

A talk between choreographers: Helmut Batista and Tanja Baudoin

Tanja: There are a few words I wrote down the last time we met: "choreography", "non-curating" and "two-person shows", which can be a beginning... The exhibition series you are starting now in partnership with MAM Rio, each time with two artists from the history of CAPACETE, has a format that isn't really new to you. You have made presentations like that many times in the past. When you first started organizing projects in Rio de Janeiro in the late 1990s, there was Espaço P where you presented Ricardo Basbaum and Ana Infante together. It was the first of many shows. What do you like about this arrangement of two artists together and how has it worked out in the past?

In the current case of the exhibition with Ducha and Isabelle, I know that you had some prior idea of the works they might show - works that were produced during their time with CAPACETE -, but together with the artists you determine things more precisely. It is about a relation between the two people and with CAPACETE, or some possible connection between ways of working... I am remembering a conversation with Daniela Castro and Anne Szefer Karlsen about the way CAPACETE brings together people, the ability to put certain people together in a certain way, which I guess even if you have a skill for it, is also always a social experiment of which you can't be sure what the outcome will be.

Helmut: Many questions... Let's start with the first because that is something I have been thinking and playing around with for some time. I have always asked myself, what does a curator really do? Why have I never been called a curator? Or why have I never been called to curate a show in Brazil; I have been called to do shows in other countries, such as the exhibition at Portikus in Frankfurt, Germany, among others! Who can really call him or herself a curator? When does that terminology apply? It is funny because, from a basic conceptual terminological point of view, I started CAPACETE as a curator; making shows with Ricardo Basbaum and Ana Infante, then with Andrea Fraser and Marcel Dzama, Pierre Huyghe and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Joachim Koester and Enrico David, etc. At the São Paulo Biennial of 2008 I put Harun Farocki next to Rodney Graham... Two years later both were in a show at Jeu de Paume in Paris, a groundbreaking exhibition. Looking back, I think that at that moment I was still thinking I was an artist and not a curator. I always thought that you need to have a lot of experience before you can call yourself a curator. So I refused this terminology straight away.

While CAPACETE was growing, slowly but steadily, those questions gained importance, as I acquired a different, and difficult to define, status in the art world. To tell you the truth, I never gave much attention to how the art world defined me. I was just having fun all around, bringing all these people into CAPACETE and initiating so many projects and interactions. In 2004, Alanna Heiss invited me to be her assistant-curator at the space she created, MoMA PS1. That's when I realized that the gap between artists and curators was growing and growing. Mega curators such as Hans Ulrich Obrist and Klaus Biesenbach were on the list of the best known personalities in the art world. Something had happened since the 1990s, when I was more active as an artist. I did not accept the invitation. I was in a car, on the way to make a show with Ducha at Galería Metropolitana in Santiago, Chile, somehow, I guess, as a curator! On the way we shot a remake of Walter Sallés' movie 'The Motorcycle Diaries', called 'Diarios de bicicleta e aquarelas'. This project was never fully realized and that trip gave birth to the Mobile Residency that continued for the next seven years. We might say it was a collaborative piece by Ducha and me, as it was a unique programme, designed as much an artistic experience as it was a classic model of a

residency programme. It's CAPACETE's proudest project as it annihilates all basic questions a normal residency is supposed to provoke.

In 2010, while designing CAPACETE's participation at the São Paulo Biennial, I tried to propose the term 'choreographer' instead of 'curator'. The programme had no less than 25 residencies, 83 public talks, 6 books, 7 new art pieces, among them a theatre piece by Adrià Julià, building a house with Jean-Pascal Flavien, etc. I ended up just being called director of CAPACETE.

It became clear to me that you need to define yourself very clearly; and if you don't do this, then you are just not considered as who you might actually be. Funnily enough, many of the ex-residents with whom I had long chats in the end defined me as an artist, rather than a curator. Others defined me as a curator, depending on the project I was working on. For me it meant that I was lingering between both, and I liked that position for the simple fact that there was no real definition for it. When I was active as an artist, I made my main work anonymously. Until today almost nobody knows my artistic work, even though I participated in exhibitions in important spaces in Europe.

