

José Luis Blondet lecture

00:02 - Good afternoon. I'm Wilkelys Pirela, a graduate of the Universidad Experimental de las Artes, and this afternoon I have the pleasure to introduce José Luis Blondet. **00:23** – **José Luis Blondet:** Good afternoon. The talk that I had initially prepared,

00:30 - when this seminar was to going to happen in November, seemed almost like an autopsy; I was a bit saturated with archival material and the talk was supposed to recover all the information from the exhibition and present it in 25 minutes. So, one thing I'm really grateful for, with this new date of the seminar, is that I had the opportunity to acquire a more personal point of view

01:00 - and speak less with the voice of a medical examiner studying a dead body, but from my own memories—some real, some invented—of an exhibition that was very important to me, which was *Caracas 10 (CCS-10)*, in 1993. So as to not deceive the public with my memories, I want to very briefly show ten images from ten projects,

01:30 – those that were in *CCS-10*, and then read a text that doesn't have a title that's in the program, it's called *Caracas / CCS-10*. **01:44** - The exhibition, basically, assigned each artist, the ten artists, a space at the Galería de Arte Nacional (GAN) for which to develop their projects. Only two artists shared a gallery, the rest were a kind of

02:00 - succession of mini individual exhibitions. **02:04** - In the first gallery was the work of Sigfredo Chacón, *18 bandejas y rejillas camufladas – Cebra*; I'm going to talk about it during my presentation. **02:16** - The piece by Oscar Machado, *Piel sobre piel*; these structures in concrete and rebar with forms related to gestation. **02:27** - José Antonio Hernández-Diez;

02:30 - I'll also talk about him, but he had two projects in the exhibition: *El Gran Patriarca* and *Las X X X*. **02:41** - The tower by Wenemoser was titled *Miracaribe* and was a kind of tower-museum of failed projects, unrealized projects, and it was called *Miracaribe* because "Caribe" —the word "Caribe"—, every letter was the initial of

03:00 - a word from a project that he would do during the run of the exhibition. **03:05** - *La multiplicación de los panes*, by Fuenmayor, which was the staging of the multiplication tables with 1,200 pieces of bread. **03:15** - Roberto Obregón, *La rosa enferma*, 25 dissections, was an homage to those dead of AIDS in Africa and the dissection of the petals of a rose. **03:27** - *Verde por fuera, rojo por dentro*, by Meyer Weismann.

03:33 - Eugenio Espinoza, *Dama de noche*, which I'll speak about in the presentation.

03:37 - And José Gabriel Fernández, *Les Célibataires*. **03:43** - And finally, Sammy Cucher with a project that was called, or really, part of a series that was called *El Yo Anotado*, a kind of exercise of photo fiction, in which, taking the doodles one does while speaking on the phone, the artist monumentalized them,

04:00 - printing them over aerial views of landscapes throughout the country. **04:12** -My memories of *CCS-10* are hazy but abundant. I remember the impenetrable ranch of Meyer Weismann, with the door closed with cinderblocks, and that today, in the archival photographs, looks monumental, almost

04:30 - beautiful. But in the exhibit hall, it looked sidelined, marginal and disturbing. Only on the second visit did I dare to look through the holes to discover the contrasting landscape inside, conformed by the original furniture from the room where the artist grew up in east Caracas. The title of the work, *Verde por fuera, rojo por dentro*, at that time was incomprehensible to me, but today it could seem prophetic,

05:00 - grotesque or revealing, or all three at once, depending on the headline in the press on any given day. I remember also an electronic screen upon which texts appeared, like advisories, they were questions launched into the open space of the gallery, and I also remember its reflection upon black mirrors against the walls of the gallery. I remember, curiously, the title of that work by Héctor Fuenmayor,

05:30 - *Dama de noche*. Embarrassingly, this was the only woman in this show that occupied all the halls of the Galería de Arte Nacional. I see flashes of a pool table—one of the works of Hernández-Diez—upon which a sickly robot played, holding the pool cue in a white hand, resting impassively, amputated, on the green felt surface. In my memory, the work by Weismann opened the circuit.

