

Master Thesis Project  
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**Understanding the Art field in Bogotá.  
Considerations for the conception of an exhibition  
in the frame of a cross-cultural year**

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# Introduction

## *Abstract*

The questions that will be addressed in the following document are divided in two main areas. The first part is dedicated to the understanding of the art field in Bogotá, Colombia. The city has become one of the most important cities in South America and the financial center of the Andean region, with a creative and innovative spirit. The city hosts many multinational headquarters, and has different venues for events and conventions making it a privileged destination for people from different fields around the world. The cultural agenda of the city includes more than 60 museums and art galleries and around 50 independent spaces. Many experts and reviewers agree that Colombia has one of the best economies in the region and Bogotá is at the heart of the blooming the country has experienced in the past 12-15 years. The city has undergone changes in many areas and the cultural sphere displays the positive consequences of this development (León de la Barra, 2014).



*Figure 1. El nuevo Dorado (2012), made with coca leaf powder pigment and gold leaf. Miguel Ángel Rojas*

The understanding of the art field in Bogotá is a necessary step in the development of the project that constitutes the second part of the document: the proposal of a project that should take place in the city during 2017. The questions that will be approached in this part of the document include, the process of organizing and curating an artistic project since the first steps of it and keeping track of all the research, the methodology followed, the exchange with artists, curators, institutions and other actors involved. A description of the

current status of the project, the implications it will have for the art field and the actors involved in its development and the expectations in a micro and macro scale are going to be part of the conclusions.

### *Justification*

I'm a Colombian artist and I've been living in Europe during the past 7 years. I grew up in Bogotá and I still have some memories from my childhood related with the fear of being in the city during the time in which Colombia declared the war against their internal mafia. In 2008, when I left the country, the city had already undergone many positive changes in the social and economic field with a big improvement in the quality of life of its citizens. This shift continued during the past years and I've been experiencing it more as an outsider, each time I go there to visit my family.

I did my studies in the art field in Europe and I've been mainly living in France during these last years. I haven't been in contact with the art world in Colombia and getting closer to it is something that I've been wanting to do since graduating from the arts school in 2012.

At the beginning of 2015 Colombia and France signed a diplomatic agreement aimed to strengthen and diversify bilateral relations in a very favorable context by adding a highlight to the calendar: organize a binational cross-seasons year during 2017. This year will include a French season in Colombia, from December 2016 to July 2017 and then a Colombian season in France, from July to December 2017. Among the events that will be conceived during next year, a special attention will be given to the arts of both countries (Institut Français, 2015).

As a Colombian artist based in France I found this event to be the ideal situation to build links with my country by conceiving a project in both Colombia and France. I've been working in collaboration with a photography festival called Voies Off that accepted my invitation to propose a project for 2017. I've been the initiator of the project and I'm taking part in the organization of the event and in the curatorial choice of the artists. The idea of having the exhibition during this particular year will allow me to ask for financing from public and private institutions in Colombia and France. Also the project will gain a wider visibility if it happens in the frame of a larger cultural manifestation.

The possibility of getting closer to the art field will be beneficial for my practice as an artist and enhance the visibility of my work. I have been involved in the organization of exhibitions since I was studying in the photography school (being head of the student association, working for photo festivals) but I haven't had a proper experience in conceptualizing an exhibition and taking a curatorial role on it. The possibility to have a first curatorial experience in the frame of an academic program is an inspiring and enriching opportunity that fits the idea of the program to *"become a bridge between your own unique artistic practice and the inter-national art world"* (Novia University, 2015).

## Methodology

The work presented is a documentation of my research process and of the steps taken in the development of the project. Even if the project is still a work in progress it was of great importance to research about the current art field in Bogotá a revise the history of the country. I was interested in acquiring a wider knowledge of the situation and understanding the reasons of the present situation. I truly believe that the research part, even if it won't be visible in the following step of the project's development, was of great importance for me also on a personal level and it will allow me to better approach the challenges and decision making that will come in the further development of the project idea.

During the process I quickly realized that I was going to have a hard time finding a proper bibliography to support the research. Not only because there are only few publications that discuss the development in the art field in Colombia during the last years but also because the few I found come from local editors and are not available in Europe. I tried to contact a university press that was one of the editor of a book that correlated with my research but didn't manage to get access to it in electronic format.

As a consequence of not having full access to a proper bibliography of the Colombian arts history I decided to conduct the research in two ways. The first by mining all possible sources found online (texts, images, videos, audio, etc.). This allowed me to get information from different perspectives and points of view. The downside was that the quality of the sources was not always the same and the information was not always clear or relevant. I decided then to contact people from several institutions and I had the opportunity to visit the country at the beginning of the year to do some field work by exploring the places by myself, meet some actors and conduct some interviews.

The process followed can be seen as partly ethnological as it consisted in comparing and analyzing information that explained the characteristics of group of people and the relationships amongst them. Being sensible to the culture of Colombia from an inside and outside perspective, the research process can be considered as being both emic and etic (Franklin, 2009). My approach is also based on interviews and observations to acquire knowledge of a culture I know from both perspectives. The whole research process is related with the recent shift in contemporary art of artists using ethnography as an integral

component in their artistic practice. This phenomenon raises a range of questions regarding the relationship between experience in the field, interpretation, and artistic representation (Desai, 2002).

*"It is through extensive conversations with various people from different socio-economic, generational and ethnic/racial background and through reading books and documents that these artists get a feel for the place or issue. Listening to people describe their experiences is crucial to their artistic process; however, the appeal to experience is framed within history and linked to power. Each of these artists voices her concern with representing experiences of the "other" as white artists. Knowing that some form of violence to the other is part of such a representational process, these artists seek to minimize the violence by actively engaging the participants in the artistic process"* (Desai, 2002, p. 313).

*"...artists create a forum for people to assist them in understanding their communities' experiences and use that exchange to naturally guide the direction of the project"* (Desai, 2002, p. 317).

# Understanding the Colombian context

## *Short History of last decades in Colombia*

Gone are the years burdened with violence, mafia and drugs, where tragedies occupied the television and newspapers in an almost daily basis. During the past decade, the country has progressively changed its image addressing several social and political issues and flaunts today the title of one of the most succeeding economy in Latin America.