Choreography was building up in my head as a possible definition. A choreographer is somebody who sets something in motion, often in collaboration with others. When we think of classic choreography, we think of dance, but there are many ways of understanding choreography; it can be a ballet, a conceptual piece by Helio Oiticica with his parangolés or also conceptual pieces by Jérôme Bell or Tino Sehgal. I think it can also be a residency programme. What unites all of these concepts is that they play and work with people in a wide array of actions. Choreography is about understanding people and their capacity to dance and move in the wide sense of the word, to express themselves. I like this. Choreographers are like curators in that sense. I actually think that curators should be more like choreographers, though I'm not sure what that may mean. Maybe because being a choreographer is so much more difficult than being a 'curator', for the simple fact that it happens live, on stage, which is a very specific form of art. Energy flows in a very different way when you are on stage. I studied opera and worked at the Vienna Opera House for two years, I guess that must have influenced me. It also impacted the three theatre pieces we produced at Teatro Ipanema in 2013 with dozens of artists. Artists presented their works in five to ten-minute slots. Vivian Caccuri and Julien Bismuth were residents at that moment and co-designed two of these pieces. Vivian also took part in Arto Lindsay's talking performance with Lisette Lagnado. One of the best things we ever made.

In that sense, when I look back on my work for CAPACETE, it is like a big never-ending ballet.

Tanja: I thought the connections you made between choreography and curating were really interesting, especially thinking that your work with CAPACETE is less about making exhibitions, as one expects a 'classic' curator to do, and more about creating conditions for people to meet and share experiences. I agree that it is something like a dance of bodies, moving together in a defined space and time. Then I wondered, if we're talking about choreography, then is the format of the two-artist exhibition comparable to a duet? Often the duet, in dance and music, involves affection and chemistry between two people. It's nice to think of you as a kind of 'matchmaker' in this sense. But I understand that all of this happens on an intuitive level. It's not about putting people together who work with the same media or the same themes. It's more about a possible 'spark'. Which is also tricky, because it can really not work and then there's nowhere to hide.

You mentioned some things - about never identifying fully with the curator role, passing on some career opportunities, and being an anonymous artist, - that underline that you enjoy playing with this undefined position. It reminded me of Ducha and his way of integrating his work with his life, to such an extent that it becomes a challenge to get to know his work. Maybe it's not a coincidence that he is one of the first artists in this historic exhibition programme. Can you talk a bit about the desire to show the work of artists from the twenty years of CAPACETE? Does it have to do with the fact that many of these works have not been shown to a Rio audience before?

Helmut: 'Matchmaker' old style. When CAPACETE moved to Athens for Documenta14, I was amazed that many of the people in the group already had an appointment with somebody in Athens in the first days after we arrived. All these apps. The old style was really about giving the conditions for a special life experience, which for me is the essence of a residency programme. Whether people matched was not under control at all. But CAPACETE was pretty successful at it and became known for that very affective perspective, as you define it.

When MAM Rio invited CAPACETE at the end of last year, 2019, and before the pandemic became a game-changer, I proposed to its director, Fabio Szwarcwald, that it would only make sense for us to engage with a bigger audience, if we could also make a historical reading of what had happened at CAPACETE in the last twenty-three years. Very few people know about CAPACETE and even less know what we have actually produced. Though we always insisted on the premise that a resident should not focus on an outcome, we ended up producing quite a lot, with residents that kept coming back to follow up on the research they started. In those cases, affect is a must.

This said, I decided to come back to the model CAPACETE started with in Rio in 1998, which were exhibitions of two artists showing their work at the same time. From a curatorial perspective, which at that time intrigued me more than today, I thought that there was no curatorial experience more experimental than putting two artists side by side. I saw large-scale exhibitions as a way of hiding behind chaos. Today those exhibitions, biennials, etc., have other political implications, but that is another story.

