

Carmen Hernández conversation with Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy

00:09 – Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy: Okay, thanks Carmen, for your presentation summarizing, not just the ideas of today, which it had nothing to do with, but to present a position about what the future is. Many of the... I wanted to invite Carmen to come here because many people, during the process

00:30 - of organizing this Seminar—now in its 6th edition as you know—your name was mentioned several times as being a very active curator. José Luis Blondet spoke of you, Costanza also wrote a text on this very active curator of the 90s, making exhibitions that are still alive in what we think of today. And, well, between the 90s and today, your position, a lot has happened and there have certainly been great changes. So, I'd like

01:00 - to start, since you've given us your presentation, or you've taken a position regarding, or facing, the future, I'd like to understand a little how you come to this kind of thesis after having had important and influential activities in the exhibitions of the 90s. What was it that happened between the 90s and today that makes you think of this?

01:24 – Carmen Hernández: Well, I think that I was already assuming this posture even then. When you begin

01:30 - to observe the modern system of art, it's full of...it's a field of landmines of power tensions, you begin to recognize that the work itself isn't going to get anywhere on its own; it has to have many boosts, many pushes. And, above all, because I've observed

02:00 - such a strong resistance as Venezuela has towards formalism, a formalism coming from all this construct that was made of modern art from the Ciudad Universitaria, Carlos Raúl Villanueva, from the exhibitions that were analyzed there, such as *La Invención de la Continuidad*. The country, from that perspective, has been polarized.

02:30 - Before it was between figuration and abstraction. Then, in *La Invención de la Continuidad*, we could experience a coming together between landscape, constructive art and everything that had to do with more minimalist constraints, and everything anecdotal, everything political was left out. That is to say, what's political is what has become fashionable here today, no one spoke of politics before but politics was a determining factor;

03:00 - it was there in precisely the formalist canon within which we have completely enmeshed ourselves. For example, it seemed very interesting to me that you made the note to José Luis Blondet about Aixa's text that proposes ten women, right? Well, that exhibition couldn't circulate internationally because it was politically incorrect, because it was sexist—sexism couldn't be addressed in those years.

03:30 - SHCC: But, in what way do you think when you say there are different... let's say, I don't live here, but during my visits to Venezuela I try to go to many exhibits, to see many

artists in person, I try to go out of the circuits that have already been established for some time, and I've certainly found the polarization which you speak, politically, and how that is also manifested in the plastic arts, but I don't understand that well what you mean, or to what kind of work you're referring,

04:00 - or what artistic practices or aesthetic strategies you're talking about when you refer to models of resistance, for example, that are today "against" or "alternative to" formalism. **04:10 – CH:** No; if you look, still today any art does not show something anecdotal or does not show something that could be corrosive has much more possibilities to circulate, to be

04:30 - supported by the most prestigious institutions. **04:33 – SHCC:** What are the most prestigious exhibitions today? **04:36 – CH:** Well, let's see, in this moment it could be this very space, *Los Galpones, Carmen Araujo Arte*. The artists also have a circuit with its own levels, there are different levels; I'm talking about this kind of acceptance. In the museums, also—also in the museums today.

05:00 – SHCC: What is it that you mean about the museums, also? **05:01 – CH:** This kind of work is much more accepted, much more accepted than some work that has a corrosive materiality. **05:10 – SHCC:** But are you seeing or finding artists that are working with this corrosive materiality you're talking about? **05:16 – CH:** Yes, they're there, and it's very hard for them to circulate, extremely hard. And I've been watching this for many years now. For example, in *La Invención de la Continuidad*, Miguel Von Dangel isn't there, Pedro

05:30 - Terán isn't there—he was here, I saw him today— Mario Abreu isn't there, Javier Téllez isn't there. Why weren't they there? **05:40 – SHCC:** Well, you were living here and already active in the 90s. In what exhibitions were these artists like Terán and Téllez represented? Because there were many other projects; those are just two cases. **05:50 – CH:** Well, it was very hard for Javier to insert himself—no, not to insert himself, to be accepted. In fact,

06:00 - at the very museum, when I was organizing curation, there were people who said that that wasn't art, my own colleagues within the museum. That is to say, we have a vision that is very marked by the formalist vision, because, well, it's associated with our process of modernization, it has been the art that's circulated internationally.