06:00 - And at the very end, you encountered the gallery of Sigfredo Chacón, which I remembered as a barely-crossable chaos. Looking at archival photos I realize that I exaggerated the scale and the chaos. I read in an interview that the artist wanted to create a situation with painting that didn't touch the walls, and I think that maybe the enlargement of its proportions in my memory has to do with

06:30 - precisely this: a situation that doesn't fit in its space and overflows. I must confess that beyond these four works I didn't remember much more when I was invited to give this presentation. Now having read the reviews and the press critiques to prepare myself, I can recall details; invent memories that were relegated beneath the deep impression these works made on me. But the image that always comes to mind when I think of

07:00 - *CCS-10* is the ranch of Meyer Weismann with its clumsily piled bricks, its zinc laminate siding and some old rubber to cover so it wouldn't fly away, and inside, the bed, the chair, the desk, the vaguely Danish furniture that lived trapped within those four walls, in that portable country that had camped out for a few months at the GAN. *CCS-10* was an exhibition that grouped together ten artists, all men, all living in the

07:30 - capital, at the Galería de Arte Nacional in 1993. The totalizing subtitle of the show claimed—perhaps ironically?—*Arte venezolano actual* (current Venezuelan art). The origin

of this exhibition is found in a series of individual projects that the GAN was planning with many of the artists who wound up in *CCS-10*. In later conversations with designer Álvaro Sotillo, the idea began to solidify to do a collective exhibition, in which each artist would be

08:00 - assigned a space to develop a site-specific installation, an installation that responded to its place. Normally, site-specific installations react to an idea about the aspect of the place or its architectures, to make a gross generalization, it could be said that a site-specific work lacks meaning if it is removed from the place for which it was created. Considering the richness and very complex history of the neoclassical building

08:30 - the GAN occupies—originally built by *the* modern Venezuelan architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva for the Museo de Bellas Artes—it is surprising that no artist was interested in that historical, political, cultural or architectural nature. Also, taking into account that the GAN permanently exhibited two seminal works in the canon of Venezuelan art: the *Mural de Bruselas* by Soto, from 1958, and the *Reticulárea* by Gego, and it's also surprising that the great majority of the artists of

09:00 - *CCS-10* didn't find in these works some larger provocation to respond to the place, with the exception of Wenemoser and José Gabriel Fernández, who mention the works in some press interviews, but do not articulate these connections in the space, nor develop them in the interview I read. "I incorporated the *Mural* by Soto," says Wenemoser, while Fernández, after explaining with care the structure of his *Célibataires*, finishes: "My work is a

09:30 - *Reticulárea*." For the GAN, the exhibition represented a risk and a considerable institutional achievement. It opened all the galleries and part of its hallways to ten contemporary artists who, under a rather relaxed curatorial gaze, had the fortune to do what they would without following too closely any specific premise, or a too-specific premise. The GAN, concerned with projecting Venezuelan art nationally

10:00 - and internationally, understood the potential of *CCS-10* and did not pass up this unique opportunity to satisfy the cosmopolitan appetite. Strategically, it did not bet on the internationalization of the art works by renowned artists via an exhibition that would travel the world, but rather it chose to internationally project the ways of working—the very contemporary ways of working— of ten artists

10:30 - producing site-specific works, works that in principle are immobile and cannot travel. From its title, *CCS-10* makes reference to the jargon of airports and airlines, and without shame it proposes Caracas, not the country, as a destination. The exhibition intended to put us on the map, call the attention of the world to the talent and the export quality of contemporary artistic production

11:00 - in Venezuela. So, the preface of the unique publication that appeared for this exhibition recognizes, I quote: “Our purpose has been to achieve the best projection possible for this exhibition, not just nationally, but internationally. That it would be visited by foreign artists, critics and curators and that it would be registered in different mass media publications, like this tabloid, and also other publications that could reach the exterior, like the bilingual book, coming soon,

11:30 - to feature a photographic registry of the installations presented by the artists.” The GAN did not skimp on efforts to promote Caracas and *CCS-10*, and they managed to bring to the capital a distinguished group of international curators and critics—heavy hitters—to participate in the symposium *La Curaduría: alianza o confrontación crítica*, organized by Rina Carvajal. So,

12:00 - they paraded around Caracas of the 90s and the halls of *CCS-10* personalities of the stature of Richard Armstrong, Manuel Borja-Villel, Dan Cameron, Catherine David, Jeffrey Deitch, Justo Pastor Mellado, Carolina Ponce de León or Katy Siegel, among many others. The symposium was structured in four panels. The first, moderated by Ivo Mesquita, was centered around the questions of what is curation and how it

12:30 - establishes a curatorial concept. The second, *Curaduría y Políticas Institucionales*, was moderated by Luis Enrique Pérez Oramas. The third, *¿Es lo latinoamericano una categoría artística?*, moderated by Rina Carvajal—remember that also this was just a year after the great celebration of the 500 years anniversary of the meeting of the old and new continents. And lastly, a discussion with the artists of *CCS-10*, moderated by Álvaro Sotillo, the show’s curator,

13:00 - and Lourdes Blanco. The museums of Caracas in the 90s had gained considerable levels of professionalization. A change to the legal character of the foundation let the GAN and the MBA (Museo de Bellas Artes) gain independence with respect to certain political comings and goings at the Consejo Nacional de la Cultura; consolidating curatorial, editorial and research teams and even sharpening the profile of their collections, with sophistication.

