

Gaby Cepeda on what it means to be a curator



February 20, 2017 - Gaby Cepeda is an independent curator and art writer in Mexico City. Her Girls of the Internet Museum is an expansive Tumblr gallery of women working in digital art. This conversation took place in front of a small audience in Parque España, Mexico City.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2625 words.

Tags: [Curation](#), [Art](#), [Writing](#), [Education](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Independence](#), [Process](#).

Between writing, curating, and making GIFs and videos, you do a number of different things. Do you consider yourself an artist or a writer or a curator?

I order it by the energy I put into it. I put more of energy into being a curator. I feel much more like a curator, personally, but I spend much more time writing than I do curating because it pays my bills. I put like no energy on being an artist. I actually went to art school. I went to school for photography, but upon graduation, it became evident/traumatic to me that I just don't have ideas. If I had to live off ideas, I would starve.

I went to get a Masters in curating in Argentina, and it gave me peace to think that I could just read and write for a living, like "Oh, I can do that for sure. There's an endless supply of things I can think about. That's perfect." I feel like I'm mostly that. I do enjoy making art but it's not something that flows easily for me. It's a little torturous, actually.

I read an interview with you where you said that, ideally, if you could do something for a living and to be paid for it, it would be curating. Does that still stand?

Definitely. [Laughs] Please pay me. That's the one. I still apply to curating jobs. I don't know, curating is a weird sphere. If the art world is already a strange, rare sphere, I feel like curating is even moreso. It's this weird sphere of power within the sphere of power that already is the art world. It's hard to penetrate. Definitely, I wouldn't want to be a superstar curator.



Bellos Jueves V - at Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires, 2014 > Débora Delmar Corp., Arabica y Robusta, 2014 hanging out with Manet's Nymph Surprised

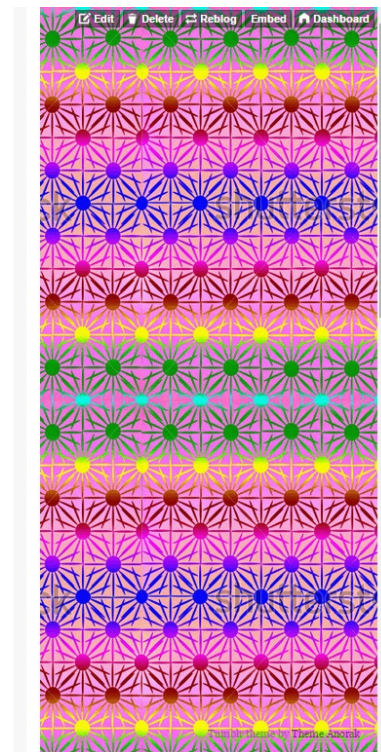
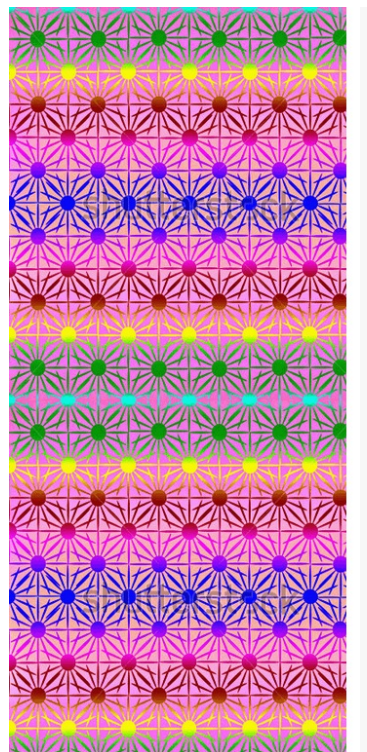
I see the role of a curator as much more of just shining a spotlight on people who I believe are saying really important things, who are being left out of this sphere where mostly white and rich people exist. I feel like that's a reason I want to be paid for it and do it more often, because I feel like parts of the discourse that are vital or super necessary are being excluded. Where I wish I could be like, I need to pay this person so they can continue to survive and continue to do this. Same with me.

The Girls Internet Museum Project is on hiatus right now, right? Is it something you got tired of doing?

Sort of-ish. I did a bunch of interviews about it and a few talks about it, and I just got tired. I did it for three years. At first, it was a very integral part of my research. I eventually felt like I was just constantly preaching to the choir. Some people would be like, "Of course, women make art, too!" That's not the point. That's like the most basic point you could take from it.

If someone were to ask you for the elevator pitch of what GIM is, how would you describe it?

It had to do a lot with how net art blew up around 2008. It "blew up," in that there were a bunch of people doing it, but essentially only we knew about ourselves. Someone would get a show and we'd be like, "Oh yeah, he got a show in real life!" It was insane. We thought: "You're going to make money," but it did never happened. It happened to like two or three people and never actually really happened to anyone else. There was a lot of talk about personal branding at the time. There was this whole selfie thing blowing up. I feel like it had a lot to do with the dirtiness of being called a millennial and a narcissist, so I wanted to be a push back against that.



GIM - Girls of the internet museum (2012-ongoing)

It became like an index. I wanted every woman making art online to be here. Then I realized there was this really good show curated by Jennifer Chan called, "Body Anxiety." It was an interesting concept but it got a lot of backlash because you had essentially like 20 white women and three women of color. While it was called, "Body Anxiety," and Hello, who has the most body anxiety? Who would could better articulate it than black women or women of color.

At that time, I remember looking back onto the GIM. The girls that were on it, and I'm like, "Oh my god, I'm sort of doing the same thing." I did have some people of color, but... If you only allow for the art world type to wash up on you, it's only gonna be white people. If you never go out of your way a tiny bit to find what people outside of Europe and America are doing, you might never find that. You have to put in the work.

That's what being a curator is, essentially. I started doing that, and it became much more of this. That's my elevator pitch. [laughs] It took forever. It became about documenting how femmes-not just cis women-were expressing their realities through the technologies of the present. Beyond becoming this index of all women working, it became more, "How can we diversify the experiences that I'm trying to put out there?"

And that's when it really took off, actually. People started noticing it a lot more. I realized I had a lot of hang-ups on myself, of what I considered to be digital art. Elizabeth Mputu, who's one of the girls that I have in there, had been doing this same selfie thing for ages. People were just like, "Oh, she's a thotty black girl." When she was doing exactly the same thing other girls were doing, white girls were doing, but in much more intelligent ways. I had those hang-ups myself, and I had to look through that, past that too. Like, "Oh, shit, I was doing the same thing."

You're curating and you're also writing. When you decide to do an animated GIF or video, what is it that calls to you to say, "Okay, now I'm gonna make one of these things?"

It's pretty clear to me. I'm very compartmentalized. It works like that for me. I've been going more to video lately. It's essentially weird or improbable juxtapositions that I can't really put down into words.

I get these obsessions. I'm obsessed with Rihanna. Forever. Which is something Hannah Black talks about a lot, and I'm like, "Yeah, okay. This is normal for artists." "Okay, I can be this obsessed with someone and still be productive about it." I'm obsessed with RuPaul's Drag Race. Literally, every time someone's like, "The Wire's the best show," I'm like, "No. RuPaul's Drag Race is the best show ever, period." It embodies a lot of the things that are relevant to me. This cyberness of being. He does this amazing song that's like, "We're all born naked, and the rest is drag." It's like, "Of course, we're all born naked, and the rest is drag."



Hannah Black, *All My Love, All My Love*, 2015

Have you taught?

Yeah, I taught in Lima at a private art school. I taught Curatorial Studies 2, which was interesting. They got a bunch of Latin American art history. Then, I got to teach current trends in curatorial work. I taught them a lot of sci-fi. It was kind of funny. They were younger kids. They were on the richer side of things, but I was always like, "Have you looked around in Lima? All the good artists are white and billionaires?" And they're like, "No, what?" It was like, "That's weird, huh?" They gave me half the curriculum, and I could put the other half in there.

I really enjoy teaching. It was severely underpaid. I took it upon myself, because I feel like one of the things of being a curator is being a good writer. You're not supposed to sound smart. You're supposed to sound legible. You're supposed to actually be understandable. That comes with a lot of practice in writing. You can jam-pack a text with obscure quotes and impress some people, but to be actually successful takes a lot more practice.

I read somewhere that someone told you that by studying feminist net art, you were putting yourself in "a ghetto."

She was the Director of the program where I studied. I never turned in my thesis; I went to this year-long curatorial and artist program in Buenos Aires that's very well-liked. It looks really good in your CV in Latin America. I was actually the first generation that they took in curators. It used to be only for artists.

I learned a lot specifically about dealing with artists. We had these long sessions every Friday, where an artist would show their work, and we would have to give them feedback. So many of them were shocked that you would say you didn't like something. I learned a lot about buffering things, or reading how artists feel. What are their more confident spots, and maybe their more insecure spots, and maybe not jab on those. It was like, okay, artists are very sensitive people. Lesson learned.

By then I was also really into feminism. The Director was this really well-liked woman. There are three women in the Buenos Aires art scene. She's one of them, another one's in the biggest museum, another one's in the other museum. You have to listen to what they say. She was anti-feminist, essentially. She would always have these comebacks to me, like "Why are you wearing that? That's not what a curator would wear." Or, "Why would you side with the feminists? You're just putting yourself into a ghetto." Ghetto. That's the word she used. I was just like, "This is so horrible." But I had really good friends there who were like, "Just don't listen to her." There are many different parts to be a curator. I'm actually wearing my curator outfit today. But I don't usually wear it. There have to be many ways—we can't all look like black dress Barbies saying things like "I'm interested in everything, all lives matter." We can't all be that, thankfully.



LIMAQ 100PRE - Eliana Otta's solo show at Museo La Ene, Buenos Aires, 2015

How would you describe what defines your curatorial process?

I try to listen a lot. Art makes me realize this. I put very little attention into mainstream art. I just don't do that. I used to care when I started in art. Like, "Oh, look Damien Hirst, did some shit." More and more, that seems removed from me. I guess that would be my curatorial process—having my ear more to people who I know for a fact are saying important things who also happen to be artists. When you do that, you open a door where people will show you people and they will show you more people. I don't intentionally remove myself from mainstream art, but I'm just uninterested. It doesn't resonate with me.

So you are not interested in the art fairs happening in Mexico City right now? Material and Zona Maco, for instance.

It's all dirty money. It feels dirty. Come on, people. They're not saying anything. In this particular moment, when the world is on fire, what does it mean to go to these art shows? You can walk through them and not remember a single piece. I mean, how does it feel to buy this? Spending like 35,000 dollars that could go into a much more productive place right now. In resistance or in activism. Even to artists who are much more committed.

Then, what it means to give it to someone who's already really rich, who's making these really empty gestures? A bunch of mainstream artists are doing this thing. A drawing of Trump where he looks fat, or stuff like that. What does it mean to you to fill the pockets of these people farther? What does it mean? What does it say about the art world? We're not even in fear of it being deregulated by Trump, because it's like Trump's dreams of the deregulation. It's already obscenely deregulated. It's even hard for white people to make a living in this world. It's the obscenity of the deregulation. What does it mean to be there right now? I am very conflicted right now. Honestly.

I'm working with another artist, Shawné Michaelain Holloway, to create a website called Total Resistance Online. We essentially want to create a place, a platform, that asks what does it mean to be doing digital art right now? Where are we gonna put our money? Where are we gonna put our attention? Whatever we can harvest, where are we gonna do it?

I think it's gonna take the shape of approaching organizers in not only the U.S., but Mexico, Central America, and South America, because everywhere's lit on fire. Asking, "What do you need? What needs do you have that an artist could fulfill, beyond doing a t-shirt?" I've seen a bunch of political t-shirts lately, too. You need more than t-shirt and stickers. What can we really do? What would that look like? That's the question we're working on right now. It's a really complex time, honestly. I don't have the answers.

I want try harder. I've been obsessed lately. I've seen these empty gestures everywhere. Politicians live off them. But artists and art institutions... I'm going to talk shit now. Material had that slogan: "Freedom to art."

That's so cynical. Are you shitting me? Art doesn't need freedom. It's already the closest cousin of capital. It goes through every border. It can say whatever you want. People will still buy it. It will stay in rich people's collections. It doesn't need anymore freedom. People need freedom.

It's an empty gesture, it's actually cute. MoMA hanging this Middle Eastern show; all the artists from the seven blocked countries. Let's go. People can't come see them. Their families are not gonna see them, but sure, thanks, MoMA. I hope their prices went up. Capital will flow into their pockets, hopefully.

That's it, art and capital can go anywhere. Humans, no. Why not just say, "Freedom for everybody?" "Freedom to all." "Freedom to art." It was so annoying. This is what people think of art. And they're right sometimes. And it's crazy. But yeah, I'm obsessed with these empty gestures. It eats at me, but it's hard not to do that, to fall into a lot of empty talk.

I feel really exhausted. I'm just making other people's ideas sound really good, but I have no ideas of my own. I didn't have any good writing ideas the whole of last year. This year, I'm like, "Yeah, okay, I'm gonna read a lot." And yeah, it's already coming to me. I already have ideas written down and I'm like "Yeah, this is gonna be great."

Gaby Cepeda recommends:

Hannah Black's book of essays, [Dark Pool Party](#)
 Mariame Kaba's work and twitter [@prisonculture](#)
[Bikini Wax Espacio de Producción Sensible](#) - Space for Sensible Production in Mexico City
[Museo La Ene](#) - Independent home-grown museum in Buenos Aires
[Liz Mputu](#), amazing artist

Name

Gaby Cepeda

Vocation

Curator, Artist, Writer

Fact

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Photo: Ramiro Chaves