

# Tangled Tongues

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A space where art can happen in a not-yet-institutionalized manner is not only a hard-to-find commodity in most parts of the world, it is also a high-strung and ever-demanding creature with a life of its own. It demands rent, taxes, programming, wi-fi, beers, music, paint, iffy electrical connections, and other forms of amateur handiwork. Above all, the so-called “independent space” demands people to constantly inhabit it. Geographers Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift describe places as moments of encounter as opposed to enduring sites: “not so much as ‘presents,’ fixed in space and time, but as variable events; twists and fluxes of interrelation.”<sup>1</sup> This feeling of fluxing and twisting runs through Bisagra like an invisible thread. It articulates subjectivities, histories, spaces, and languages, as well as flooding houses and changing communities. As a space and a collective, Bisagra is both a material container and an affective territory, one in which art and discourse can happen and shift from a single and stagnated voice to a multiplicity of tangled voices moving in all directions.

In 2014, when Bisagra opened its doors for the first time, it did so to pick up on a conversation that began decades earlier. In the mid-1960s, critics like Juan Acha had advocated for a cultural revolution that would weave visibility and the avant-garde together, and which would foreground the urgency for open and public dialogues about the local avant-garde and its role in society.<sup>2</sup> In order to mobilize the art world, Acha organized exhibitions and public debates, including the 1969 conference series he titled “Nuevas referencias sociológicas en las artes visuales: Mass media, lenguajes, represiones y grupos” (New sociological references in the visual arts: Mass media, languages, repression, and groups). This series was a discursive encounter, bringing together artists, critics, and art historians to discuss the future of Peruvian art during one of the most violent periods

in the country's contemporary history,<sup>3</sup> and was one of the many actions that would lead to his theory of *arte no-objetual*. Three decades later, while Peru was starting to leave the authoritarian Fujimori years behind,<sup>4</sup> the need to articulate a thoughtful and critical discourse became urgent once again and provoked the emergence of independent projects, such as the magazine *Prótesis*, the independent space Espacio La Culpable, and the nomadic public program Charla Parásita. It was the unassailable need to talk and listen to each other that moved Iosu Aramburu, Miguel A. López, Eliana Otta, Andrés Pereira Paz, Florencia Portocarrero, and Juan Diego Tobalina to bring a cluster of past experiences together and assemble them into a new collective space.

Situated in Lima, at the crossroads of decades of governmental disregard for Peru's production of contemporary art and a decade-long financial bonanza that had brought an array of commercial galleries, fairs, and biennials to the city, Bisagra followed a simple premise: the creation of a space not in which to exhibit art, but to talk about it. Most importantly, it would be a place for listening. Instead of creating another white cube devoid of context, they would create a space made up of pure context, a permanent and collective learning exercise. The articulation of knowledges and practices—artistic and curatorial, but also related to music, film, activism, and many areas of research—that became the ethos for the project also informed Bisagra's material conditions of existence. The two houses it occupied between 2014 and 2018 responded to this principle. Both were located in the neighborhood of Pueblo Libre, far from artsy Barranco and upscale Miraflores, but with easy access to downtown and on the way to the Universidad Católica campus—a decentralized location that enabled connections among different territories of the city and their respective communities, art practices, and languages.

In a deeply fragmented society, one in which colonial heritage is still palpable on the streets and social gaps have turned into deep canyons, the act of listening has become charged with sedimented meanings of both external and internal colonialism. The Other is often perceived as speaking in tongues, like the outcast and the insane, and the mere act of engaging in meaningful face-to-face conversation is thus transformed from a somewhat natural human interaction to an event heavily laden with gestures that scan for differences and similitudes to interpret the words being spoken. In order to disentangle some of these muddled notions of difference, and to encourage an openness in the exercise of listening and the production of critical discourse, Bisagra has devised a multilayered public program of talks, conversations, workshops, collective experiences, and the occasional exhibition. The group created an ongoing series of monthly talks called "Una al mes" (One a month).

Led by guests from diverse fields of practice and knowledge who would discuss a visual artifact or work of art, these diverse panels convoked an equally diverse and alternating audience. They ran a series of crit sessions that summoned art students and artists to critically share their work with their peers. They invited artists, curators, and researchers to present their work; they screened films and hosted performances, fashion shows, and concerts. An increasingly fluid and mutating community grew around the project. Each time they met, this fleeting ensemble would interrogate the contemporary political, social, and economic structures surrounding art from a different point of view, allowing for a broader discussion on the construction of institutions, the role of art in the local context, and the unwritten history of Peruvian art.