13:30 - A symposium of this kind was to reinforce specialization, and in some way, to guarantee Caracas a place in the globalized history of art that was being written at the moment. The title of the seminar proposed a slightly puerile opposition: the curator as ally or as critic, as friend or enemy, and it left out the possibility of an understanding of curation as a critical, dialogical, balanced

14:00 - alliance; but it was a conversation that was just beginning and that would, one hoped, soon bear fruit. It’s important to note, though, that among the points addressed at the symposium, the notion of curation and the public—according to what was described in the press, at least—was not discussed. *CCS-10*, the exhibition, was a bigger event in the

city. The voluminous press kits in the archives of the CINAP (Centro de Información y Documentación Nacional de las Artes Plásticas) show the

14:30 - extraordinary reception from the public and the critics. I could not acquire statistical data about the number of visitors and probably no records of attendance were broken, but I remember as a spectator how avidly people talked about the show. In a certain way, it was the equivalent of the festive spirit that flooded Caracas during the international theater festivals: a phenomenon, the best, the best of the best: something new had arrived

15:00 - to stay. In some interviews, Sotillo declared that he was interested in changing the sentiment towards contemporary art, as well as the excitement that this installation circuit could create. A phrase from the GAN's press bulletin often leapt to the pages of newspapers, without quotes. In almost all the reviews you read: "These are ten proposals that show that narrative is played out

15:30 - and the image is ruined." From my perspective as a 20-something, the installations of *CCS-10* were one irreverence after another, inexplicably sheltered by the museum...did the museum not realize? Everyone who wanted to understand what "contemporary" was had to poke their noses into the GAN. Whoever got tongue-tied saying "postmodernity" had to walk through those galleries,

16:00 - miraculously, to untangle the confusion. In addition to poking my nose in, I wanted to celebrate the novelty, make it into my new creed and become a fan. But my enthusiasm crashed loudly into the cold song that was this show, into the apathy and its lack of interest in seducing me. One of the questions of *Dama de noche*—which I can only now read—

16:30 - summed up this discomfiting thought: What is the relationship between seduction and annoyance? That distance imposed by the works was, for me, formative, deeply formative. A fleeting, instant distance from the political situation of the then-named Republic of Venezuela that can offer contexts and perspectives.

17:00 - When *CCS-10* was inaugurated, the provisional president was Ramón J. Velázquez, who replaced Carlos Andrés Pérez, removed from his position before finishing his five-year term. The Sacudón, or Caracazo,

17:18 - had taken place only four years before, leaving, in addition to so many unanswered questions, hundreds of dead and disappeared that we are still counting. The Caracas of *CCS-10* bore deep civic wounds and was in a political period of transition in which the structures that defined our imperfect democracy, our perfectible democracy, were redefining themselves. *La dama de noche* by Espinoza, as I said earlier, shot out questions about, and I quote the artist: "art,

17:55 -culture and urbanity.” These constitute existential reflections: “Why do I want to be someone else?” Questions for the art and museum systems: “Why do they call killers “cure-ators”?” “Why are museums matriarchies?”, questions about love and sex: “Why not live sexually?” and various allusions to the vernacular figure of the *cachifa*, a domestic servant or maid, that point directly to an issue of class,

18:25 - power and privilege. I quote: “Oh mi cachifa, why have you, too, abandoned me? Father, why doesn’t my cachifa come back home? Oh, why does my cachifa like my friends’ paintings better than mine?” Often, Espinoza’s tone took on humor and irony, but other times the questions sounded candid and sincere, as for example, “Why is making fun of something the only thing

18:55 - that redeems us?” I try to imagine the snap of the word “cachifa” in the halls of the museum in 1993, four years after the Caracazo. I repeat the exercise today, I try to imagine those blunt sounds, ca-chi-fa, next to the ranch that houses a little middle-class room and I hear a sound that I really don’t know how to describe.

