

Chus Martínez
**Gathering Sea I
Am!**

01/11

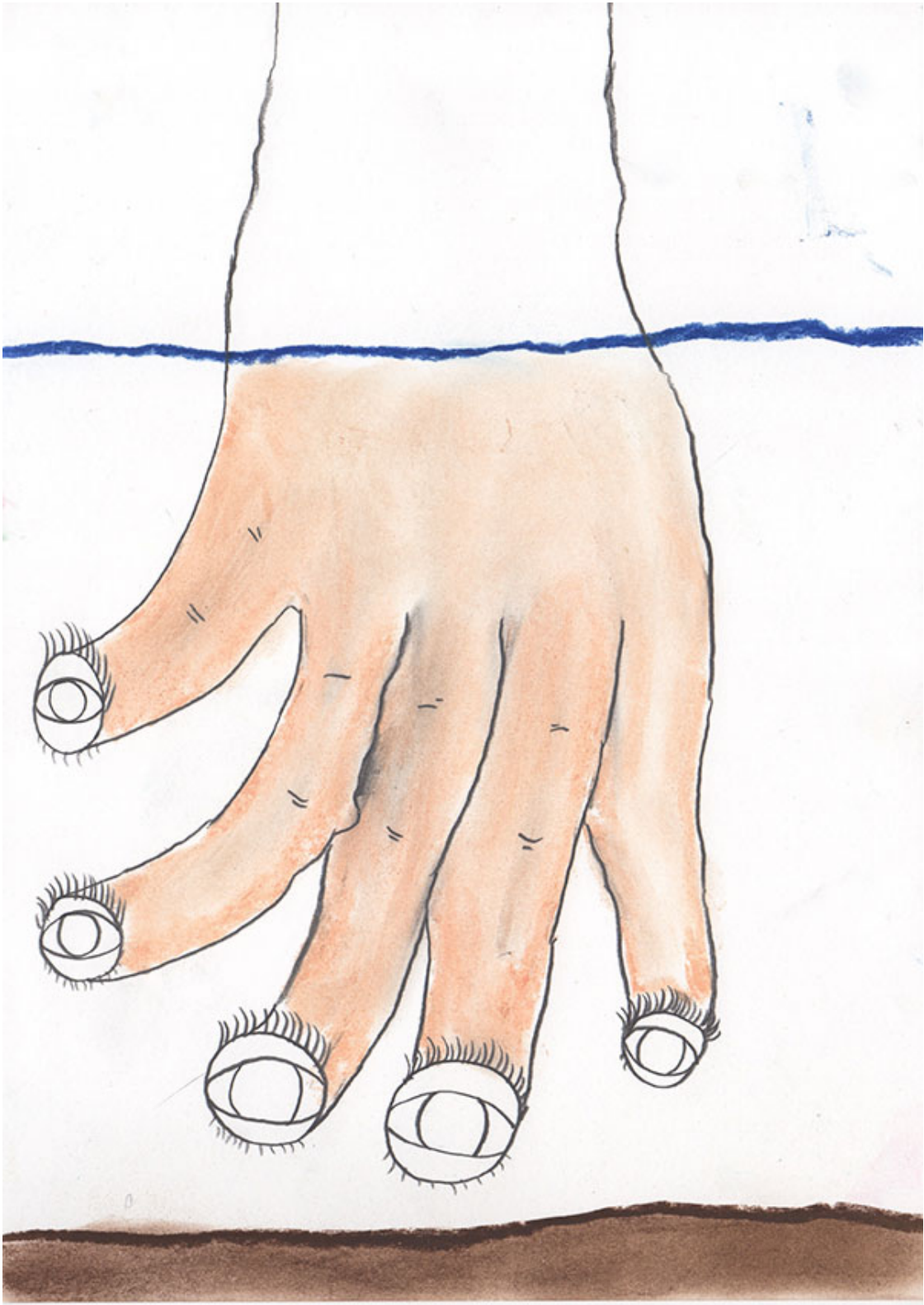
e-flux journal #112 — october 2020 [Chus Martínez](#)
[Gathering Sea I Am!](#)

The Trouble with Wishes Coming True
It would be radical – but probably right – to say that the rising interest in nature among artists and art professionals has less to do with nature and a lot more to do with the institutional structure of the art world itself. The rise and development of museums, public collections, and all other participating institutions in this history has been dependent on an idea of social structure and citizenship that is now radically changing: one could even say that nature embodies the last institutional twist in the history of institutionalized art, as the emergence of Nature – as a space and a ground – embodies not so much an institutional alterity to the museums and white (and nonwhite) cubes, but rather the very possibility of a rebirth outside the frame of history. Yes, history. I do believe that more important than the problem of culture is the question of history and national identity that art has been dealing with for so many centuries. However, this is not the question that preoccupies me here.

Both democracy and museums had a short-lived, minor revival at the very edge of their decay, before continuing their descent. The transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century was marked by the energy of discourses inhabiting art institutions, an energy of renewal that affected not only the big institutions, but also the role of medium- and smaller-sized ones. The question of the future of representation within the Western democratic system was answered by the proliferation of philosophers and different curatorial and artistic agents promoting access, ideas, and the archive. The past gained a plurality and the question of history started to fragment into the problems of the legacy of postcolonialism. The archive was the first door: the document – still white – preceded the entrance of materials and artistic voices from different territories and histories. Restitution started to gain body and reality, in regard to the question of race in the art world. Still, the energies of renewal were possessed by enthusiasm, by an economic and social growth that unprecedentedly empowered art to see itself as capable of opening the social to its past through new and different ideas of education, participation, social wealth, and access. The art world believed in itself and many politicians in Europe supported this wave – at the beginning – as a way of activating the Union and creating a resonance between the old continent's dreams and this new political organization, which on its surface seemed a genius development of all those historical loose ties among nations that were never friends, but permanently interdependent. It was only natural that the Union needed to spread a strong sense of



TBA21–Academy, *The Current II*, Summer School #2: *Phenomenal Ocean* led by Chus Martínez. Photo: Enrico Fiorese.



Eduardo Navarro, (*New Friends, New Senses*), 2018. Pastel and graphite on A4 printer paper. TBA21–Academy *The Current II*.

culture, one that was critical and, at the same time, capable of capitalizing on the old flavor of history through a renewed “park” of art institutions. This also explains why the tsunami of critique of the old and the belief in its force were interwoven. But, more importantly, this also explains why the whole exercise of investigating the limits of established art institutions and the possibilities of new formats was a very controlled impulse; one was absolutely convinced that at the end of the rainbow was a pot of gold. The emerging interest on the part of the press in museums and the “stars” that created exhibitions enhanced an idea of access that was mostly sponsored by low-cost airlines.¹ All of a sudden, cities were like the musicals that reemerged as a genre in new North American cinema. Thanks to Zara, Uniqlo, or Swatch, many old forgotten buildings in city centers started to sing and to smell. All the glories of past centuries responded to the arrival of all these tourists as if they were new wings in old art institutions presenting both the identity of the past and the city under a new form and a new light – and, of course, wearing new clothes.

The art world said “access” and access it was! The citizens started to open the doors of their houses. Did you say hospitality? Et voilà, millions of apartments were redecorated with white and bright elements and opened – in a competitive quest – to visitors. Who said that shelter was not the notion that would reign in the old continent? Who could now claim that the wishes expressed by art and its institutions were not listened to? Millions listened to the call ... Never had it been possible to peek into the private houses of the Catalan bourgeoisie, for example, if you did not belong to their inner circle, but now, just log into an app and you can not only see their spaces, but also compare their prices with yours. It is true that this could be seen as an undesirable development, but this development still has everything to do with us, with the language and the desires we expressed with these words which cannot be entirely and independently blamed on tourism and the marketing of all the city centers of Europe. Tourism is the complex result of seeing the enormous importance and impact of the transit of people as an incredible source of income, as well as of using this type of transit as a veil to cover the arrival of those thousands of people that seek refuge and a future in the developed territories. These two forms of transit cannot be separated from one another.

But what has all of this to do with art? Or contemporary art? One cannot truly claim that development occurred in the right direction, that museums and art institutions gained relevance, that curators were established in a new and

unprecedented way, or that criticality and the new formats are visible, now that collectors and the market rule the art world in the absence of public money or foundations defending the common interest. I would say a lot of it has to do with how contemporary art sped up and was used to speed up a transformation of our society in directions that, while overall positive, are at the same time rapidly growing dangerous as we are unable to create a political frame for it. Art has been obsessed with the tensions created between elites and public communities. No other field of practice and study has dedicated so much effort and speculative thinking to addressing this question. And it is this very question that determines today’s development of technology and politics.

Ocean

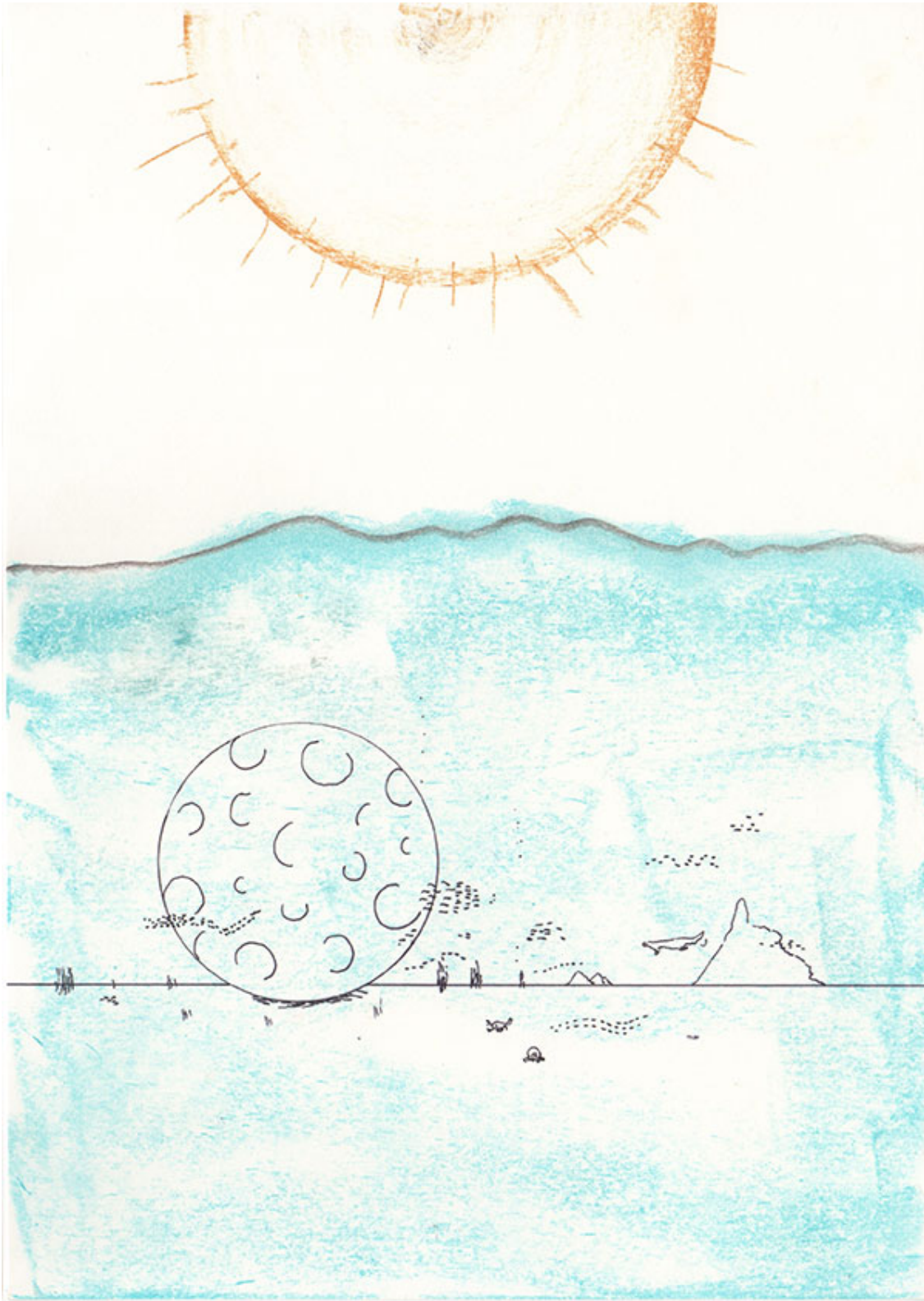
The field of art has indeed contributed massively to generating a sense of experience about gender, nature, and race, and has served as an amplifier of other disciplines concerned with the same questions and rights. However, it is equally important to face and to discuss the transformation of our institutional structures regardless of their scale, to understand the interdependency of the evolution of our public sphere and the capital dedicated to it and the future of art, and to reconsider the relationships we are building not only with technology as an industry, but also with technology as a substance that itself needs to be reevaluated in terms of gender, race, and in relation to nature.

Art and its world have been from their origins directly dependent on urban and industrial developments. Even if in the past – and also in recent years in a limited way – many have been pointing towards the nonurban as a possible context for future artists in which to make art, the fact is that it always sounds like a last resort and, in actuality, the countryside (read as an “other” to the wealthier urban centers) is neither fully considered to the extent of its possibilities nor stands to make a comeback. Art has never – for reasons related to the development of education and our physical and necessary dependency on demographics, on the presence of an audience – reflected properly on an “other” contrary to and outside of the modern models of production and transmission. Why should we? Art, in the way it has been conceived, has not needed fields and farmers but rather citizens and scholars. Institutions need to be where the bureaucracy is and where politics are formed. But are politics even really taking shape in cities today?

The question of understanding the nonurban context is a very complex one, and one that also relates to the rise of the internet in an

04/11

e-flux journal #112 — october 2020 Chus Martínez
Gathering Sea I Am!



Eduardo Navarro, *(When We Don't See the Moon)*, 2018. Pastel and graphite on A4 printer paper. TBA21–Academy *The Current II*.

intriguing way.

Art in nonurban contexts has historically taken other forms, ones that relate to craft and to community values, such as tradition, but also to traditional notions of gender and work. And until now, projects proposing contemporary art in the countryside have mostly stressed the historical interest artists have in the landscape or the way they conceptualize certain elements of earth and nature, but have failed to engage with the reality of the people inhabiting those areas. Probably only Canada and some northern parts of Scandinavia have created institutions with collections responding to indigenous art and First Nation concerns and views on the world. Otherwise, it is still very difficult to find examples of logics that defy empirical – even if some are critical – views on different knowledges.

Postcolonial theories and debates have raised enormous awareness about the realities of those suffering the normalization processes imposed by imperialisms of all kinds, and yet, those same realities have been the subject of an enormous fictionalization of local cultures and indigenous wisdoms. Somehow, our institutional and academic ways of reading the real have left space for exceptions of the best kind. Art has displayed an enormous interest in the testimonials of the oppressed, forcing those voices to sound oftentimes like factory workers displaced in a nonindustrial context. Furthermore, the antagonism towards technology, social media, and all the miseries left behind by the evolution of labor in our developed and service-oriented centers has created an idealized view of indigenous peoples as possessing an original wisdom that we have lost. The rise of interest in ayahuasca and the growth of an industry dedicated to substances that are supposed to enhance our quality of life – like superfoods – go hand in hand. Many scholars – such as oceanographer Osvaldo Ulloa – have denounced the systematic construction of the indigenous as the original ecological subject, as if nearness to their lives will serve to provide benefits to ours that we can incorporate into our ways of production and consumption, without much change except a new empathy for their way of living. Indeed, there is a space for difference and an attention that were not there before, but these have come with a failure to deal with more complex differences that cannot be easily described. Further, the political situations of many indigenous communities are endangered like never before and any mechanisms to protect their resources are silenced in the face of public and private interests, such as capitalist extraction.

It is not only radical ways of conceiving life

that are affected or at stake here, but the many millions living in territories that are of no interest – not even for an exercise in exoticism – to the powers that be. The reality of the countryside is leading to the rise of old-fashioned right-wing values. Poverty marks the lives of many who see how educational systems only shape individuals according to models of labor and life that have nothing in common with the reality they are living in: a reality of millions of kilometers of country dispossessed of any beauty, sense of sustainability, or health, and also remote, disconnected, and suffering from endemic class, gender, and discrimination problems.

In these circumstances, it is a prerequisite to read the interest in nature not as a subject, but as a necessary turn towards new conditions of space, politics, action, gender, race, and interspecies relations. As of late, it is much more common for art practitioners to say “nature” than “countryside,” for example. The reason is to be found in the philosophies common in the art sphere: those that proffer a systematic thinking against nature, on the background of nature, on the otherness of nature, in a dialectical manner with nature, which have made nature much more legible, in all its nonurban forms.

It is because of the prevalent discourses and understanding of nature that we are still nonspecific about the future of art in a nonurban context. Nature and art are other names for life, and life needs to be reintroduced into our thinking in a big way. But the interest in nature preserves – probably for good reasons – a level of indeterminacy regarding the actions that attract artists and inspire us to think about the spaces that exist outside institutionalized life. This seems easy to say, but it is radically difficult to imagine it in nonnegative terms. Institutions have been our language and the form we invented to organize ourselves. Therefore, every time a scientist says they have discovered a new species of fish, they are saying that there is a whole part of life – a sentient part – that we have not responded to. And this response is not just a question of “expanding” our aid or action towards it. Rather the contrary: intelligent life and sentient life should – and eventually will – function like an imperative to organize differently every structure that plays a role in our relationship to nature.

This idea of coexistence, interspecies communication, etc., is not entirely new. Such notions have a long history, and yet it has been mostly science that has paid attention to intelligence existing in nonhuman realms, but also more importantly, to the different philosophical minds that have tried to describe the political and epistemological dimensions of this crucial phenomena. Humanities and the

06/11

e-flux journal #112 — october 2020 Chus Martínez
Gathering Sea I Am!

sphere of visual culture have been skeptical and conservative in embracing any theory or study taking this possibility seriously. The entanglement of the questions of rationality, language, and labor has acted as a barrier for those presenting ideas of intelligence based on forms and dimensions of consciousness that defy the classic parameters that safeguard the status of the human and uphold production as one of the most important functions of our human lives. Language and labor structure two of the pillars of our early, modern, and late capitalist life: education and production. Both go hand in hand, since the major goal of education – and more and more so – is none other than being able to work. Education makes labor possible, by producing capitalist subjects, and it has as a secondary mission to familiarize workers with future labor scenarios. Education for the sake of knowledge, or for the nourishment of our capacity to speculate or preserve old forms (classical studies, for example) through new forms (computer science, etc.) has dramatically lost its importance. We speak of research, and there are a few who still believe that research does name the speculative worlds that ancient academia nourished and protected, but research nowadays is mainly a tool that extends hypothesis to the doors of industry.

Another of the big prejudices that culture and the visual arts have with regards to the idea of nature possessing an intelligence that may influence our political forms and languages has to do with gender. Women have historically been seen as those defending sensorial forms of communication that defy classical – and narrow – understandings of rationality and the role it plays in the definition of social norms. Therefore, to accept expanded views on the sensorial implies accepting and undertaking a reform of the social norms that situate certain behaviors, knowledges, and artistic productions in a secondary realm in relation to the canons that cultural and artistic institutions have created. And this has been the case for centuries: a misogynistic prejudice runs all through the history of Western philosophy and art and has determined the silencing of so many other forms of relating to life that would have rendered the premises of, for example, institutional critique radically conservative and opportunistic towards the old order – as indeed they are.

