Curated Conversation 3: On Curatorship

Curated by Ana Vivaldi and Peter Wade;
translated by Peter Wade

Sources: the authors of this text are Abril Caríssimo, Flora Alvarado and América López. They are members of Identidad Marrón, a collective that emerged as a response to Argentina's invisible racism. It aims to create a meeting point and space of visibility for Indigenous and mixed-race people negatively racialised by others in Argentina as *negros populares* (dark-skinned working-class people), who are usually associated with stigmatised *villas* (low-income, informally built neighbourhoods), and whom the collective defines as *marronxs*. *Marronxs* are people with Indigenous ancestry who may or may not recognise themselves as such, as well as the city-born children of campesinos, Indigenous people, and immigrants from the countryside and neighbouring countries. Identidad Marrón promotes anti-racist strategies and affirms the non-white bodies that the myth of a white Argentina has tried to silence.

The statement by Abril Caríssimo was designed as a contribution to a CARLA workshop, held in Manchester in April 2022, with some twenty-five CARLA researchers and artists. Abril was involved in the curation of the Virtual Visual Art exhibit in the section of the CARLA online exhibition dedicated to Identidad Marrón. Ana asked Abril to record a video about curation (https://youtu.be/wWA9rlIzgZg), which has been transcribed and translated here.

The text by Flora Alvarado and América López, titled 'Malonear los museos', was written by them at Ana's request as a reflection on their experience of curating an exhibition titled *¿Qué necesitan aprender los museos?* (What Do Museums Need to Learn?), which ran from 12 December 2020 to 6 March 2021 and was curated by Identidad Marrón and the writers' collective Poetas Villeres (Poets from the *Villas*) for the

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public state museum Palais de Glace in Buenos Aires.[1] The exhibition included various items from the museum's collections, which served as points of reflection.

Context: the phrase *malonear los museos* is a good entry point for understanding these texts. *Malonear* is a Spanish word used in Argentina and Uruguay meaning to undertake a *malón* (from the Mapuzugun *maleu*, to inflict damage on the enemy). *Malón* is the name given by colonial and Republican authorities to the raids carried out by Mapuche warriors. The term gained special significance during the genocidal campaigns against Mapuche and other Indigenous populations carried out under the name of La Conquista del Desierto (Conquest of the Desert), directed mainly by General Julio Argentino Roca in the 1870s. The campaigns were nominally a response to Indigenous *malones*. The famous paintings *El malón* (1845), by Mauricio Rugendas, and *La vuelta del malón* (The Return from the Raid, 1892), by Ángel Della Valle, capture the dominant image of Indigenous people as the barbarians against whom the forces of civilisation were ranged. One aim of the interventions designed by Identidad Marrón is to *malonear* – 'invade', 'raid' or 'occupy' – the spaces of the venerable institutions created by the forces of 'civilisation', such as museums and galleries, and appropriate them for the expression of *marrón* identities and priorities, including an acknowledgement of the pervasive presence of racism in Argentina.

STATEMENT BY ABRIL CARÍSSIMO, A.K.A. BBYWACHA

Hi, I'm Abril Caríssimo. I work as an artist under the pseudonym Bbywacha and I am a research student in visual arts. I was part of the curatorship of the virtual exhibit [in the Identidad Marrón section of the CARLA online exhibition].

There is a theme that I think is important to highlight in the way we think about curatorship, which perhaps has to do with specific problems in Argentina, particularly institutional ones. And this also involves the idea of translation: the translation of our own work and the translation of our experiences into institutional settings.

For the racialised artist, I feel like there are like two levels of difficulty.[2] One is that we are trained in artistic institutions that are governed

[1] See the exhibition catalogue at www.argentina.gob.ar/sites/default/files/dossier_el_museo_aprende.pdf.

[2] 'Racialised' as used by members of Identidad Marrón means racialised as non-white or racialised negatively or disadvantageously.

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by white structures and schemes of thought. For all that art has been theorised and researched in Latin America, the reality is that, not only in the ways we understand and study art history, but also more generally in the ways we study today's artists, conceptualisations and problems, and the theorists and thinkers that we read to this day – all these are still European and white.

And the problem is that a lot of how we present our own experience in art continues to be under these hegemonic gazes. They are a way of perceiving our own experience so that it continues to be seen from the outside and through the internalisation of this external, hegemonic gaze. [And this] creates a limitation on the ideas that we validate and the themes and aesthetics that we use in our work.

In my journey as an artist and in [the journeys of] other artists, I see that in the process of translation there is a difficulty in how we divide ourselves between two worlds. Between a real, everyday world, where our work is appreciated and understood in self-managed artistic spaces; and an institutional world where it is often impossible for us to translate these works or these dynamics.

And I think [the second difficulty is] the fact that historically, in Argentina, artistic spaces, such as artistic training institutions, galleries and museums, have been mostly occupied by white middle-class people. And the people who criticise and consume art, the people who know about art, surround themselves with very little diversity of experience.

