

Too Much Is the Way by Chus Martínez

flash---art.com/2022/07/too-much-is-the-way

By Chus Martínez

29. Juli 2022

A Monthly Column on The Art of Giving Unrequested Guidance.

I had noticed it before, but it was not until working on the *100 Notes, 100 Thoughts* notebook project for Documenta 13, at the point that we were fully engaged in sending out invitations to potential authors, that I had absolute proof. Every time we invited a male author, with very few exceptions, a positive response came the same day or the day after. When the same letter was sent to a female author, the response took much longer, and very often took the form of a carefully written text that showed that the person had given thought to the matter but had decided in the negative.

Reasons included having too much work already, and the fact that taking on another commission could result in a poorly written piece. I was possessed by panic and frustration, since all the female and queer writers I most admired said no, one after the other. I couldn't accept this, so I decided that it was my mistake — that my letter carefully explaining the request had added more anxiety to an already anxious subject. So, instead, I went in person. Agreeing to meet was easy, and every one of those many meetings felt like the beginning of a friendship. Because of the reason for the meeting, Documenta, people were willing to make the effort, and those visits became a core part of my research. They were a wonderful way to actually experience how each writer approached their practice. Spending time with all those authors felt like a gigantic pedagogical exercise, one that only made the notebook project more meaningful and more sensitive to the fact that a piece of writing was being born — one that was still in note form, an intuition. To fill the world with speculative hypotheses could only help all of us to better understand coexistence and creation and the Earth and the vernacular and quantum physics and extravagance and pain... These one-to-one conversations were a kind of architecture in themselves, building a larger and more accessible space in which thought and voice and poetry might offer hope to the world. But also, after every one of these meetings, I left trembling, feeling that I was at risk of being perceived as too pushy. But I simply could not give up on any of these wonderful thinkers. One by one, everyone eventually said yes. This time, the argument about having too much work was pushed aside: "Let me see how I can encompass your expectations and find a way to respond." I felt blessed. But also, I was left with a horrific thought: "What if I had not gone in person?"

The experience, however, showed me that women are ambitious and want to succeed in what they do. And this can result in too high an expectation of perfection from oneself, and a keen awareness of the consequences of delivering a job that may be perceived as “not as good as expected.” I would have assumed that all genders shared this fear. But that is not the case, and there are reasons for it, one being that no one turns a blind eye to the work of non-males.

So, the answer was to send a short, less explicative letter requesting a conversation, in the hope that through such a talk a bond might form, as well as a sense that it was very necessary to accept the job.

More recently, though, I have been facing some of the same problems when offering demanding but great jobs to women. Seated before hiring committees, far too often female candidates explain their time concerns, their capabilities and their willingness to take on the tasks required, only to conclude that the reality of the demands will make it impossible. You cannot stop an interview and beg the best candidate to simply lie. So many times I've wanted to say, “Please say you'll take the job, and once you are on the inside you'll force them to figure it out.” But, of course, these same women would also consider this to be unacceptable and dishonest. I disagree though. My hope — and it is happening in certain places, but not many — is that those qualified candidates, faced with various responsibilities, with their various concerns and views on life, power structures, and identity, would be given the opportunity to apply collectively or find more flexible structures to accommodate those responsibilities. In the meantime, accepting far too much responsibility can also be a way of drawing attention to the very important question of how the positions we want can accommodate us.

Hormonal Determinism by Chus Martínez

flash---art.com/2022/06/hormonal-determinism

By Chus Martínez

27. Juni 2022

A Monthly Column on The Art of Giving Unrequested Guidance.

If money makes the world go mute, what really motivates people to talk are hormones. Sometimes I feel like an inside-out tree exposed to a congress of dendrochronologists (those versed in the science of reading tree rings for chronological and historical data). The first dark ring to be exposed would surely be when I first got my period, which remained hidden to the scientists of the art world because at that point I was too young to work there yet. The second ring, thick and dark, was pregnancy. The hormonal chatterboxes multiply when you hit your mid-thirties, or, as Lamarck would say, in your mid-thirties your ears mature in ways that allow you listen more acutely to those who might be receptive to your potential hormonal transformation, even if you never noticed them before.

