

# ADRIANA LARA

© 1978, MEXICO CITY - (MX) / ARTIST REPRESENTED BY GAGA ARTE CONTEMPORANEO (MX) / MEMBER OF PERROS NEGROS / PUBLISHER OF PAZMAKER / MEMBER OF MUSIC BAND LASSER MODERNA / BASED IN MEXICO CITY  
BY EVA SVENNUNG

## Wild Guess

**Eva Svennung:** In 2005, you started to work on NAAP (Nuevo Archivo de Arte Público), a Mexico City public art archive—to quote Daniel Baumann, “this complicated and partly unlabeled child of the arts and the art world.” What does public art mean to you, and how related is this project to Mexico City?

**Adriana Lara:** Public art is problematic, boldly I would say it’s a kind of art that offers itself to people who don’t necessarily care about it.

I do enjoy finding interesting things on the street (art or not). But I think the problem comes when public art becomes part of the political or urban planning agenda. I see it as a place where all the very different notions of “what is art” meet, always full of disappointments or misunderstandings.

### Problematic in what sense?

There is no common agreement as to what should be out there or what shouldn’t be, between the commissioners and the public. But specifically in Mexico City, which is where I live, I see it from two different points of view that at some point intersect from both sides. One is from that of the commissioner that has the interest in it as a decorative/entertaining/promotional object that more than anything intends to embellish the urban planning and to attract tourism. I have always wondered who chooses the artists and how commissioner/artist manage to match their expectations. Here is where we come to the other point of view, that of the artist. I think it is extremely tempting to have such visibility.

Although it is not always the case for contemporary artists that have worked on public art. I would add that the interest of showing an artwork to an open audience has to do with a need of having recognition as an artist, in a context where it is barely considered a real profession, more than a need to extend an observation to a number of people.

Just before I started NAAP, after having worked in public art projects with other artists, I came to the conclusion that public art in Mexico was a waste of energy.

### A waste of energy?

When I started making art, I was doubting that I would be able to survive as an artist, knowing that the past genera-

tion of artists had mostly ended up needing to make a living in other fields and eventually abandoned their artistic career because of the lack of support and the local art economy at the time. So one of the strategies I thought of working on was to work with other artists in bringing art to more visible spots in order to make it a present, actual non-fictional profession. But I realized it was a waste of time because people on the street in general didn’t care, so instead I should have focused on continuing to work in my studio rather than trying to establish contact with a faceless person.

This project was conceived as a reflection on this. On how the fact of this unawareness of contemporary art in Mexico had to do with a gap in Mexican art history and the non-existence of documentation on what had been going on in the arts for the past thirty or forty years, and how in parallel, during those years there had been very interesting transformations and interventions in city development. So I decided to refill this information gap with made-up documentation of these unjustified constructions that exist all over the city disguised as public artworks, creating this idealistic scenario from the past in which artists were considered the raw model for society (for urban planners, for politicians, for workers in general), having been given space and support for large-scale projects, not necessarily ornamental or entertaining, but rather critical and politically involved.

So the project was definitely related to a local situation and couldn’t have been conceived anywhere else.

**You’ve developed a series of works after that (*Art Film 1: Ever Present Yet Ignored, A Problem Has Occurred and Things*) that often uses the exhibition format, or leans on a curatorial gesture, to stage situations (the archive, then a series of solo shows) where your position, the position of the artist, is undermined, or rather located in, the actual exhibition “scenario,” and in which art is almost put forth as fiction, and artworks as props, to put it very roughly.**

Through those works I try to perform or re-enact “being an artist.” Instead of assuming my role and automatically making art (which I also sometimes do), I have kept on exploring



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Adriana Lara *On Shadow Paintings*, 2010.

what it means to be one, as it seems to me such an unrealistic profession. So the projects you mention have been the result of that exploration, *AFI* is about the subjective power of art, how an artwork can be everything and nothing at the same time depending on how language structures and conducts it or defines it, *APHO* plays the political artist/artwork in search of a problem to create/exist, *Things* (*Cozas*) plays the absent artist/artwork in a suppositional unpopulated (destroyed planet) world, and *Artificial* as the spectacle of the arts, the artist existence as being fictional.