While it would be wrong to think that when one says “ocean,” one is naming a “subject,” we might be so radical as to posit that to say “ocean” is, today, to say “art” – art without the burden of institutional life, without the ideological twists of cultural politics, art as a practice that belongs to artists, art facing the urgency of socializing with all who care about

life. In other words, to say “ocean” is to replace the historical notion of the avant-garde with a code that is not determined by form and the invention of new gestures, but by an investigation of the substance of life, identifying this as the mission of art.

This would imply that all those artists directly interested in life underwater, in nature, in new forms of sensing from nonhuman-centered perspectives, are “in.” But it also means that all those not directly interested in thinking along these lines – who do not identify the intelligence of art as lying in its radical interest in life – are even more important than those who are. Think about the current situation of all the structures constituting the art world; about the impoverishment of a language inherited from past left and liberal social visions, and the impossibility of reinventing these dreams and their premises under a late-capitalistic economic system; and about the need for a new sensorium to invent new notions, to build new sentences, to embrace a new idea of equality and social justice. If we do, we can see that to say “ocean” is to say the expansion of museums, of public space ... that the ocean is a source that reprograms our senses and contains a potential for transforming the future of architecture, of communications, of gender entanglement, of economy, of art.

The Teacher-Curator

At the end of 2017, I was invited by the TBA21 – Academy to curate an oceanic expedition for their program *The Current*, a series of three-year cycles organized around the state of the ocean. I was the third curator, preceded by Ute Meta Bauer, who successfully finished a three-year cycle, and César García-Álvarez, who did only one trip. For my cycle, the artist group SUPERFLEX and I were commissioned to curate three expeditions led by artists and scientists and three public gatherings whose form would be defined by the person or collective in charge. The crucial part of this initiative and its programs was the problems it posed to curatorial practice and to my own individual work as a curator within an art institute.

The invitation not only provided me with an opportunity to see curatorial practice in “a new light” or an “expanded” field, but actually forced me to reimagine the whole question of the future of curatorial practice. Am I still a curator if I direct an art school but do not program exhibitions in a consecutive and publicly accessible manner? Is the title “curator” needed for an organizer of expeditions that take their name from the old habit of exploring territories to enhance not only knowledge but also frontiers and possessions? Will there be a role for curators

07/11

e-flux journal #112 — october 2020 Chus Martínez
Gathering Sea I Am!



Albert Serra, *Oceaneering*, 2018. TBA21–Academy, *The Current II*, Expedition #1: To Find the Vegan Lion, led by Chus Martínez.

– as well-trained mediators – in a world where seeing is not only a human or animal trait but a technological threat?

Our field – as curators – is constituted by the questions we are able to ask.

When I moved to an art school, I was motivated by several inquiries. A very simple one: How are art schools to become part of the art institutions that nourish our social space through artistic and speculative production? Why has our view of art schools been so reductive? If they contribute to the development of artists and thus art, they should also actively participate in forming the field of attention and study around nature, and also around the questions about the future of race and gender that are so crucial to the future art practice. What does the term “education” include today? If education is the key to curing all of our social ills – from doubts about the reality of climate change to gender and racial inequality – then why don’t countries, private foundations, and all the forces in favor of a free and democratic society unite to create educational programs capable of responding to this?

Never before has a term said so little. From literacy to digital skills, “education” names basic requirements to be part of a system, but it lacks the force of an approach to thinking that is capable of tackling the biggest challenges we will face. No one seems to be ready to gather the many parties – contemporary art included – that are searching for new modes of communication and pedagogical systems, for a collaborative effort toward bringing younger generations and populations with less access to art to experiences that would help them renegotiate their relationship to nature and formulate new knowledge.

