

Welcome!

A Conversation with Sol Calero about Tropical Hospitality, Latin American Legacy, and the Potential of the Exotic

A Conversation between Sol Calero, Emanuele Guidi, and Lorenzo Sandoval

Emanuele Guidi: As you know, we wanted to meet you because of our ongoing research dubbed Spaces of Anticipation, which investigates artistic, curatorial, and institutional practices that operate at the intersection between production/arrangement of space and production/circulation of knowledge, a relationship that implies the forever-challenging notions of “participation” and “public.” In these terms, your practice is very relevant for the way you question the “function” of certain institutions/art-spaces you have been working with, very often starting from a very spatial and aesthetic perspective to design situations that facilitate encounters between “agents” of different kinds. This approach of drafting conditions for a co-habitation represents one of the central aspects in the way we understand “anticipation”; a gesture of care, taken ahead of time, with all the risks it can imply.

Lorenzo Sandoval: In that sense, we wanted to talk with you about a main question in your work related with our research on anticipation: the way you work architectonically providing welcoming spaces through generous strategies. You combine the artist approach on the one hand, with the practice of curating, and an active intervention on architecture on the other, as one can see in many of your projects and in the project space you run together with Christopher Kline, Kinderhook & Caracas. Also, this space is placed in your own home: the domestic space as a model for institutional practice emerges from there, creating a subtle line with the practice of welcoming, that is transversal in most of your projects.

Sol Calero: Terms like “public” and “domestic,” “welcoming” and “inclusivity” are central ideas both in my practice and in our project space. In general, it has

always been very important for me to work in a collective way. When it comes to the domestic and welcoming aspects of my work, it’s a very simple gesture: hospitality is an essential part of the culture I come from, and I create welcoming spaces that involve social interaction and exchange. I’ve been very inspired by the tradition of Latin American artists from the ’60s and ’70s, who worked with politicized ideas, and activism together with art. And also with what are the limits between low and high art, between design and craftwork, as well what is considered to be art and what is not.

LS: At some point you were even doing wearable pieces.

SC: Yes, it’s true. And as you can see, I still keep my interest in design, furniture, and crafts as essential elements of my projects and installations because of their domestic and functional aspects. Design is part of our daily life, we are surrounded by objects, they are both vehicles of tradition and defining of the way we live. This also became part of the conceptual structure in my work alongside the interest in engaging with people.

LS: This question of the engagement functions clearly as curatorship in your case. When you have been curating inside of your installations, many times you included artists from Venezuela and Latin America, and also close friends.

SC: The curatorial aspect has a lot to do with the layered nature of my work. On one level, the aesthetic exploration talks about a Western perspective on Latin American cultures: I started working with a bright, colorful palette, and referencing a tradition that hasn’t been submitted to the discourse of Art History. Below,



Sol Calero, *Casa de Cambio*, 2016. Art Basel Statements, Basel. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist and Laura Bartlett Gallery, London. Photo by Andrea Rossati.

there are many deeper levels that address the political implications of that. This is reinforced by the access to other voices, other artists' works dealing with issues of identity, racism, or the consequences of colonialism in today's globalized world, which are also part of my work because I have experienced them in the past, as a citizen and as a member of the contemporary art world.

Now that I have a platform of visibility after playing within the rules and conventions that the art world imposes, including other artists' voices is a way for me to make artwork more inclusive and complex, instead of perpetuating a system that I have experienced as classist and exclusive.

LS: Your projects are extremely visual. At the same time you challenge the hegemony of sight by incorporating all the other senses, like for instance with the inclusion of plants and fruits, which underlines the aspects of your installations that deal with the exotic. Indeed, the beginnings of cultural collections in Europe in the modern period started

with practices of extraction from Latin America and Africa, following the same general logic that characterized colonialism. These early collections built the idea of the exotic itself. This extraction activity happened as well in many avant-garde movements. The challenge of the construction of the exotic is a central subject in your practice. You are approaching this idea generating a critical discussion on where it comes from. What place does that tradition have in the background of your practice?

SC: The way I started working with the idea of the "exotic" came from the vision of the "other" towards what is Latin American art. Because one still has the idea of Latin America like this pool where everything is the same, when every culture and country is actually very different. We have the same perception of Africa, for example, and we often still encounter ideas like "the new African art," the new "Latin American art." But the big question for me was: "What is Latin American art?" because after living and studying in Europe for a long time, I became worried about having the same perception about Latin America. This is why I



Sol Calero, *Benvencidos a Nuevo Esfido*, 2014. Installation view. Laura Bartlett Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Laura Bartlett Gallery, London. Photo by Andy Kate.

started from zero, and I decided to educate myself about this subject and about my own identity. I started learning about Latin American art and I found many interesting threads that guided me towards the projects I've been doing. And in relation to what you mentioned about the cultural collections from Europe, I found very interesting how there was this dynamic during Modernism where artists from Latin America and Europe were constantly exchanging cultural ideas, which became the references to their work. For example, the references to pre-Columbian art from European artists, like the Albers did. One will encounter Anni Albers' work when studying the Bauhaus school. But it was later when I started my research on Latin American art that I found out that Anni and her husband Josef Albers had an extensive collection of pre-Columbian objects that helped them explore the relationships between cultures and that became very important for the development of their work. When Anni published her book *On Weaving* in 1965, she dedicated it and paid tribute to "my great teachers, the weavers of ancient Peru."

EG: I'd like to talk to the spaces you create, from the point of view of architecture. Coming from painting, textiles, and objects, you decided to act clearly at the level of architecture and even at the level of the institution-making, founding a space such as Kinderhook and Caracas, as we already mentioned. It is a change of scale, and it expresses a clear intention of becoming more inclusive to design a larger "picture" and to make it accessible... can you speak about this relationship between architecture and exhibition-making?

SC: Yes, this relation gradually grew on me from running a project space, where we had to think of ways of displaying things, ideas, or structures. Since our space is so small, we started pushing the artists to work on their concepts and translating them to the whole space with immersive installations. Showing small objects didn't make much sense, so we were producing architecture for showcasing an idea. Architecture became a conceptual aspect of the work. When I start my projects, I often do this exercise and think about what could be a social space that I can recreate in the exhibition in order for something to happen, and that's when you see the hair salon (*Benvencidos a Nuevo Esfido*, Laura Bartlett Gallery, London, 2014), *The Inter-net Café* (Frieze Art Fair, 2014), the school (*La Escuela del Sur*, Studio Voltaire, London, 2015), the currency exchange bureau (*Casa de Cambio*, Art Basel, 2016), the sauna (*La Sauna Callejera*, Kunsthaus Bregenz, 2016), etc. I started referencing social places, and I worked from this pre-existing form to develop the show.

I also became more and more interested in Caribbean architecture, because in that kind of construction one sees a very beautiful overlap of cultures—the colonial and Spanish architecture mixed with the colors of the Caribbean.

LS: For instance, we could think of the project *Inside The Archive of Oswaldo Lares: Music Across Venezuela, 1969-1989*, a collaboration between Guillermo Lares and Laura Jordan with Kinderhook & Caracas, for which you built a piece of architecture to host their father's collection of music and sound recordings he had made across Venezuela. It connects very well with *Salsa or La Escuela Del Sur*.

EG: All your projects articulate in different ways your interest in the ideas of the exotic and hospi-

tality. And here, your approach to architecture clearly emerges; they take place in three completely different kinds of spaces (your own project room, a contemporary art institution, and a dance school), and your intervention is always meant to transform the atmosphere by acting on the design or even by searching for diverse audiences.

SC: The archive is one of my favorite projects. It was very collaborative in many ways, and this is a good example of how we combined our way of working with Kinderhook & Caracas with the visual identity of my work. We needed to find the best way to present an archive that was easy to access for the public and that could visually represent the identity of the archive itself. This is why we selected my aesthetics mixed with Guillermo's and Laura's ideas. Creating a tropical patio would immediately transport you to the archive.

