

works in the exhibition

Galia Eibenschutz (b. 1970, Mexico City)

1 *Sedentario(a)* (Sedentary), 1996 / 1999
Wood and leather stool with strap and buckle, colour photographs, manuals

Daniel Guzmán (b. 1964, Mexico City)

2 *¿Qué extraordinario que el mundo exista!* (How extraordinary that the world exists!), 1996
Plastic bucket with vinyl lettering, colour photographs, installed with buckets found locally

Jonathan Hernández (b. 1972, Mexico City)

3 *SE BUSCA RECOMPENSA* (Seeking Reward), ongoing since 1998
Found photocopied posters

Gabriel Kuri (b. 1970, Mexico City)

4 *untitled (doy fe / by my faith)*, 1998
Cast fibreglass, vitrine with light

5 *untitled (a la brevedad posible / a.s.a.p.)*, 1999

Painted cast fibreglass

Mejor Vida Corp. (Minerva Cuevas, b. 1975, Mexico City)

Bar-code Stickers Service – Ottawa, local version of long-term project

6 Self-adhesive stickers, research materials, website at

www.irational.org/mvc/barcode.html

Yoshua Okón

(b. 1970, Mexico City)

7 *Poli I*, 1999
Video

Luis Felipe Ortega

(b. 1966, Mexico City)

De la serie "Los cuerpos dóciles"

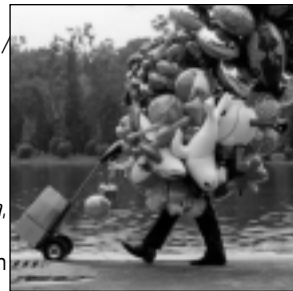
8 (From the series "Obedient Bodies"), 1995-97

Three colour photographs

9 *La distancia necesaria* (The necessary distance), 1997
Photograph

(not in the exhibition)

a Galia Eibenschutz,
Caminando (Walking), 1999



acknowledgements

This exhibition was made possible through the generosity of the Instituto Mexicano de Cooperación Internacional of the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (IMEXCI-SRE) and the Embassy of Mexico in Ottawa, with the particular assistance of Cultural Counsellor Alberto Fierro. The collaboration of Galería Kuri-manzutto, Mexico City, was also much appreciated. SAW enjoys the generous support of its members and volunteers, The Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, the Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton and the City of Ottawa.

**SAW 67 Nicholas Street
Ottawa Canada K1N 7B9
t 613-236-6181 f 613-238-4617**



c/o la Ciudad

Galia Eibenschutz

Daniel Guzmán

Jonathan

Hernández

Gabriel Kuri

Mejor Vida Corp./

Minerva Cuevas

Yoshua Okón

Luis Felipe Ortega



curated by

Germaine Koh

SAW Gallery

23 March – 22 April

2000 Ottawa



ARTIST-RUN

c/o la Ciudad

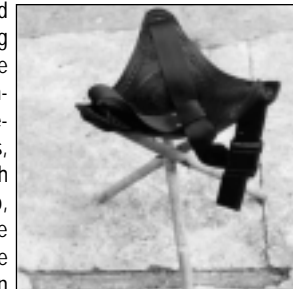
Mexico's Distrito Federal, Mexico City, spreads over the vast and shifting ground of a former lake, surrounded by volcanoes and subject to earthquakes. A centre of power since its founding in 1325 as the Aztec city Tenochtitlan, through Spanish colonization and the extended tremors of revolution to today's forces of globalization, it now has some twenty million inhabitants, joined by another couple thousand each day, who contend with pollution and congestion, a certain lawlessness, startling violence, volatile politics, and deep socio-economic inequities.

It is a city of extremes of time, magnitude and society that can seem irreconcilable to an outsider. Still, a number of artists have consciously assumed the task – the same one borne by the population at large, really – of reckoning with the monumental presence of the city itself. These artists are not only locating their work within the D.F., but also working with a sense of concern, taking care but also caring for this seemingly immovable yet unstable entity. They operate with a feeling for the socially immense, imbued with a certain precariousness, and with a sense of the incongruity of the city's long history and its difficult contemporary conditions.

This consideration for the city itself is particularly moving in certain strains of dematerialized and situationist artwork being produced in the D.F. As elsewhere and everywhere in today's contemporary art, there is a current predominance of conceptual practices, realized in particular through everyday objects, photo, video, performance, and other elusive forms. These tendencies coincide with an interest in quotidian urban phenomena that is by now commonplace in the international art world. Still, it may be that Mexico City is a particularly telling place for the production of work about the abject, the fleeting, the decaying, and the disappearing. Certainly some work there seems inflected by a quiet sense of survivalism. The present exhibition focuses on pieces which convey a particular sense of pressure that might be specific to that city, but which also speak eloquently outside of it, in a wider context of re-imagining the possibilities for productive urban action.