Few people saw how my plan to introduce into the curricula of an art institute ways of rethinking nature, race, and gender could contribute – modestly, but steadily – to a transformation of a field otherwise bound to the processes of exhibition and the market. Moreover, as a woman my move toward education was perceived as a retreat to something minor – perhaps important in principle, but incapable of having the same impact that art spaces or galleries have. Once the hype of education as a twist in exhibition-making – as reported by numerous articles in art magazines – had passed, the reality of art education returned to the way we knew it from the past. There seemed to be a big difference, as well, between an art school directed by a man and one directed by a woman, a difference that negatively affected the ambitions I had. When run by men, the schools are seen as still possessing some of the charm of the avant-

garde heroic gesture of advocating for a free space, which resonates with radical politics. However, the very moment a woman was in charge, questions about teaching – versus curating – began raining down upon me. But if we once proposed the idea that artists can curate, surely today we should propose the idea that teachers can curate? What are the kinds of methods, exhibitions, and public exchanges this would generate? In post-liberal Western societies we face a recurrent problem of failing to identify women – and all minorities – as capable of producing a meaningful and strong public sphere, and this affects and distorts the perception of what is possible in the future of our art and cultural systems. So the idea that teachers can curate makes sense. Teachers, understood as practitioners of *paideia* (the rearing of citizens), aim to cultivate a closeness, an insight into a subject that helps each individual communicate their experience and therefore create a sensing system that goes hand-in-hand with a language to convey it, to make it communicable.

So, let’s embrace the imbalance and all the imbalances that are needed to create new balance. Anyhow, the teacher-as-curator is nothing new. We accept the expert, the magician, the shaman, the leader, the CEO, the collective as curators, yet we seem to have a problem with curation by the harmless teacher or the person in charge of creating a bond with a group of young people.

One of my favorite examples of this exercise of turning everything into a classroom, then into an exhibition, was performed by a school teacher: Raphael Montañez Ortiz. He was a primary school teacher in a public and very poor school in Harlem, New York City. He was asked by the parents of his students to create a method to convey their experience of being Caribbean and African – mostly of Puerto Rican descent – to their children, who were in an educational system that taught them in English and in a culture very different from their own. It was this teacher-curator who founded El Museo del Barrio, a museum that miraculously appeared in the classroom to perform the many operations of explaining, demonstrating, and translating cultural realities that were very far from the city.

In my short, but very intense, time at El Museo del Barrio, I had the great pleasure of talking to Raphael and many other artists of his generation about the challenges of conveying diasporic culture to children, such as introducing them to “the sound of the *coquí* frog.” At the time, I did not understand the meaning of this statement, and so I underestimated it, or perhaps more precisely, categorized it as a beautiful metaphor. But it was meant literally.

09/11

e-flux journal #112 — october 2020 Chus Martínez
Gathering Sea I Am!

The *coquí* gets its name from its mating song. The male of the species sings “*coquí, coquí.*” For Puerto Ricans in the US, missing the sound of this song is one manifestation of the enormous pain that colonial processes of the past and present have created. Their exile is perceived as migration, and they have a political status that never allows them to arrive at full citizenship, nor fully retreat into their native land and its symbols.

Raphael represents a specific paradigm in a theory of the teacher-curator that I want to put forward.² He embodies a model that is helpful for understanding what this teaching-curating function may mean. In the late '60s he was highly involved, alongside Gustav Metzger, in the question of destruction – a question that he never truly abandoned in his practice as an artist. In the '70s, with the publication of his *Physio-Psycho-Alchemy*, he revitalized his research on behavior and creation. He very soon – at least in his thinking – identified in the myth of destruction the question of a potential new and authentic origin. One of the most interesting traits of his thinking is how it surpasses radical individualism, seeking profound political responsibility. His teaching was not understood – not even by himself – as part of his artistic and curatorial practice. And yet I would claim that his study of Mesoamerican rituals and of all kinds of therapies that allow one to be “born again” were part of a long research practice that worked to propose a vision of how to deal with all we are not: how to deal with knowledge if we don't have it, how to deal with whiteness if you are not, how to deal with feminine sensing if you are male, how to deal with wealth if you are not rich ... how to deal with all these dualities if you don't want to be bound by any of them, and how all these poles and dialectical systems affect our ability to deal with complex racial, cultural, and economic realities.

