

## Always out of his comfort zone

A conversation between Raúl Ortega Ayala and Ive Stevenheydens

Ive Stevenheydens: *Field-note 25-01-16 (unintended anthropometric and behavioural study material)* is part of your recent series titled *From the Pit of Et Cetera*, that from what I understand, takes a plunge into the vast array of things that aren't preserved in history.

Raúl Ortega Ayala: That's right, lately I have been working around the theme of history focusing on the things that are for some reason or another not taken into its course. When I found this footage, it fitted perfectly within this project. Before I did this series I used to work with anthropological methods, such as *participant observation* or *embodiment of knowledge*, so when I got interested in an idea, subject or world I would become part of that sphere for 2 to 3 years and embody different jobs and situations. Afterwards I would produce a series of works that related to that know-how and that experience. At some point I decided to invert this methodology to see what would happen if I distanced myself from a context or worked with 'absent' contexts and this of course led me towards History. I began researching several things, but most of them referred to prominent facts or people; for example I worked with paintings that have been found under some of Van Gogh's paintings or audio missing from Richard Nixon's recordings of meetings that took place at the oval office in the White House at the time of the *Watergate* scandal. However in the case of this found footage it was different because the people who appear in this film are ordinary people."

IS: Where did you find this footage?

ROA: "I was invited to take part in a group show in Mexico City that took place on a film set. The artists had to react somehow to this fake environment. When I visited the venue, I couldn't find anything in the set to relate with, so I went upstairs and found piles and piles of old and dusty VHS tapes. I went through them and selected ten tapes that I digitised and then examined. To be honest I was looking for outtakes of political campaigns, hoping to find for instance politicians not delivering a message as they should or trying to sell themselves but doing it wrong. But instead I found several castings which showed people that in the end were not selected for a commercial and they

intrigued me, in particular this one that depicted people who seemed to aspire to become an actor in an advertisement for a phone company. This footage also showed how people related to an object, in a range of different persons and situations: kids, elderly people, women in bikinis and even people pretending to talk on the phone whilst walking a dog. I also found other castings for junk food commercials – crisps and ice creams– but somehow they did not date very much. The crisps and ice creams that you saw then could be the same now, while with the phones it indicated a specific era and place - I am guessing it was around 1995-6.”

IS: What made you decide to rename this found footage *Field-note 25-01-16 (unintended anthropometric and behavioural study material)*?

ROA: “Methodologies used in anthropology have been an integral part of my practice, I have always been interested in objects or things that have an anthropological edge and this footage reminded me immediately about anthropometric exercises that have occurred in many parts of the world in the past– the measuring of indigenous populations, the quest of the Nazis for the pure race, to name a few. However in these images we see footage created with a completely different goal that can have a strange and cunning resemblance to these anthropological exercises that were bizarrely conceived within the frame of an ‘anthropologic’ mind-set.”

IS: Casting can be seen as a predecessor of the selfie. Although not meant to put oneself in a positive light on social media, they are also a form of self-promotion.

ROA: “I completely agree. Everybody in this footage is representing their better self, especially when they turn around to show their profile: they always display what they consider as their best side first. Aesthetical values of the time filter in as well, we see ‘good looking’ or ‘beautiful’ people and in contrast to this you have older people with whom the criteria of value seem to shift from looks to empathy: how can the viewer relate with this character as being someone beautiful, loving, inspiring or something else? The same goes for the children and dancers: here the criteria shift to charm/cuteness and respectively performance/condition. There are even people walking a dog. What criteria should one apply here?”

IS: Personally I find the footage affecting, uncomfortable, sometimes a bit embarrassing to watch and certainly unintentionally funny. It has

something terribly tragic, reminiscent of a meat inspection. At the same time innocent too: these people were not aware yet of what impact mobile communication would have on our daily lives today. ROA: “You can see that the people are struggling to make themselves noticed, which gives the whole ‘selection’ process a tragic overtone. They seek their self-worth in this particular medium and that makes it harsh to look at and funny at the same time. All of this material was shot a long time before TV-shows like *The X Factor* or *America’s got talent* existed. The principle however stays the same: people are trying to prove their talents in one way or another – to be a good dancer or actor, or to just show off a nice body. Nowadays the biggest hits mass media has produced, especially in television, are based on that principle, and it turns it into a talent or meat inspection industry.”

IS: What were the criteria for selecting the footage you used?

ROA: I decided to intervene in the least possible way and hardly edited the piece. The people who filmed the castings made most of the editing cuts. I think this footage has more impact in its ‘pure’ form and I like the idea that we can see it as an anthropological exercise implemented to take a hard look at our selves.”

IS: When and why did you decide to become an artist? Or was it by accident? You started studying art at the Escuela Nacional de Pintura, Escultura y Grabado or La Esmeralda in Mexico City.

