

## INPUT #5: The Blockhouse, Interview with Editor Renee Vara



Avelino Sala, Blockhouse, 2012. Courtesy of Input Foundation and the artist.

*INPUT is an avant-garde nonprofit journal founded in 2009. The journal seeks to preserve the book form as a space for artistic experimentation and collaboration in the field of art publishing. For each limited edition, a guest art director is invited to approach the space of the book in a curatorial fashion. INPUT has been featured at the New York Art Book Fair, The Armory Show and Printed Matter.*

*Under the curation of guest creative director Avelino Sala, “Blockhouse” as a metaphor for a bunker, explores the capacity of artists to confront crisis, and to question the symbolic function of art and the role of creation during a critical moment of metaphorical entrenchment.*

*Art-Rated’s Jonathan Beer had the chance to sit down with editor, curator, NYU professor Renee Vara and talk about the latest volume of INPUT:*

**Art-Rated:** Since 2009 you’ve published five volumes including BLOCKHOUSE – what brought you to starting a publication? What motivated you to preserve and promote the book format?

Would you consider each INPUT volume to be a curated exhibition in book format? It’s an interesting turn from the standard post exhibition catalog, which is more of a passive archive.

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**Renee Vara:** I think it all started in two ways, one, taking my curatorial practice and working as an independent curator I felt that there was such an ephemeral element and as an art historian I really love the trace, written material and published material. And I think I was also really dissatisfied with a lot of what was coming out on web based blogs and that sort of thing. I had an impulse that I would try to do it, in a way that brought in a curatorial practice and rubbed and slightly resisted the idea of a magazine or a journal or an exhibition catalog. Which is frankly kind of amazing, when you have someone be a guest Art Director, it's amazing how sometimes it takes them a while to understand that they're really free to rethink it and play with it as a medium in itself -

**AR:** Because it's no longer a passive archive -

**RV:** Right, and its more than just being a way to illustrate something, and that something I really try to encourage. Obviously when we're trying to self-fund we don't have an insane budget to produce something crazy. I was really inspired by a lot of art books from the PS1 Book Fair, and I really like to collect a lot of art books and I came across a bunch of hand printed, ditto copied, early Richard Prince pamphlets and thought they were beautiful. So all of that I just said, well let's try it. The first one was small – the overall theme was public spaces and we did it in a month. We really DIYed it, it was all self-published, and I had to teach myself how to publish. And that alone was a good experience for me. Plus I think artists get a lot of chances to make work but not a lot of chances to make books. