



Perspective, Opinion, and Commentary

Ritual Curating: Deep Hanging Out and Exhibition Making

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Abstract: In this interview with curator David Ayala-Alfonso, which was conducted on August 23, 2023, Daniel Tucker inquires into Ayala-Alfonso's recent curatorial projects in Philadelphia, Mexico City, and Bogota and the traveling exhibition *Never Spoken Again*.

Keywords: Curatorial Practice, Ritual, Latin America

Introduction

In this live interview, conducted on August 23, 2023, I spoke with curator David Ayala-Alfonso about his practice today in Mexico City and its origins in Bogota. David and I met ten years ago in Chicago where he was studying on a Fulbright and coming off of an intense period of collaboration with Grupo 0,29 in Colombia. We reconnected in Philadelphia where he recently presented *Where You Left Off* in collaboration with the artist-run gallery Tiger Strikes Asteroid's artist network and his co-curator Tally de Orellana, which will have its next iteration in Mexico City. In 2020, he collaboratively launched Cuarentena Baking (Quarantine Baking), a bakery in Mexico City that continues today, and currently, his curatorial project *Never Spoken Again* is produced by Independent Curators International and is touring different museums in the US between 2020 to 2025.

Interview

Daniel Tucker: Before we get into talking about some of your specific projects, I am wondering if you could talk about some influences or pre-histories of the work you are doing? For me, when I ask that I am thinking about subcultural activities that involved a lot of conscious construction of "scene" communities through musicians sharing unusual concert billings or zines bringing together multiple voices around thematic issues but also programming as exhibit projects in Chicago by folks like Laurie Jo Reynolds (*Ask Me!*) and Temporary Services (*Warming Center*) and then projects happening at international art

exhibits by Oreste (*Venice Biennial*) or much later folks like And And And or Ruangrupa (*Documenta 13 and 15*). Are there experiences you had as a witness or participant (close by or at a distance) with iterative and process-based curation that sparked your imagination about how the work could live in the world?

David Ayala-Alfonso: My background is as a visual artist, and I started working as part of a collective called Grupo 0,29 in Colombia, so I think many of my original inspiration comes from there. It was there where I got interested in thinking about art as a platform for a number of causes and ideas that were not necessarily just showcasing art. 0,29 formed as an impromptu reading club at a coffee shop, where we would extend the debates that were taking place in our undergraduate classes but which we felt needed to be more expansive.

In those days, we were looking for a lot at projects that were engaging with the social in a broad spectrum, but mostly, their work had a political aim. I am thinking about Colectivo de Acciones de Arte (CADA) in Chile, active during the dictatorship years; Critical Art Ensemble and their associates; and the *a.f.r.i.k.a. gruppe*. In Colombia, Colectivo Cambalache is a good example of the kind of work we were interested in—participating in the social context with artistic tools, experimenting with alternative communication practices—but always in a generous way that prioritized the context and communities over the art and the experiment.

At the time, besides public interventions and performance, we were creating meeting platforms for leaders of independent spaces in the city and developing workshops, teach-ins, publications, and residencies. Some of us were more or less involved with institutions. I enjoyed the thought of being halfway inside and outside the institution, and thinking about how the work of museums, for example, could go beyond the idea of academic art and culture to be more generous to their surrounding/host communities.

During the 2010s, I was very interested in the work of SAVVY in Berlin and also the way that Martin Grossman defined the Centro Cultural de São Paulo in a broad spectrum of culture that incorporated community projects, festivals, community fairs, etc. under his leadership. Also, I liked to think about the para-institutional models proposed by Studio REV and No Longer Empty and eventually all the events around social practice in Chicago, which I discovered when I moved to the city in 2013.

As an artist I was always thinking of ideas to create more engaging experiences with art and the conversations it nurtures, so I started to think a lot about rituals that would combine care with engagement and deep thinking but also deep hanging out. This required a designing of programs and also processes where you would go back to the work recursively and have more contact than what is typically required for putting together a show. Eventually I started organizing exhibitions for our art collective and also for the residency projects we created, so I incorporated a curatorial practice. This idea of creating rituals that would go beyond the idea of showcasing stayed with me and defined part of what I wanted to do as a curator.

Though I do most of my work today in curating, writing, and education, I still think of myself as an artist, and I believe any idea can take different forms. They can be the origin of an artwork but also of a curatorial, editorial, or educational project. I am not interested in pursuing a specialized practice, and I like to move between roles as a form of resistance to today's pressure from the markets. Coming back to the practice, the engagement with physical works is important for me because I am interested in a form of critical discourse that goes beyond the ideological critique and looks into matter in more detail, its origin and trajectories, and then sees how all the politics spring from there. Because of this, the creation process is very important for me, and I have long, repeated conversations with artists about it.