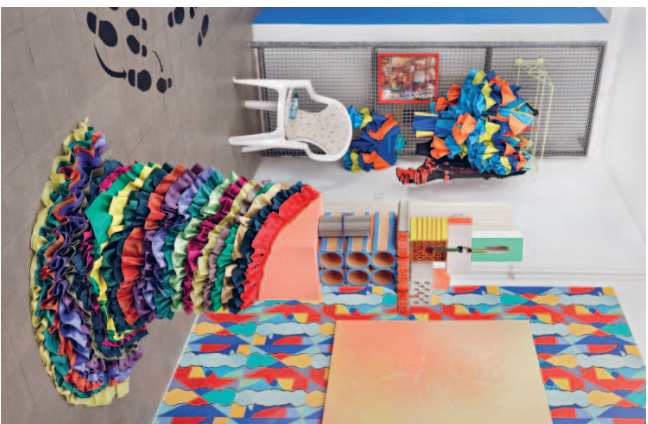
Oswaldo is a Venezuelan architect who dedicated his life to trying to collect the musical identity of Venezuela. He spent decades documenting different forms of musical expression across the country, creating one of the most complete music and folk archives of Venezuela. He is one of the only people in Venezuela who did this kind of research, which is really amazing because he was thinking of the importance for the future generations to know how the country used to be. Actually, some of these traditions or instruments, for example, don't exist anymore, which is very sad. In 1974, he founded a group called *Convenenzuela* to spread the music and traditional and popular dances of the country. Among other offerings, his most important is perhaps the donation of all the original audio recordings done between 1969 and 1977, including all of this radio programs, to The National Library in Caracas. In 2002, he started a foundation called *Fundadora* to begin the activity of digitizing this material.

In the show we had a few tablets were you could listen to the music and sound archive by periods, and we displayed a wallpaper designed and printed with all the covers of each record, together with photos and images from the archive collection.

LS: This is very interesting if one is thinking in terms of politics of the archive and politics of archival heritage: who has access to heritage, what is a public good, and who produces the narrative of the archive through the different techniques of presentation.



Sol Calero, *Sadea*, 2014, Installation view, Gilmeier Reeh, Berlin. Courtesy of the artist and Laura Bartlett Gallery, London. Photo by Hans-Georg Gaidl



Sol Calero, *Sadea*, 2014, Installation view, Gilmeier Reeh, Berlin. Courtesy of the artist and Laura Bartlett Gallery, London. Photo by Hans-Georg Gaidl

SC: Yes, you are right. It's very interesting and a very difficult job. But one thing that I would like to add is that even though it was a lot of work, the archive project opened a new vision for our space. We had that exhibition running for three months and had a great response from the public. We thought we really wanted



Sol Calero, *La escalera del Sur*, 2015, Installation view, Studio Voltaire, London. Courtesy of the artist and Laura Bartlett Gallery, London. Photo by Andy Keate

to start working more in this way and to build projects not necessarily related to contemporary art. It achieved another type of audience; every week there were people coming, sitting down, and listening to the archive for hours while Guillermo and Laura watched the space. So, after this exhibition we wanted to start working with long-term ideas, and this how *Conglomerate* was born.

EG: And in the design of the exhibition, or through the program, did you use any form to activate, facilitate or "translate" the archive? One can say that at some point architecture is not enough anymore, and one needs to bring something else.

SC: We had a program, and we organized some parallel events and talks: a night with Venezuelan musicians, a listening session, a panel discussion, and a visit to the exhibition with Oswaldo and other guests. Another example of this, in my personal projects, is *La Escalera del Sur*, which I did at Studio Voltaire in Lon-

don. With this project, we had a program for the duration of the show. We organized a series of lectures with artists and curators on issues surrounding the cultural appropriation of Latin American art and its reception in Europe. We also had kids from the neighborhood coming two times per week after school to have painting lessons. It was really great to see the space activated during the whole duration of the show.

EG: How did you conceive the space?