At the beginning of the new millennium, people still lived in fear of kidnappings, terrorist attacks and guerrillas were part of the reality of the nation. Because of its civil war, Colombia was then completely isolated from the international sphere. Since 1964, the conflict had involved government, army, paramilitary, guerrilla groups like the FARC, ELN, M-19 and drug cartels in a battle for territory. The battlefield was the whole country and the target the Colombian population. (Stanford University, 2015)

*“By most accounts, in 2000 the government was barely in control of one-third of Colombia’s countryside and had ceded a sanctuary the size of Switzerland to terrorist insurgents. Just seven years later, government presence had extended into about 90 percent of national territory...”* (Meacham, Farah, Lamb, 2014, p.5).

It was difficult to travel outside the country and to move from one city to another was almost only possible by air due to the insecurity on the roads. There have been more than 300,000 victims of the conflict, and five million people have been displaced from the rural areas to the cities and from the cities to foreign destinations. Many experts agree that an important positive shift in the security of the country was given by ex-president Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010). During his period, Colombia made a big progress in terms of improving security in rural areas and increasing state presence in the countryside, fighting the guerrillas with a tough policy against violence that produced a sense of stability that didn’t exist for decades.

Since 2012, Juan Manuel Santos Calderón, the current president of Colombia, and his government are engaged in reaching an end to the conflict with the FARC, the biggest guerrilla group in the country, hoping also to put an end to the rural violence that has plagued the country for decades. The peace process hasn’t reach a final agreement but there’s a common frame in which the government and the FARC are currently working. At



the same time, the economy of the country is still one of the most stable of the region even if the drop in the oil prices is slowing the growing rate and showing the dependency the country still has on the foreign capital. The level of investment and its multiplier effect throughout the economy will be in fact, the most important variable after the signing of a peace agreement.

Macroeconomics aside, the country and the population are involved in a complicated process of social and political reconstruction. In this context, sociologists have begun to visualize what has been called the “post-conflict”, defined as the phase that comes after the final signing of the agreements. This will be the phase in which the population will be involved in restructuring the society with issues such as the demobilization of armed groups, the further improvement in the security of the citizens, the reintegration of the people into society and other important challenges that result from of the peace agreements.

*“The peace talks are set to include main issues such as: agrarian reform and development, political participation, drug trafficking, the rights of the victims of violence, and an end of armed conflict, and a system for the agreement’s implementation. So far, the issues of land reform and political participation have been resolved, with the two sides still in negotiations on the remaining four. The negotiations have been highly controversial; many prominent political figures in Colombia... With the peace process, however, Santos remains optimistic, aiming to end 50 years of violence and to overcome the rural conflict” (Meacham, Farah, Lamb, 2014, p.26).*

### *The Shift in the Art field*

During the past decades in Colombia, several generations of artists came and went, largely unseen by the international art world. Nowadays the country has one of the most robust economies in Latin America and a stable political environment that has led to a progressive shift in the image of the country. The country has also gain international visibility during the last years. After being closed for many decades in its internal war, the doors seem to be open again and the country is also becoming an important destination for businessmen and tourists.

In the last 10 years the international art world has finally started to pay attention to Colombia and the art scene has become vibrant and interesting for galleries and collectors. In addition to the socio-economic changes that have taken place, the above is also the result of an internal process that started in the nineties and that helped to revitalize the field of arts in the country with a special focus in the city of Bogotá (León de la Barra, 2014).

### *First steps, the nineties in Colombia*

Until the mid-nineties things were really quiet in the field of arts in Colombia. The war against Pablo Escobar concluded on December 1993 generating a fragmentation in the Drugs Mafias and diluting the power of the Colombians Cartels. Until that time, the well-known international artists were only a few people, mostly born in the thirties and forties, who studied in Europe and were established already since several decades. Probably the most well-known among them were Fernando Botero, Enrique Grau, Alejandro Obregón and Beatriz Gonzales. There was something in common among these artists; their personal work has a starting point related with subjects that address objectively or symbolically local questions about the situation of Colombia (Rubiano Caballero, 1995)



Figure 2. *La Violencia* (1962), oil on painting. Alejandro Obregón

After 1995 Colombia experienced a development in its art field giving visibility to other types of practices in the art. The art scene in Colombia started slowly to wake up, with a new generation of artists that changed the panorama of the established artists like Botero or Obregón. This new generation consisted of artists that were in their early thirties, people like Danilo Dueñas and Carlos Salas, but also of younger artists, people with interesting proposals in contemporary art, more open to an international audience and with a more globalized perspective (Iregui, 1991).

During those years, there's also a market that slowly starts to grow, people are interested in buying art, specially paintings. Galleries start to show artists from different generations along with the established ones. Some artists begin to make changes in the critical side of the field and open independent spaces. An example of this was *Gaula*, initiated by Jaime Iregui, Danilo Dueñas and Carlos Salas in the mid-nineties (Iregui, 1991). Even if it didn't last long it was the first example of artist-lead space, taking distance from the tradition of galleries and museums. There were also some important critics that contributed to these changes. People like Carolina Ponce de León (Ponce de León, 1991) and José Hernández Aguilar (Aguilar, 1989) were supporting this new generation of artists. José Hernández, who was working for *El Tiempo*, the biggest newspaper in the country, started to publish content concerning the local art field, creating a space for talks and discussions in the medias. The above mentioned opened in 1997 an arts space, called *Espacio Vacío*, under the direction of Jaime Iregui (Iregui, 2000). *Espacio Vacío* was another independent space that didn't follow the conventional rules of the gallery system. Both *Espacio Vacío* and *Gaula* were the first spaces that summoned the contemporary artistic field in the city. They started to make projects that involved people from the neighborhood, organizing participative works, performances and also some small educational programs. Franklyn Aguirre, another artist from the same generation, started organizing *La bienal de Venecia de Bogotá* or *Venice Biennial of Bogotá* (Venecia is a popular neighborhood in the city of Bogotá) involving artists, the people from the neighborhood, the municipality and other actors. The biennial quickly became a successful project and its last edition was in 2011 (Aguirre, 2009).

## *The XXI Century and the transformation of the art scene*

At the beginning of the new millennium things were still pretty quiet in the art field compared to the actual situation of Bogotá. Even if the conditions of the country had improved and the war against the mafias was over since already several years, the guerrillas were still part of the agenda and after a failed peace process that ended in 2002, the hopes to finally put an end to decades of war and violence were again pushed away.

Maria Clara Bernal, art historian and researcher from Los Andes University, played an important role in the internationalization of the arts scene in Colombia. Working in cooperation with the British Council, she curated several exhibitions in the city with artists coming from Europe. During those years she also worked in partnership with London institutions and brought to UK several Colombian artists that were in their thirties and forties. Among those artists we can find Milena Bonilla, María Elvira Escallón, Humberto Junca, Oscar Muñoz, Nadín Ospina, José Alejandro Restrepo and Miguel Ángel Rojas who became really active in the national art scene during the following years. This was also the period in which European curators started to visit the country, following Bernal's invite, to explore the art field and meet local artists. One of the most important exhibitions curated by Maria Clara Bernal took place at the Glyn Vivian Gallery in London during 2007. The exhibition was called *Displaced: Contemporary Art from Colombia* and featured 15 Colombian artists whose work dealt with the ideas of mass migration and displacement of identity (Bernal, 2007).

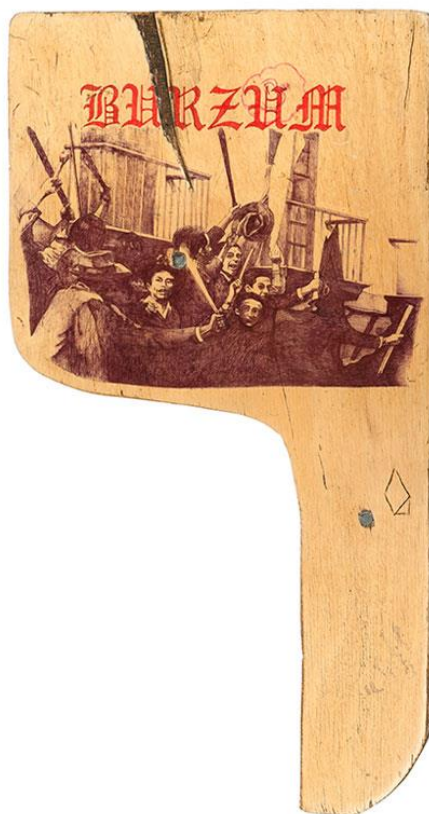


Figure 3. *Damn Right!* (2006), pen on wood, using old school desks, by Humberto Junca

Carolina Ponce de León and José Hernan Aguilar were no longer active in the art field and the arts critic was missing voices that generate dialogue and debate. As a consequence, young artists started slowly to get involved in the development of the arts. At the same time Jaime Iregui came back with *Esfera Pública* a project that was born as a forum-style website in which questions were posted in order to create open discussions. The project became really successful and *Esfera Pública* was invited to participate in Kassel's Documenta 12 in 2007 as part of the exhibition *Publishing the public: Contextualizing Locality*, that approached writing and publishing as a public act (Documenta, 2007).

According to Clemencia Poveda, even if there was a clear development in the art field, the government was not showing interest in supporting the field. As with the arts critics, places to show art outside the galleries and few museums were still rare and the galleries were still showing and selling established artists and modern art avoiding many contemporary practices. Artists-run spaces started to appear creating alternatives and *Esfera Pública* became the perfect spot to create controversy and debate. It was for several years the reference point for people involved in contemporary arts in Colombia. Debates about the art scene and information about events were centralized here (Poveda, 2016).

At the time it was almost impossible for a young artist to get into the gallery system and to be exhibited in the few museums or participate in collective exhibitions and these artists-run spaces brought new opportunities to them. Many spaces started to open yearly but the average life of them proved to be shorter than expected. There was not a proper direction or “raison d’être” for these places and many were ran by artists under 25 that were trying to show their works in their space. Only few of these places survived and became established but their existence served to prove how things were starting to change (Poveda, 2016).

By the time, several Universities started to open Arts programs, and in the span of 4 to 5 years the amount of artists that were graduating each semester tripled. Not only young people were getting more interested in arts but also the quality of the existing arts department was really high. Jaime Cerón, art curator and one of the major figures in the art scene in Colombia, explains and justifies this situation as a consequence of the absence of a market. The artists were led to become teachers, and the art faculties were populated with many quality artists that helped to boost the field. As a consequence of an economical obstruction qualitative programs were created. Living as an artist during that time was nearly impossible and the artist only had two choices: working in other fields or becoming a teacher for an art school (Cerón, 2016).

By 2006 the Political situation was becoming more and more stable and the economy was also going through a good moment. Multinational companies started to open branches in the country and a renewed high-class started to stablish. These events lead to the strengthening of the field of collectors and the independent spaces that had started to pop-up began to have a public that was also interested in acquiring contemporary art.

From this point of view, the change that happened in the art field in Bogotá can be seen as an organic process. Helped without doubts by socio-economic reasons and by the improvement of the political situation in the country it was also triggered by the internal conditions of the art fields. A telling example of the above is the fact that even today the art market in Colombia is still very closed. Colombian collectors are still used to acquiring Colombian art and artists living in Colombia find their clients within the field. The international exposure that Colombian artists have seen is still small and constitutes more the exception than the rule. Two of the most well-known contemporary Colombian artists are Doris Salcedo and the young Oscar Murillo. Both of them studied and built their

careers abroad, in New York and London respectively, allowing them to acquire an international recognition and taking advantage of the highly-developed art scenes of both cities. In the case of Murillo, Marta Gnyp states that “A combination of several social, artistic and financial aspects helped to create a hype around the artist, which attracted the attention of collectors. His artistic and social talents were noticed and supported in a short period of time by various important actors in the art field. Each of these actors has another network through which Murillo could be promoted...” (Gnyp, 2015)

During the last years the art field has continued to grow steadily in Bogotá and the situation has deeply changed in the last 10 years. At the beginning of 2000 there were still only some local galleries whose clients were almost exclusively local collectors interested in established Colombian artists and modern art and the government and public institutions were far from being interested in helping to change the panorama. Thanks to the already described circumstances, today we can find dozens of galleries and art spaces that have opened their doors in the past years and a circuit of public and private initiatives that include residency programs, art foundations and art fairs.

Some, among all the artist-run spaces and private initiatives that started to open 10 years ago, are today recognized institutions in the field that has importantly contributed in the restructuring of the field. In this context it is worth mentioning initiatives like *Flora Arts+Natura*, *La Agencia*, *El Mentidero*, *MIAMI* and *ArtBo*.