It happens that all the artists in this show are from the D.F. by birth, but more critically, each has in turn adopted the city as a privileged subject, site, source, and object of his or her work, with all the senses of obligation and mutual care that this implies. Throughout, these individuals adhere to a dual principle of making do and of doing-it-yourself, employing strategies ranging from active defiance of authority to careful extraction of poetry from everyday things, and speaking in modes that are by turn blunt, theoretical and humorous.

In the latter vein, Galia Eibenschutz's *Sedentario(a)* (Sedentary – no. 1) is a fanciful proposition imagining the betterment of city life. A portable stool, its tooled leather seat proclaiming its Mexican origin (and thereby confirming its own inauthenticity), has been re-domesticized, conveniently adapted for constant use through the addition of a seat belt. An illustrated manual and instructional photos depict this strap-on urban crutch in use, eking for its user the bare



comfort of a place of his own in whatever uncertain terrain he traverses. This sense of the human element as somehow at the mercy of its surroundings or its own accoutrements continues in other pieces by Eibenschutz which distill a sort of absurd existentialism from daily life itself. One photo shows a figure rendered immobile as she dutifully obeys non-sensical directions painted on the pavement. Another series of drawings and photos (fig. a) isolates the postures of passing figures burdened with all sorts of implements. The question remains open as to whether these objects are impeding their way through the city or actually providing them with some kind of support, or even solace.

Some apparently-ironic practices are seriously anarchic, like Minerva Cuevas's brand of activism. Her Mejor Vida Corp. (Better Living Corp.) is dedicated to encouraging in modest ways a better standard of life, addressing basic hopes and needs by distributing free subway and lottery tickets and stamped envelopes, providing caffeine *Safety Pills* for subway riders, proposing its representative as a security agent, and so on. These services target the most fundamental common needs: for instance, its *Bar-code Stickers Service* (no. 6) helps ease the cost of living by providing citizens with the tools to lower their own grocery prices. MVC also undertakes political campaigns in support of homeless people's rights and other social justice issues. Still, we must recognize that, behind the pseudo-corporate identity of these projects, there is an individual acting concretely on her beliefs and concerns, putting these on the line through local action and personal example. In a thoroughly extraordinary righting of corporate irresponsibility, MVC's catalogue of products and services declares that this organization "holds itself fully responsible for any use of this product."

Street-level operations have also been part of Jonathan Hernández's practice. *SE BUSCA RECOMPENSA* (no. 3), his ongoing collection of found home-made posters seeking lost dogs, ably recognizes a pared-down language of tragedy – "seeking," "reward" – and allows this to be amplified through the simple repetition of the same words of loss by so many individual voices. In the video *Vehículo Inmovilizado* (Immobilized vehicle) Hernández, having assumed legitimacy simply by wearing an identification badge, assists motorists by depositing money in their expired parking meters and eventually attempts to explain his actions to uncomprehending police officers. Elsewhere, he and Fernando Ortega (who, on the other hand, has abetted would-be motorists through a "Do It Yourself" brochure providing instructions for dismantling steering-wheel locks) placed some 100

4 samples of building plaster common to local house construction amongst the fossils, gems and minerals in vitrines in the city's geology museum, thus assigning tectonic gravity to these material expressions of popular taste.

Gabriel Kuri's work finds grace in daily routine, through a keen ability to draw out the collective desires embedded in everyday objects and rituals. In his golden cast-fibreglass version of a *chicharrón*, the commonplace fried-pork-skin snack, we observe the miraculous apparition of the words "Doy Fe" (By my faith – no. 4), suggesting a kind of hopefulness sustained and transubstantiated

through daily fare. Another fibreglass facsimile, of a large stone apparently laboriously chiseled with the phrase “A la brevedad posible” (As soon as possible – no. 5), makes concrete the intuition that everyday patience is frustrated by some larger, elemental bidding of time. His *Plan de San Lunes* (Plan for Saint Monday) project focuses on the emotional interval between the leisure and feasting of Sunday and the productivity and good resolutions of Monday, imagining a kind of holiday that specifically names that private-yet-collective moment of melancholic waiting experienced at the close of each weekend. An earlier piece in this quietly grand mode linked nothing less than human endeavour and the forces of Nature, via the banal, packages of aerodynamically-shaped fish pieces discreetly labeled with a summary of the evolution of aviation.

