Conversation between
Lisette Lagnado,
director of Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage, and
Daniela Labra,
the fourth guest curator in the Visiting Curator program

Lisette Lagnado: The Visiting Curator program was created to foster curatorships that took a more experimental perspective, encouraging guest curators to question exhibition formats. Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage is a fitting site for this, with its aura of cultural effervescence since the 1970s and its 52 hectares of Atlantic forest. Would the exhibition you've conceived have been possible inside a museological institution, or did you devise it specifically for an educational and research setting? What differences do you see?

Daniela Labra: I curated “After the Future” specifically for Parque Lage. I wanted to think about what authorship, criticism, and making and teaching art mean in the cultural, social, and political context today, which is as complex as it is unstable. From the outset, my goal was to build up a dialogical relationship between theoretical discourses and contemporary art practices and also to show how these practices respond to the future scenarios that are presented empirically, with such troubling questions as critical analyses of the students’ work, and to have conversation sessions every day. So, there were lots of lively counterpoints, such as Zé Carlos Garcia’s wooden objects on the wall and natural plumes, or the techno-scientific sculpture, Equilibrium, by Guto Nóbrega. Some of the works will be “sneaked in,” using the pillars at the entrance or switching the toilet seats, as proposed by the young artist, Felipe Ferreira, who collects these kitsch furnishings decorated with artificial landscapes. There are some works I’ve known for years, like We Support [2007], by Runo Lagomarsino, and Donde nada ocurre [Where Nothing Happens, 2012], by Spanish artist Irene de Andrés. It’s a real pleasure for me to present them here.

Ll: What exhibitions have proved central to the development of your work as a curator?

DL: The exhibition that marked me most strongly before I was a curator was the Venice Biennale, which I happened upon in 1999 when I was backpacking alone round Europe. It was a real shock. The curator that year was Harald Szeemann, and years later I found out he was something of a groundbreaker for independent curatorship.

When I started working as a curator in 2005, one of the exhibitions that most marked me was “Populism,” curated by Lars Bang Larsen, Cristina Ricupero, and Nicolaus Schafhausen, at Stedelijk Museum [Amsterdam], which investigated populism as a phenomenon in contemporary politics. Some of the works were acerbic, others were discursive, but they were all engaged; and there were lots of young artists alongside established names like Cildo Meireles and Sarah Morris. That event influenced me so much that in a way this exhibition, “After the Future,” could be interpreted as a response to “Populism” ten years on.

Ll: Another idea behind the Visiting Curator program is to choose projects by some (at least five) of the students, supervise their work, and include them in a group show with artists who are already part of the circuit, without distinguishing them hierarchically. This initiative is designed to forge a web of professional interchange in much the same way that at biennials we see young artists presenting their work alongside more established artists they admire. I’m reminded of the interest Gordon Matta-Clark’s widow, Jane Crawford, had in Tomás Saraceno and Marcelo Cidade at the 27th São Paulo Biennial. Here, the students’ work constitutes a third of your exhibition. Do you think art should dispense with selection processes?

DL: Actually, there was a selection process, based on letters of intent. Once the group was formed, I presented the proposals of the artists I had already invited to take part in the exhibition. We worked as a study group, and this involved doing research into sociology, geography, aesthetics, biopolitics, and other humanities. The students would bring along questions, artists, reading matter, links, and had their work discussed by the group. For those that were interested in theory, I encouraged them to write about topics or works that inspired them during our sessions.

The exhibition itself reflects a significant sample of the web of interchanges that were set up. I’ve been developing a method for study dynamics for some five years now, leading art research groups independently. I’ve put on exhibitions that grew out of critical analyses of the students’ work, and in every case we took the opportunity to view the exhibition-making process as an educational activity.

Ll: To begin with, you wanted to focus all the students’ work in one room in the mansion. Why was that?