Hints and comments relating to your reproductive potential pop up. You start feeling observed — like a poached egg in an English kitchen. “Too early” is replaced by “it is never the right time, and yet...”, which soon becomes “too late.” One goes to work and develops projects and feels surrounded by these hormonal master chefs who foresee your future.

It is horrendously obvious how everyone feels fine showering you with comments on aspects of your life that you might want to keep private, invisible, unspoken, hidden, even repressed. You also wonder why the same collective wisdom is not shared with such intensity with the fathers of curating, with the masters of our institutions, with the makers of our markets. It is almost unnecessary to describe what comes next: one day it becomes obvious to all those people that you are growing a new life right in front of them. To your wish to continue working there are multiple cultural and institutional responses that overlap with your desire to show that you can do it “without an effort.” You then expend all your energy in this attempt to seem “effortless.”

To the pornographic exposure that the social system subjects you to, in multiple and subtle forms, you try to respond with a newly developed nonchalant-ism that results in millions of micro-anxieties that now populate your mind. The reason?

Your performance *should* be affected. As a women in the arts, everything counts — your smaller size, your origin, your pregnancy.

All can be crucial factors in making you noncrucial. You continuously analyze your performance and wonder if others are truly aware of your value. When you were younger, it could have been because you were hypercritical. Later on, because you were not mainstream enough. Then the hormones. Subsequently, the child, the childcare, the balancing act with your job. And, finally, the third ring: your age, your state of decay, the fact that your place is, in any case, elsewhere.

Yes. The third ring, darker and thicker than the second, which is absolutely exposed to the scientific body of the art world, is menopause. On the one hand, media and society address the many problems facing a young body: aging and, of course, weight gain. On the other hand, the media's incredible ongoing effort to "demythologize" menopause has caused a certain group of women to be more exposed than ever before. Certainly it is important to address all these subjects, to allow all genders within the social sphere to address the multiple transformations that affect our lives. And yet, I feel that, once again, the intention to help us cope with certain issues that "we may be afraid to address" has created a meta-mouth that addresses them in ways that scare the shit out of humanity.

I was recently part of an event in which women my age were in the majority, and I couldn't help but notice that they were remarkably fit. And I thought: are they reading these friendly articles that anticipate their hormonal debacles? This month I counted fifteen articles in my Twitter feed about weight gain due to hormonal changes; eight addressing mood change; nine discussing insomnia and menopause; and at least five talking about urinary incontinence.

It makes me wonder if I can ever be invited again to a project interview or a life-changing event with all these eventualities being aired publicly. Is this communal review and presentation of certain gender-specific realities really necessary? Is it possible to trust and believe in and truly and sincerely desire our company after all this hormonal outing?

Perhaps I missed it, but as yet I've not see any symmetrical efforts to demythologize testosterone deficiency or the progressive loss of libido, or erectile dysfunction, middle-age weight gain, and hair loss... In order words, I am convinced that this ever-growing hormonal empowerment is working, once again, against an understanding of all genders. There are hormonal hierarchies in the arts. My advice: we need to opt out of this brutal hormonal determinism and allow individuals to decide — and work toward — how their hormones are to perform for them.

The Doctor by Chus Martínez

flash---art.com/2022/04/auditions-advice-the-doctor

By Chus Martínez

28. April 2022

A Monthly Column on The Art of Giving Unrequested Guidance.

When I was in my twenties, my “woman’s doctor” retired and I was assigned to a recently graduated doctor only a few years older than me. Seeing him, my surprise was evident, so he said, “Sit down and tell me your fears, instead of looking at me as if I cannot fix them!” I told him that my biggest fear was not to be able to work in a field I am passionate about. “Take your clothes off. I totally understand you. I always wanted to be a gynecologist — I had no other dream.” We saw each other a lot, since I am a complete and total hypochondriac, and he assuaged my fears and enabled me to regain my senses after a short checkup. Once, I came to his office for one of my micro-checkups and he noticed I was infuriated. “What’s the matter?” “The matter? I asked a male friend for a few restaurant recommendations for a friend, and he blandly replied, ‘I don’t go out much these days.’ Just avoiding helping! I sent the same message to a female friend living in the same city and I got an extensive list!” While examining my body he said, “Well, as a man, I would have given you the same evasive answer. Of course, if you were to ask me as a doctor, I would help you.” I did not know what he was talking about. You open your mail, or today, your chat apps, and a very close friend asks you for a micro-favor and you don’t even try to help, to please me, not even a single bit? I’ve encountered this situation so many times, enough to really be able to state that, yes, there is a gender gap in relationship to certain issues, like helping a friend and sharing certain information. I am saying this not to criticize those who do not share, but to analyze how some people are educated toward helping and others toward being professional — as my doctor noted.

I soon understood that my skills as a professional woman would never be perceived in the way that I wanted. When I was younger, I quickly had the sense that I was not behaving appropriately. Too soon, in listening to a scenario or a problem related to work, I would jump in with ideas on how to fix it. Contacts, proposals, ways of doing things that might help the person in front of me. However, far from being generous, this rushing-to-assist style was the result of structural anxiety. I was helping but also telling the world that I was able, a good asset, a great worker, someone with know-how, ready to fix things. If someone asked me for contacts I

readily gave them. And yet I felt a bit instrumentalized and often thought, try to get emails and phone numbers from a male director...

I completely saw the difficult role of a woman, small, with a strong accent when speaking English, wanting to come across as “admirable.” Truly: who would like to become me? Or give me the opportunity to run big things? This was and is a problem I share with many, since the art world is conservative by practice, and exclusion is part of its colonial DNA. It only acts when it must; otherwise it preserves customs and old, mainstream ideas of prestige as it preserves artworks and collections. How to overcome then the problem of authority and its symbolic attachment to practices and values I don’t share but that are still at work?

I shared this with my doctor. And he said, “I get your point. You need to become a doctor.” By that he meant to actively be able to read symptoms, diagnose, and be ready to give guidance that equally serves the body and the mind. He meant, one needs to train. He was aware that I couldn’t attend medical school, but that I could learn certain basic principles on how to listen attentively to what a body says and to what a person says. These two very important elements are normally not synchronized.

While the body suffers easily and creates its own signaling system, the mind tries to cover up pain with wishful thinking or distractions.

He proved his point by saying that doctors love to watch medical series, especially those with a forensic element. He said, medically and socially speaking, television shows are useless, but, funnily, they dramatize and “document” the immense importance of deeply observing the body. Doctors are there, he very often repeated to me, not because they know more — though of course they do — but also because we are unable to help ourselves alone.

By opening our senses to the pain of others we create a fundamental mutuality that bonds us together. It demands a practice, the exercise of continuously observing but also reading. And it was at that moment that I started to teach myself about food, cooking techniques, and remedies as a daily thing. I understood that while Western culture situated me low in the pyramid of importance and gave me the role, as a woman, of servicing the community, I could aspire to

become a caretaker and skip the frustration and powerlessness I linked to mainstream Western cultural framing.

Pau, my very, very dear doctor friend, died in his office four years ago, in a second. He departed, leaving us orphans of the best healer and caretaker that I ever met. I still talk to him every day. Without him, my own hypochondriac mind would not had resisted the collective burden that Covid imposed upon a community of brilliant young artists and their teachers — our Institute — in experiencing the impossibility of going on with their lives. Gracias Pau.

