

# *Charles Benjamin: P for Everything*



— por Alejandro Alonso Díaz

in conversation with

João Mourão

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# Samuel Leuenberger

Alex Alonso (AA): Decidedly weird in terms of scale, *P for Everything* considers the repertoire of things that can come to the foreground: a still life, an ethereal mobile, a calculator, a t-shirt and pants, parquet flooring, a lawn. This kind of gesture reveals the value of things and their spatial occupation, be it petty or massive, static or ephemeral. When you decided to show the work of Charles Benjamin at Kunsthalle Lissabon were you thinking about how these ideas echo in a re-contextualised, displaced SALTS?

Samuel Leuenberger (SL): In a weird way, I did. Charles has slept in galleries, mounted shows while living in the same space. His work is based on collecting a lot of memorabilia from work, from his walks around town. He writes and annotates, building up a diary of sorts, of things and their various values. The scale of the paintings fall also into this categorisation. The shaped canvases, squeezed into the basement of the Kunsthalle Lissabon was an important thought. It was meant to be perceived in terms of: how did this even get down here and how will these paintings get out again. It also reflects on the value of the painting, and its very structure. Charles enjoys building things on site. He also likes to leave them behind again, if it helps the logicist arrangements. There is something very poetic about this idea, about not being attached to things...

AA: And for Kunsthalle Lissabon, what is this show changing the institution into?

Kunsthalle Lissabon (KL): The show per se is not what changes the institution. Everytime KL invites an artist to a project it has to adapt itself to the artist's needs, goals, ways of thinking and ways of acting. That's what we have been doing for ten years: changing ourselves to adapt to what the artist wants from us. What changes the institution, and what has been changing the institution throughout our anniversary program is to disappear. To let someone else take over. Take over our space, our budget, our infrastructure, everything. In a way we became Sam's assistants. Whatever he needed, whatever Charles needed we were there to make sure it happened. Thinking about institutions has turned over the years into thinking about hospitality, friendship and generosity. We wanted to push that to the extreme and for once (or for one whole year) fade into the background.

AA: It's interesting that you both refer to the same thing: What Samuel calls the poetics of not being attached to things or the radical hospitality that you put into practice at Kunsthalle. Do you feel that we can escape the increasingly threatening political scenario by rehearsing those relations of hospitality?

SL: Hospitality takes the form of collaboration in many cases. You have to be generous when you collaborate, otherwise projects don't come to fruition in the way they ought to, to their fullest potential at least that is. And it is one way to steer away from becoming streamlined in your own practice, something you have to constantly challenge once you have been doing it for ten years. I hope this very attitude actually has an effect on the political scenarios around us, the constant breaking out of normative behavior.

KL: We believe the role of institutions is to institute, which is to say, to create the protocols that we, as communities, use and reproduce in our daily routines. From the onset we were interested in creating an institution that imagined (and attempted to produce) the world otherwise. Specifically, one in which friendship can be recuperated as a political category to counteract the forces of global capital with all this entails. That means being together, spending time together, thinking together, acting together. This does not have to be productive in the sense that a material outcome is the final result. The final result is to change those protocols slowly, so that the ones we find inadequate disappear over time, while others which we find more ethical get reproduced. Hospitality, generosity and solidarity are some of the protocols we wish to institute, being a small art institution, as a direct response to the world as it current presents itself to our eyes.

AA: In ten years you've both become important epicenters of artistic experimentation for the local and the global art communities, but it seems like this anniversary is also marking an opportunity to question your very structures. Do you think the format of institutions built upon exhibitions in physical spaces needs to change?

SL: I feel it needs to change, but it's tricky. First of all, I love drafting exhibitions and executing them, artists need this platform to experiment and an audience needs an address where they can return to and see what is developing and thought about in the contemporary art scene. But we are living in a time where we need to question everything. Galleries are rethinking their way of working, art fairs are rethinking theirs, and collectors are adapting to the new ways of encountering art. The value of production and thus the value of consumption is being challenged ecologically, but simply financially speaking too. We are spending a ridiculous amount of money on temporary installations that get thrown away once the exhibition is over.

