

Tamara Díaz Bringas lecture

00:15 - Many thanks to Lupe for her presentation and my apologies for what happened with the images. Continuing, in the year 1993 the Salón Pirelli was created for young artists. Together with the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas, Sofía Ímber generated an exhibition space to see the new processes that were being used. Artists such as Javier Level, Javier Téllez, Alexander Apóstol and Nayeli Castillo participated in this salon. And now I have the pleasure to present to you the curator Tamara Díaz Bringas.

01:03 - Thank you. Hello. **01:15** - Some afternoons it fell to me to close up; more than once, while I tried to activate the alarm, the wail of sirens was set off before I could get the code right. Immediately the telephone would ring with a question from the security company,

01:30 - a brief exchange in the midst of the upheaval, and it was over. They knew I was part of the team when I could answer: *Mesótica*. The password was the title of exhibits organized by the Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo (MADC) of Costa Rica. In 1995, *Mesótica I: the américa non-representativa* convened singular approaches to

02:00 - the abstract. The third and last, in 1998, focused on installation with the slogan *Instalo Mesótica*. But really the key was *Mesótica II: Centroamérica re-generación*, the first show organized from the region where it proposed to research and make visible artistic production in Central America. With curators Rolando Castellón and Virginia Pérez-Ratton, *Mesótica II* implied an ambitious program of research, critical and artistic production, curatorial articulation and international dissemination

02:25 - of Central American art. The challenge, according to what Virginia herself narrated in the exhibition's catalog, had been set by *Ante América*. During the forum, I quote—and it's up there, too—during the forum on problems of Latin American art, Mosquera was asked the reason for not including any Central American artists in such a wide exhibition that sought to offer an inside vision of artistic production in our America. The response from

03:00 - Mosquera had to do with the little that was heard about regional activity and our own difficulty in getting more information out, making evident the lack of documentation and dissemination of contemporary art from Central America. *Mesótica II* proposed itself as a first step in making it known, a first step that implied nothing more than staying in place. As the project's title suggests, it was about a place that partially existed and partially was invented. Located, as the catalog of the

03:30 - first *Mesótica* stated, at a point between north and south, a point of Central America in a polymorphous region that wasn't completely exotic. If the allusion of Mesoamerica conjured a cultural zone demarcated by indigenous culture, the Central America of this exhibition traced its contours from the colonial splitting up of the five

countries that constituted the former region of Guatemala's capitanía. References to indigenous culture and to the long colonial history would be present in various works in *Mesótica II*.

04:00- But the common territory was also that of a post-war present, as this era soon began to call itself, as well as the generation who came after the conflicts of war and the peace treaties. The end of the armed conflict in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, and the end of one of the last and most brazen chapters of the Cold War, promised a new stage for Central America.

04:30 - The same year that the peace treaties were signed in Guatemala, *Mesótica II* was promoted from Costa Rica with the title *Centroamérica – re-generación*. Perhaps the notion of Central America aspired to serve as a kind of common stage after the armed conflict. A kind of imagined "community" beyond the national states and the fractures of the civil wars. Central America, with *Mesótica*, was also a political fiction that proposed to influence the art map at a local,

05:00 - regional, and global level. In the show's introductory text, Virginia proposed a diagnostic of the situation of Central American art in that moment; mentioning on one hand the condition of isolation, the lack of institutional structure for documentation, for criticism, for curating, as well as disinformation and indifference. In contrast, it underlines the growing recognition of Latin American art, at least that of countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Cuba. To the question,

05:30 - no doubt rhetorical—Virginia says this in her text—"Where is Central American art situated?" The answer of the curator herself is "Nowhere," according to the great majority of those generating criticism. Well, what makes *Mesótica* is the suspension of this "Nowhere," and leading it, albeit precariously, towards "Somewhere." A place that existed in part, and that in part had to be invented, a place that in its first instance had to be known and connected; these were the first movements