SC: I went to Los Reques, a Caribbean archipelago in Venezuela, where I saw this architecture, which actually is the reference that I was using in other projects. I was in the "cathedral of Caribbean architecture," so I decided to create a space that makes you feel immediately that you are suddenly in the middle of a different place that is not London. That's also an important thing: the spatial translation. The space can take you to another part of the world—or at least the feeling of it—and create a Caribbean environment in order to



Sol Calero, *La escuela del Sur*, 2015. Installation view, Studio Voltaire, London. Courtesy of the artist and Laura Bartlett Gallery, London. Photo by Andy Keate.

learn about Latin America. That was in a sense a very simple idea, and by learning in a school, I created this program that you could learn from the perspective of a Latin American artist and British curators. So that's why I decided not only to activate it, but also to create this tool with this idea: it's just time to sit down and learn about these things.

EG: I find interesting the different ways in which your idea of painting as a “tool” is articulated. Can you speak more about that?

SC: Yes, together with the classes that the kids after school were going to learn how to paint. They were painting all the references that I had provided in the show. The paintings that they were doing were actually Caribbean beaches. In the way I work, paintings in my shows become decorative elements of the space. The idea—like in Salsa and in most of the shows I do—is that you don't know if the painting should work as a painting or if it's just decoration. In Salsa, it was even more exag-

gerated because the paintings were really over the top, and I think that people who came to the school didn't even notice that there were artworks in the space.

Formally speaking, the figurative aspect of the painting is there because I create these iconic elements to support an idea that I want to project, in a bidimensional way. I come from abstract painting, and after all, when you are in the creative process, everything is so abstract that wherever the concept of the painting comes from doesn't matter. In that point is when you are completely free, because it is about color and shape... Painting is the most amazing thing and the most difficult, too. And I feel it doesn't matter how much I develop the way I think—the way I approach art—painting is going to be getting hopefully better.

LS: One of the aspects we are addressing in *Spaces of Anticipation* deals with how to challenge history writing. In your case, one of the ways you have worked with it is through oral histories on one hand, but also music, like in the case of Salsa,



Sol Calero, *La escuela del Sur*, 2015. Installation view, Studio Voltaire, London. Courtesy of the artist and Laura Bartlett Gallery, London. Photo by Andy Keate.

which works as a historical device within the core of your research. Rewriting history not with the text itself, but with the movements of the body and the strata of the music. In your project *Salsa*, as well as in the archive we have already spoken about, music plays a key role.

SC: With this project, the idea was to start a project aside of the exhibition space. I was in my studio listening to a song of Rubén Blades—who I've danced and listened to since I was a kid—and I realized that the lyrics are very sad, talking about the situation of the Latin immigrants in New York. Rubén Blades invented the term in New York City, together with Fania All Stars. They were mixing mixed mambo, cha-cha-chá, and different rhythms from Latin American immigrants who had moved to the USA to have a better life. Music was so important for the identity of the whole Latin community abroad, in the sense of how one creates something that is done outside of the place of origin. Before Rubén Blades joined Fania, his songs were about folklore. Later, he started addressing social issues in his lyrics, which was very important because then one could reach people. That's the clue for my work: through a welcoming party sound, one can tell people about very serious things. That's what I want to do when I work in this way.

There is so little that has been written from the perspective of the artist in Latin America. When information is limited, you have to look towards other points of reference, like music, which is a very accessible subject in culture in general.

EG: Music encapsulates the coming together of high and low culture. Coming back to Salsa, the main space where it was taking place was...

SC: A Salsa school run by German instructors. In that sense, the project was also reflecting on how Latino culture is approached from the eye of a German person—or just another culture. And not necessarily from a negative position: people who are fascinated by the other culture and start acting alike, translating elements from it: the clichés of one culture, absorbed by another culture, interiorized and re-enacted. That's quite something.

LS: Performing the Latin, so to say. For instance, looking at the tension between avant-garde and popular culture. Thinking of some of your sources, it made me think of process of “autoconstruction” in different parts of Latin America, which is present in your installations as well.

SC: That's very interesting, because it's very problematic. When you are working with identities, there are all these aspects that fall onto a darker side. I'm always trying not to get there. For me, the idea of working together still remains the most effective. If I'm going to work with a Salsa school in Germany and be critical about it, I have to work side by side with them in all honesty. In fact, there was a Salsa class on the opening night, and I was very surprised at how all these people from the art scene who attended couldn't make it through the entry—they were completely afraid of the whole theme.