## Field Work, visiting the art scene in Bogotá

In December 2015 I got in contact with several art institutions located in Bogotá. As the situation has changed a lot since 2008, when I left the country, many of the places that can be found nowadays didn't exist by that time or were small initiatives that are now established institutions. There are more than 120 spaces related with arts in the city between galleries, independent spaces, foundations and museums. Half of those spaces opened their doors in or after 2010 and have reinvented the local art scene inviting also international artists and curators to come to the city.

I was in Colombia during two weeks at the end of January 2016 and, after having started my research on the contemporary scene in the city, it was extremely interesting and exciting to get in touch with and visit places that have contributed in the development of the art field during the past years. Among all these places I had the opportunity to approach some public and private initiatives, to meet some of the people behind them and also to discuss the possibilities and their interest to get involved in exhibition or residency projects. I visited *La Agencia*, *El Parche*, *El Mentidero*, *Alliance Française* and *Flora Ars+Natura*. These meetings became an important part of the research process and the project as they gave me a personal perspective of the situation in Bogotá and additional information that was not available online. I understood that, even if there were small differences in the way of assessing the development of the art field, there was an agreement in the magnitude of the transformation and a positive attitude towards it. The persons I personally talked with were enthusiastic describing the projects they have been working on and underlining public and private initiatives that are part of the revamped agenda of the city. Other positive point of the meetings was the possibility to introduce me as an artist and curator and propose the existing possibilities to collaborate in artistic projects.

The following selection of initiatives is far from constituting an extensive research of the situation in Bogotá but is a first approach that allowed me to get in touch with these institutions. In any case, several of these organizations are among the most active and established initiatives in the city with dynamic and stimulating programs along the year. I intent to keep developing contacts and researching about other institutions in the city to have a wider perspective of the scene.



## *La Agencia*

*La Agencia* opened its doors in 2010. Among its activities *La Agencia* hosts artist residencies, exhibitions, develops curatorial projects, educational projects and creates editorial publications, among other activities. It has participated in projects such as *ArteBa* Buenos Aires (2013), *Programa arte+educación*, Arco Madrid (2015) and *Salón Regional Zona Centro* (2015) among many others. It consists in 5 artists (Monica Zamudio, Mariana Murcia, Santiago Pinyol, Diego García and Sebastián Cruz) who have developed their personal practices in between curatorial and educational projects inside *La Agencia*. (Murcia, 2016)

During my visit to *La Agencia*, Monica Zamudio, Mariana Murcia and Santiago Pinyol were present and I had the opportunity to talk and learn about their experience working in Bogotá. According to the visual artist Mariana Murcia (Murcia, 2016) their Residency project was successful for years but they recently decided to focus in educational projects in arts with their project *Escuela de Garaje* (garage school). They were in charge of curating the *Salon Regional Centro* in 2015 which is basically a public initiative that happens every two years and divides the country in seven regions to show the transformations that are happening in the field of arts across the country. For this project, they developed an innovative proposal in which they transformed the exhibition space in an experimental research school, seeking to build an alternative viable arts platform, to create and educate an active public. The importance of *La Agencia* is found in their ability to communicate and collaborate with other art institutions in the city, develop project together and to have initiatives that seek to include the local communities.

## *El Parche*

Founded in 2009 by Olga Robayo, Herman Mbamba and Marius Wang, *El Parche* project works using the model of an artist residence and laboratory space focusing on the development of a wider networking with African and Latin American communities of artists. It's an independent project that serves as platform for diverse proposals in the field of visual arts.

*El Parche* started as an independent space sponsored during the first two years by several Norwegian institutions and arts foundations, among them *TrAP* and the *Norsk Kulturfond*.

Back in 2009, when it started its activities, it was the only artist residency program in the city of Bogotá. El Parche has hosted many international artists and temporal exhibitions during these years. In 2013, they organized in Norway “Colomborama”, an exhibition project whose aim was to show a selection of today’s vast art and culture scene found in Bogotá; inserted into the Oslo art scene. The project took place in six different venues and lasted from February to June 2013. (Wang, Robayo, 2013)

During our meeting, Olga Robayo proved to be optimistic about the changes in the city since 2009 and the future development of the art scene in Bogotá. El Parche is nowadays focused in projects with Latin American communities of artists taking inspiration from Capacete, the famous artists’ residency in Brazil. With a more alternative approach, El Parche offers a dynamic platform for artists to develop and/or exhibit projects. They open their doors to national and international artists looking to develop and idea in their space. *El Parche* was one of the first artist-run institutions in the city and one of the few that still survive from that time. They are an essential institution in the arts field of the city and have develop a national and international network that includedes contacts in Europe with emphasis in the Scandinavian countries (Robayo, 2016).

### *El Mentidero*

Located in a house in the center of Bogotá inhabited by artists, *El Mentidero* was created by Juan Obando and Paulo Licona with the idea of being a creative school, a place for artist residencies and host of several artists’ events. It was founded in October 2012 with a project called *Mercadito & Mentidero*.

El Mentidero is a place that mixes several practices in arts and it’s at the same time the living space for the artists and residents. I had a talk with Paulo Licona about their future projects and the possibilities to host exhibitions and artists in residency during 2017. *El Mentidero* is a smaller institution compared to both *La Agencia* and *El Parche*, but Pablo Licona has witnessed the change in the art field and is one of the artists that were in their twenties during the beginning of 2000 and started to open places and realize alternative activities in a context in which the government and the public institutions were not supporting young artists. With rebellious and sarcastic ideas *El Mentidero* managed to find its place in the renovated context of the city of Bogotá (Licona, 2016).

## *FLORA ars+natura*

FLORA ars+natura is a space for contemporary art in Bogotá that specializes in the relationship between art and nature. FLORA's activities are focused on realizing exhibitions, residency programs and diverse educational activities addressed to the local community. Since its beginnings FLORA became a reference point for the scene in Bogotá, establishing links through international residencies, commissioned projects, and intense educational activities.

FLORA started in 2012 when there were already several artists' residency programs in the city. José Roca, its founder and main institutional curator chose the name alluding to his interests in arts and botanic even if the place remains open to all kinds of links between nature and art.

The relationship between art and nature has in fact interested José Roca for a long time. His thesis is that since the mid-nineties many Colombian artists were interested in Botanic, using this allegorical approach to address and confront local problems, in particular the complex situation of the country during those violent years, in which insurgency, repression and drug trafficking were common issues (Roca, 2012).