06:00 - of its curators. To travel to each of the countries and see, converse, ask; to know firsthand some of the most solid experimental and critical artistic practices in each context. In parallel, it tried to establish relationships among works, among people, among situations. The Central America that began to be sketched by *Mesótica II*, was perhaps closer to the maps of artist Rolando Castellón. Poetic cartographies, made of language,

06:30 - of little symbolic interventions, of capricious tracings or political adjustments. *Mesótica* invented—as did *Teorética* later, founded in 1999 by Virginia, or *Mayinca*, the annual series of shows that Rolando Castellón has promoted in Costa Rica since 2013—new terms to designate realities to be built. Neologisms refuse to obey any given framework, to cooperate with structures of artistic validation.

07:00 - It tried not only to influence those generating criticism, but also to generate its own critical framework. *Mesótica* implied the institutional positioning of the Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo and the curatorial positioning of Virginia Pérez-Ratton in space and time: that of contemporary Central American art. At the same time, the exhibition offered a place, albeit provisional, from which to locate themselves, for institutions, for curation, for artistic practices.

07:30 - *La primera guerra de las bananas* is the title of a series by Moisés Barrios that was presented in *Mesótica II*; large-format paintings fantasizing covers of the influential media publications of the hegemonic art system, presenting bunches of bananas as an ironic attack on the mainstream by the “banana republics.” This would be the first time that this Guatemalan artist employed a banana-centric iconography, which since then has been recurrent in his work, albeit in different registers. To judge by the central place

08:00 - he had in the show, at the very entrance of the MADC, the series seemed to work as a kind of declaration of intentions also for *Mesótica*. Sharing with Barrios’s work a position that was critical, ironic, at times self-parodic, the project promoted by the MADC intended no more or less than to give that central visibility to Central American art. More than an exhibition, *Mesótica* was a system with many components, all those that a battle, let’s call it, “the first war of the bananas”

08:30 - might require. To the component of curatorial research it would add the construction of an archive via the compilation of documents and the activation of an editorial program, critical production charged with texts for publication and the celebration of two forums for the opening and closing of the exhibition in San José; the generation of networks and international diffusion, supported by the show’s international tour among other actions, including some works’ entry into collections such as that of

09:00 - the Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo and the private collection of Virginia herself. Although the exhibit was opened in 1996 in San José, from the time it was being put together it was predicted to have an international circulation, which extended the show till the middle of 1998, at sites in Madrid, Rome, Turin, Paris and Apfeldorf. Among the effects of *Mesótica II*’s European tour, Costa Rican researcher Tatiana Rodríguez summarizes:

09:30 - “exhibit design was rethought, the objective of making something visible on the international scene was solidified, and yet, it was not thought for the exhibit to travel in its own region.” This line of questioning was quite pertinent for an exhibition that presented itself as the first in Central America to be integrally organized from within—this is also a quote from *Ante América*—and that nevertheless gave priority to international circulation. But perhaps looking at the context from within, recognizing the persistence of colonial structures in the

10:00 - systems of teaching, dissemination and artistic appraisal, the curators of *Mesótica* understood that to have an effect upon their closest context it was necessary, or at least strategic, to obtain external legitimacy. In an article on the occasion of this show, published in *La Nación* newspaper at the end of 96, Virginia commented, I quote: "This eventual and chance acceptance by the centers, a mirror of the banana artist we all are, ironically results in a local evaluation that doesn't exist without that international confrontation."

10:30 - *Centroamérica re-generación*, proclaimed *Mesótica* with certain optimism in 1996. There is something in that title that has always grated on me, perhaps for its echo of moral regeneration that biology describes as an organism's capacity to reconstruct itself when it a part of itself becomes damaged or is lost, but in the wars of this region, too much was lost.

