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By Chris Gilbert

This is a curious piece of political positioning - a radical curator, Chris Gilbert, has resigned from Berkeley Art Museum after the museum's directors demanded that he neutralise his statement of revolutionary solidarity that accompanied a show on Venezuelan media 'along the path of the Bolivarian Process'. Gilbert delivers a stinging admonishment to institutional hypocrisy (the duplicity of its brief to serve the 'people' while servicing its bourgeois paymasters etc.) - and it makes for a rollicking read. But how has such a radicalised individual been able to square this insight with an evidently successful and *long-term* career as a curator (albeit, one of highly politicised material)? It looks like it has taken his own personal run in with the powers that be for him to formulate a generalised politics of total non-engagement with official culture. I can't help but feel slightly sceptical reading this - although I agree with his basic analysis of institutional complicity. So does this mean that all the time he spent bringing politically dangerous material to the museum has been wasted? Is this portal to such material so terminally polluted? Are there 'cleaner' ones? And why the hell did it take him so long to wake up and smell the napalm?

Chris Gilbert - statement on resigning 5/21/06

I made the decision to resign as Matrix Curator on April 28, but my struggles with the Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive over the content and approach of the projects in the exhibition cycle "Now-Time Venezuela: Media Along the Path of the Bolivarian Process" (<http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/exhibits/nowtime/index.html>) go back quite a few months. In particular the museum administrators -- meaning the deputy directors and senior curator collaborating, of course, with the public relations and audience development staff -- have for some time been insisting that I take the idea of solidarity, revolutionary solidarity, out of the cycle. For some months, they have said they wanted "neutrality" and "balance" whereas I have always said that instead my approach is about commitment, support, and alignment -- in brief, taking sides with and promoting revolution.

I have always successfully resisted the museum's attempts to interfere with the projects (and you will see that the ideas of alignment, support, and revolutionary solidarity are written all over the "Now-Time" projects part 1 & part 2 -- they are present in all the texts I have generated and as a consequence in almost all of the reviews). In the museum's most recent attempt to alter things, the one that precipitated my resignation, they proposed to remove the offending concept from the Now-Time Part 2 introductory text panel (a panel which had already gone to the printer). Their plan was to replace the phrase "in solidarity" with revolutionary Venezuela with a phrase like "concerning" revolutionary Venezuela -- or another phrase describing a relation that would not be explicitly one of solidarity.

I threatened to resign and terminate the exhibition, since, first of all, revolutionary solidarity is what I believe in -- the essential concept in the "Now-Time" project cycle -- but secondly it is obviously unfair to invite participants such as Dario Azzellini and Oliver Ressler

or groups such as Catia TVE to a project that has one character (revolutionary solidarity) and then change the rules of the game on them a few weeks before the show opens (so that they become mere objects of examination or investigation). At first, my threat to resign and terminate the show availed nothing. Then on April 28, I wrote a letter stating that I was in fact resigning and my last day of work would be two weeks from that day, which was May 12, two days before the "Now-Time Part 2: Revolutionary Television in Catia" opening (<http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/exhibits/nowtimept2/index.html>). I assured them that the show could not go forward without me. In response to this decisive action -- and surely out of fear that the show which had already been published in the members magazine would not happen -- the institution restored my text panel to the way I had written it. Having won that battle, though at the price of losing my position, I decided to go forward with the show, my last one.

One thing that should make evident how extreme and erratic the museum's actions were is that the very same sentence that was found offensive ("a project in solidarity with the revolutionary process in contemporary Venezuela") is the exact sentence that is used for the first Now-Time Venezuela exhibition text panel that still hangs in the Matrix gallery upstairs. That show is on view for one more week as I write.

The details of all this are important though, of course, its general outlines, which play out the familiar patterns of class struggle, are of greater interest. The class interests represented by the museum, which are above all the interests of the bourgeoisie that funds it, have two (related) things to fear from a project like mine: (1) of course, revolutionary Venezuela is a symbolic threat to the US government and the capitalist class that benefits from that government's policies, just as Cuba is a symbolic threat, just as Nicaragua was, and just as is any country that tries to set its house in order in a way that is different from the ideas of Washington and London -- which is primarily to say Washington and London's insistence that there is no alternative to capitalism.

I must emphasize that the threat is only symbolic; in the eyes of the US government and the US bourgeoisie, it sets a "bad" and dangerous example of disobedience for other countries to follow, but of course the idea that such examples represent a military threat to the US (would that it were the case) is simply laughable; (2) the second threat, which is probably the more operational one in the museum context, is that much of the community is in favor of the "Now-Time" projects -- the response to the first exhibition is enormous and the interest in the second is also very high. That response and interest exposes the fact that the museum, the bourgeois values it promotes via the institution of contemporary art (contemporary art of the past 30 years is really in most respects simply the cultural arm of upper-class power) are not really those of any class but its own. Importantly the museum and the bourgeoisie will always deny the role of class interests in this: they will always maintain that the kinds of cultural production they promote are more difficult, smarter,

more sophisticated -- hence the lack of response to most contemporary art is, according to them, about differences in education and sophistication rather than class interest. That this kind of claim is obscurantist and absurd is something the present exhibitions make very clear: the work of Catia TVe, which is created by people in the popular (working-class) neighborhoods of Caracas, is far more sophisticated than what comes out of the contemporary art of the Global North. The same could be said for the ideas discussed by the Venezuelan factory workers in the Ressler and Azzellini film that is shown Now-Time Part 1 (http://www.ressler.at/content/view/93/lang,en_GB). (Of course, it is not because these works and the thoughts in them are more sophisticated that we should attend to them; what I am saying is simply that it is clearly an evasion and false to dismiss anti-bourgeois cultural production -- work that aligns with the interests of working class people -- on grounds of its being unsophisticated.)

To return to the museum: I believe that the enormous response to the "Now-Time" cycle -- there were 180 visitors to the March 26 panel discussion that opened "Now-Time" part 1 and if you google "Now-Time Venezuela" you get over 700 hits -- put the class interests that stand by and promote contemporary art in danger, exposed them a bit. I suppose some concern about this may have given a special edge to the museum's failed efforts to alter my projects.

I think it is important to be clear about the facts that precipitated my resignation: that is, the struggle over the wording of the text panel, which fit into months of struggle over the question of solidarity and alignment with a revolutionary political agenda. That issue is discussed above. However, it is also important to understand the context. Again, it is too weak to say that museums, like universities, are deeply corrupt. They are. (And in my view the key points to discuss regarding this corruption are (1) the museum's claim to represent the public's interests when in fact serving upper-class interests and parading a carefully constructed surrogate image of the public; (2) the presence of intra-institutional press and marketing departments that really operate to hold a political line through various control techniques, only one of which is censorship; finally (3) the presence of development departments that, in mostly hidden ways, favor and flatter rich funders, giving the lie to even the sham notion of public responsibility that the museum parades). However, to describe museums and other cultural institutions as simply if deeply corrupt is, as I said, too weak in that it both holds out the promise of their reform and it ignores the larger imperialist structures that make their corruption an inevitable upshot and reflection of the exploitive political and social system of which they form a part. Such institutions will go on reflecting imperialist capitalist values, will celebrate private property and deny social solidarity, and will maintain a strict silence about the control of populations at home and the destruction of populations abroad in the name of profit, until that imperialist system is dismantled. Importantly, it will not be dismantled by cultural efforts alone: a successful reform of a cultural institution here or there would at best

result in "islands" of sanity that would most likely operate in a negative way -- as imaginary and misleading "proof" that conditions are not as bad as they are.

In fact, with conditions as they are, a different strategy is required: there should be disobedience at all levels; disruptions and explosions of the kind that I, together with a small group of allies inside the museum, have created are also useful on a symbolic level. However, the primary struggle and the only struggle that will result in a significant change would be one that works directly to transform the economic and political base. This would be a struggle aiming to bring down the US government and its imperialist system through highly organized efforts.

We live in the midst of a fascist imperialism -- there is no other way to describe the system that the US has created and that exercises such control through terror over populations both inside and outside. History has shown that to make "deals" or "compromises" with fascism avails nothing. Instead a radical and daily intransigence is required. Fascism operates to destroy life. It installs and operates on the logic of the camp on all levels, including culture. In the face of that logic, which holds life as nothing, compromises and deals at best buy time for the aggressor and symbolic capital for the aggressor. One should have no illusions: until capitalism and imperialism are brought down, cultural institutions will go on being, in their primary role, lapdogs of a system that spreads misery and death to people everywhere on the planet. The fight to abolish that system completely and build one based on socialism must remain our exclusive and constant focus.

Chris Gilbert