Both Ducha and Isabelle have collaborated with CAPACETE many times. Ducha is local and Isabelle, French, comes back to Rio regularly, she has her own relation with the city of Rio, independently from CAPACETE. But one of the CAPACETE rules is that ex-residents can come back if they need to. Some come back all the time. Affect is surely an ingredient for these choices, but I would argue that this isn't enough. As a professional you make your choices based on premises that are part of the path of art, or art history. You can't think outside of that. I think that, as an artist or curator, you build a kind of 'permission' during your career that gives you a certain legitimacy to figure things out, even if the chance to do something wrong is inherent in the action and choices you make. In that sense, I give myself permission to experiment with my own history.

When artists are good, their work is almost always political on some level and 'readable' from many perspectives. This is a suggestion I want to make with this historical approach. It should be up to the public to figure out if both artists make sense together. I build up my 'permission' of not being defined as a curator, so I should take advantage of that. It gives me the credit to go all the way to legitimize myself as a choreographer rather than a curator. It is like making art. You wear some undefined piece of cloth with some plastic and it turns into a parangolé; only Hélio Oiticica can do this.

Tanja: Yes, it is a special feature of CAPACETE that residents aren't obliged to present a new work at the end of their stay, with the result that many use that time to engage in deeper research, often connecting with a specific local topic or with the city, and end up producing great works. Some foreign residents come back several times or stay longer, which of course also has to do with global economies and historic processes that often put the European artist or curator at an advantage. CAPACETE managed to survive as the first and longest running residency in Brazil, for over twenty years already, on the basis of partnerships with governments and institutions abroad, but always involving local artists alongside the foreigners and redirecting some of that foreign money into its local structure.

Without going too much into the financial aspect, I'm curious to hear what you think about this balance of foreign and Brazilian artists in the residency programme, as it will also be reflected in the historical exhibition programme. I see it as something that was always a concern for you. In recent years, under the directorship of Camilla Rocha Campos, this investment in the local artist community has become even more pronounced, with a focus on artists with diverse social-economic, racial and gender backgrounds.

Helmut: The decision of stepping down and building up a board was directly intended to create more equal opportunities for local and regional professionals (including South Americans). This means that only through this structure we were able to handle this new situation which is now under the directorship of Camilla until the end of this year. But if CAPACETE did not have this history with foreign partnerships it would have probably been impossible to do what we are doing now, as local cultural politics do not give the conditions to build a local programme. Look around you and you will only see festivals and independent spaces that are closing.

On the other hand, I am always astonished at how things are misread when you look back on our history with a critical political view. CAPACETE has had Brazilians in its programme since the start. We actually opened CAPACETE with two Cariocas, Ricardo Basbaum and Ana Infante. Ricardo made another important piece three years later. After that came Andrea Fraser and Marcel Dzama, and after that the Paulista artist Rubens Mano... Along the years we did a lot of stuff with Brazilians that you might not know about. Marepe, Laura Lima, Carla Zaccagnini, Camilla Sposati, Camila Rocha (from São Paulo), Amilcar Packer, Jorgge Menna Barreto, etc. Ducha's exhibition is a kind of testament to his involvement with CAPACETE on several levels.

When CAPACETE was part of the São Paulo Biennial in 2002 we presented a project with the Carioca artist Marssares and the French artist Marie-Ange Guilleminot. At the São Paulo Bienal in 2010 we presented a huge programme and half of it was with Brazilians. We actually started our one-year programme in São Paulo with only local artists and curators. Our Portikus show in Frankfurt was only with Brazilians. The CAPACETE group at Documenta14 in 2017 was half Brazilian and the other half South American!

Of course we were never able to offer the same conditions as the Norwegian or Dutch governments offer their residents, but I think people might underestimate the very big impact we made on local art production. As for gender and race, that is a very different question. I do think we have made a big move in that direction, even more so with Camilla as director.