Conclusion

Like Raphael Montañez Ortiz and many artists of his generation, it is imperative now to learn to situate behavior inside art practice, inside artistic production, and to become aware of the *how*, observing not only the language we use to address problems, but also the conditions we create to allow for different experiences of volumes, symbols, images, power, connections, media, etc. Doing so holds the key to understanding the future of a practice of mediation that can be identified with the teacher, and with all the hyper-pedagogical resources we may need to invent, positioning art as the experience of freedom, nature as the experience of gender. The teacher-curator is that figure that insists on the importance of matching

together gender and nature with the efforts that are ahead of us in the decolonizing processes that we need to maintain – or actually, activate – in all cultural structures, which seems to be a relevant task to collectively undertake with young artists. At the same time, the continuous production of opportunities to include alumni and a broad community of artists and those interested in art is also a must.

And yet, there is another key question, different from but parallel to those mentioned above. It concerns the status of ignorance: the ill-suited tools we have inherited to deal with it, the question of transmission when reading decreases, and the challenge of embracing with joy those spaces that function outside our institutionally shaped modern minds. I have come to believe that the many multiple and different futures that may lie ahead of us are dependent on our ability to interpret ignorance and its structure: an ignorance that suggests that knowledge absorption as our traditional educational methods conceive it is in deep crisis; an ignorance affected but the structure of media, like it was in the late eighteenth century; an ignorance radically dependent on self-affirmation, just as traditional class structures are eroding. Recently, a researcher from the media analysis nonprofit Harmony Labs in New York explained to me in a private conversation that people share news and tweets that they identify with, not those that inspire them or make them change their minds. What goes viral on social media are thus those things that reinforce of our own views, while we keep private the things that alter our views. The reason for this, as writer Ingo Niermann explained to me, is that stability is privileged before change. Even when a person or a piece of information or a documentary changes our views, it also creates a vertigo, a sense of losing the old ground before having a new one to stand on – a new ground from which to be assertive and defend this new acquired sense of the real. It is the production of a ground from which to defend one's values that matters, from which to create a sense of identification that does not – or at least not only – consist of ultra-conservative views, or the rehearsal of the liberal and left-progressive ones that we need to work on.

Therefore, I would insist that ignorance is a real active force, and in order to reach the goals of equality and freedom, it is important to invest in the understanding of the structures and the experiences that constitute the transmission of ideas and feelings today.

x

10/11

e-flux journal #112 — october 2020 Chus Martínez
Gathering Sea I Am!

Chus Martínez is head of the Art Institute at the FHNW Academy of Arts and Design in Basel. She is also the expedition leader of *The Current II* (2018–20), a project initiated by TBA21–Academy. Additionally, in 2021 and 2022, Martínez will hold the artistic directorship of Ocean Space, Venice, a space spearheaded by TBA21–Academy that promotes ocean literacy, research, and advocacy through the arts.

11/11

1

There is a very beautiful and unexplored aspect of this story: the word “star” and its function. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu remarked that “sociology and art do not make good bedfellows.” His reasoning was grounded in the tension between the art world’s desire to focus on individual creative genius, and sociology’s insistent aim to explain phenomena in terms of social forces. No better term than “star” describes how easily men – no matter how many conscious public programs one has attended and despite how many women have warned about the dangers of assigning them power – have been able to sit as heads of museum boards and entice journalists to cover them. But the “stars” find their own Bourdieu-predicted predator: the influencer. The influencer is like an avenger defined positively in market terms: it modifies the course of a decision and reunites all like-minded thinkers – like a shepherd – under its influence. If a “star” is like a king or an old-fashioned boss, the influencers are the true children of the model developed by big companies in defining and putting to work indirect leadership – that is, acting upon very large structures in which the message reaches the recipient through an indirect source of command.

2

Before I proceed, I would like the reader to set aside all prejudices against the word “teaching,” as well as against the possible roles a teacher may have. Those prejudices are key to understanding the radicality of what these artists did and the potential of what I would love to describe as a proposal for the future of contemporary-art culture.

e-flux journal #112 — october 2020 Chus Martínez
Gathering Sea I Am!