

TALKING TO ACTION: *An Introduction to the Project and its Platforms*

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Talking to Action: Art, Pedagogy, and Activism in the Americas (hereafter referred to as *Talking to Action*), the title of this volume, is also the name for the larger, multi-layered project that is part of the Getty-led initiative Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA. Investigating contemporary, community-based, social art practices by artists based in Latin America and Los Angeles, the project consisted of an initial two-year research phase (2014-15) with two additional years to produce an exhibition and this publication (2016-17). While several of the PST: LA/LA exhibitions imported historical art from diverse locations in Latin America to the United States, *Talking to Action* is among a small handful of projects devoted to recent art production from the 2000s. This project resulted from direct, convened dialogues between artists and researchers across the hemisphere who engaged in extended conversations about shared political alignments and disparate methodologies. The title *Talking to Action* underscores the dialogical and discursive nature of this research process, the authors' essays and the artists' practices, all of which are instances of critical public attention, transhemispheric community participation, and engaged scholarly-artistic political action towards current social issues.¹ To emphasize the discursive, dialogical, and pedagogical nature of this work, our curatorial strategy for *Talking to Action* includes a series of five distinct but inter-related platforms.

Platform 1—*Publics in Dialogue*: Research and Convenings

For the first phase of the project, lead curator Bill Kelley, Jr. traveled to seven countries to begin our curatorial research and to organize the first platform—*Publics in Dialogue*—a series of conferences with artists and activists, researchers, curators, and scholars from both Los Angeles and Latin America. The first convening took place at Centro Cultural de España, Mexico City (fall 2014) and the second at the Fundación Museos de la Ciudad in Quito, Ecuador (summer 2015). An impressive grouping of international activists, researchers, and scholars attended these meetings.² Our third convening at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles (fall 2015), included extended conversations with our project advisors and researchers: Maria Fernanda Cartagena, David Gutiérrez Castañeda, André Mesquita, Lucía Sanromán, and Paulina Varas, whose early, in-depth engagement with the artists informed their insightful essays in the following chapters. Additionally, facilitator Sara Daleiden moderated the initial discussions with the project researchers that also included participation from visiting artists Alfadir Luna and Paulina Leon, as well as local artist/activists Cog-nate Collective, Sandra de la Loza, and Ultra-red.

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Platform 2—*Talking to Action*: Exhibition and Collaboration

The critical thinking and intellectual debates about community-based, social activist practices emanating from these advisors guided the direction of the second platform—the *Talking to Action* exhibition that premiered at Otis College of Art and Design’s Ben Maltz Gallery September 17th and ran through December 10th, 2017. The exhibition travels to the Arizona State University Art Museum in Tempe; the Sullivan Galleries at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. Each venue plans to work with artists from within their communities whose practices, production, and pedagogical concerns relate to the artists and content of the *Talking to Action* exhibition.

The twenty-one contemporary artists and collectives from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and the United States, focus on collaborative projects that specify locations and subjects for in-depth, process-based investigations. Exploring a range of disciplinary practices across media and genre, they blur lines between object making, performance, political activism, and community organizing as they interrogate migration and memory, gentrification, labor conditions, gender rights, indigenous knowledge, and racial, police, and state violence.

A long-term collaborative project between Tijuana-based collective, Dignicraft (Paola Rodríguez, José Luis Figueroa, Omar Foglio, Blanca O. España, David Figueroa, and Araceli Blancarte) and indigenous Purepecha artisans focused on migration and memory. In workshops with Dignicraft, the Purepecha families each mapped their relocation from Michoacán to Rosarito, Baja California, used their migration story to inspire the production of piñatas that spoke of their migratory experience, and worked to negotiate a more equitable trade relationship with vendors in Los Angeles. Similarly, Alfadir Luna’s long-term *mayordomía* [sponsorship] of twelve public markets at La Merced in Mexico City also improves a community’s visibility and labor conditions. For ten years Luna has participated in an annual procession carrying a life-size *Señor de Maíz* or Corn Man sculpture and colorful banners that identify each merchant, a performative action that works simultaneously as a live form of branding, a ceremonial ritual, and a labor parade.

Several collectives in *Talking to Action* employ strategies of critical cartography. Iconoclastas, the Brazilian duo of Pablo Ares (graphic and comic artist) and Julia Risler (researcher/teacher at the Universidad de Buenos Aires), creates free, participatory mapping workshops and collective research projects to bring together different communities to deconstruct dominant paradigms and to facilitate new visions of history and society. The Kolectivo de Restauración Territorial (KRT) (Gonzalo Cueto Vera, Jorge A. Olave Riveros, and Cristian Wenuvil Peñan) worked with Valparaíso-based researcher Paulina Varas on the *Interzona* [Interzone] project, siting violence in the Mapuche territory located in southern Chile where these indigenous people have struggled to maintain autonomy from the state. Los Angeles-based art collective Ultra-red organized a series of community workshops with residents in Boyle Heights, a Latino neighborhood east of downtown LA, that involved spatial mapping, interviews, and listening sessions to create a “gentrification library,” featuring publications and video portraits that analyze the impact of the increasing gentrification of their neighborhood.