*Figure 4. Exhibition view in Flora arts+natura (2014)*

José Roca is without doubt one of the most experienced curators in Bogotá, with a highly international profile and experience. I didn't manage to get an appointment with him

during my visit to Flora but it is easy to understand that he is a major actor in the development of the artistic field in Colombia. He was Adjunct Curator of Latin American Art for the Tate Museum until 2015 and has a wide international experience curating exhibitions in South America and participating in the Merco Sur Biennial in Brazil in 2011. He was also a jury member for the 52<sup>nd</sup> Venice Biennial.

FLORA ars+natura is probably the most successful independent space in the city inviting local and international artists to their residency programs and exhibitions. They have a recently opened school named *Escuela Flora*, that will have yearly programs for young and confirmed artists.

### *Alliance Française*

The *Alliance Française* has a presence in over 140 countries. Its main objective is to promote the French language and culture outside France. It established close links with local institutions to develop social and cultural projects. They organize conferences, exhibitions, artistic workshops and sponsor several festivals in the field of arts, literature and music.

In Colombia, the *Alliance Française* has presence in 13 different cities and Bogotá alone has 4 different spaces. The Colombian branch of this institution is in fact one of the biggest ones across the world, French language being the second foreign language among citizens in the country.

Even if the main purpose of the *Alliance Française* is not directly related to arts they play an important role in the cultural sphere of the country in the same way as other cultural centers such as the Goethe-Institut and the British Council.

As mentioned above, 2017 is going to be the binational cross-seasons year between Colombia and France. In the frame of this year the *Alliance Française* will be responsible of the organization of several manifestations in collaboration with the French Institute and the Colombian Ministry of Culture.

Morgiane Laib, the former cultural director of the *Alliance Française*, informed me about part of the events that are going to take place during 2017 and showed interest in other

initiatives and collaborations. Two of their spaces in Bogotá have in fact gallery spaces with a program of exhibitions throughout the year (Laib, 2016)

## *ArtBo*

Ten years ago, the Chamber of Commerce of Bogota decided to organize an art fair. The purpose was to position and promote Bogota as a cultural destination, as well as strengthen the visual arts in the country and create an inclusive city platform through an event that goes far beyond the market platforms. In its ten year's existence, *ArtBo* has managed to consolidate all these objectives.

*ArtBo* has been essential for the development of the art market in Colombia. Most notably, it's the creation of parallel fairs during *ArtBo* like "La Otra" or "La Feria del Millón", a phenomenon which tells a lot about the scope that *ArtBo* has taken in the last years. *ArtBo* has also been a driving force of new initiatives devoted to young and non-established artists hosting spaces from public and private institutions inside the fair. This has been one of the peculiarities of *ArtBo* compared to other Art Fairs and it has helped to bring recognition to it. *ArtBo* transcends its commercial aspect. It contributes to position Colombian art in the international arena, becoming a more inclusive and educational platform with a dynamic and evolving program. (ArtBo, 2015)



*Figure 5. Exhibition view from artBo (2013)*

*ArtBo* can is in general an essential event for the art scene in the Bogotá and has become the largest annual platform for the arts in Colombia and one of the most important fairs in the whole region. It has also become the backbone of the Art Month in Colombia and

today is recognized internationally thanks to the quality of galleries represented and the diversity of its propositions.

From another perspective, the art field in Bogotá has become a victim of the success of ArtBo. As often happens in cities with a young art scene, the program of the entire year is highly-concentrated on the weeks that precede and follow the fair. An example of this phenomenon is Dubai, in which 60% of the sales for local galleries are happening during the Art Week, an event in direct link with Art Dubai (Art Dubai, 2016). In Bogotá, events that used to take place during other periods of the year were rescheduled to happen simultaneously with with *ArtBo*. Many initiatives organize their exhibition at the same time with the fair and it seems to be a bloom in the arts during the month of October, but leaving gaps in the program of the rest of the year. *Luis Caballero* prize, probably the most important in the art field in Colombia, was re-organized to happen during the month of ArtBo when it used to happen during 7-8 months of the year with several exhibitions of the shortlisted artists.

The fair has become a great opportunity to visit and experience what is happening in art in Colombia but with all the initiatives that happen at the same moment it is impossible to seize all the events and get a clear picture of how the local art scene looks like. Other downside of this situation is that governmental policies are also prioritizing an event that focuses on the commercial side of the arts, without having an intellectual or critical focus for the field and leaving aside other “more-cultural” manifestations that were happening in the city.

As part of *ArtBo*, *ArteCámara* is a part of the fair, devoted to showcase new artists and young collectives of Colombian artists under 40 who do not have commercial representation. Since 2015, the section opened a space to promote the work of independent spaces, that operate throughout the country and other initiatives that happen outside the gallery system. Each year they have an open call for proposals and they appear to be flexible to host different kind of proposals. *El Mentidero* and *El Parche* were featured here during the last edition of the fair.

# Project Proposal

## *The Photography scene in Bogotá*

By the end of the past millennium photography was still underrated in Colombia. Working with photography was full of prejudices and neither galleries or museums were taking the risk of showing photography exhibitions. The dynamics of the photography field were outdated and people working with this medium were mainly doing it with a practical approach. Contemporary or conceptual approaches were big exceptions and the artists with these kinds of approaches had to wait years to be able to show their work in private and public art institutions.

At the end of the nineties several young artists started to get more and more interested in photography and video art. By that time the Gallery Alonso Garcés was one of the first galleries that decided to exhibit photography. After coming back from Europe in 2002 the gallerist Alonso Garcés brought to Colombia the work of Hiroshi Sugimoto, Thomas Ruff and other international artists working with photography (El Tiempo, 2005). At the same time the gallery started to support Colombian photographers with rising careers like Clemencia Echeverri, Luis Morales and Ana María Rueda. (Garcés, 2015)

In the following years there was an important development in the field of photography, but at the end of the last decade, things slowed down again. According to Clemencia Poveda, many artists that had started to work with photography got back to more traditional mediums like painting or sculpture. Even if people were interested in working with photography there were no educational programs dedicated to photography in the country. Only some photography courses were taught as part of the art programs but the Universities did not have full-time programs to offer (Poveda, 2016). This situation stays the same, regardless of the fact that some Photography Schools have opened their doors in the last years. Among them: *Zona Cinco*, *La Bloom* and *Salle College*; they all share a practical approach to the field. Art theory and contemporary photography are not part of these kinds of programs.