This goes to show that the very idea of inclusivity and the elements that I use and explore in my work are actually uncomfortable for people to be confronted with, in the conventions of the contemporary art world. The welcoming, festive appearance of my work is both a bridge for access, and a trigger for these kinds of reactions and relationships to take place. The point is precisely how that unveils constructions of class, identity, and culture.

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Notes

1 Anni Albers, *On Weaving* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

Sol Calero was born in Caracas, Venezuela in 1982. She lives and works in Berlin, where she runs a project space alongside Christopher Kline, entitled Kinderhook & Caracas after their respective hometowns, and she is a member of the ongoing collaborative project Conglomerate TV. Calero studied at Universidad Complutense de Madrid and Universidad de La Laguna, Tenerife. She has been nominated for the Preis der Nationalgalerie in association with Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin, and shortlisted for the Future Generation Art Prize. Her recent work has been included in the Folkestone Triennial, UK, and shown in solo exhibitions at Kunsthaus Bregenz, Austria; Kunstpalais Erlangen, Erlangen; Dortmunder Kunstverein, Dortmund; Studio Voltaire, London; David Dale Gallery, Glasgow; SALTS, Basel; Frieze London; Laura Bartlett Gallery, London; Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf; Galmeyer Rech, Berlin; and The Taut And Tame at Luttgenmeijer, Berlin. Sol Calero's work draws on the complex political and social histories behind the construction of Latin identity. The ambivalence that allows her work to approach highly problematic issues with a semblance of frivolity is exemplary of the way Calero works through, rather than against, the coded cultural vocabulary of the cliché.

Emanuele Guidi is a writer, curator and, since 2013, artistic director of ar/ge kunst, Kunstverein of Bolzano, where he carries on a program of productions exploring the reciprocal relationship between society and the expanded field of visual arts. His practice unfolds around exhibition-making and its slippages into other forms and formats of knowledge production and circulation (for more information: www.argekunst.it). Further recent exhibitions include *The Variational Status – Riccardo Giacconi* (FRAC Champagne-Ardenne, Reims, 2017); *Freizeyt, Ingrid Hora* (DAZ, Deutsches Architekturmuseum, Berlin 2015–16); Edited publications include: *The Variational Status*, with R. Giacconi (Milan: Humboldt Books, 2017); *Negus*, with Invernornuto (Milan: Humboldt Books, 2014); *Rehearsing Collectivity – Choreography Beyond Dance* (Berlin: Argobooks, 2012) (with E. Basteri, E. Galleria E. Astuni, 2012); *Urban Makers, Parallel Narratives of Grassroots Practices and Tensions*, (Berlin: bbooks, 2008). His texts and interviews have been published in various magazines and artists' publications.

Lorenzo Sandoval works at the intersection of artistic practice, curatorial processes, and spatial design. He holds a B.F.A and has a Masters in Photography, Art and Technology from the UPV (Valencia, Spain). He has exhibited in many venues internationally as well as attending international residencies in Denmark, Spain, Germany, Portugal, and Kenya. He received curatorial prizes such as Inéditos 2011, the Can Felipa Curatorial Prize, and the Nogueras Blanchard Curatorial Challenge 2012. *Deep Surface* at L'Atelier-ksr and *Your Skin Is a Frozen Wave* at BDP Bür were his most recent solo shows in Berlin in 2016. He recently won the art prize "Generación 2017" presented in La Casa Encendida (Madrid) in 2017 and the production residency grant "V. Beca DKV- Alvarez Margatide," which made possible his last solo show "Shadow Writing (Algorithm /Quipu)." He works on a regular basis with Savvy Contemporary, District Berlin, and Archive Kabinett as a spatial designer. Since 2015, he has been running the fictional institution "The Institute for Endotic Research" dealing with topics regarding reproductive labor. His recent research deals with computation and domesticity. He is preparing a project for Nottingham Contemporary related to the history of lace production, and a collaboration with Bisagra in Lima, Perú about Andean textiles and the technology of the Quipu-
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