BijaRi—a collective of artists, architects, and designers who met at the School of Architecture and Urban Planning at the Universidade de São Paulo—also explores gentrification in the urban metropolis. For the 2011 *Encuentro Internacional de Medellín MDE11*, they worked with Santo Domingo Savio community leaders and the neighborhood to address rapid changes in their community that resulted from the then-recent installation of the Metrocable aerial tramway and the Parque Biblioteca España. BijaRi quoted from community testimonials about the history of the neighborhood and its current social and economic conditions, painted the excerpts on banners, and placed them on the rooftops of houses so they could be easily read/seen by those in the Metrocable as it passed overhead. Another project, involving a completely different kind of transportation, is Andrés Padilla Domene and Iván Puig Domene’s *SEFT-1* (Sonda de Exploración Ferroviaria Tripulada) [Abandoned Railways Exploration Probe], a futuristic, aluminum capsule-like vehicle used to explore disused railroads in Mexico and trace the country’s history of capital development.

Several projects in *Talking to Action* tackle issues of institutionalized violence and racism in Latin America that commenced with the sixteenth-century European invasion and persist today. Frente 3 de Fevereiro, a Brazilian collective whose mapping and public interventions reveal issues related to police violence and racism, produced a documentary film based on the racist “exporting” of militarization and mechanisms of social control deployed in the historic conflicts in Medellín, Colombia to the predominantly Afro communities in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro and the areas affected by natural disasters in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Clara Ianni shot her video *Apelo* [Plea] (2014) in Dom Bosco Cemetery in São Paulo, a graveyard for victims brutalized and disappeared by different regimes. The video presents Ianni’s collaborator, Débora Maria da Silva—whose son was murdered by death squads of the military police—giving a speech that connects these contemporary acts of violence with those from the colonial and dictatorial past.

Los Angeles-based artist Suzanne Lacy explores domestic violence in Quito, Ecuador in *De tu puño y letra* [By Your Own Hand], a project that commenced with workshops organized by civic, educational, and community-based partners and culminated in a performance in the Plaza Belmonte bullring. Drawing from the city’s earlier campaign, *Cartas de Mujeres* [Letters of Women], in which 10,000 Ecuadorean women submitted written testimonies on domestic abuse, 350 men of all ages read these letters in the bullring and then engaged in a public conversation on violence with almost 2000 attendees.

These are just a sampling of the *Talking to Action* artists and collectives who engage in durational, dialogical processes that are often represented by written transcripts, sound or video recordings, and archival documentation. How could this profusion of materials be accessible to viewers without using traditional museum displays that could potentially aestheticize, fetishize, or inappropriately enshrine ephemera? One way this was addressed was by inviting artist/architect Giacomo Castagnola to design the exhibition installation using his unique sculptural displays and furniture that brought materials away from the peripheral walls and into the gallery space. This re-oriented the visitor’s conventional behavior by facilitating closer viewing and more embodied encounters with the art. Castagnola’s hanging vertical wire structures [Estructuras Vertical Alambreira or EVAs]—based on collapsible shelving used in marketplaces—housed the exhibition’s interpretive materials, while his design for the “conversation table” provided space for intimate discussions, reading, and listening to audio programs.

The curatorial process for the exhibition also elicited several collaborative nodes consisting of artists, curators, and researchers from Los Angeles and Latin America who worked together on projects. For example, Sandra de la Loza [Los Angeles] and Eduardo Molinari [Buenos Aires] utilized writing, dialogical practices, and archives to explore questions of politics, history, memory, and landscape in their respective cities. Engaging with each other by writing “cartas caminantes” [itinerant letters or

postcards], and meeting in each other’s cities, the artists gathered different types of visual, archival, sound, and textual materials to integrate into their installation/archive. Cultural critic Jennifer Ponce de León, who has worked with de la Loza and Molinari previously, served as their interlocutor and wrote about their work in her essay in this publication.

Platform 3—Public Engagement and Otis College in Session: Participation and Pedagogy

Talking to Action’s third platform—*Public Engagement*—aimed to contextualize the artists’ works and provided opportunities for artists and researchers visiting from Latin America to engage more directly with audiences in Los Angeles. Organized by Otis College and community partners, the programs included a series of roundtable talks and lectures, film screenings followed by conversations between artists and scholars, and public interventions such as Cog-nate Collective’s *Mobile Institute of Citizenship + Art*—a trailer that functioned as a portable research hub and cultural, pedagogical, and economic platform for dialogue and interchange around legal rights, transnational identity, and other issues that affect immigrant communities in LA.