From that generation, we can find Juan Pablo Echeverri, Javier Vanegas and Santiago Forero that keep working within photography. Many other artists moved back to other practices due to the lack of opportunities that were offered at that moment. After a rapid

expansion of the field at the beginning of the 2000 there was a period of contraction, in opposition to what was happening with other mediums.

At the beginning of 2002 the first photography festival in Colombia made its debut. *Fotología* was a festival aimed to promote artistic practices within photography. The festival's aim was to provide spaces of debate, dissemination and circulation for the artists' work. Seminars, workshops and conferences were also part of the program. Another important effort of *Fotología* was to encourage collectors to get interested in contemporary practices within photography. It was during the first years of *Fotología* that the gallery owners, institutions and artists involved with photography rapidly increased. Unfortunately, the life span of the festival was very short and due to the global economic crisis, the last edition took place in 2008. The founder and director of the festival was Clemencia Poveda that has been engaged with the development of the photography practices in the country since the late eighties (Arte-Sur, 2008).

During the same period the gallery *Alcuadrado*, was the first gallery that consecrated its program to exhibit artists working with photography. Among the artists that were represented by the gallery we can find Miguel Angel Rojas, Oscar Muñoz, Juan Fernando Herrán, María Elvira Escallón and Jaime Ávila. The gallery opened their doors in 2000 and took an important place in positioning Colombian art abroad showing its artists in fairs in London and other European capitals. The gallery closed its doors at the end of 2009 after the death of Juan Gallo, its founder and director. Another gallery that was engaged with photography was *El Museo*. Working with Clemencia Poveda at the beginning of *Fotología*, they also exhibited artists like Rosario Lopez, Javier Vanegas, Santiago Forero, Juanita Carrasco and Sandra Bermudez (Poveda, 2016).





Figure 6. *Línea del destino (Destiny Line)* (2006) by Oscar Muñoz

After *Fotología* ceased its activities, Bogotá was left with a photography biennial that started in 2005 by the name of *Fotográfica*. The festival that counts already five editions focuses on a different country in each occasion. In 2013 the Nordic countries were guest of honor followed by Germany in 2015. The festival invites important international artists to their program and tries to create dialogues with the work of Colombian artists. The festival has been developing its program within the public space with an important part of the program exhibited in open places. In the frame of the festivals, seminars and workshops are also organized (Fotomuseo, 2015).

*Fotográfica* has the merit of being present in the city for the late 10 years and concentrates its efforts in the field of photography. The problem comes when it appears to be the only initiative that exists in the present. There is not a point of comparison and the program of the festival is always in hands of the founder and director, Gilma Suarez and the main focus of the festival is given to international artists.

### *Justification of the Project in Bogotá*

After the end of *Fotología* the situation hasn't changed much. According to Clemencia Poveda the initiatives in the field of photography have been rare especially when compared to the dynamics of the art field in the city. Young artists continue to prefer other mediums and among all the galleries and independent spaces that have opened after

2010, there isn't any place dedicated to exhibit and promote contemporary practices in photography. The latter being said, galleries are showing photography in a more regular basis and the presence of the medium is seen in fairs like ArtBo.

Compared to other South American countries the situation of Colombia is not bad but due to the absence of good programs in photography there are not as many artists that have experience working with photography. The end of Fotología matches the moment in which the field became stagnant and new propositions in the field are important and necessary today.

Jaime Cerón and Clemencia Poveda agree that there is a dearth of spaces that convoke the people interested in photography and create dialogues around it. There is a public interested in photography but a lack of initiatives in the field.

In this context the idea of an artistic projects that creates a dialogue between artists working in photography in both Colombia and France appears to be valid and crucial for the further development of the field in the country.

### *Punto Tangente*

The project is conceived in the frame of the cross-seasons year between Colombia and France during 2017. Through the presentation of works by young French artists in Colombia and the counterpart in France, the purpose of the project *Punto Tangente* (Tangent Point) is to reveal proposals that, coming from distant places and contexts, can be found in one or multiple points related to local practices but at the same time distant in a general line.

In design practice, a tangent is created when two or more lines interact in a way to suggest a relationship between them, causing a spatial ambiguity. This idea, which also exists in the photograph, is the starting point of this project. By presenting a visually challenging proposal, with this project want to encourage new practices, provide a greater depth and enrich existing practices in the photography field of each country.

The main actors of the project are going to be the *Voies Off* festival in France and Clemencia Poveda in Colombia. The project is a personal initiative conceived by my position as a Colombian artist living in France, my knowledge of both countries and the art

field in each of them. The organization of the project will be done by me in conjunction with the Voies Off festival for the French season and with Clemencia Poveda for the Colombian one.

The project is declined in two main stages. The first part of it should take place in March-April 2017 and will be focused on the practices of young French artists in Colombia. The second part is scheduled for July 2017 and will be dedicated to the promotion of young Colombian photographers that will be presented during the *Voies Off* Festival in Arles, France.

Each stage of the project is an opportunity to present the work of young artists in the form of screening events, but also round tables, conferences and other professional meetings linking to contemporary photography.

### *Development of the Project in Colombia*

In March-April 2017, the inhabitants of Bogotá will be invited to discover the practices of emerging artist in the field of photography in France. The possibility of presenting young artists in a distant context, can trigger new ideas among local artists.

The aim of the Voies Off Festival has been, for more than 20 years, to discover new practices worldwide in the contemporary photography field. Taking as a starting point the shortlisted French artists that have been presented in the Voies Off festival during the last 10 years, a selection will be made, to highlight the practices of the young photographers of this country.

With this first event we seek to revitalize the medium of photography in Colombia, proposing an alternative to existing festivals and events. We also try to showcase the talents of young photographers in a distant context and in front of a different audience, expanding the scope of their artistic proposals. The selection of the artists presented will be made under the artistic direction of Christophe Laloi, founder and artistic director of Voies Off, and myself.

This part of the project is thought to be presented within the facilities of the *Jorge Tadeo Lozano* University echoed with another space in downtown Bogota, such as *El Parqueadero* or the *Gilberto Alzate Avendaño* foundation. The idea will be to eventually

extend the screenings in other cities like Cartagena, Cali and Medellín taking advantage of the network that the Alliance Française, with its presence in 13 different cities, can provide us.

