

To quote:

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Salvador Allende Solidarity Museum: A museum permeated by its surroundings

The Salvador Allende Solidarity Museum is a museum of modern and contemporary art. It was founded in 1971 with the mission of being a museum for the "people of Chile." And it was formed thanks to an international mobilisation of solidarity, based on the donation of works by the artists themselves.

The spirit given by its founders was different from the traditional conception of a museum. They sought to abandon the elitist position of hegemonic culture. They had the idea of bringing the plastic arts closer to the Latin American people. They did this in a lively way, for cultural and educational purposes, with full democratic accessibility. Hence, this is a museum capable of responding to the needs of a new society, as a means of advancing the integration of the arts with life.

I will tell you a little about the museum's history, which is fundamental to understand our current values and outlook.

This museum model was conceived by an important network of progressive intellectuals and artists from around the world. It was founded in solidarity with the government of Salvador Allende, the first democratically elected socialist government in the world.

The museum was led by Mario Pedrosa, a Brazilian art critic exiled in Chile. And the International Committee for Artistic Solidarity with Chile was formed. This was made up of Dore Ashton, Giulio Carlo Argan, Ronald Penrose, and Harald Szeemann, then director of Documenta V, among others. They promoted and advertised the idea in their countries and invited artists to donate their works to this new museum. Within a few months, they received donations from Miró, Vasarely, Frank Stella, Lygia Clark, Calder. More than 650 works were received. The museum was inaugurated in May 1972 in Santiago. After that, in September 1973, we suffered the military coup, which made the museum invisible. Its collection was lost, and its managers were exiled.

The project was re-organized in 1975 from Paris and Havana, under the name Museo Internacional de la Resistencia Salvador Allende. This project was part of an international campaign to denounce the abuses of the Chilean dictatorship. Despite not having its own headquarters or a stable budget, this museum in exile managed to build up an important collection of 1,200 works. It held countless traveling exhibitions and persisted until 1990, thanks to the solidarity of different affective networks in Europe and Latin America.

The museum encourages projects based on the idea of its first director Mario Pedrosa. He proposed projects where plastic language would gradually become integrated into everyday life. In these projects, art is an "experimental exercise of freedom". And art can connect the interior with the exterior and fulfil the social function of re-educating people's sensitivity. This allows people to discover new ways of knowing and relating to the world. The museum was conceived progressive and experimental: a space for experiences, "a parallel laboratory" for both artists and the community.

This view of the 1970s is extremely necessary for the reality and social demand that we are experiencing in Chile and in the world. We see the museum as a living, open and permeable space, a facilitator of processes and experiences, a dynamic platform in permanent dialogue and transformation. So today, we ask ourselves: how do we, as a Museum, promote this experimental space? How do we relate to the communities?

I will tell you about the process we went through with the community of the Barrio República neighbourhood, the central sector of Santiago where the museum is located. This is a multicultural and diverse neighbourhood that contains many layers of Chilean social history. It is a neighbourhood with the architectural richness of small palaces from the early 1900s. It is also a neighbourhood where Pinochet's repressive police were installed during the dictatorship.

Since 2012, when I took over as director, we had been making different attempts to get closer to our neighbours. Before there was a total disconnection. We worked from museology and critical pedagogy, based on the principles of cultural and artistic mediation. Also, we encourage dialogue, experimentation, and reflection of the individual in terms of the collective. But we had to go further to propose a strategy projected over time. This strategy would lead us to a relationship of mutual trust with the community.

Therefore, in 2016 we started the "Mirada de Barrio" project. This project was gradual, sustained over time, and interdisciplinary, with the participation of sociologists and artists together with the museum's professionals for an initial survey. After different meetings and dynamics with the neighbours, we decided to work on an exhibition on the theme of the heritage of the neighbourhood, in its present, past, and future. In this negotiation, we became part of the community, ready to be transformed as an institution, with all the risks that this entails.

For six-month, we did textile, photography, writing, and bookbinding workshops. Afterwards, in September 2018, we inaugurated the exhibition "Haciendo Barrio". This exhibition was the product of a collective curatorship with a group of neighbours from these workshops. They worked on the name, the works exhibited, the museum design, the inauguration, etc. It was a great and wonderful learning experience in all its complexity. And it has transformed both the museum as an institution and its workers. It has opened up new relationships and a bond of trust in our immediate community.

To give continuity to the project, we created the Territorial Linking program within the Public Programmes area. The has a coordinator in charge. Also, it aims to continue generating

collaborative links with our neighbourhood audiences. Hence, the project involves agents and organisations in the implementation of activities related to arts and culture.

Motivated by the neighbours, we continued with the textile and photography groups and created the vegetable garden school. Hence, we created three Brigades that operate autonomously under the museum's wing. These brigades are linked to the museum through a permanent program of artistic workshops. These workshops are designed and implemented jointly, facilitated by members of these brigades together with invited artists and professionals.

The institution and community relationship has always been complex and asymmetrical, with suspicion towards the former being common. Collaboration has been built little by little between the members of the neighbourhood, the organisations, and the museum and its workers. Respect for diversity, for the organisations, and the dynamics of each one prevails. And, at the same time, there is a dialogue that is built day by day. The common project is in permanent negotiation and dispute. The audiences are heterogeneous, propositional, and in constant transformation; each person comes with her own subjectivities and stories to put tension on the shared space, the museum, and, therefore, its visitors. In this way, the museum as an institutional structure is stressed and redefined in this action.

Part of this tension lies in understanding the link with the territory as a fundamental part of our museum policy, which is based on the axes: Solidarity, Art, and Politics. Through them, we investigate and make contingent matters visible. For example, how to make visible the stories made invisible by the great history; or how to make visible human rights; or how to make visible resistance to hegemony; or how to make visible the recovery of the social fabric; or how to make visible the egalitarian relationship with the environment; among others. We weave networks together of international collaboration - which have led us to exhibit recently, for example, at the Berlin Biennale. Additionally, we weave links together in the streets of República with the neighbourhood assembly, the neighbourhood council, the textile factory, with our neighbours. And, at the same time, they connect with artists, curators, or cultural professionals, feeding back knowledge.

The social upheaval of 2019 in Chile reinforced our ties with the community. Other museums in the centre of the capital closed due to riots in the streets and attacks on their buildings. However, we generated a public statement as workers, making ourselves available to the community. This is how we began a frenetic agenda: citizens' meetings; and a cycle of dialogues in the museum; and textile and wellbeing workshops. These workshops were carried out by the brigades in the neighbourhood square, in which hundreds of people participated. Additionally, citizen reflection was growing. The path to change the Political Constitution created during the dictatorship was being consolidated. A year later, in the midst of the pandemic, 80% of the citizens approved the drafting of a new constitution and elected the constitutional assembly.

During the pandemic, we have done workshops and online meetings with our community. Also, we have met in person in the few moments that health measures have allowed it. Affection implies responsibility, and for a few months, we honourably hosted a self-organised soup kitchen. In the face of the economic crisis, this kitchen operated in our front garden, providing hot meals to hundreds of neighbours.

We are convinced that we must rebuild the fractured social fabric today, from the affections, from the local, with our community. Our commitment as a Museum is to be a permeable platform open to collaboration, where horizontal management, listening, trust, and honesty are effectively expressed. A platform where we all have a sense of belonging and move towards the integration of the arts into everyday life.

We will soon publish the book "Mirada de Barrio," which has been co-edited by neighbours and museum workers, and deals with the project from different voices and in-depth.