19:25 - The expository model that *CCS-10* demanded was pertinently ahistorical; it was not interested in propitiating dialogs between the works, nor in proposing discursive sequences during its run. It openly favored singularity, the pulse of the present and the formal language of the site-specific installation. It did not pursue historical resonances, nor the traditions of Venezuelan art, but rather aspired to found them.

20:08 - In 1997, four years after the close of *CCS-10* and a year before Chávez would win the presidential elections in 1998, the GAN presented *La Invención de la Continuidad*, a show organized by Luis Pérez Oramas

20:25 - and Ariel Jiménez, whose objective was to establish dialogs, bridges and insurmountable distances among Venezuelan visual traditions, contemporary art and, even, the youngest artists, recent graduates of the *Armando Reverón*. *La Invención de la Continuidad* was an exhibition of an opposite sign from *CCS-10*, and sometimes it seems to me complementary, a kind of yin-yang of the 90s. *CCS-10* intended to sketch out the promise of a

20:55 - decade, while *La Invención* picked up the threads, looking to knit together the landscape of the end of the century. I quote from the catalog’s essay by Pérez Oramas: “A form of illusion impedes us from seeing how similar, in many aspects, are the two ends of centuries Venezuela has lived as an independent nation. Between the previous years of the 19th century and these that mark our own days,

21:25 – many things align themselves, which, without intending to give an exhaustive list, we can name: the fracture of the national illusion, the crumbling of the project of social cohesion, the brutal mutation of the political habits, the unceasing deferral of the limits of

ungovernability, the apparition of new political subjects and a culture abruptly unmasked by the course and by

21:55 - the succession of things.” If *CCS-10* followed an ahistorical methodology, giving prevalence to the voice of the artist, *La Invención* traced—or tried to—lines to suggest trajectories, or to attempt a chorus, a duet, a dissonance. *CCS-10* wanted to leave the country, while *La Invención* was obsessed with meticulously

22:25 - returning to it. This coming and going, the desire to leave the Island and at the same time to plant palm trees next to the fjords, is a sign, not necessarily exclusive to our 90s, but certainly a distinct trait. All the artists of *CCS-10* were also represented at *La Invención*, in different contexts, obviously. *Verde por fuera*—Weismann’s ranch—

22:55 - was erected alone at *CCS-10*, isolated, in the middle of a gallery. At *La Invención* it was flanked by our most international artist, Jesús Soto. In the background, the *Mural de Bruselas*, early and promising, a kind of annunciation of what would come for kinetic art. In front, obscuring the view of the ranch, was a powerful penetrable cube shape that the master Soto had finished a year before the show, in 1992.

23:25 - The invitation of the penetrable cube is contradicted by a windowless brick structure, whose door has been closed with cinderblocks: a room without a view. Pérez Oramas speaks of the ranch as a rhyparographic gesture that dirties the transparency of the work of Soto. Weismann, nevertheless, describes the ranch as the only architectural invention of Latin America, and with a tone in which

23:55 - irony is difficult to perceive, if it’s there, he says, “I was quite interested in showing the ranch. One grows up knowing it as something ugly, undesirable, as a wart that must not be looked at. It’s meant to change the perception of things, a little.” end quote. *Verde por fuera* does not present two faces, two sides

24:25 - of the same coin. It can also be read as a Moebius strip, as just one side, perennial, without inverse or reverse. The riddle that serves as its title is simple: “green on the outside, red on the inside” and the answer is often repeated by all schoolchildren. To speak about *CCS-10* is also to speak about Caracas,

24:55 - its improbable pasts, its presents, its futures. I want to conclude by reading a well-known poem by Eugenio Montejo titled, you guessed it, *Caracas*. Caracas: “So tall are the buildings/ that you no longer see anything from my childhood./ I lost my patio with its slow clouds/ where the light left ibis feathers,/ Egyptian clarities,/

25:26 - I lost my name and the dream of my house./ Straight scaffolding, tower over tower,/ now they hide the mountain./ The noise grows to a thousand motors per ear,/ to a thousand cars per foot, all mortals./ The men run behind their voices/ but the voices go

drifting/ after the taxis./ Farther away than Thebes, Troy, Nineveh/ and the fragments of their dreams/

26:57 - Caracas, where was it?/ I lost my shadow and the touch of its rocks,/ you no longer see anything from my childhood./ I can now walk through its streets/ groping, more and more solitary;/ its space is real, undaunted, concrete,/ only my history is false.” Thank you.