DL: That’s right. The project was going to take place in November 2015, and one of the galleries had been reserved to be occupied by the students in a process-oriented way. I imagined that “students’ room” like a living space in the exhibition. The idea was to blend the curator’s gaze with that of the teacher/proposer. But as the school had to postpone the exhibition to 2016, all the students occupied the Cavalariças gallery for one week last December. It turned into this big laboratory, giving a chance to test out some of the finished works and to have conversation sessions every day. So, that experimental room for the students took place there before the official event. It was fundamental for keeping everyone motivated while the schedule was altered because of financial difficulties. The new version lost some of its initial configuration, but it still has the idea of using the school in proposals that draw on different times and supports, including non-objectual ones, like performances, a festa, an internet platform, interventions in the park, and debates open to the public.

With the guest artists, I was careful to make sure the works interacted with one another, like a text responding to the topics. Building up relationships between the works in an exhibition is one of the core responsibilities of a curator: to give the assembled set of works coherence. These works have a political, almost virulent nature, bringing together leading figures from the “niche” of political art, like Mexican artist Teresa Margolles and Brazilian artist Maria Thereza Alves, who now lives in Berlin. Most of the works directly address problematic current-day issues, although there are some more lyrical counterpoints, such as Zé Carlos Garcia’s wooden objects on the wall and natural plumes, or the techno-scientific sculpture, Equilibrium, by Guto Nóbrega. Some of the works will be “sneaked in,” using the pillars at the entrance or switching the toilet seats, as proposed by the young artist, Felipe Ferreira, who collects these kitsch furnishings decorated with artificial landscapes. There are some works I’ve known for years, like We Support [2007], by Runo Lagomarsino, and Donde nada ocurre [Where Nothing Happens, 2012], by Spanish artist Irene de Andrés. It’s a real pleasure for me to present them here.
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As for neoliberal populism in Latin America and Brazil, it hailed increased consumption as the remedy for the problems of employment and income generation. It worked for a while, but here, for instance, what we’re seeing now is streets choked with cars while public transportation is still underfunded. Education has never been a priority, and corruption has become endemic at every level and in every party. Yet despite this political void, there are still agendas identified with “left-wing” and “right-wing” leanings.

Glorifying neoliberalism and justifying environmental degradation and the excessive concentration of income as mere side-effects of economic growth and the well-being of the global population is a cynical, spurious discourse, because there are pockets of extreme poverty that are clearly growing all over the world. Of course I won’t provide answers for all this. To paraphrase Leonilson, “Daniela can’t change the world,” but what we have here is a real platform for research at an art school, in this space where you can discuss ideas and throw some light on different kinds of political action, using art as a tool to sensitize the gaze and engender critical attitudes.

**Visiting Curator**

“Visiting Curator” is a program of exhibitions designed in 2015 in the form of a course open to students of Escola de Artes Visuais (EAV) Parque Lage. Its goal is to strengthen dialogue between the city’s leading art education establishment and the artistic community and to help actively shape its cultural agenda.

Contemporary Art Practices is the new education program conceived in order to establish a link between the works produced at EAV with professional critics and writers, encouraging interchange between them. It is grounded in the belief that contact between different generations is a way for the school to broaden its social outreach.

Each visiting curator is invited to present their current interests and to give 40 hours of seminars, during which they provide guidance for students whose interests converge with their own. The work of at least five of these students must be included in their exhibition. In this way, EAV assumes an important stage in its students’ development process by: providing for their future insertion in the art circuit.

Structured as a laboratory, the program features the work of young curators, inviting them to use the art school as a field for experimentation, without any concern for market demands, and to work alongside its teaching staff.

The exhibitions themselves occupy a variety of spaces: the Cavalariças gallery, the chapel, the grotto, the tower, the gardens, and other sheltered areas, interacting with the historical features of the Read office and green space, which the school has occupied since 1975.

Visiting curators in 2016:

Daniela Labra*, Marta Mestre*, Beatriz Lemos, Santiago García Navarro, Gabriel Bogossian.

* 2015 exhibitions postponed to the first half of 2016.