Since the Lula government and the quotas in the early 2000s, those issues are being addressed directly and the results are appearing everywhere on the cultural spectrum. I think it is the greatest contribution and achievement of Lula's government. These and many other questions are very recent issues that urgently needed to be dealt with. I think that Brazil is

always late. Maybe because Brazil was the last to abolish slavery. Maybe because Brazil is the only country that hasn't placed any of its military dictators under arrest and doesn't seem willing to do so. The black movement that is getting stronger by the day is dealing with one among many urgent issues. The indigenous drama is only on the table because the forest is burning; the racial aspect of their slavery is still not very well understood. As for the Nordestinos, another population in the north of Brazil, they face huge discrimination and they should be really part of all these discussions, but are not!

CAPACETE is too small to handle all of this. We are making steps and yes, with support from outside, otherwise we would not have had any Brazilians at all, as there has never been public money for these kinds of activities.

I am glad we have arrived at a 'no turning back situation', there can't be a programme that treats professionals in any different way. There is no more room for that and it should not have been that way before. But building up something that has legitimacy is not an easy thing to do here. There is no philanthropy in Brazil. It needs time and a lot of political manoeuvres. CAPACETE always faces a dead end at the end of each year.

And of course, I am a white tall man coming from a bourgeois background. One cannot hide from these issues that brought much of the malaise that we face in this world today. I guess we have to face this moment and learn.

But now, I want to invert our talk and ask you a question. In 2010, for the São Paulo Biennial, I invited Jorge Menna Barreto to be my personal 'psychological assistant'. His paid job was to attend everything that was happening during that whole year of the biennial - we had a one year programme, an exhibition space with a 150 seat theatre where 83 talks and performances took place, a night bar and twenty-five residents along the year. I was directing the programme that was designed to absorb our CAPACETE logic - of real life with work, meaning it was infiltrated by many different moves and different productions. At the same time, Jorge would give me his point of view on what he was witnessing. I think it was a 'job' that did not exist before and I still think it does not exist. He was a kind of psychoanalyst of my decisions. I needed somebody to give me feedback so I could make decisions on the go. This was very important for me and we had really good discussions. The administration of the biennial, who paid him, considered him an assistant. But his job was far from that; as a matter of fact, I had another assistant, Adriana Pineda from Colombia. I really think big events such as biennials should introduce this job. It would help the curators a lot.

It is with this in mind that I invited you to accompany the exhibition that we are now co-choreographing or co-cureographing!! How do you feel?

Tanja: Haha, I feel like now I finally got some insight into what you asked me to do! But seriously... I think normally it's very helpful for me when roles are clearly defined, but in the case of collaborating with you and CAPACETE, maybe I also feel more of what you call 'permission' to go with the flow. It's also true that the role of the curator doesn't totally fit me. I have worked on many aspects of different projects, the production of performances, publications, workshops, communication, and what gives me a lot of pleasure is following a project through all its stages and being involved in all of this, together with others. Being able to get into details and follow the larger line at the same time. Whether this is possible depends a lot on the size and the institutional setting of the project - I think it's why I loved organizing events at the Parque Lage School of Visual Arts Library; the scale and the context are perfect for me.

It's really nice to hear this story about Jorge Menno Barreto and the way you formulated his position. I think having a witness is incredibly valuable, it creates an instant relation. Often when we are organizing things for a future public, by the time it reaches the audience we are already so deeply involved that we can't take any distance anymore and don't know what worked and what didn't. I imagine when you are 'observed' during the process and can have conversations with the witness, it gives you a different perspective and chance for reflection...

You mentioned the São Paulo Biennial and I'm curious too about these institutional relations. This biennial took place in 2010; in 2017 the CAPACETE was part of Documenta14 in Athens, now it is in partnership with MAM Rio for two years. How do you see CAPACETE's involvement in relation to these larger institutions, is it like a temporary occupant, a parasite, a little brother...? Or can CAPACETE function as a witness to the institution? I remember in Athens there was this idea of following the whole programme and reflecting upon it... How has this been defined with Mam, or maybe it hasn't been defined?