11:00 - The numbers were always in dispute, always inexact, the number of dead and disappeared, without counting the displaced, the mutilated, the orphaned, and all the others affected by the conflicts. The numbers are horrifying: nearly 75,000 in El Salvador between 1980–82; close to 62,000 between 1980–89 in Nicaragua in the Contra War, supported by the United States; 200,000 dead and 45,000 disappeared in the long-armed conflict in Guatemala

11:30 - between 1960–96, in which a large part of the victims were from indigenous communities. The three countries that had recently experienced civil wars were the focus of the first Central American exhibition of the 90s, titled *Tierra de Tempestades: Arte nuevo del Salvador, Guatemala y Nicaragua*, organized by the Harris Museum and Art Gallery in Preston, and it traveled to other cities in England. The exhibit's curator Joanne Bernstein would say in the exhibit's catalog, I quote:

12:00 - "Despite being so different, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua share, literally and metaphorically, the lashes of the same tempests. On one hand, the hurricanes and tropical storms, together with earthquakes and erupting volcanoes, and on the other, guerrilla insurrection, military repression, civil war and revolution." The way colonial and political processes intermingle with conditions that are more or less natural has not stopped being problematic. Even though *Tierra de Tempestades* justifies its belonging in clearly political terms,

12:30 – this exhibition, Bernstein also says, is an attempt to reduce the long isolation that Central American artists have suffered while re-injecting the sometimes saturated British public with enthusiasm for art's communicative power; it takes place at a moment when a continuous interest in and support for the region is vital, she says, the yet-to-be-resolved problems in Central America made its peace highly vulnerable. Organized barely

13:00 - two years after that show, *Mesótica* also works from a context of still-vulnerable peace. With the inclusion of five countries, the show at the MADC approaches the postwar

situation in the region farthest from the national borders, to speak in terms of the British exhibition. Certainly, Honduras and Costa Rica were not in the eye of the hurricane, but nevertheless none of these countries would be untouched by the neighboring wars. A place of exile for some, of refuge for others, a territory of military training in some cases,

13:30 - and of arms trade in others, or platforms for one side or the other. With enormous differences from country to country, and from region to region—urban, rural or border—the memory of the wars in the region constituted a stage that was to some extent shared. Various works in *Mesótica* seem to explore, or at least approach, this painful memory of collective or personal traumas that are written, firstly, on the body. In the mended textiles of Patricia Belli or the embroideries of

14:00 - Priscila Monge, in the leather books of Pablo Swezey or in the *Historias Paralelas* of Luis González Palma—I'm quoting here—"they work in a postwar climate of reconstruction and spiritual rebirth"—so said the press mention on *Mesótica* in Paris. When just a while ago I asked Rolando Castellón why *re-generación*, he told me: "The mounting of the show was dictated by the nature of the socio-political themes of the region,

14:30 - which was in the process of recuperation given the recent armed conflicts. That's why it was titled *re-generación*, a new generation documenting its future. "To document the future...the idea seems powerful to me and is perhaps a good summary of what *Mesótica* sought to do, no less. If the exhibit's travels constituted one of the resources for producing displacements in the local realm, we could also

15:00 - ask ourselves, what place did it occupy in the agenda of international relations? The European tour of *Mesótica II* was supported by Costa Rica's ministries of culture and foreign affairs via the country's embassies in Madrid, Rome and Paris. It also had the support of host institutions like Casa de América in Madrid, the Instituto Italo-Latino Americano in Rome and the Maison de l'Amérique Latine in Paris, all of them also linked to the ministries of foreign affairs in their respective countries. I have no doubt

15:30 - that a large part of the support for the exhibition was given thanks to Virginia's efforts, her stubborn productivity and an incredible capacity to bring all the gods around to her cause. But it's not difficult to imagine that a show that was presented with the title of *Centroamérica re-generación* had become especially attractive for the diplomatic representations of the Central American states after decades of war and open conflicts—as the press release from the Maison de l'Amérique Latine recorded in its announcement of *Mesótica II*

16:00 - in Paris. It was possible to articulate this Central American project from Costa Rica—from the country with greatest political and institutional stability and with relatively wide cultural infrastructure. From the country that, on another subject, had played a negotiating role in the region's armed conflicts and whose political ability in the

Esquipulas Peace Agreements, in which the presidents of the five countries participated, earning the 1987 Nobel Peace Prize for then-president Oscar Arias.