Luis Felipe Ortega's work also muses upon the collective significance of public structures. He has focused on particular types of usually-unremarked spaces that exist in all large cities: spaces of passage and waiting, non-places. One project is an archive of photos of all kinds of public places around the world, taken and sent to him by friends. The fact that he absorbs these places through others' eyes emphasizes that one's understanding of such spaces is somehow always shared and maybe already familiar. Certain of his works even point to the tenuousness of individual effort within the built environment. The series *Los cuerpos dóciles* (Obedient bodies – no. 8) depicts a figure adapting himself to various unyielding urban markers: trees, a pair of planters, or a spherical sculpture that this would-be Sisyphus tries but cannot budge from its position. It is a case of all-too-human force encountering the immovable objects of its own making. In the photograph *La distancia necesaria* (The necessary distance – no. 9) a figure is depicted simultaneously arriving at and arising from a stone bench, a transient presence whose particular history slips away in relation to the fixity of this apparatus. Ortega proposes a sort of inversion of gravity, assigning a specific weight to places of dislocation, and wave-like energy to the bodies who pass through them.

In contradistinction to Ortega's theoretical mode, Yoshua Okón operates within the immediate difficulties of the city. He is a provocateur who uses his own presence to catalyze various pressures— class, race and power relations – that drive the city. In the video *Poli I* (no. 7) his simple action of confronting a police officer with a camera, representing both privilege and scrutiny, draws out a barrage of insults and resentments on the part of this authority figure. Another video records Okón paying the bribe requested by the police who arrested him as he was producing a piece for which he had paid another policeman to be filmed in a compromising position. He and Miguel Calderón once presented a sculpture of 100 stolen car stereos along with a video of them stealing one. Okón confronts existing social relations and then witnesses and facilitates their unpredictable and uncomfortable results. These can be brutally metaphoric, as in his video capturing the unforeseen mating of his native hairless dog and a white poodle, with all the affronts to cultural and class structure implied by this clearly “improper” miscegenation. They can also be unexpect-



9

edly touching, as when he invited people to dance in front of the camera in sequences that can be endearing records of individuals managing an uncomfortable situation.

Daniel Guzmán is best known for brash paintings and drawings that speak in the violently decadent vernacular of popular culture, yet there is also a quietly poetic aspect to his work. In one instance, standard five-gallon utility buckets printed with the phrase *¡Qué extraordinario que el mundo exista!* (How extraordinary that the world exists! – no. 2) were placed and documented in typical situations in which this type of object is used, thus gently and unexpectedly insisting on the dignity of existing ways of making do. A recent series of magazine pages altered with rough captions carries a similarly elegiac tone: one picturing a dog laments “Solitude is something that has followed me all my life” (La soledad es algo que me ha seguido todo mi vida), and in another the appropriated face of a man reminds one gravely that “You should live until you die” (Debes vivir hasta que mueras). In Guzmán's work there is an awareness – condensed, for example, in the title *Unas vacaciones baratas en la miseria de los demás* (Some cheap vacations in the misery of the rest) – of the essentially compromised state of daily life, and it is quite remarkable for permitting everyday language itself to eloquently reveal a fundamental collective malaise.

Without ignoring the differences between these various artists' approaches, one can say that they do share a feeling for the contradictions abiding in the daily life of the city, and a real involvement with this. They also forgo ironic disaffection or abject paralysis in favour of real, if sometimes understated, social commitment. Luis Felipe Ortega once suggested, with a certain humour, that an everyday rallying principle for Daniel Guzmán has been the belief “that people are not taking responsibility for their acts.”¹ Perhaps works such as these can be understood as attempts to do just this.

These artists' involvement with the city they inhabit is often reflected in activism and critical activity that extend beyond their own art work towards a larger culture and society, and at the same time towards other artists. Since the late 1980s there has developed in Mexico City a vital tradition of artist-led galleries and initiatives which have been more mobile, more polemical and also more personally accountable than the artist-run movements we have known in Canada in this same period. For instance, the critical Temístocles collective (including Luis Felipe Ortega, Daniel Guzmán and notable peers such as Eduardo Abaroa, Abraham Cruzvillegas and Pablo Vargas Lugo) has dissolved, yet its members continue to be deeply involved with each others' work and ideas. Artistic collaborators Yoshua Okón and Miguel Calderón founded the independent space La Panadería, which six years later continues to be the most likely venue in the city to find raw,



7



2

unadulterated artistic ventures. These types of organizing activity indicate a valuation of debate, a generosity of spirit, and a real sense of community obligation. Ortega has been a curator at the alternative contemporary art centre Ex Teresa and has led theoretical seminars that included Minerva Cuevas, Jonathan Hernández and Galia Eibenschutz. Gabriel Kuri was part of a small discussion workshop led by Gabriel Orozco from 1987 to 1991. More recently, Ortega, Kuri and Guzmán, along with Damian Ortega, published the zine *Casper*, a one-year, thirteen-issue forum for circulating ideas and recycling gems mined from the world of print.²

Certain local artistic precedents may inform the activity of these and other artists in the D.F. who are working with a regard for both the everyday culture and the living history of the place. Beginning in the 1970s diverse artists such as Felipe Ehrenberg, Marcos Kurtycz and Carlos Aguirre and a number of collective Groups variously produced street performances, Fluxus-related ephemera, and assemblages of impoverished and recuperated materials. It is possible that current tendencies such as “object art,” conceptualism and “alternative media” have also arisen at least in part in reaction to the reductive burden of 1980s Neo-Mexican expressionism, while their prevalence may also be related to their having been institutionally defined and officially named within systems of support for the arts. One might be tempted to speculate that the particular strains of quotidian, street-based work now issuing from the D.F. are directly due to the influence and example of like-minded artists such as Gabriel Orozco or Francis Alÿs, to the presence of many foreign and foreign-trained artists, or to the general embrace of global artistic currents – all of which have been recognized as enrichments of the community. However, it is perhaps telling that the 1997 pan-Latin-American show “Así está la cosa,” curated by *Poliester* editor Kurt Hollander, was criticized for tying object-art from Mexico to international conventions. This reaction would seem to suggest that there is a will to recognize the effect and influence of the local. Indeed, the artist-critic Abraham Cruzvillegas points to a moment in the collective history of the city – the 1985 earthquake – rather than any artistic movement as a critical turning-point for the energy of the art community (as well as being a catalyst for wider social changes).³ Similarly, in an article specifically tracing a history of “Garbage & Art in México” up to Orozco and Alÿs, José Springer also suggests that the use of low materials is a constructive response to the country's social circumstances:

*If we could talk about a new artistic current or tendency that has, since the 80's, provided an alternative to the iconographical and pictorially-representative art for which Mexican artists have gained a certain renown in other countries, we could define such a tendency as an impulse (to talk about a movement would be too risky) to work with three-dimensional, disposable materials. Once recycled and placed in another context, these materials become more ad hoc for an era which has destroyed the myths and tenets of the past, yet needs to create new rituals upon which to construct the present.*⁴



5

The works in this exhibition continue this impulse to deal with the present. Taking their cues directly from the predicaments of a local culture but avoiding any sort of national identification, they display a sure commitment to engaging with and intervening in these realities. Among these actual conditions are social divisions that render art-making a *de facto* privileged domain, to a far greater extent than it is in Canada, for instance. The problem, as Francis Alÿs has put it, is that “When working in a zone of poverty, the sense of being an exploiter is never far away.”⁵ This incongruity contributes to the burden of speech that conscientious artists such as these have assumed, so that their work might on one hand take the form of direct intervention or subversion, but on the other, commit to exploring the potential of conceptual propositions as another form of social engagement – “poetical activism,” in the terms Gabriel Orozco has used to describe Gabriel Kuri. And really, one could consider that a rarefied discourse about public issues has historically been the chosen mode of both artistic avant-gardes and conscientious objection. Thus the socio-poetic effect, if you will, of Kuri's chicharrón is generated in the emotional distance between its



3

impeccable craftsmanship and the baseness of its reference; and the “utility” of Galia Eibenschutz's stool is actually our recognition of its impracticality, which underscores the very difficulties it only pretends to assuage. Similarly, it is precisely by extracting them from their original context that the lost-dog posters preserved by Jonathan Hernández begin to speak of a common plight. Importantly, then, much of this work implies that poetic language and conceptual speech could have a real effect on how a community views and addresses its own shared situation. In other words, while these artists do operate within a specialized field, the authority they assume has less to do with artistic trend than it does with the fact that they recognize and uphold, through both critical action and imaginative speech, a real responsibility to the actual, pressing, conditions of the place they live.

Germaine Koh

1. Daniel Guzmán cited by Luis Felipe Ortega in “Do you feel disappointed? Drawings by Daniel Guzmán,” *Acné o el nuevo contrato social ilustrado* (Mexico City: Museo de arte moderno, 1995), p. 67.
2. Certain of these details rely on a chronology by Abraham Cruzvillegas in the catalogue of an exhibition held at the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal: “Tratado de Libre Comer,” *Moi et ma circonstance: mobilité dans l'art contemporain mexicain* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1999), pp. 124-139.
3. *Ibid.*
4. José Manuel Springer, “Arte y basura en México / Garbage & Art in México,” *Poliester*, no. 3, Autumn 1992, p. 18.
5. Note in *Francis Alÿs: Walks / Paseos* (Mexico City: Museo de arte moderno, 1997), p. 56.