Helmut: These are very big questions and I would need one book for each of these experiences. Each was very different, due to very different contexts. One builds upon the permission obtained from the prior experience. CAPACETE had already participated in two other São Paulo Biennials before (in 2002 and 2008), with similar, but smaller scale involvements. I have the impression that in 2010 there was a kind of a competition with CAPACETE, as we had a higher number of public attendance in downtown São Paulo, at the Teatro Arena, than the Bienal itself had at the Pavilion in Ibirapuera Park, to the point that it created an internal problem. Our programme was huge and we produced a lot.

At Documenta14 we were in the position of witnessing; we were the foreigners just looking and absorbing everything that was being produced. A total luxury that everybody in the art education system should experience. Our group saw everything. I am pretty sure we were the only thirteen people that actually saw the entire Documenta14. The Athens experience could also be defined as a parasitic situation. Our intentions were very open-ended and that is how CAPACETE works anyway. It was a unique programme that will probably never get a second chance under those conditions. I loved it and I learned a lot. Half of the twelve participants are still in Europe... All participants were from Latin America.

As for MAM Rio, the story is even more complicated. I think both MAM and CAPACETE are parasitizing each other, in a positive sense. It's too early to say much, we have just started and the pandemic has already demanded that we make several changes to the first draft of our proposal, and that is fine. I put this on the discussion table with the executive and artistic directors: a big part of our collaboration are the intriguing questions that will arise from that collaboration; a lot of attention should be given to these institutional political aspects. What happens to a small independent space like ours when it is absorbed by a big institution, such as MAM? Is it helping us or is it killing us? Can it actually help? Or is it a gateway to the downfall of small institutions?

We will only know in the near future. But if we are aware of these forces, both sides might learn something. If we just take it for granted, CAPACETE will surely be consumed like a barbecue. I have argued with the artistic directors that our participation can only last a short period of time; maybe two or maximum three years. After that, another small institution should get that opportunity. MAM Rio has, in that sense, much more to gain than the small institution. The beauty would be to find that special balance, which is so hard to get nowadays... even among good friends... the agenda today is all about political gain and that is very sad and destructive.

Changing the subject: you worked for an important, small, flexible institution before you came to CAPACETE in 2015. I think that this experience is apparent in your programme at EAV Parque Lage and the way I think you make decisions on an artistic level. Wasn't If I Can't Dance choreographing too? Actually, the name If I Can't Dance...

Tanja: Yes, I worked for If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution for five years, where the main focus is on producing and presenting current performance art and supporting research projects on performative practices. It is a flexible institution that has a particular methodology. We always collaborated with other institutions, from big to small, and each project followed more or less its own trajectory. I remember that the idea of choreography was always around, even if If I Can't Dance is acting in the visual arts context, it was part of our vocabulary. Of course, performance art has a relation with dance and theatre, and at certain points in history they are closely intertwined, but the notion of choreography, on a curatorial level, helped us think a lot about how to deal with the organization of time and space. I'm talking about, for example, how to conceive of the duration of an event, the way it begins and how it ends, and all the fluctuations in between; how bodies come and go, move along and take on different perspectives... I'm also thinking about the audience and how people can experience a certain rhythm in the way they are guided through a programme or through an exhibition space - we spent a lot of time working on that with If I Can't Dance, and your notion of 'choreographing' is all about that for me.

What I took from this is a sense that all these aspects, which are easy to take for granted, benefit from more attention. I guess they are also important ingredients in the CAPACETE mix. It's about setting bodies in motion and everything that happens around it. Then we might also arrive at the old discussion of where art ends and life begins, which is impossible to answer, but I think also relevant to many of the practices of the artists from the CAPACETE history and the experience they had here in Rio.

But hey, we didn't talk about Ducha and Isabelle?!