16:30 - Esquipulas had established the basis for a peace that would not be signed by Guatemala till 1996. *Mesótica*, then, is configured within a political context of negotiations and more or less precarious peace agreements. In 1996, the Partido de Liberación Nacional—the party of Oscar Arias—was back governing Costa Rica. During the administration of Figueres Olsen, from '94 to '98, Virginia Pérez-Ratton was named the director of the Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo.

17:00 - It was the first time she assumed an institutional responsibility on that scale after pursuing activities as a teacher and artist. At the end of the 80s, during the emergency of those displaced by the conflicts in Central America, Virginia also worked at the Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados (High Commission of the UN for Refugees, ACNUR) in Costa Rica. She was at ACNUR when several inflection points took place with regard to the neighboring conflicts: the Salvadoran guerrilla offensive at the end of 1989, which precipitated

17:30 - negotiations with the government, the convening of elections in Nicaragua and the electoral defeat of Sandinismo in 1990. Toward the middle of the decade, the open conflicts in Central America and the effects of the Cold War were still sharply felt. In 1996, *Mesótica II* announced itself in a postwar situation, one in which it was as urgent to remember certain episodes from the past as to forget them. The spirit of turning the page, of reconstructing, of healing, resounds in

18:00 - the term “re-generación.” As a kind of image-manifesto on the cover of the catalog, *Mesótica* presents itself as a force of transformation and regeneration: fire. The image is a photo, taken by Virginia herself, while outside the museum a pyre of chairs was burned in an installation by Isabel Ruíz. As the index that accompanied the show's tour states, this work called *Historia Sitiada* alluded to the communities that were burned by

18:30 - the Guatemalan army. Mourning. Communities that were razed in a genocide that was spoken of with difficulty. I quote: “They try to remember a certain massive and violent event in an indigenous rural community,” suggested the Guatemalan curator Rosina Cazali in the text for the *Mesótica* catalog. Attention to the difference in voltage. This insistent alert in the index of the itinerant show made me think of *Mesótica* as a kind of transformer that allowed

19:00 - for the raising or lowering of the tension, depending on the circuit. It got my attention, for example, that in these documents with instructions for the exhibition sites in Europe, a work such as *Encuentro entre dos mundos*, from 1992, by Marta Eugenia Valle, is registered with the title omitted and with the following note: “Sober installation of three textiles embroidered with popular motifs, one after another like veils, pierced by a lance that unites them, floating over a bed of small round stones.”

19:30 - The violence of a lance piercing the embroidered textiles is softened with the idea that the lance unites them. The limits between the mere technical description and curatorial reading are slippery in these documents, whose registry can include anything from simple painting from within new abstraction in the work of Bayardo Blandino, to painting with strong texture, in a dark palette, flat brushstrokes, with themes that refer to urban existence, marginality,

20:00 - Loneliness, in the pieces of Emilia Villegas. I confess that none of the discourses from the exhibition, none of the curatorial texts, catalogs, criticisms, or press mentions have fascinated me as points of entry to *Mesótica* like these technical indices that accompanied the itinerant show. Who speaks in this archive? In the indices, material and technical descriptions commingle with

20:30 - critical commentary and clues for reading the works. With no standard protocol for all the pieces, the descriptions adjust their criteria on a case-by-case basis, sometimes being merely bureaucratic, sometimes more narrative. The indices have a feel that is almost domestic in some details, like those that may have addresses in San José—I've found out that the ones from Caracas, too—some little pieces sculpted in wood and colored with pencil, pre-Columbian objects with little toy figures