KL: Lisbon, has changed dramatically over the past ten years. We've experienced it professionally and personally. We work here and we live here. We do not come to visit because of the picturesque streets, the food or the weather. Kunsthalle Lissabon is responsible, in its own scale and scope, for that change. We were (and are) active agents in the coolification process of the city which, together

with unregulated gentrification and touristification, changed the city dramatically, and not for the better. We took the tenth anniversary as a way of looking into these aspects more in depth. We wanted to step back and invite others to take our place, in a very literal way. Taking over resources and infrastructure and seeing what and how they would respond to that. One of the main conclusions is that, despite everything, the city and the artistic community still needs a place like KL, so we will resume our program as of February 2020. The space is very important since it serves as a physical anchor in a sea of neo-liberal turmoil, and the program —the exhibitions we present— function as the physical embodiment of those protocols we wish to institute. An exhibition is not just the placing of objects in a space. It is a discursive nexus where the subjective views of the artist, the production modes of the time, the resources available, the needs of a community and many other factors come together in a public way for a duration of time. We don't think that is something we want to let go anytime soon.

AA: I agree the importance of having a physical space lies in its potential to weave community and ethics, but we live in an increasingly interconnected community, and connectivity has this tendency towards homogenization, specially through the online circulation of “documented art”. What kind of politics of representation do you feel are important in order to encourage difference and freedom today?

SL: Being known through the ether is one thing, and it's always nice to hear that people know your program from far away, but distance creates also a very non-emotional support. Representation through physical contact can never be replaced. The sort of freedom one feels during a live event, knowing that your presence in this very moment counts and contributes to something special, connects deeper than anything else. This is true freedom, choosing where you want to spend your time and with whom.

KL: That has been something we have been thinking about throughout our “sabbatical year”. We have been asking ourselves the question of who do we present, which is obviously asking who do we represent. We have always paid attention to issues of representation, who is allowed to speak versus who is not. Our program is, for instance, showing more women than men. More international artists than local ones. More artists from geographies other than Europe and North America. Once we come back in February 2020 we have a program for the next two years that furthers the reflection on the politics of representation. We will continue our ongoing research into artistic practices coming from Latin America, with exhibitions by Ad Minoliti (Argentinian), Sheroanawe Hakihiwe (Yanomami/Venezuelan), Manuel Solano (Mexican) and Federico Herrero (Costa Rica). We will also show Zheng Bo (Chinese) and Otobong Nkanga (Nigerian). In terms of European artists, we will be showing new projects by Laure Prouvost

(French) and Rita Sobral Campos (Portuguese). Besides geography, gender and gender identity are also very important for us and we will, like in previous years, show more women than men (4 women, 3 men and 1 non-binary artist). We will continue to critically reflect and question the white, male and heteronormative narrative of worth and relevance in the field of contemporary art that is still the canon both locally and internationally.

AA: One distinctive feature of both of your programs —at least in the last months — is a similar emphasis on joy through the work of artists like Charles Benjamin, Kris Lemsalu, Sol Calero, Flora Rebollo, Thiago Barbalho and Yuli Yamagata, Melanie Bonajo, Engel Leonardo, etc. I wonder how important the idea of playfulness was in your minds when you drafted your programmes/exhibitions?

SL: Having enough time to engage with the person you want to work with is essential. Otherwise you cannot go beyond a formalist pursuit of the logistics and physical aspects of the show. This means, the better you know or have gotten to know the person you invited to your programme, the further you can go once you are realising the projects. So when drafting the programme, it is always good to have a good mix of artists you have watched for a long time, known for a while, admired. The collaboration with KL, for instance, has happened after Luis and João kept inviting PIVO, CURA and SALTS for a few years to talks, engaging in lively exchanges. So once this show in Lisbon happened, we trusted it each other fully, and the artist could feel this energy and go to the max with his ideas. It was wonderful.

KL: You mention Flora Rebollo and Thiago Barbalho, but those artists were shown during Pivô's take over, so we don't have any curatorial responsibility over that. However, being together and working together in a meaningful way with the artists is a very important part of how KL operates. We take that into consideration when we invite artists to do a project with us. We take this job very seriously and we love what we do, but we also want it to be a very pleasurable process both for us and for everyone involved: the artists, the technicians, the audience, everyone really. So ideas of playfulness, pleasure, joyfulness, etc. are very important in how we define KL and how it relates to the world around it.





AA: This relates to the relationship between work and friendship. Friendship as a structure for multiplying perspectives. Could you speak a bit about that?

SL: It's quite simple really, it's the same discussion between work and non-work or the feeling what you do is a calling or a passion rather, the transition of the two is much more fluid. The art world, as untransparent as it might feel from the outside, is based on values that we consider similarly close to those found within our families or circles of friends, especially on the level of non-for-profit organisations like ours. There is no money in this business so if you don't do it for reasons of congeniality and friendship, what do you do it for?