Unrequested Advice by Chus Martínez

flash---art.com/2022/03/audacious-advice

By Chus Martínez

22. März 2022

A Monthly Column on The Art of Giving Unrequested Guidance.

Now that I've turned fifty, it feels more legitimate to share with you a new series on the nature of advice. I am aware that being a middle-aged curator has many limitations, but one of the potentials is sharing with others and trying to be of use. These words come from a person who actively blocked all forms of advice when young, and yet, consequently, I probably followed it more than anyone. Coming from a radically uneducated and therefore nonacademic context, my teachers, particularly one who became my doctoral adviser, took upon themselves the task of guiding me. I still remember much of my adviser's advice.

“When writing on a given subject matter, try to gently acclimate the reader. Imagine she arrived a little late to a dinner and does not know the whereabouts of the subject matter. Then, she encounters a group friendly enough to explain the details. One by one they will introduce to her the questions and the terminology, so that she will be immediately familiar with the terms and also how everyone uses them, so that she can imagine what it is possible to do with them.”

I knew, then, that in my paper I had jumped directly into the subject, presenting my position as if I were trying to win a trial and leaving the reader half informed about her chances. But instead of thanking my teacher for the advice, I would say, “What do you know? Can one not reinvent the way papers are written?” He often sat down with me when I was deciding what seminars to take, and actively asked me to explain my choices. I would recite an eternally long list of seminars dealing with very similar subjects, and he would smile and say, “It is great to be interested in chocolate, but make sure you know something about cakes, the price of ingredients, and the potential allergies they cause. Don't only go for things you like. Train your tolerance and patience by listening to things you do not feel any affection for.” And again I would reward him with a beautiful, “What do you know about me?!”

This led to me secretly doing as he said, but trying to hide it so he wouldn't find out. Without a doubt he was — and is — an incredible adviser, one that also took no advice from his own teachers and suffered greatly from his mistakes. So, as Yoko Ono advised, he learned from his pain. He swallowed his pride and began relentlessly advising students like me.

Of course, advice is a fishy substance. Grand scenarios in which gender, age, class, background, and power relations play a part generally do not favor the advised. But exactly because of this, we may be presented with a very interesting and important set of options and possibilities:

Can we take advice from those we do not even like? Is it possible that someone with a radically different, even opposing background can give us useful advice? Is trust the only ground upon which to generously listen to what others have to say? Should the adviser have experience themselves in similar situations in order to be able to give advice?

These are very complex questions. One of my reasons for starting this series is because I couldn't become a formal advisor — and make a living from it — and so I am bound to eternal and gracious forms of informal advisory duties. Ever since I entered the art world I've dreamt of advisory boards, advisory committees, advisory groups. I really thought — and I still think — I could help build incredible collections full of works with soul, with ambitions toward the values of life, with incredible beauty, with very diverse ways of understanding artistic languages... I could advise on the need to work more closely with children, to integrate artists in residence in different infrastructures and also research and scientific contexts. I could advise on communication, on the importance of word choice, the need to be humble, direct, diverse in telling. I could also advise on the need to embrace technology, to try to think of those using it not as “media” artists but as artists exploring and developing essential and organic parts of our experience. I could competently give advice on reading contracts, on administrative concerns and their simplification. I could advise on career choices based on happiness, real conditions, age, expectations, and gender... Am I arrogant for saying so? Not at all.

An adviser brings a certain amount of experience, and should have a capacity for seeing the question, the task, or the problem from the point of view of those requesting the advice. I can do this. Why then was I unable to end up on all those committees and boards and think tanks? I sadly but very realistically realized that being small and a woman is not how certain groups interested in seeking advice wish to see their adviser.

During one very crucial, very big conflict that I had the “honor” of surviving in New York, a very, very famous adviser told me: “You are extremely petite to be in my shoes, but wait until you've aged.” And this is exactly what I expect. I expect the world to understand that

every year counts in my favor, and that I am ready to become an adviser and I am starting here with you.