A cycle of conferences around contemporary photography will provide the opportunity to present and discuss in front of a Colombian public about contemporary practices from an European perspective. Christophe Laloi and Clemencia Poveda will be two of the guests at the conference. Other artists and curators from the photography field in France and Colombia will be invited.

### *Development of the Project in France*

At the heart of the Rencontres d'Arles for more than twenty years, Voies Off Festival is a major event in the world photography field. It's a place to discover new talents during the evenings of screenings involving an audience of professionals and amateurs. The selection of participants is made among the near 1500 candidates that apply to the festival each year.

In July 2017, the Festival Voies Off will have Colombian photographers as its honor guests during the opening week of the festival. The selection that will be presented is the result of a curatorial process that will be done by Clemencia Poveda and me, from an open call that will be spread in the main cities of Colombia.



*Figure 7. View of the Voies Off Festival (2015)*

In order to create a meeting point between the young generation of French artists and Colombians, Voies Off will also host a Franco-Colombian masterclass organized during the festival in 2017. This masterclass will bring together a small group of photographers from both countries to reflect on and discuss the practices of each person in relation to those present in the workshop. The participants will be selected from the calls received in both countries.

Among the artists featured in the screenings, some may also be able to be fully involved in the Voies Off festival, attending it as guests, having portfolio reviews and being present in the conferences organized within the frame of the festival.

### *Possible Sponsorship and Current Status of the Project*

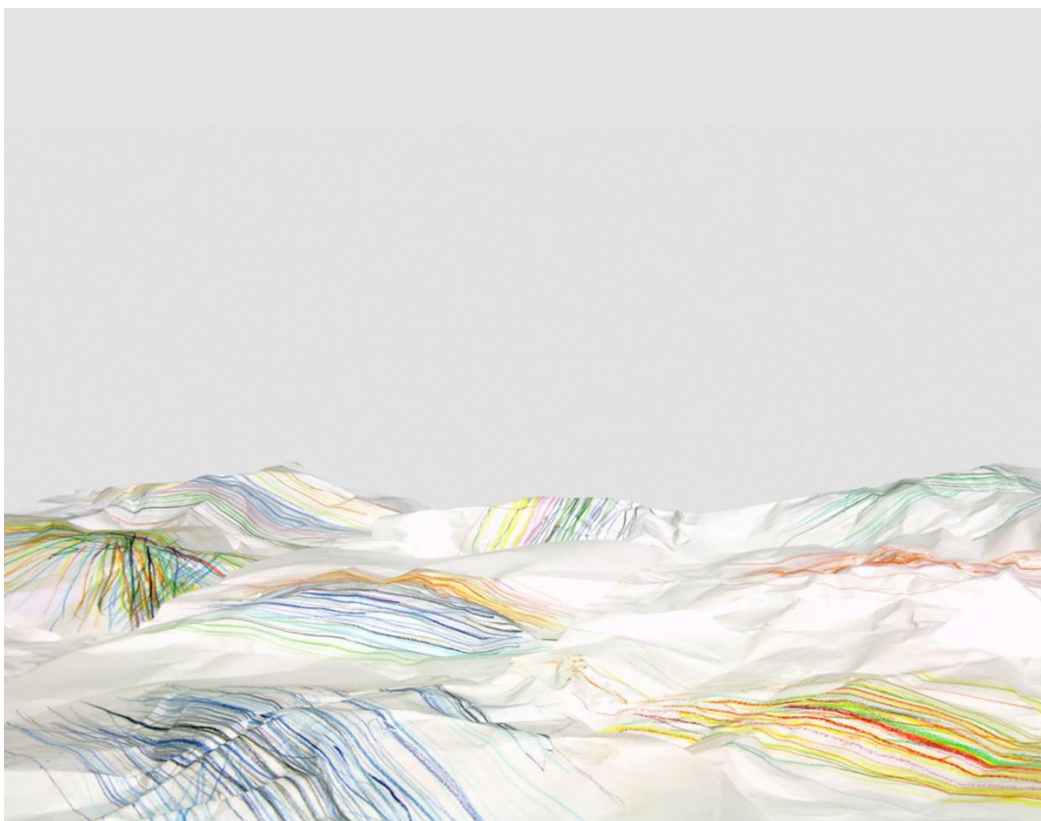
An open call was conducted in February and March 2016 to label projects that will be presented in the official program in both France and Colombia during 2017. The open call was conducted by the French Institute in Paris and the Ministry of Culture in Colombia with the help of other local organizations. A formal proposal of the project *Punto Tangente* was sent to both Paris and Bogotá and can be found in the annexes of this document. The answer to the open call will be given during the first weeks of May.

The general budget of the project, for a total of 50.000€ can also be found in the annexes. Taking into account that the cross-seasons year between Colombia and France is a public initiative of both countries, we're applying to public institutions to cover a substantial portion of it. The Colombian Ministry of Culture and *IDartes* (the local entity in charge of the development of the arts in Bogotá) are the main sponsors in Colombia. The French Institute, the city of Arles and the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region are the main sponsors in France. We are asking to cooperate with other local institutions in Bogotá as the *Alliance Française*, *Los Andes University*, *Jorge Tadeo Lozano University*, the museum of the National Bank among others. Some French private companies and organizations with presence in Colombia are planned to be contacted.

In the meanwhile, we are already in contact with the local institutions in Bogotá. The *Alliance Française* confirmed us their interest in taking part to the project as well as *El Parqueadero* and the *Gilberto Alzate Avendaño* foundation.

Taking part in the official program for the cross-seasons year 2017 is a crucial point to the further development of the project as it will allow us to ask for funding from the already mentioned institutions with a better success rate, assuring already funding from the French Institute and the Colombian Ministry of Culture. Taking part to the official event will also provide important repercussions in the work of the artists presented in both countries assuring a wider audience to the events.

The perspectives of the cross-seasons year and the experience of Voies Off in France and Clemencia Poveda in Colombia are important points to develop the project in a successful way. Voies Off is already in partnership with the city of Arles and the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region. Clemencia Poveda has a wide experience in curating and organizing cultural projects in Bogotá and has been a partner of the Ministry of Culture in the development of other past projects.



*Figure 8. The Two Labyrinths (2014), by Michel Lebelhomme. Winner of the Voies Off prize 2015*

## Conclusion

### *What I've learn from the art scene in Colombia?*

As I mentioned at the beginning of the document, for almost 4 years I have wanted to achieve a better understanding of the art field in Colombia and to get in contact with it. The exhibition project appeared to be the perfect excuse to start a research on the changes in the field during the last years. It was a really interesting task that led me to discover many art institutions that I didn't know before and many fascinating Colombian artists from the past years.