Daniel Tucker: Your most recent projects have invited participating artists to meet, collaborate, and remake work over time. Can you walk us through the process?

David Ayala-Alfonso: I think one of the ideas that defines my work is that I strive to privilege human connections over professional ones, so I try to create spaces where those relationships can be developed while professional projects unfold. I like the idea of rituals because the conversations that I have with artists and people working in the arts in general need to go beyond an exchange of information. The idea of ritual allows me to go back to ideas and develop them further while establishing more meaningful personal connections. Many of the projects I am interested in are rooted in a deep concern for a place and its culture, ecology, and politics, so the ideas are always very personal for the artists.

A good example of this is the experience of curating *Nuevos Nombres*, a program created by Banco de la República in Colombia to showcase emerging talent nationwide. I was invited to curate the 2017 version, but I felt that *Nuevos Nombres* had become a space that stopped representing a meaningful experience for young artists because most of the budget was cut due to other responsibilities the bank acquired with new collections, in particular the large modern European collection donated by Fernando Botero, which drained a lot of the resources from the exhibition programs for local emerging artists.

Because of this, the curatorial team from the bank and I decided to change the format of the exhibition from a three month showcase in one of the rooms of the art collection to a large-scale intervention project in every space of the museum complex that was not an exhibition space. This would allow us to stay open for a longer time span and play more with the format. The final form of the show consisted of three cumulative iterations where we invited eight different artists to propose an intervention for any of the five museums of the bank. The first iteration was about the architecture, the second about the collections themselves, and the third one was more open ended and was related to the place that was hosting us, the main art complex of a national bank, which owns the largest art collection of the country.

The project took over two years to complete, so we ended up doing the longest temporary exhibition that we could imagine. Every cycle allowed me an opportunity to look at what the

project was becoming and go back to the drawing table and throw new ideas, creating new iterations that would deepen the idea of intervention or perhaps that would test further the will of the institution to be open to more experimental stuff. The conceptual premises of the exhibition revolved around the life and trajectories of matter and understanding the geographical and political placement of the museums, what kind of objects and material culture they were preserving and showcasing, and what kind of language they were using to present the collection to the public.

While all of this was happening, I started throwing frequent dinner parties for the artists of the project, which eventually became full dance parties, and I extended this dynamic to include the participants of Escuela FLORA, a residence I was coordinating during the same period. This also created space for the artists to meet each other, start collaborations, and provide feedback for the project that would translate into additions, modifications, or new public programs. In general, it helped me develop more meaningful relationships with artists, and I work with some of them to this day. Also, since I started working with the service industry in 2020, I am developing a collaborative practice around cooking with chefs and friends at different venues in Mexico City, and I understand this as an extension of the idea of hospitality and being-together that is present in my curatorial practice.

Daniel Tucker: Maybe first you can clarify, does this approach to “deep hanging out” function kind of like a shared reading/reference for the artists that might work, as far as making an invisible thread for the audience to experience, some kind of coherence, or is it more of a temporary learning community of participants? Looking forward, despite them being premised on an unfolding process, do you imagine that these projects lead toward a particular kind of destination or outcome? Does this change the kind of art world you want to be part of?

David Ayala-Alfonso: I have continued to work with this idea of creating a social space around the exhibition project, and I keep creating different formats for deep hanging out and connection in my current projects. These modes of working definitely allow me to have a more cohesive conversation with the artists, which I feel transpires to the audience. The more the artists are involved in the activities surrounding the exhibition project, the more they are open to think about their works, not only in terms of the curatorial prompt, but also in relation to other artists and their work. They are also more committed to the success of the project and to continuing the intellectual conversations that started with the pretext of an exhibition.

This also extends to other participants in the project. For example, at *Never Spoken Again*, a traveling show that deals with the origin of museum and scientific collections and processes of insertion and extraction of cultural artifacts and species in colonial contexts, I introduced the possibility of having new works at each iteration. The idea is that I engage in dialogue with the curators from the institutions, so they can suggest two or three works that would create an interesting dialogue with any of the conceptual threads of the exhibition. The

objects themselves are not required to be artworks because I am interested in all kinds of collections and how an object becomes valuable for a museum. In *Never Spoken Again*, I use a stuffed parrot as a rhetorical device to talk about the notion of scientific truth. This is because part of the mythology of the show comes from a tale of Humboldt's parrot and how there are all kinds of legends around it speaking a dead language, like a gossip among scientists. At every venue, I ask the resident curators to source a new parrot, which can come from other collections or institutions but also thrift shops, eBay, or someone's personal collection, and then we engage in a conversation about the materiality of the parrot, its origin, ownership, etc. This idea of scientific truth is teased further by the curatorial text, which is also a speculative narration with blank spaces that invites the audience to imagine their own ways for completing the sentences with their own repertoire.

