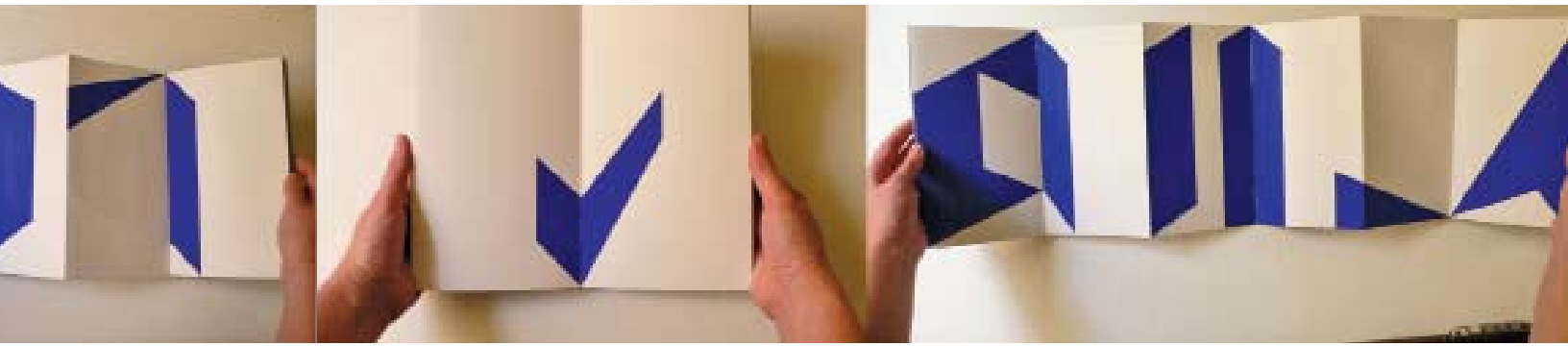
AS: As you speak, I am thinking about your relationship with the public or the user of your work, which is a complex one, as you, as an artist, have an initial expectation of the public reaction to your work. Yet, the reality of the public's reaction is sometimes quite different and thus transforms how you think of your art-making practice. I understand that in Austin you started a project that consists of inviting elementary students from Austin's east side to go to the print shop and create, by very simple means (in this case, using folded pieces of standard paper), new prints. How do you envision your public or user and how important to you is it that you accurately predict their actions?

DPG: I envision the public as an active one. The public is very important to me. The public is the end, the receiver of the message. Without the public, art's true sense is lost. What perhaps I am trying to point out or even change is the relationship between viewer and the art piece in order to push toward a more participatory process, a more inclusive process, one in which the public is almost the essential part of the artwork. We have to establish new relationships between artists and society. We [the artists] should not be separated anymore, as if sacred and individualistic, showing artwork

as if it were created by a divine hand.

AS: So how do these ideas about the art public relate to your relationship with printmaking?

My relationship with printmaking is the same I have with a stone I find along the way. I don't want to change that rock unless I need it to change something else. That is to say, I don't have a strong relationship, or almost no relationship, with the medium of printmaking. My departing point with the project, for working with prints, was that at this point of art history, whether it be in history in general or printmaking history, I believe that there is little to add if I were to start a project by envisioning it within a field. And even in the case that I could offer small changes in a certain technique specific to a field, then its range of action would remain in a very constrained sphere, that is, the small circuit of me, the workshop, the museum, and little else. If we want to believe that art is a vehicle for transformation, in a social or spiritual way, then we should start thinking about creating deeper effects and trying to avoid our little sacred roles as creators of beautiful objects—paintings, prints, sculpture, etc.—to be appreciated only by our own clan of art members. That is



why I asked to develop the project in Austin in the way that I did: bringing people from outside of the art circuit inside of it in order to make these ideas spread and so that art may be regarded as something other than object production.

AS: Could you tell me a bit more about the project you did in Austin?

The work with the folding paper is the project that I started in Austin but have yet to finish. It is a project that I have not finished as I chose to work with kids, and that aspect of the project has not yet been coordinated. I am going to go back in autumn to finish the piece. The piece that I created during my first stay could be considered a sort of departing essay and precursor to the project that I will make in the autumn with the kids. At Flatbed I was shown different techniques and different materials, and in response I said, well, this is very nice but it would be great to show schoolchildren this and let them make their

own art. It seemed a bit selfish to go through the process by myself, to be the isolated artist. My idea was to bring kids to the workshop to show them how artistic practice can be and to involve them in the creative process from folding a single piece of paper and putting it in a machine to getting something out at the end.

The Blanton runs a number of educational programs with local schools. I talked to the Blanton about bringing kids who would not be involved in the educational programming of the Blanton, who were essentially outside of the artistic circuit. The school that we were thinking about was located right next to Flatbed.

The project's intent is to communicate that art and beauty could be everywhere if you open yourself up to it. That is how the folding pieces came into being—very simple shapes could transform, in the end, to a very beautiful drawing, an unconscious drawing.

I tried to execute the project during my residency. But it took me a couple of weeks

to work out what I wanted to do, and then spring break came and so I was unable to work with the kids. I am supposed to go back to the school to talk about art with the kids and make drawings on recycled paper and discuss if a line could be a drawing, a folded paper could be a drawing, or not. I think that those kinds of discussions could enrich the kids' perceptions of everyday life. In the end, I did not finish what I intend to do in Austin. The whole month that I stayed there was a kind of preparation for what I am supposed to do this fall. I hope the project allows the kids to be freed from the weight or respect or distance that they feel for art that museums have instilled in them because museums are always teaching them. I hope that the project allows the kids to get closer to simple creative practice, to open up the possibility that there could be art in things; it is a simple idea that could have greater implications.

Alexis Salas is a Ph.D. student in art history at the University of Texas. ☀



Diego Riveras' last drawings