06:30 - Jesús Soto is the most famous international artist—well, I imagine that now Reverón is, and then it would be Gego. **06:38 – SHCC:** Tell me a little about—there are several points we could touch on here—but, one of the suggestions that Lupe gave us in our conversation was to really put into action a labor that would create new systems of giving art value.

07:00 - of resignification, and that's not a merely institutional responsibility. What Lupe suggested in her own conversation was to set up a workshop right there, in that moment,

to see how an ecology could be constructed, or thought of to be constructed, that would not only produce an art scene but would produce new values that create dignity, culture, that create an appreciation and, at the end of the day, a cultural activity

07:30 - that would be more effective in building the social fabric. **07:34 – CH:** That seems very pertinent to me. **07:36 – SHCC:** Of course it's pertinent. But, taking into account that suggestion and listening to what you said just now about, let's say, taking a critical look at the current ecosystems in existence, what would you propose? In what way do you see yourself involved, possibly, in creating this new system of giving value, which is so necessary in this context? **07:58 – CH:** Well, I think that before anything else we should

08:00 - begin to review that recent memory, all that memory of modernity. **08:06 – SHCC:** What would some steps be? **08:09 – CH:** With a critical sense; that is to say, the labor of our museum, the labor of criticism, of all the spaces that don't exist anymore—publications, a series of magazines that are no longer produced—we have very few spaces for criticism to circulate. So, to review that memory. In fact,

08:30 - you look online and museums don't have web pages, museums are in limbo, there is very little information about current programs and facts; what's always there is a photo of the event, of the opening event. And, for the others, there are some for galleries or alternative spaces that, sure, have some information, but beyond that there's nothing, we don't have

09:00 - a way to reflect on how we have constructed ourselves: what things have we made, what things have we given more or less value to? **09:11 – SHCC:** But, from your perspective, how do you think we can make this change? **09:13 – CH:** I think that we as a society need to review this memory to project ourselves into the future, because there are many prejudices, there is still too much active prejudice in every sense.

09:30 - Artists have left; there are artists who have left the country because there came a moment when they didn't have anywhere to circulate their work; who had shown in two or three spaces and that knew that couldn't repeat shows in these spaces, and they had a large production and they left. What are we doing? We are talking about art by who, by who all, from where, from what place? So, we have to be sincere in that sense, to be very honest and not think

10:00 - that what we have as artistic production can be fully served by the current circuit. **10:05 – SHCC:** So what kind of circuit would you consider it's circulating in? What is the circuit in which you are circulating? **10:14 – CH:** No; I circulate in the one we have, but what I mean is that there are many contingents of creators who don't have spaces, they don't have them. **10:26 – SHCC:** And now, you who were working in the museums over

10:30 - a long period of time in its moment, and now you're working in education, in what way do you, from your place of education or criticism, think that you can contribute to or

make a change? **10:41 – CH:** With my students, I try to get them to lose their naivety. (applause) Yes, of course, absolutely. **10:52 – SHCC:** Okay now, how does one lose one's naivety? It seems like they already know. Tell me how it's lost. **10:58 – CH:** I met up

11:00 -with a friend over the past few days—it had been a long time since I'd seen him, he was a professor of mine at the Universidad Simón Bolívar—I told him this and he said, "But why would you do that?" **11:09 – SHCC:** But, how is naivety lost? **11:11 – CH:** Well, when you realize you're in a context... Well, first you are a student, then you're going to go from that and you're not going to be an artist just because you have a degree; you have to work very hard so that your work begins to be seen as something beyond

11:30 - a student's exercise. The context is determining, because there are prejudices, prejudices in authority, professors, there are too many prejudices that prevent suddenly discovering a young person's potential. **11:52 – SHCC:** And, in your experience now, let's say, with the exhibits that have been mentioned that you organized, what did you curate, what did you envision

12:00 - in the decade of the 90s, in museums...in what way do you think that this legacy, from your point of view, has contributed to the way of thinking of current contemporary art? **12:12 – CH:** I imagine that something would have had influence, in young people above all, because they come up to me, they comment on this, they ask me and stimulate a dialogue,

12:30 - I believe it has. I think that at the end of the day, what is not said here is that there must be passion. There must be passion for the work, for art, for the practice, for criticism, for whatever we do, for writing. Without passion, we don't do anything. And I think I tried, the few times that I had the opportunity, to infuse passion into these explorations. I think that one must have that audacity, and go a little beyond the

13:00 - canonizing gaze (everything in line, politically correct, where everything is said in just the right way and measure) in order for things to really be generated, for things to happen. **13:13 – SHCC:** Now, what do you think should happen in this 2020? What are some of the concrete proposals for not only considering otherness—which is what you're positioning here—as a theoretical-philosophical question, but to consider otherness within a project of

13:30 - cultural politics. In what way do you think this could happen, in terms of projects? What are the openings where this otherness—that you consider necessary to have a more diverse, more harmonious, more intelligent, more developed society—can happen? **13:50 – CH:** I think the field must be widened, made more flexible, at least here in Venezuela. **13:57 – SHCC:** When you speak of the field, we're speaking of art history.

14:00 – CH: No, I'm speaking of institutionality: physical, symbolic, critical spaces, the wall of academia, all that: widen it, make it more flexible. This is to say, I always encourage

artists to create alternative spaces where they can circulate things, even if they last only a short while. This is very important; it's basic. I say it because I could see in Chile—which is my country of origin—

14:30 - The era of the dictatorship was when we had the most art and the most circulation. Why? I say it in my second book, at the beginning of the book, when I interview Paz Errázuriz; no, that's not true, it was Lotty Rosenfeld, and she says: "Because power was obvious, power was visible, there, it was easy." In these times in which power in our society

15:00 - is not so visible, it's atomized, it's disguised, right? It has many forms, so it's harder for us, sometimes, to project ourselves in a precise way into the future. And I think that we must create alternative critical spaces, open more blogs, but with a critical, reflexive purpose, for dialogue. Not: I don't like you, You're ugly, You...who knows? These things wind up being

15:30 - skin-deep—just like my attempt to mention it, in some way. Rather, we must go beyond this. It's a growth that we must take up as a collective, or else we won't be able to do anything. We have to work together. **15:48 – SHCC:** And there is a series of projects happening that are doing this, that, in reality, certain markets that you have mentioned also serve as spaces—let's say, you mention,

16:00 - for example, the space of *Los Galpones* or the galleries you spoke of—and well, these are spaces that have been created also to incentivize artistic production through support platforms that exist, and at the end of the day, also include the market, the art markets. **16:14 – CH:** No, the market is inevitable, that is, art could not exist if it didn't have at least a minimal market. But also... **16:24 – SHCC:** But, how do you explain, or what would you demand of the national museums? **16:28 – CH:** Well, they have to open to diversity,

16:30 - they all have to open. **16:31 – SHCC:** But what is diversity? **16:33 – CH:** Diversity in all postures, in differentiated practices. In all postures, that they would not be only...**16:40 – SHCC:** But do you think it's only a question of the gaze? Don't you think that a project itself is lacking? That's why I'm asking about a project. It seems to me that it's not only a question of demanding a more diverse gaze or being more inclusive. **16:55 – CH:** Well, I don't think that that project exists,

17:00 - I don't think that someone is thinking of it like that, I don't. I think it could exist at the level of desire, at best, but I don't believe it. I think that my labor is simply to say it, announce it, stimulate things to happen. I am very bored in Venezuela, very bored, extremely bored; I'm profoundly bored of art, very bored. (applause)

17:30 – SHCC: No, but as you say, you are seeing corrosive things, I mean, tell me what they are. **17:33 – CH:** No, well, they're always there, but they're over there....another over

there, and another there. **17:36 – SHCC:** But, this also seems unsatisfying to you. **17:38 – CH:** Well, no, not unsatisfying, what happens is that these people, those who are working on this, they get tired, too. They get tired of fighting to be seen, to be read, to be able to circulate, right? It's very hard for them. So, I think what's missing, what's lacking is to open up, that all of us open a little more, that we become more receptive, and, above all, more

18:00 - critical, right? To not make deterministic announcements like, before we lived in this marvelous country, and today it's so terrible, right? **18:10 – SHCC:** But to understand, for example, to understand in some way, the 90s in Venezuela and in many parts of the world, there were exhibitions that really catalyzed a new way of making art, not only of making exhibitions; they really were key exhibitions that

18:30 - invited a public to think about its immediate surroundings in a completely different way, in terms of identity, of territory, politics and more. When I invited you here it was precisely because you had been a great point of reference during the decade of the 90s when we asked about exhibitions. I'd like to understand a little more about how the context was, or the conditions you experienced, as a curator, to have done those projects, of which,

19:00 - in some way, you identify that they don't currently exist. **19:03 – CH:** When, there was—as I think José Luis Blondet said, I think he made the comment—that there was already maturity in the museographic field, which permitted us to be able to work in the medium and long term, with a program that was, we could say, reasoned, trying to make it as diverse as possible.

19:30 - At the same time, it wasn't easy because there are perspectives that are difficult to digest. I was pushing for the exhibition *Desde el cuerpo* for about four years, and I had to argue for it a lot, and explain many things to see if it would soak in. We had the luck of having María Elena Ramos as director of the Museo de Bellas Artes, a very talented woman, very sharp and very open to

20:00 - the diversity of contemporaneity. That is, she, it must be recognized that in that sense, she did not act in a canonical manner, as could have happened in other organisms, and that allows for an oxygenation, at least in the case of Bellas Artes. We also had the luck of having, in the other museums, directors who were also open, such as Taías Ribero at the Museo Alejandro Otero,

20:30 - who also pushed a lot for the opening of contemporary art, and, above all, Latin American art. And also, the conditions weren't so adverse, the country's economic conditions, which allows for greater flexibility. But the prejudices that there are today are well distributed, we have so many prejudices; and that means there are

21:00 - some aspects that we sometimes forget; that is what I want to signal out as important, specifically: to widen our gaze. To widen our gaze perhaps not with a specific,

determining project, perhaps it could be to seek routes for exhibition as well as criticism, publications; I think that we have to start there to open up, we must try. Or if we're going to critique, to do it

21:30 - beyond just the external, the visible, to go further, to put on the table the myths that are truly bothering us. I say this because, for example, in the case of the works that have assumed a critique of the imagination of the heroic, it has created

22:00 - an interpretation that is very directed toward the government, a critique of the government. I think that the imagination of the heroic is very complex, it's complex, the very legacy of Bolívar, Bolivarian thought is complex. That is to say, there are at least three important principles that it has left us and that, sometimes are contradictory; some take one, some take another, because there is a struggle. **22:26 – SHCC:** Tell us about the three principles. **22:28 – CH:** Well, one is

22:30 - the idea of progress, the other is the principle of patriarchy and the third is Latin American integration. So, for example, depending on which of these, on how the situation is, then you can take the patriarchal idea, or take Latin American integration, right? So that is the legacy that we were left, that is the legacy analyzed —not even by me—

23:00 - I'm talking about a very studious American who did very important work about this legacy of the Bolivarian legacy, Christopher Conway, I recommend reading him to whoever I can. And I think that then we have to start to analyze with more nuance, with more depth; that's my point, just that. The truth is I'd like to get away from this boredom, truly. **23:25 – SHCC:** One of the things, speaking of boredom and other kinds of feelings, one of the,

23:30 - let's say, the ideas that has been floated in different conversations over the course of the day, in the Round Tables too and also some of the presentations, was the importance of what's dear to us, of affection, and I'd like to today try to understand if your gaze, or if your boredom, in some way includes the possibility of thinking of affection. **23:24 – CH:** Yes, of course, that is vital. **23:56 – SHCC:** So, in what way do you position the sentiment

24:00 - of affection that can be produced in an artistic community and that art can generate its immediate public with conversation, for example, the very aesthetic experience. In what way do you relate the possibility of this affection with what is corrosive, or the importance of what's corrosive that you have talked about? **24:18 – CH:** Well, what's corrosive is for some people, right? for example, for some feminism can be corrosive, annoying. "Oh, you're talking about feminism!" I've been told, I've been

24:30 - insulted, they have said horrible things to me in seminars or conferences. I say corrosive because it is corrosive in relation to an already accepted and instituted model. I think that affection, the world of what we hold dear, is key; if not, what's it for? What

purpose would art serve today? I think, like Antonio Caro, that for me art—and I believe faithfully in what he says—is the last utopia. Why? Because it’s the only dimension that

25:00 - has not yet been totally determined by instrumental reason. Then, if we don’t defend this space—to share, to play, to enjoy ourselves, to think, to get to know ourselves—then what is the point? We’re going to instrumentalize it? And there is the world of what’s dear, and the world is at war, I mean, this is when art must push, or from art, we have to look for the way to stimulate affection.

25:30 – SHCC: Well, with that phrase, “to stimulate affection”, I think we have come to an excellent closing. Thank you, Gracias Carmen. **CH:** Thank you, many thanks to you.