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Palas



Leverage

## Interview with Pedro Reyes

by Carolee Thea

In producing a body of work, the methods employed by an artist are often made up of intricate and personal methodologies and associations that may confound the way a viewer assimilates knowledge. Pedro Reyes, curator, architect and artist, employs simple means, objects and casual scenarios, blending the realms of utopia, magic, function, individual fantasies and collective aspirations. His works, often emerging from existing forms, are reordered into meaningful participations and social renewals. Aligned with the theories of Nicolas Bourriaud, he believes, "The role of an artwork is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and to produce models of action within the existing reality, whatever the scale". Trained as an architect, Reyes work is, conceptually based and visually inconsistent. His project *Palas Por Pistolas* presented at the Storefront for Architecture in NYC in October 2007 inspired this interview and is the first among four projects discussed here.

PR: I was invited to do *Palas Por Pistolas* for The Botanical Garden in Culiacán, a city in northern Mexico with the reputation as the drug trading capital of Mexico. The Gardens are beautiful and bucolic, considered to have the best collection of tropical plants in America but outside its walls, violence prevails. With my project I try to bridge both worlds. The initial step was a campaign organized by the city government to collect weapons and to melt the metal guns to form them into shovels that would be later used to plant trees in the Botanical Garden. It's like a transmutation of a metal motivated by the social design embedded in the process of removing them from circulation; agents of death turned into agents of life. Actually we might save a few lives, but the real purpose of the piece is to add a story to the world, so in other cities they will say, ?In Culiacán they did that . . . ?

CT: How did this project come about?

PR: I was invited by the curator Partick Charpenel. I quickly understood that, Culiacan is like a gun slinging town in an American western movie. In my research, many people with whom I spoke, knew of someone in theirs or another family who had been shot. My ensuing deliberations included the guns, the garden to produce a social metamorphosis

CT: Instead of a traditional approach of making sculpture for a specific site, yours was a negotiation with both environments and more. You seized upon the opportunity to collaborate with the institution to transform its surroundings. This is a very different approach than in the 60's and 70's where artists used symbolic means to expose the inequities in society and the undemocratic nature of the Institution. Working against the institutions, enlisting their help was often, not an option.

PR: The point you make is very interesting. Often the idea of resisting the institution is a bit like renouncing your responsibility because the people working within the institutions are reachable for dialogue and furthermore, they're like the wheels that can be called into the project. So, for me, the idea of going against the institution is childish.

CT: We were idealistic -- foolhardy, maybe but it was after all the times. Yet unlike the times, the works were not violent, but were often symbolic instigators for renewal.

PR: I'm not necessarily against it-- voices of dissent are critical tools that might lead to resistance movements. On the other hand, I think there are few initiatives where you're willing to do the kind of slow work of trying to change things from inside.

CT: What was the apparatus of the community that made *Palas Por Pistolas* possible?

PR: In this case the project involved working with the state authorities, with private investors

and with the military. Some of the private money came from a collector who owns a chain of supermarkets. Agustin Coppel. He is also a visionary. A mechanism was devised so that if someone gave up a weapon, they would receive a dollar amount in food coupons. For example, if you gave up a weapon worth five hundred dollars, you would get coupons equivalent to the worth of the weapon; an AK-47 or other high-powered arms were most highly paid.

CT: Was this the axiom you presented to your funders?

PR: Yes. They loved it. This is their city and they're committed to improve the quality of life. For the gun owners, the incentive was economic, activating a mechanism within their family where, for instance, the wife or mother would say, "I'd like a fridge, a new fridge, we need a new fridge so why don't we give up that weapon stashed in the closet," or something like that. But the operation had to be carried out by qualified people who, in this case, were the military because handling the weapons can only be done by them.

CT: A lot of ironies here! It's a kind of a spiritual barter, a finite fractional equation that is collectively solved.

PR: Yes. The same amount of arms destroyed, are the equivalent to the amount of shovels that were made and the same amount of trees that were planted. The management of the process also involved fifteen hundred twenty seven persons who were willing to plant one tree each. It ends up as a very collaborative project where the piece will be completed only when we end the process of the plantings. I liked having this kind of holistic approach to solve a social problem.

CT: Guttari talks about art not purely as agency for communication but as a catalyst for change with the potential for collective and social reinvention.

PR: Yes. I know Guttari's work quite well.

CT: Other projects or systems you devise do not seem obvious in their social beneficence. In your show *ad usum*, to be used, at CARPENTER CENTER'S SERT GALLERY AT HARVARD, you presented a collection of open systems where many of the pieces required viewer participation or intervention. You said that you based the exhibit's title on your own curiosity about the distinction between what is useable and what is useful. In your collection of objects here, many are open systems where the viewer not only looks at the object but is encouraged to participate in order for the aesthetic experience to be complete. One object, a see-saw, was a lure for visitors to climb on and play. Consequently, one person was thrown from his perch when his seat suddenly detached from the mechanism. How does this elucidate your theory?

PR: The artist is in a privileged non-alienated position to carve out a work in which we are mentally or spiritually involved, where our intelligence or ideas are taken seriously and observers are especially attentive to whatever we put across. This can involve resources and institutions and further, it leads to the question, can one person change anything? I definitely believe that one individual can -- and it doesn't have to be a kind of action.

CT: ? do you mean -- by using a symbol?

PR: A symbol can have some real course. I think that at a certain moment each of us has to find a space where our action can become significantly effective. More interesting is finding an opportunity to activate group engagements; inviting people to elect a new policy within your organization, for example. If you happen to do that with a powerful tool that matches the idea and has an art value, that's where the fun begins.