Given that Otis College of Art and Design is an educational site, it was important that *Talking to Action* focus on the pedagogical dimensions of community-engaged art. The third platform—*Otis College in Session*—consisted of curricular connections and workshops with artists in *Talking to Action*. Otis and partner organizations, including the Grand Central Art Center in Santa Ana, the Bunny House in Echo Park, and the

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Little House Gallery in Venice, sponsored artists’ residencies. Buenos Aires-based Grupo Etcétera... [Loreto Garín Guzmán and Federico Zukerfeld] engaged with Otis College students for “NO-WORK NO-SHOP,” which focused on investigating the privatization of education and cognitive labor to create a collaborative public intervention: a text-based installation mounted on the large windows of the Galef Fine Arts Center on the Otis College campus. Other artists such as Cog-nate Collective, Liliana Angulo Cortés, Dignicraft, and Taniel Morales presented lectures in a Public Practice seminar and students subsequently conducted interviews

with these and other artists in *Talking to Action*. These texts—along with graphics, maps and other re-prints—were available in Castagnola’s EVA shelves, which visitors could assemble into a free, do-it-yourself gallery guide that added another level of interpretation to the exhibition.

Platform 4—Talking to Action: Art – Pedagogy: Culmination and Compendium

This final platform consists of publications, which include not only the previously mentioned gallery guide and artist-generated booklets and brochures, but also this comprehensive volume of essays and photographs. This is not a catalogue per se, but a culmination of the entire *Talking to Action* project: four years of curatorial research on thought-provoking, socially engaged production of twenty-one artists and collectives; a compendium of written texts, discourses, and debates generated by the advisors, curators, and researchers associated with the project.

Following this introduction, in the first chapter, “*Talking to Action: A Curatorial Experiment Towards Dialogue and Learning*,” Bill Kelley, Jr. delves into the challenges and possibilities of a cross-hemispheric project between the two “LAs”: Los Angeles (where social practice studies are found in fine art and art history programs) and Latin America (where these practices are imbricated into the social sciences and the public sphere). Kelley also traces the hemispheric-wide influence of Paulo Freire’s writings on decolonial and liberationist work and, crucially, how Freire’s critical pedagogy continues to make a methodological path for contemporary dialogically-driven, community-based art practices.

Given the histories of displacement, migration, and exile within the Americas and the important confluence between artists and writers of the region, we only hope that this exhibition, as well as the efforts of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA initiative, are the beginning of a more sustained dialogue of learning and pedagogical exchange within the Americas.

TALKING TO ACTION: A Curatorial Experiment Towards Dialogue and Learning¹

Bill Kelley, Jr.

To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. . . . Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Hence, dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming. . . .²

—Paulo Freire

1 The curatorial team extends its deepest gratitude to Director Kate McNamara and the entire Ben Maltz Gallery staff, past and present, whose efforts brought this exhibition to fruition. We thank our key advisors Grant Kester, Suzanne Lacy, Ana Logoni, Sally Tallant, and Stephen Wright, and all the artists and researchers who made this extensive project possible.

2 Bill Kelley, Jr. took part in the *Estar aquí haciendo algo* as part of the *De-Formación: prácticas artísticas desescolarizadas, reflexión y acción* event, organized by David Gutiérrez Castañeda at the Centro Cultural de España en México—Faro de Oriente—Universidad Autónoma de la Ciudad de México. Participants included: Jimena Andrade, Andrés Arredondo, María Fernanda Cartagena, Alejandro Cevallos, María Clara Cortés, Maite Garbayo, Suzanne Lacy, Alfidir Luna, Marco Moreno, Katia Oldade, Mabel Tapia, and Paulina Varas. The Quito convening was organized by María Fernanda Cartagena and it was attended by David Gutiérrez Castañeda, Suzanne Lacy, Silvia Juliana Mantilla Ortiz, Lucía Sanromán, and Paulina Varas. Artist group Proyecto Transgenero as well as several members of the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo’s education staff, including Paulina León, also participated.

The citation above frames the problem of dialogue between people who do not share a language. That language problem is the result of dealing with the co-participation that dialogue requires. Dialogue as co-participation must be mutual and intercultural if we are here, in fact, to name the world together. With the challenges assigned to globalization, interculturality asks the globalized to both understand and occupy ways of being in the world beyond previous namings or knowing. One could sardonically say that for Latin America this historic challenge has been its lingua franca.

From its inception, *Talking to Action: Art, Pedagogy, and Activism in the Americas* (hereafter referred to as *Talking to Action*) was meant to focus on dialogically-driven, community-based art making across the Americas. Given the quick growth and academicization of the field that we call social practice in the United States over the last decade, I was determined to say something about the intellectual and methodological roots of these practices that were not simply anchored in northern-transatlantic thinking. Thus, *Talking to Action* was a research project that was born of a need to redirect the legacies of the past. Given this alternate mapping, it only made sense to begin with the