So what makes translation difficult is that they can't necessarily understand or empathise with our experiences or even understand our points of reference. Many of the ways in which we are conditioned to exist in institutional spaces continue to be in terms of ignorant art or young, emerging art, as seen from an external perspective.

Despite being racialised [as non-white] in the same way as a large part of the Argentine population, in institutional spheres we continue to be seen as belonging to another age. The importance of curatorship and institutional critique and racialised production has to do specifically with this, but there has to be an interrogation of how we are categorised, how we are understood to begin with and how we are presented. And this also has to be done from a racialised perspective because, if not, we continue to exist under these super-limited perceptions of what we should and should not talk about in our art. Like the idea that we make art that has no depth or that comes from outside, from the non-institutional [sphere]. The reality is that for the art world and for the racialised artist, these places of curation, these places

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of institutional critique generally come from outside, they come from spaces like Identidad Marrón.

MALONEAR LOS MUSEOS: STRATEGIES AND CONSIDERATIONS

Text by Flora Alvarado, with América Canela

As part of the exercise of breaking with the racist structures that exist in Argentine society, the Identidad Marrón collective not only denounces the glass doors that invisibly restrict access to cultural institutions such as national museums, but also implements actions to counteract the exclusion of the Indigenous *marrón* population from them. Acting on the premise that 'anti-racism is action' and posing questions such as 'Is art in Argentina only for white people?', the collective carries out numerous activities, including debates on spaces of power, led by *marrón* people who, from a peripheral location, work to ensure the inclusion of their territories, their perspectives and their voices, while questioning their absence in the places considered as historically relevant, which are often also the spaces where decisions and meanings are defined.

The project to decolonise, or *malonear*, museums must take into account various institutional factors: the spaces as such, the collections or archives that comprise them, the public that visits them, the texts that accompany the exhibitions and the way in which they are written, whether admission is free or not, and so on.

Taking culture as a right, the collective sees museums as spaces where people with cultural competences acquired through academic or classroom education should be able to participate, but also the children of workers, peasants and migrants of popular origin, because, as a right, culture should always be accessible to everyone and not just to one social sector.

Questions: Who are the people who go to museums? Do we all go? Should museums be committed to diverse communities or just to the white middle/upper classes?

Forms of exclusion operate quietly when it comes to accessing institutions that present themselves as open and inclusive. This is the case with museums and cultural institutions that are mainly accessed by a social class with certain economic and cultural capital. In addition to economic and class factors, there is also a racial factor, since the sector that occupies museums or cultural institutions (not only as spectators, but also

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as representatives of these spaces) is predominantly white. Even under progressive policies, racialised people, *marrón* identities and subaltern populations continue to be excluded from real access to culture and its spaces. Reaching museums located in wealthier areas of cities means travel, when distance, cost and time pose challenges that restrict equal access for all. The majority of racialised populations live in peripheral or working-class neighbourhoods, far from these areas. In other words, access to museums is a privilege reserved for a very small sector.

Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that cultural rights must be guaranteed, including the right of everyone to participate freely in cultural life, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advances and the benefits thereof. Access to culture is a right that is being violated for a broad section of the working class, mostly racialised people. In this context, the Identidad Marrón collective faced several challenges in curating the exhibition for the Palais de Glace. Not only did we have to break with preconceived notions about the audiences that usually have access to the museum, we also had to take into account the various barriers we have mentioned (economic, geographical, ethnic-racial). Above all we had to break through the biggest barrier of all: the indifference generated by the absence of racialised people in these places. It meant adopting, as a key principle, a perspective that sees racialised people as active agents in culture, not as objects to be exhibited or subject matter to be presented and represented by an othering or white gaze, but as participating as workers and creators of culture, as bearers of voices and knowledges derived from their experiences and territories. A key challenge was also to raise the issue that museums do not discuss questions regarding access and the social profile of the public they reach. They present themselves as public, free and accessible, but in practice the exclusion of racialised sectors continues to be the reality.

The idea behind the curatorship of the exhibition, the inaugural and closing events and the various activities that took place during the exhibition was to design actions in which *marrón* people could walk through the glass doors of the museums. In this and in line with our key premise that anti-racism is action, we took the position that museums should take responsibility and, more importantly, take action and change their practices through dialogue and collaboration with our collective: understanding the museum not only as an exhibition space, but also as a space that has the potential to repair, to build collectively and to give a place to populations and perspectives that have been historically marginalised and silenced. A fundamental factor is that, in order for this reparation to

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be real and not just symbolic or temporary, it must take place in dialogue and joint action with the communities concerned.

Question: How can we create an exhibition that has an impact?