Even if the scene in Colombia has changed, there is still a lot of work to do if Colombia wants to position itself as an important player in the art world. With some exceptions, Colombian artists still live in an environment that doesn't promote openness and internationalization. There are more and more institutions that collaborate with international organizations but the cooperation is still not the regular rule and collaborative projects seem to be still difficult due to economical and geographical reasons. During my research, for example, I didn't find organizations focused in promoting exchanges between Latin American countries. As the region shares a common past and the problems each country faces are or have been the same under a certain perspective, the artists have been influenced by communal topics and share similar problematics. In order to understand local practices and to promote internationalization, I believe that it will be highly beneficial for artists to have institutions that promote regional exchanges and collaborations. This would be one of the first steps to create a stronger identity and to give a better exposure of what's happening in the art scene in a regional but also international level.

During my research I found it interesting to see the different ways independent and artist-run spaces survive and develop in a context in which public funding is still the exception. Diversifying their activities and creating contact with institutions abroad are among the solutions found. I also noticed a recurrent practice of creating independent art education programs within these institutions. As an example, *El Mentidero*, *La Agencia* and *Flora arts+natura*, have all educational programs directed to the people from the artistic field, to the local people from the neighborhood and in some occasion to other smaller cities,

bringing art projects to contexts in which initiatives are rare and creating a dialogue with the rural areas of the country.

There's a lot to be told about the art field in Colombia and I still have a lot to research in order to better understand the current situation.

In the frame of a residency program between the *Alliance Française* in Bogotá and the *École Nationale de la Photographie* in Arles, France, I was invited to participate in a two month residency in Colombia. Even if it's not directly related with the project described in this document, it will be an essential opportunity to be in the city and to develop contacts that will be useful for the further development of the project. Also it will allow me to meet local artists, to introduce myself as an artist and to have my work seen as part of the exhibition that is scheduled to be held at the end of the residency.

The opportunity of this residency in the frame work of the project in 2017 can be seen as a complementary opportunity and with a bit of luck a beneficial one to expand both my artistic and curatorial career. I'm looking forward to experiencing the field from an artist perspective and to get in contact not only with other institutions but also with young artists working in contemporary art. The open call that will be conducted in Colombia at the end of this year represents another opportunity to discover the work of artists in Bogotá and other cities and to widen the perspective of the contemporary practices in the country.

### *Expectations of the Cross-Seasons Year*

The cross-seasons year between Colombia and France is a diplomatic agreement that has a lot to do with economic and political interests of both countries. The fact that Colombia has faced many positive changes during recent years makes it more attractive for the international community and France has already taken the first steps by opening branches of French companies and investing in the country in a significant and consistent way.

Even if this is not openly related with the cultural program of 2017, it is clear that many of the projects and initiatives won't be able to happen in a different context if they were not backed-up by the conditions given in the context of the cross-seasons year.

The only south American country to have this kind of manifestation with France has been Brazil in 2009. Researching information about the results of this year, one of the



conclusions was that culture generates a very suitable opening environment to the development of bilateral cooperation. The strategic importance of it is visible when one looks at the official visits that took place in Brazil during 2009 in which culture was the pretext to build durable economic and political relations. Part of the justification for the cross-seasons year between France and Brazil was that Brazil was no longer a developing country but a new emerging power which France has to interact and build strong relations with (Senat, 2009).

As with Brazil, France is also showing its interest in supporting the Colombian ambition to get international status and the cultural policies during 2017 are a way to strengthen their relationship in different fields.

The latter being said, 2017 could be a highly beneficial year for the art field in Colombia if the country manages to create an environment suitable for the further development of cultural exchange programs in a European country. France has a vast and developed cultural system that can be beneficial for the career of talented Colombian artists if the delegation of the country manages to propose challenging and interesting projects in the main cities.

The program for next year is still being completed and I would like to see the presence of Colombia in important French art institutions during 2017. In the context of bilateral events it is always easier for the “stronger” country to propose bigger projects and to take most advantage of the situation. An example of this is the fact that France will be already the guest of honor in major cultural events in Colombia during 2017 as the *Festival Internacional de Cine de Cartagena de Indias*, *Feria Internacional del Libro de Bogotá* and the *Festival Iberoamericano de Teatro de Bogotá*. On the other hand, Colombia’s program in France is still undefined and when visiting the city at the beginning of 2016 I was surprised that only few of the people I interviewed were aware of the cross-seasons year in 2017.

### *Importance and viability of the project*

I believe that organizing an alternative project in the field of photography is pertinent and valid due to the lack of initiatives that exist in the city today. From having one yearly festival dedicated to photography and a biennial, Bogotá was left with only the second

event since 2008 and there aren't still proper educational programs in photography that have an intellectual or critical focus.

Even if the project is conceived as a one-time initiative and its size will be small compared to other manifestations in the arts field, it is still important to have alternatives to the main events that are organized in the city each year. Another important point of the project is the fact of being imagined as a bilateral event concerning photographers from both countries. In this regard the Colombian photographers that will be involved in the program will be the ones that could take a bigger advantage by being exhibited in an important European photography festival. *Voies Off* festival happens in a privileged environment visited by experts in the field and among them curators from other festivals and institutions around Europe. Presenting the work during the festival can be highly beneficial for young artists and could have important follow-ups for their career.

The project is still at its initial steps. The application to be in the official program was sent during the past weeks and the answer should come within one month (in May 2016). A positive response will be crucial for the better development of the project and being part of the official program will allow us to count with two major sponsors (the French Institute and the Ministry of Culture in Colombia) and will give it a wider visibility and reach. The initial budget of the project was made taking into account travels, workshop and other expenses but in the case of a shortage in the financing it can be rethought and replanted with a lower budget due to the format of most part of the events. The screenings in Bogotá should take place in Universities and public institutions which whom it is possible to collaborate and the French part of the project will be organized in the frame of the festival and shouldn't represent important extra costs to the organizers of the event. The project is still feasible in limited and reduced conditions even if being part of the official program and being able to organize conference and workshop in both Colombia and France will give another dimension to the event.

The research of the current situation in Colombia will continue to expand and this project has triggered my curiosity to deepen my knowledge about the art world in the country and my interest for engaging in building further links with it.



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