The discussions about the lack of institutions for art and

art education were critical to Bisagra's program and key to unearthing the origins of the seemingly barren institutional landscape of Lima. These conversations were carried out mainly within the context of contemporary art, at events such as "Escuela de Arte ideal / Escuela de Arte posible. Una tarde generosa" (Ideal Art School / Possible Art School. A Generous Afternoon) in 2016: an afternoon of group discussions led by Michy Marxuach (curator and cofounder of Beta-Local, San Juan, Puerto Rico); Raimond Chaves (artist, Lima, Perú); Martín Guerra (academic coordinator of Escuela Corriente Alternativa, Lima, Perú); and Miguel A. López (curator, member of Bisagra, and curator and director of Teor/ética, San Jose, Costa Rica).

On occasion, these discussions managed to spill into actual political debate. In the run-up to the 2016 parliamentary and presidential elections, for example, Bisagra collaborated with other cultural and political organizations on "Cultura futura: Candidatos al congreso debaten sus propuestas políticas culturales" (Future culture: Candidates to congress debate their cultural policy proposals), a debate in which three candidates from different political parties presented their platforms and engaged with the audience. Shortly after the first round of the elections in April, Bisagra responded to growing discontent with the social, political, and economic crisis with an unusual event in their program, a mini-exhibition titled *Objetos de protesta* (Protest Objects). The show served as an excuse for a small group of activists, artists, and audience members to gather and work together to create new protest objects while sharing their experiences, knowledge, and hopes. Operating with a fluid and dynamic rhythm allowed Bisagra to stage events that responded to the urgencies of a given moment, opening and closing its doors as circumstances demanded.

Bisagra's flexible and responsive attitude resulted in a space constantly bustling with activity. Two years into the project, the house in Pueblo Libre was hosting talks, workshops, residencies, and exhibitions nearly every week. Around that time, the Bisagras decided to document their busy schedule and all its written traces in a publication that served as a kind of expanded archive. Released in June 2016, the publication's first issue assembled a series of essays that responded to the discussions held at Bisagra during the preceding year. Embedded within these essays were the core questions that the project had dealt with since its inception: who has the right to speak, and who listens? How do you listen? What are the local dynamics of art circulation? What kind of dialogue and exchange constitute them? Two years later, in December 2018, the fourth issue, *Bisagra #004*, turned the conversation towards South America and the Global South, taking a Brazilian artist residency in Athens as its point of departure. Though Bisagra is no longer a physical space, it remains an ongoing and moving event that accompanies and contests local contemporary art practices. It is still an exercise in listening together in a city full of noise. Listening to a multiplicity of voices that speak multiple languages will not only produce a more understanding and supportive community, it might also remind us of the urgency of reclaiming the histories, languages, and knowledges that have been erased or distorted by colonialism.

For centuries, people in Latin America have built their own institutions—informal, organic, and sometimes ephemeral—the kind that makes up for lacking support from the state. Peruvian sociologist and thinker Anibal Quijano has called these spaces "public-non-governmental institutions."<sup>5</sup> They are key components of the social fabric of countries like Peru. Independent and artist-run spaces and initiatives have been shaping the art world for many decades. They make their

own rules and push other institutions to transform, respond, and adapt to the needs of artists, audiences, and changing contexts. They provoke some much-needed disobedience. Bisagra, like many other locally situated projects, attests to the significance of independent art practices in a region where the state has left the building, and where the slightest gesture can project itself into an expanded field of art practices, like ripples on a pond or dark mold on old walls.

NOTES

- 1 Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 30.
- 2 Joaquín Barriandos, "Revolution in the Revolution: The Aesthetico-Political Writings of Juan Acha," in *Juan Acha: Revolutionary Awakening* (Mexico City: RM/MUAC, 2017), 154.
- 3 The Peruvian Military Junta was a de facto left-wing government led by General Juan Velasco Alvarado. It ruled the country between 1968 and 1980. Though Velasco's rule was characterized by left-leaning policies of development, it slowly grew into an authoritarian regime that censored and violently repressed any sort of dissent.
- 4 Alberto Fujimori was president of Peru between 1990 and 2000. During his tenure, he concentrated power in his own hands, greatly strengthened the role of the armed forces and National Intelligence Service, and thwarted political opposition.
- 5 Aníbal Quijano, *Modernidad, identidad y utopía en América Latina* (Lima: Sociedad & Política Ediciones, 1988), 28.

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