Creating an exhibition is not just producing materials that generate pleasure, entertainment, or contemplation. For our collective, the curatorial act of conceiving and making an exhibition is an opportunity to put into practice a class-conscious anti-racist perspective on the art world. The primary aim is to extend to the *marrón* population the right to access, the right to culture. It is also a matter of beginning to notice the presence or absence of debates about progressive policies of inclusion, and whether this inclusion is actually made real by working with the populations in question. It is about seeing artistic and curatorial practice as a political act. In this way, putting together an exhibition creates a space that invites reflection and the questioning of preconceived ideas about who makes decisions in museums and the art system, and what happens with their installations and agendas. Furthermore, it is an opportunity to think of an exhibition as a place of encounter between the different populations that might make up its audience, but with particular attention to the racialised population of popular origin.

We tried to create an exhibition that would occupy – that is, *malonear* – the museum, transforming it into a space in which links between different communities are actively developed. The focus was deliberately on *marrón* people in order to reduce the distance between the institution and the racialised communities that do not usually occupy it. This was taken into account in the curatorial process, the inaugural and closing events and the associated activities: guided tours, workshops, audiovisual clips and social media content.

The organisers, the participants in the activities and the artists invited to star in the video clips were racialised people who already had experience in artistic and cultural practices. In this sense, the aim was also to validate and recognise their work and personal journeys, as well as to provide a space for them to meet each other. For many members of the public, on the other hand, it was the first time they had been to an institution of this kind.

The selection of works from the Palais de Glace collection was made on the basis of the bodies represented in the images, the themes they address (racialised labour, access to rights, etc.), the materials they used and the allusions they made to specific places. These works were acquired by the Palais de Glace during various editions of the annual competition

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of Salón Nacional de Artes Visuales. The works were selected in dialogue with racialised corporealities and realities, bearing in mind that none of the artists who created them belonged to racialised communities. The aim of the selection was to question who has the opportunity to produce artistic works. We envisioned a dialogue between the works of the Palais de Glace collection, the presence of the *marrón* population, the series of video clips, the guided tours and works produced by the Villeres Writers' Collective. The exhibition opened the possibility of a dialogue between works that could have come from artists from popular backgrounds and actions performed in the present that question social imaginaries from an anti-racist perspective.

Museums are places that legitimise discourses and validate knowledge and narratives. Working collaboratively means understanding they can also be seen as a tool that provides reparations to diverse communities, always taking into account the place the museums have historically occupied and their relationship to racialised communities. It means beginning to see museums as potential spaces of reparation, not only by providing a physical space but also by enabling debates, opening their doors to reference points and collectives whose trajectories and histories can be recognised both symbolically and economically. It is a way of building the museum collectively, making a museum that allows for the existence of possibilities beyond the dominant ones.

Question: Who are the creators of knowledge, of truth, of history?

The debate about the differences between arts and crafts is still current today. Art is seen as something produced by creative geniuses, associated with an exclusive sector that possesses innate talents, and linked to a position of power and elite, that is, only for the few. Crafts are associated with a job that is taught and learned, and with manual and mass production; it does not have a unique value because it is mass-produced. In the social imaginary, when we think of the bodies that create arts and crafts, there is also a valorisation based on racial factors. Which bodies are understood as being capable and worthy of producing the works of art, the knowledge and the signs of cultural and intellectual value that can be presented in a museum? In the art system, success is measured not only in terms of quality and productive capacity, but also in terms of the tools and doors that networking gives access to, which intervene in construction of figures taken as representative.

Art is a sign of the political, historical, social and cultural events happening at the time of its creation. It serves as an indicator that,

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together with theory, create narratives about history and its participants. In Argentina, the primary exponents of the arts have generally been – and still are to this day – of European descent. Those who produced the works that shaped social imaginaries and represented the Argentine nation, commissioned by the state during its process of formation, have been Europeans or Argentina-born white people trained in European art academies. In other words, the gaze that shaped the artworks foundational to the country's history is white and Eurocentric.

Racialised bodies – Indigenous *marrón* bodies – are seen as objects of study, in museums to be analysed, studied and measured. The descriptions in the diaries and illustrations of the European travellers who came to the Americas revealed an anthropological or sociological gaze that objectified, infantilised and animalised Indigenous *marrón* people. From the transporting of Indigenous individuals to the Global North for study, to the theft of cultural artefacts from Indigenous communities, museums retain colonial roots in their history. In this scenario, the representation in art institutions of alternative ways of being for *marrón* bodies represented a break with the social schema in which *marrón* people are not even considered human persons, but objects or animals, and their cultural artefacts, in turn, are considered only as anthropological objects.

Considering racialised subjects as knowledge-producing subjects and creators of art allows us to give space to the diverse voices and knowledges of different communities. Objects are given life and meaning through the people who represent them, in a process of re-signifying and affirming narratives. It is people and their communities, and in this case people who identify as *marrón*, who, by their active presence in museums, can use words and use their bodies to occupy, disrupt and expose structural racism, unequal access and entrenched prejudices. Museums must position themselves as places of exchange, learning and reparation that can make their tools available to communities and collectives to ensure change with real impact.

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