21:00 - and other icons of cultural penetration. One of these descriptions especially attracted my attention when, referring to the pedestals for Regina Aguilar's work, it mentions: "If they can be included in the shipping, we will send them, but they are conceived as pyramid forms painted with clay." Quite far from the white cube, *Mesótica* chose pedestals in pyramid form and painted with clay. It chose to create its own conditions of exhibition based on the singularity of the works, of the context, of the exhibition space

21:30 - and of the relationships that could be activated among all the elements, including the spectators. If *Mesótica* was a political project, a large part was entrusted to its poetic dimension, to its singular space-time order and the sensorial experience that the show proposed. In a conversation with Virginia in 2009, she spoke to me about *Mesótica*: "Rolando and I did the design for mounting the show. It was a moment when a way of working the museum's exhibitions was set up

22:00 - so that the mounting was designed with great care to create relationships." In this way of working, the exhibition is understood as a specific perceptive mechanism, and the installation is its most efficient tool. At the beginning of 1997, in San José, Gerardo Mosquera was asked what in *Mesótica* had most called his attention, and his answer was, "The museographic presentation has a lovely aesthetic resolution of high international quality. The work of Rolando Castellón must be highlighted." – said

22:30 - Mosquera. It is difficult to separate the work of Castellón the curator from Castellón the artist. In his personal exhibitions he often includes the works of others, and when he installs shows of other authors he takes great license, as if he were working with his own pieces. I suspect, for example, that in the clay of *Mesótica*—that of the pedestals, the walls or floors, as in the installations by Regina Aguilar and Xenia Mejía—there was also something of Moyo Coyatzín...well, it's one of his heteronyms, right?

23:00 - Among the multiple dimensions of *Mesótica*, I'd like to think about this exhibition as a tool for self-formation and learning, first and foremost for the team of the Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo. In the middle of the 90s, in charge of directing the MADC, Virginia started what would be a brilliant curatorial itinerary. Rolando, for his part, was recently arrived in San José after a long trajectory in institutions and museums in California. He was one of the founders and the first director of the Galería de La Raza

23:30 - in San Francisco from 1969–70; he was a curator at MoMA San Francisco from 1972–81 and director of the Mary Porter Sesnon Art Gallery at UC Santa Cruz from 1983–92. These experiences not only gave him tools but also a certain legitimacy to put to some, let's say, unorthodox use, to spin it around, appropriate it, twist it. With all that experience, the self-taught Castellón had not stopped acting like an amateur, like an

24:00 - intruder, a ranger, an enthusiast, a lover. Someone who moves between knowing what to do and doing whatever he wants. I ask myself whether *Mesótica* could be one of those first moments for the team of the MADC in which the learning and unlearning the grammar of the exhibition could constitute simultaneous experiences. When I think of the pedagogical dimension of Castellón's work, I find so much in his workshops, editorial work, conversations, in his permanent efforts to promote projects and artists, as with the fascinating

24:30 - opportunity to accompany him while he installed an exhibit. In a recent text by Lidia Blanco, I was pleased to recognize sensations from my own experience with Rolando; she says "When *Mesótica* arrived at Casa de América—says she who was the director at that moment—I had the luck to see Rolando Castellón and it was perhaps the occasion during which I most enjoyed and learned from the mounting and creation of a show, its special way of being in time

25:00 - and in space, of moving against the current, to imposing its rhythm of observation and reflection, of smelling, looking at and feeling its spaces, letting one's self be won over by them and transforming them. He showed me so much about cultural administration and the commitment to the creation made by so many studio hours." In the same publication where this testimony from Lidia appears, there is also one from Nicaraguan artist Patricia Belli,

25:30 - and it said: "Virginia offered me the key to Central American contemporary art, which for me meant not being alone, to know the work of people who would nourish my

process, who would put that private process into perspective for me in the coming years. I enthusiastically embraced the predicament of my time, my postwar, my peace process, my mourning and my joy. Nor did I realize the synchronicity of those works at that time till Virginia's visit and the great party

26:00 - that *Mesótica II* was." What began to knit itself together with that exhibition were, above all, relationships, networks and a certain common scene for Central American art. That party of *Mesótica II* turned out to be contagious. It's notable that various participating artists from the exhibition had also been active agents in the promotion of education, art and critical projects, in their respective contexts and coincidences in the region: *Artefacto* magazine

26:30 - and the Artefactoría group—today Malagana—brought together by Raúl Quintanilla in Managua; the workshop-school San Juancito, in the town of the same name in Honduras, has promoted Regina Aguilar, also since '92; the Asociación Mujeres en las Artes, which since '97 promotes Bayardo Blandino in Tegucigalpa; the Coordinación de la Bienal Centroamericana, on whose team Blandino himself has worked, from Honduras, and Rodolfo Molina, from El Salvador; the Taller de Arte Joven, founded by Patricia Belli in

27:00 - 2001 and the inspiration for Espira, the space for research and artistic reflection that's been active since 2003 in Managua. For the Bienal de Sao Paulo in 1998, Pablo Henkel Kof invited Virginia to work as a regional curator, resulting in the presentation titled *Centroamérica y el Caribe: una historia en blanco y negro*; that invitation was the direct result of *Mesótica II* and the visit of the Brazilian curator to the exhibit presented at the Maison de l'Amérique Latine. That same year as *Mesótica II*, there began

27:30 - to form another project of regional vocation, supported by private initiative, a group of businesspeople and professionals: the Bienal Centroamericana, which since 1998 has existed as a nomadic model traveling the capital cities of Central America. For the tenth edition of this event, the organizers proposed to change the model and a proposed change to the general curation was sought. In 2016, 20 years after *Mesótica II*, and ten years after *Estrecho Dudoso*—the international event with the participation

28:00 - of more than 70 artists in various sites and public spaces in San José, and which I co-curated with Virginia in 2006—, the Bienal Centroamericana took place on a radically different stage. What had been recognized in the mid-90s as contexts that were isolated among themselves had converted itself into professional and personal networks that had multiplied and consolidated in Central America. This situation allowed us to approach the curation of the tenth Biennial almost as a mode of continuing conversations that were started long ago,

28:30 - or to support and strengthen projects that were already happening in the region. A mode of visualizing other transformations could happen thanks to the work of Moisés Barrios. In *Mesótica II*, *La guerra de las bananas* situated a certain change in the battle

within the context of art, its instruments of legitimacy and all it forgot. The abandonment explored by the series *Bananera Blues*, which was presented at the tenth Biennial, questions one of the great forces of economic transformation and of the

29:00 - natural, cultural and demographic context at the beginning of the 21st century. The vulnerability to banana plagues, and also the greater ecological vulnerability of monoculture, moved the companies to change from one region to another, constructing and dismantling infrastructure, promoting and abandoning crops and populations in their wake. Perhaps the abandonment of a banana-growing enclave, registered in Barrios's photos, can be read less as an accident and more as a structural condition of

29:30 - the plantation The tenth Bienal Centroamericana *Todas las Vidas*—as it was titled—was inaugurated last September in the old administrative building of the *United Fruit Company* in Limón. We were interested in situating questions about our present from there, from a key place for this company that, as one author says, “modeled the world” and that in Central America had an exceptional laboratory to test out the economic, political, fiscal, labor and environmental practices of a multinational corporation,

30:00 - one of the most influential institutional forms of our time. The region alluded to in the tenth Bienal Centroamericana is configured from specific articulations, poetic constellations and shared political urgencies. Putting sustainability of life at the center, countering violence against normalization, producing other representations imagining other bodies, other sexualities, lives that are important, these have been some of the axes of the tenth Biennial

30:30 - via concrete artistic practices. But the capacity of art to generate debates, transformations, public spheres, depends on collective articulations, this is what *Mesótica* understood, or at least what it attempted, and what seems even more urgent today: to not be alone. Thank you.