ROA: “I come from a family that encouraged going to the museum, to concerts and to other cultural activities. I never really knew what it meant to be an artist because I never met one personally, but I grew up surrounded by multiple manifestations of it and that fascinated me. At La Esmeralda I studied painting but after finishing my undergrad I felt I needed something else, so I moved to Glasgow because I liked the variety of art that was being produced there at the time with artists like Douglas Gordon, Claire Barclay, Simon Starling and many more. I had created a comfort zone within painting but I was not happy with it any-more and I wanted to leave the studio. I was interested in otherness and in others so I looked for a way to relate with people within my work and I also looked for ways of working with topics that were not necessarily related to my art practice as I had it in mind then.”

IS: You go very far for your research. You had an office job for a year,

worked as a gardener for two years and trained as a butcher. These experiences led to three series of works; *Bureaucratic Sonata*, *An Ethnography on Gardening* and *Food for Thought*.

ROA: “Yes, I like relating to topics for long periods of time in order to construct my own ideas around the issues of each of the contexts that I decide to explore and this takes me out of my comfort zone. Challenges are enriching and changes always bring something new and fresh to my practise in terms of reflection and in terms of new materials to work with. If I had decided to only be a painter, I wouldn’t have encountered all the experiences and materials to work with that I have by leaving my comfort zone. In the case of the *Bureaucratic Sonata* series for example, I was trying to marry my life as a working person with that of an artist as I had to work for a living from 9 to 5 and ‘became’ an artist after that. So I started using my ‘other’ experiences within my art practice. The outcome was very sculptural: I used elements I would find in the office: post-it notes, lamps, chairs, etc; to make works which reacted to this environment in a sort of tautological exercise. I realised later that I was practicing some form of intuitive ethnography, which led me to anthropology and to using its methods more consciously. So later on in London I worked as a gardener for two years, nine to five as well and in public and private gardens. I got completely involved in this world, I would go to gardening fairs, I would watch gardening programs and visited frequently the botanical archives in the National History Museum. The outcome of that experience was the *An Ethnography on Gardening* series in which I produced botanical illustrations, scents of imaginary flowers and hybrid plants that work as sculptural objects. After that I considered food as a subject as I wanted to explore the political and religious aspects of it”

IS: *Food for Thought* had clear biblical references. You made a copy in fat of the Babel tower, while for *The Last Supper* you invited twelve exhibition goers to consume the exact meal the twelve apostles had, based on research of food historian Daniel Rogov.

ROA: “It was not really a conscious decision. I guess coming from a profoundly catholic country and being brought up catholic, these issues must have been in the back of my mind. I do not practice religion, so maybe it’s an exploration of the values I grew up with. Actually with *The Last Supper* I wondered what would happen when something sacred became secular, so I made people part of a situation that was charged with religious

content to see how they would interact with it. I presented the results in a gallery space, and of course some remarkable situations occurred; some people started enacting what is believed to be the appropriate behaviour for such an event whilst others were just having a good laugh.”

IS: It seems that you travel quite a lot.

ROA: “I like going where the issues are. Recently I went to the Städel Museum in Frankfurt and to the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, because they possess some wonderful x-rays of paintings. Last month I travelled for the fourth time to Chernobyl, Pripyat and the surroundings, where I am making a film about the nuclear disaster. These works are part of the series *From the Pit of Et Cetera* (mentioned above) where I am also exploring contemporary ruins. Pripjat, Chernobyl and its surroundings are not only an abandoned place. It has to stay completely abandoned for thousands of years because of radiation. Largely constructed in the seventies, the buildings in Pripjat are the same as the ones we are currently live in. The city displays our own reality as a ruin; it is a vortex into the future. You see the supermarket, movie theatre, apartments and roads all in ruin. You witness how nature takes over and realize everything is submitted to that process of decomposition, even your current reality; it’s a humbling experience. In the film I work with a small sample of people that used to live there: a person who was a kid when this happened, a soon to be mother at that time, the ex-vice-mayor of Pripjat who had to deal with the whole evacuation, and an ex-gym teacher who had 200 student-athletes that were competing at the moment the reactor exploded and who was actually one of the last people to leave the area, jeopardising himself and his own family. The film also deals with the fragmentation of history and with issues around accuracy. I have filmed the same things in four different seasons, which will create a dislocated sense of history. Moreover I had access to some incredible ruins. One of them being a huge antenna designed to jam the communications of the enemy (the US at the time). It is a huge, impressive and brutal structure. The film will be finished in February 2017 and have its premiere at Dürst Britt & Mayhew in The Hague.”

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Ive Stevenheydens is a writer, art critic and curator. He works as a curator at Argos, Centre for Art and Media in Brussels.