This experience creates more engagement from the visitors and the museum teams with *Never Spoken Again*, but it is also a learning opportunity for me as the many participants are always offering new references and ideas to nurture the next version of the exhibition and showcasing strategies or unforeseen additions to the show. I think it is a privilege to develop a project and see it through but then learn from the way others see it and try it all over again. The curators, museum staff, and people from other institutions that loan works or contribute in some way to the show become a more active and engaged audience, and the entire process of conceiving an exhibition becomes an even more collective one. Here, the idea of participation becomes quite fluid, and it definitely goes beyond thinking of participants distinctly as creators and audience.

Then, I think very intentionally; I have sought to create situations where this idea of a learning community could go further. Teaming up with curator Tally de Orellana, we conceived *Where You Left Off*, a format where artists in the US and Mexico would be paired together to collaborate over the course of two years. We would first try to curate and pair artists that would make sense together. Not because their practices were close but rather because they could teach something to one another. For example, we paired an anthropologist turned artist, who had issues articulating the ideas behind her work, with someone who has a practice strongly based in written and spoken discourse. We also had pairings where the artists did not speak a common language, so they would need to figure out their own communication system. Artists are usually quite concerned with controlling the process, and this experience means they have to surrender to the rules and prompts of the project and allow themselves to accept outcomes that do not necessarily look like "their" work. This process is also recursive; after a few months we put together a show of the processes and works that resulted from the collaboration, and a new cycle is happening at the moment, which will end in a new exhibition. Here, much of the curatorial writing is performed after each cycle is complete, as an interpretive practice that helps Tally and myself to enrich the next iteration. I am curious to see how much has changed from one show to the next one and how the first experience can stimulate the artists to experiment more in the second iteration.

In *Where You Left Off*, the artists themselves become a sort of audience, and the amazing thing is that by having multiple versions of the show they can react, transform, refine, and experiment more in the next one.

I think there is no specific outcome in the sense that this is not a fixed methodology that I would like to consolidate. Rather, it is an exploration of the possibilities of art languages and methodologies to be transformed over time. Our historical moment compels us to rethink what we do as makers—if it is relevant to continue with historical art practices or if the ideas, methods, genres of making art, showcasing art, and educating artists are still relevant today. This is a question I ask myself and one which continuously drives my research and writing, but the answer is always a debate as well as a moving target.

In a different sense, this way of working is also teasing with the willingness of the institutions to open their processes for experimentation, to resist the idea of consuming the works and ideas and then putting them aside. My intention is that in each project, every part involved creates an engagement that goes deeper than the exercise of creating art and creating a show, so the ideas that the works and the curatorial narrative are offering can become a more durable and malleable material for as many people as possible. The practice of going back to the same work or project—doing it all over again and also writing about it, creating and disseminating as much material as possible, and ruminating these ideas with the artists over dinner—is just an attempt to stay with the ideas and with the people as much as I can.

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The authors declare that generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were not used in any way to prepare, write, or complete essential authoring tasks in this manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Daniel Tucker (Interviewer) helps artists and activists create impactful work. He has done this through the creation of independent publications, academic programs, dynamic gatherings, and critical exhibitions. His writings and lectures on the intersections of art and politics and his collaborative art projects have been published and presented widely. As a curator, his exhibitions have toured nationally and internationally, and his latest co-authored book *Lastgaspism: Art and Survival in the Age of Pandemic* was picked as a “Best Art Book of 2022” by Hyperallergic. His current work is focused on how artists are engaging conservation and industry to inspire the bioregional and infrastructural imagination. Tucker is Associate Professor and Director of MA in Museum Studies at University of the Arts (Philadelphia, USA) and is the Arts in Society Research Network Chair. See more of his portfolio at miscprojects.com. Email: dt@miscprojects.com

David Ayala-Alfonso (Interviewee) is a curator based in Mexico City. He is Guest Curator at Independent Curators International and Op.Cit., advisor at the SOMA Academic Program, and author, editor, and advisor for different publications in the US, Mexico, and the UK. He has published books and articles on visual culture, critical heritage, and art in the public realm, and he has delivered numerous international lectures. His work as an artist and curator has been showcased in the US, Latin America, Asia, and Europe. Ayala-Alfonso has received various awards, including the Fulbright Grant (2013), the AICAD Teaching Fellowship (2015), the ICI-Dedalus Award for Curatorial Research (2013), and the EAGER Grant (2014). He holds a MA in Visual and Critical Studies from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, a Specialization in Art Education from the National University of Colombia, and has done different curatorial residencies in France, Colombia, the US, and Germany.

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