That they are ?to be used? doesn't mean that they are useful; I'm influenced by game theory and usefulness varies with each context. It could be said that games are a waste of time because they don't actually produce or deliver a value, but actually their aim is to introduce reflexivity. The see saw, for one, has this idea of a symmetric relationship when one player equals in power to a group of nine or whatever number -- and it absolutely has many ways for interpretation. That's one of the qualities, that fact that you don't have a singular interpretation, but you can have an open number of interpretations. So at first, when I did that piece, I was thinking of oppressor against the oppressed, like a diagram of the inequities or

hierarchies present in all human organizations.

CT: Was it that you wanted to make tangible that one person has the equivalent power to a group of ten or something like that?

PR: I'm trying to see the problems that are disguised as opportunities and I believe there must be a positive interpretation for this. I started thinking it was a single player who was taking advantage of the group ? but really, in order to propel them into a positive direction. So I understood this as an opportunity? like when one person says, okay, I'm going to take the assignment or the task of changing this within my group and if every person were to change something. Let's say that twenty people live in a building and one person says, I'm go to help all of you take care of the electricity, or whatever.

CT: It's a way to see an action differently and so was, the see- saw accident a catalyst for this impromptu happening?

PR: Well, it is just a symbol, it doesn't have a real activity, but the idea is to experience this physically. Like, when you enter the exhibition space, you need to call in another person in the exhibition space to work with you on the seesaw. It's an example of a spontaneous activity.

CT: Joseph Beuys' works involve symbols that contain a mixture of the spiritual and playful. Has he been an influence for you?

PR: Yes, tremendously -- I've been interested in him since I was a teenager, reading every interview I could find.

CT: Did you ever think of him as a charlatan?

PR: Well, I think that's an important signification because certain magicians will cure you, not be performing surgery -- but by tapping into your strong faith that will lead to a psyche-change and that will lead to healing. It's an interesting example of a psychological process where the charlatan is the means for a person to lie to himself. Like a sacred lie, it's a program to change your mindset. A ritual has that has the power to externalize ? to give plasticity to an intention that would otherwise be difficult to implement. Today magicians are like neuroscientists, they're people in whom we put our faith and, art can work at that unconscious level.

CT: Speaking of magician, doctor or charlatan brings to mind Lewis Hyde's book, *Trickster Makes This World; Mischief, Myth and Art*. (North Point Press, 1998) In it he compares the artist's role to that of the trickster, the coyote or legendary boundary-crosser. The trickster/artist shifts the joints or workings of a society and may play a critical role in keeping those joints flexible, receptive to change, and able to bridge differences. Mediating or translating between worlds, artists can connect audiences and communities, suggests Hyde.

Much of your work is inspired by or contains elements that are architectural. *Capula XVI (obolo a)*, *Capula XVII (obolo b)*, two giant vinyl basketlike structures and the, *Evolving City Wall Mural* was executed for the Seattle Art Museum's Olympic Sculpture Park that opened in January 2007. The capulas are part of an ongoing series you installed around the world. Consistent with your desire to include communities, these vinyl sculptures, capulas, were woven by Mexican craftspeople and translate local basketry techniques into an architectural scale. Seen within the light filled space, it appeared that their solid geometry became flattened and optical.

PR: In the Pavilion itself, I also created a mural where visitors could interact and respond to changing visual stimuli. More than a painting, it's sort of a collage made of three hundred independent events, characters, and flat silhouettes -- shapes that can be moved around every couple days. It's an environment you can enter and in which you can construct a different experience that changes your psychodynamic.

With the capulas, I wanted to make something round, translucent, movable -- an environment you enter and construct an experience that changes your psychodynamic. The weavers who worked on the capulas, were excited and encouraged to make something that didn't exist in the world yet.

CT: In creating new forms, your architectural background often comes into play.

PR: I definitely nurture myself from architecture, I study it and I want to make actual buildings that do not exist in the world.

CT: *La Torre de los Vientos*, an early project that you executed in your city was inspired by architecture. It was also a catalyst for change. You've said of the structure; "it looks like a bunker, a cenotaph, a missile, silo, a chimney, a granary, a lighthouse, an oven, a tower, a mosque, an observatory, a water tank, a ziggurat."

PR: This tower was originally constructed in 1968 and had been abandoned in the middle of the highway for 25 years. I lived south of the city and would see this conical structure all the time. However, it wasn't until I broke the lock did I see what an extraordinary and dramatic space it was. I squatted in it as a studio and began to develop projects. From 1996-2002 it became an art laboratory where I invited artists to submit proposals that subsequently arose autonomously?they fed off the futuristic yet biblical-like entity, giving forth artistic processes never imagined before, or even after. These were always low budget entities with funds coming through some state grants plus, the artists themselves contributed. In the 90's, this was an important development in that many of us were running independent spaces. It was also important to cultivate a work whose primary audience was your immediate friends/artists. And it was also an obvious departure from the kitsch stereotypes that defined the earlier generation. It was also a move against the white cube as many of the works happened on the street. Often, you would take an artwork into a public space to test it, perhaps do some photos. Public spaces are not controlled so you may disturb someone but this is not problematic.

CT: In a sense, your projects, creating new worlds, new habitable spaces apart from ordinary ones is very much related to utopian architecture and avant-garde ideas and constructions.

PR: I think we need other topias to play with. We should talk about psycho topia, a mental place, neo topia, a new place; proto topia, almost a place, eco topia, a sustainable place, hypno topia, the place of our dreams, teo topia, a sacred place, infra topia, less than a place, and so on.

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