

## Conversation

Curator Zane Onckule in conversation with artist Rodrigo Hernandez on the occasion of his exhibition in Riga

March, 2017

**ZO:** Who or what is the “*Shakiest of Things*”? And how come it’s simultaneously “*The Most Solid*” which on it’s own was the title of one of your earlier projects.

**RH:** Close, but not exactly. By the previous title I guess you mean - “Nothing is solid”, a short fragment of a Sonic Youth song I was listening to again and again in Puerto Vallarta, on the brink of my coming out some years ago. Those were strange, and very exciting times. The complete line of the song said: “Nothing is solid, nothing can be held in my hand for long...” Later I did a series of five drawings called “in my hand for long”. I am still curious why this still always sounds and feels so wrong and incomplete, even after such a long time I’ve done them and listened to this title in my head. I would imagine I should be used to it by now, but it’s still a little unsettling. I see this kind of grasping of the song and the words in it over time as an elliptical movement, as a handling of parts of a particular kind. I remember reading one day that an artist is someone trying to make things float. “Being happy, after all, surmounts and surpasses all frailty and strength. Happiness is the shakiest of things and yet also the most solid” would be the full quote from one of Robert Walser’s *Microscripts*.

**ZO:** You’re repeatedly inspired from writers and poets, their writing. What is it about Robert Walser’s *Microscripts* that appeals to you here? Is it the “complete insignificance of content and the neglect of style” as Walter Benjamin has put it?

**RH:** Robert Walser is an author I really enjoy reading. This simple principle is the only one I try to follow when I chose what I read and what I look at. In the case of Walser, I never feel his writing pushes one to an agreement or an understanding of what one reads. I get the feeling while he’s trying to be as clear as possible when describing any kind of situation -sometimes to the point of insignificance- at the same time he’s maybe, secretly thinking about something else. And that this *something else* leaks through that apparent descriptiveness in a very powerful and joyful way. There’s something that isn’t easy to grasp there, for sure. Walser is protective of his subjects, of what he sees and how he sees it. I admire and love this in an artist more than anything, and the *Microscripts* are the most extreme case of this sort of elusiveness or *reticence* as Benjamin calls it.

**ZO:** For my own sports I am listing the channels of methods and forms you use: starting with your *thing* a piece of paper, caught in various situations – *mise-en-scenes* of one project following the next; then – a certain story, author, an article of historical reference (even though you say you don’t focus on the characters and their identities); then a colour – the recurrent presence of yellow, blue, black and other deep hues that you use in quite a colour blocking way; then- perhaps a certain form of geometry with references spanning from ancient Aztec to Greek to cosmology to Russian constructivism...

**RH:** ...there would be parts of everything that you mentioned in my reaction to this list, but I would also say that there are a bit too many words. I would prefer a shorter answer and unfortunately I don’t think I have it. I can say I like getting involved with many things around me and the way I do this is by making my own things, with my own hands. What I’ve made so far and what I am currently making are at the same time tools for this involvement but I can also see a conversation starting among them, and that me I’m sometimes just watching, articulating or moderating the conversation. I like this idea that I can be constantly getting in and out of that universe, free of myself in a way. That I am completely sunk in, but at the same time that it is but a simple game that I juggle between my hands.

The first thing I thought of when reading this was the title of one of my favourite *Microscripts*: “The words I’d like to utter”, but maybe that would be a bad answer.

**ZO:** No, it wouldn't be. Would you agree then that it is not so much the content as the form and material itself that interests you? You do seem enjoy reading these texts you reference, but it feels like they are not necessarily as related to the idea that you're about to bring to life. Instead, it's more the tactile feeling and the materiality of the paper – thinness or the way the ink, pen or pencil has left its marks on it that appeals to you.

**RH:** That's quite right, and it's a very important point for me when reflecting on my own practice. Totally important. Let's put it like this: paper is something easy to approach as both substance and body simultaneously, or as either one of them back and forth. It's something that gains and loses meaning all the time so it really has a tendency to stay in an ambiguous position. With paper you can't help but be a reader and a "toucher" at all times, or, -as you prefer to see it- be just one of the two and not the other at a given moment, even in spite of your will or of the circumstances. I often like referring to a *yantra*, that dynamic diagram used in Hinduism: it is conformed by the interlocking of geometrical shapes that surround and radiate out from a central point. The observation of it – of how it is actually constructed- is supposed to have a mystical power to guide you into mediation. What interests me here is that apparent contradiction where a yantra is nothing but a shape, and only in its shape does its power reside, and at the same time it's nothing but an instrument to shapelessness.

**ZO:** Shapelessness (of a paper) that undergoes numerous actions: soaking, shredding, drying... And speaking of drying paper, that's what we're about to experience in this exhibition - is this "drying studio environment" a symbolic reference that suggests your upbringing in Mexico under the direct sun?

**RH:** When thinking about the actions on paper I think of the speed of the paper as a material to work with; a speed I've learned to adapt to through repeated work over time. What I mean is that I have become very aware of what the time span is, in which I can still affect and transform the material before reaching the point of destroying it, and this simply relates to the time it takes to dry. When you think about it, it's similar to the process of painting with oil colours, or of working with clay: your material determines how fast or slowly you can make decisions, and somehow your working plan becomes or finds the way to stay programmed to be as compact as it needs to be to still fit into that "un-dried" time gap. After that, it's all over. The moment when the material finally dries is like the sound of an alarm that wakes you up and forces you to recede. I don't know how this relates to Mexico specifically, but I've certainly been more nervous during European winters when I have wished things would dry faster.

**ZO:** With formal and thematic references reminiscent of certain ancient relics, your choice of material is rather removed from the seriousness and richness of the original, trading gold or silver for foil or again and repeatedly - paper. What relationship do you share with these motives or the territory they *populate*?

**RH:** Here you touch upon two important subjects. First, the "poor" nature of the materials I often chose. I think this started in a very natural way: I wanted to give shape to an idea in a very simple way and this meant proceeding as follows without any additional steps - standing up from my chair, going to a store, buying a couple of things, returning to my chair, doing something, and then having something I could see as being finished the morning after. I got used to this lonely, uncompromised way of moving forward and then one might say I only tried to see how this process evolves and what it involves, what this process actually consists of. Secondly, you referred to my interest in Ancient Pre-Columbian imagery. This could be a longer answer, but mainly what drives me to it is the idea that those images function in a way that is almost impossible to grasp. They repeat motives and subjects that we can try to read with the help of experts or by analogy, but those images are mostly locked inside a place that we really do not belong to anymore. So I see them with a kind of sadness, as something definitely lost. And yet, it's maybe precisely because of this that I'm not surprised to see many of those images being used when talking about that big subject of "Mexican identity". Besides this, the specific narratives constructed from and around those images are very beautiful and mysterious and very often suggest ideas that I draw inspiration from and then appear tangentially in my own work.

**ZO:** The site-specific exhibition we're about to open will undergo last-minute adjustments-improvements by the hands of the younger audience members. This is like a full circle knowing that the amateur drawings you collected online are the source of the inspiration for this exhibition. They are given quite a voice. What is behind this intention?

**RH:** It will be the first time I do something like this and I'm very excited about it. This new element in my work relates to what I mentioned before about trying to see what the process actually consists of. In this case, the involvement of kids adds an element that changes the process and will hopefully help me see something new in it. Recently I felt I had been trying to do this over and over again by moving or changing the thing in front of me, but perhaps it could be useful now to change the place where I'm looking from; or to take a part of the construction that is in the center and move it to the margins. You know what I mean? Also, I enjoy speaking with kids and seeing how they act and make decisions, and I will also try to make sure that they enjoy this too.

**ZO:** Besides local art lovers activating the exhibition, what does the "site" mean to you in this instance? Is it the institution or the context of Riga? Or is it Walser's writings or a group of kids "messaging" with the installation? Or is it a general state or an "archaeological site" that you seem to be very affected by?

**RH:** I have been thinking lately that it's a curious thing that we as artists move at a certain pace based on a wide variety of factors, but for putting up the work somewhere, this pace suddenly has to change and adjust to the pace of that "somewhere", that place hosting the work. Meaning: a title has to be chosen at a certain point, a press release of any kind has to be written and finished before a certain point, the work should be ready, shipped, installed, documented, reviewed, etc. at a certain point. This is of course very practical and perhaps simply natural if one wishes to have anything that can be called a "show", but maybe it is also some kind of dark suit we have all silently agreed looks good for going to work. There's some rapidness or some kind of lightness that I wish doing an exhibition would have more of. We write too much for practical reasons in the "real" life, there are tons of signs around us to be read and followed, it seems like we are meant to make sense of things, and I wonder if an exhibition could work just a little differently sometimes. I don't know it, but I am just asking myself this question. And yes, I find an archaeological site to be a very powerful image indeed. In this case, nevertheless, I imagine the margins of the site as not being clearly marked, so that the viewer is invited to metaphorically jump into the process of the work instead of staying behind or outside of it. This is perhaps what I mean when I say what I want is evolves or involves what I see a process consisting of.

**ZO:** Thank you. Looking forward to see the show.

**RH:** Thank you.