**By extension, your interventions sometimes seem to address and literally display the discrepancy between life, experience and the space of experimentation or representation that the art world stands for. The exhibition space is almost a dead end, or a Natural History (of Art) Museum.** I don't think of a display of discrepancy, instead, a way of conciliating this space of experimentation you mention as the art world with the real world in the same space. I see the exhibition as a format, as a still life: myself, the spectator and the exhibition space included in it, an association of elements in a specific time and context.

**As you play with different formal vocabularies and media, and submit different experiences in one single show that imply a set of different relations to the works on display,**

the viewer arrives in a specific but uncertain space, where he's led to examine the nature and the conditions of what he is facing. But often too, there's a clear sense of decision as to the future/destination of the actual works; I'm thinking of the banana peel, or the shoe/cat litter box. Those inscribe themselves in several (art) (hi)stories at the same time, all the while producing/performing their own way out of it.

The decision you are talking about comes as a consequence of what I try to do, which is to use a common place or familiar something to embody an abstract idea momentarily. I was talking to a friend about that. He thinks of these works as demonstrations, which I understand as a thought that justifies itself in both ways of existence (as an object and as an artwork). For me these things become "staged objects" and that's where their future might be in a game, once the show is over, they could be worth nothing, or I mean, as much as their equals—a banana in the supermarket or a homemade cat litter box.

**There's this playful ambivalence embedded in some of your works, at once skeptical of and ready to challenge the idea of the possibility of affecting the (art or cultural) context it interrupts in, and of having this existence/potential of their own. In that sense the objects you produce (or a work like *APHO*) elegantly, and often humorously too, seem to operate like sophisticated allegories. Would this be a weird way to describe the way the pieces operate?**

No, you might say the works are allegories. For example, the show I did in Puerto Rico where I was doing a representation of an enclosed version of outer space by revealing some sections of the brick wall behind the staged black wall, stood for the idea that "we say we can understand the infinite, because we are blind to limits, but we actually can't understand infinity because we are unable to see the unlimited." But then that brings me to something else: what could it mean if we were not able to conceive the infinite, or were blind to limits...or the opposite? These are the kind of questions that I come to in the middle of my process and my intention is to project these questions in the work. So I think eventually the work operates more as a symbol (perhaps a symbol of my own thoughts) more than an allegory, because there isn't a way to decipher it, the work is standing alone there as a question mark, and as the only expression of what it is symbolizing.

**How does music, your musical production, complete your practice? And, compared to the visual arts—and the questions you're tackling—doesn't it feel like a looser, more open ground to venture in?**

At first, I found it a fun strategy to start existing as an artist, a kind of literal introduction, through my voice, a non-phys-

ical (meaning invisible) presence that could filter into several venues, houses, cities. Nowadays, my practice in music has different motivations, like for example, to be able to write lyrics, or work with rhythm, sounds and instruments as raw materials, which doesn't come so naturally to me. I would say it's as free as the rest, except people get more involved in it than an exhibition and this somehow gives the impression of doing something well.

**The outsider, "non-professional" position you can have in your nonetheless serious, and advanced musical practice, is that something that's still possible in the visual arts as it operates today? I'm thinking of the figure of the artist working outside of the "system," following his own agenda that is a recurring subject in your work, both as artist and curator.**

Non-professional is one thing and outside the system is another thing. I think none of both are really possible, I wouldn't like to be isolated 100 percent as I couldn't be non-professional in order to get things done. I just like to play with the system a bit, acknowledging it has different levels or branches. It would be nice to think of the artist as a professional amateur, some kind of category that develops method rather than discourse, that allows for exploring different fields and positions, like an actor whose method allows him to play the doctor, the kid, the politician. Having said this, my position is more of an empiricist.

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