KL: Some people may be doing it for money, but those people are clearly not running a small scale institution like we are. Friendship enables multiple perspectives but more importantly, at least for us, it enables togetherness. There is an overall tendency towards isolating oneself, either through precarious labor conditions that demand total commitment, or through media saturation and online presence, which trigger a bizarre sense of belonging. Friendship keeps us connected to each other, in touch (literally and metaphorically) with one another. And being together is the trigger to many, many things which are of paramount importance these days.

AA: As someone who runs a project space from a remote location, I'm interested in the somewhat scattered attention of the art world. Working from places that do not exist in the collective imagination has a very weird and interesting quality allowing art to exist at a different rate. From your perspectives living and working from two small-scale cities but still important artistic centers, while working as curators internationally: what is in your eyes the potential of working from this not central or partially-central positions?

SL: In our case, we couldn't be located more central within Europe. It's a question of perspective, Basel is the second largest city in Switzerland and we have three of the leading museums, not just in Switzerland or Europe, but worldwide like the Kunstmuseum Basel, the Fondation Beyeler and the Schaulager. We also have Art Basel, the leading global art fair, so culturally speaking our little space is competing with a lot of cultural heat, that is why running an institution that promotes emerging art is so important, in light of all these blue chip and historical platforms, it's a tool to vent with, in a lot of ways.

KL: We occupy two very different positions. As Sam mentioned Basel is a center, period. We can discuss what kind of center it is, within the larger framework of the art world but it is a center nonetheless. Lisbon, on the other hand is a completely different story. We like to tell a tale of when we started KL ten years ago which illustrates the changes the city went through over the last decade. One day, in one of these networking events of the art world we were introduced to someone who asked us where we were from. We mentioned Lisbon and the response we got was a shrug. Fast forward to another of those events, now in the present. We were again introduced to someone who asked us where we were from. We mentioned Lisbon again, since we are still here and the response we got was a hyperbolic *"OMG, Lisbon is the best city in the world! I totally want to move there!!!"* Nothing really changed in the city, or in its cultural landscape, at least nothing structural, but it is hyped and with it come a lot of problems: gentrification, touristification, coolification, etc. People do come live here because it's cheaper than London or Berlin, but that move makes the city more expensive for the locals, which in turn makes life more difficult for us. Same thing with trying to develop a cultural activity in the city. Our travel and accommodation budget had to increase because flying to Lisbon and staying in Lisbon became more expensive. These practicalities, while boring to read about, are what structure the way we work in a place like Lisbon. The program itself hasn't changed because the local community hasn't changed that much. To a certain extent Lisbon has developed a sort of schizophrenia: there is the local Lisbon and there is the international Lisbon, the one everyone talks about and wants to visit. These two Lisbons occupy the same physical body, but they're not completely in touch with each other. We keep working in and for the local Lisbon, not for Madonna and the likes.

AA: We've focused a lot on your respective ethos, the logics, stimuli and goals behind your programmes but, to finish, what excites you the most at the moment and when you project yourselves into the future?

SL: SALTS remains foremost a platform to bring people together and a place for artists to experiment. However, now it is time to think and rethink what it can become outside of that, this after 10 years and 75 exhibitions further down the road is really exciting –who to partner up with, who to engage with, to talk about, where to draw inspiration outside of Switzerland, outside of Europe, who might have similar experiences but comes from a completely different vantage point. I'm excited about discovering what urges arise and where they emerge from!

KL: What excites us the most about the future is its uncertainty and unpredictability. It's uncanny to think where we are now. When we started we had no idea what we would become, how long we would last. And now thinking about the future, the next ten years, for example... we have no idea! We don't have a map or a plan because things change. We started at the height of the economical crisis. Lisbon was a forgotten city. Now it's booming. No one could have foreseen that. No one could have foreseen KL would last ten years, so the future is for us to imagine and hopefully produce. And that's the most exciting thing!

Alex Alonso: Fluent (<http://fluentfluent.org/>)

João Mourão e Luís Silva: Kunsthalle Lissabon (<https://www.kunsthalle-lissabon.org/en/>)

Samuel Leuenberger: Salts (<http://www.salts.ch/#/en>)



Charles Benjamin: *P for Everything*. Exhibition views. Kunsthalle Lissabon. Photos: Bruno Lopes.  
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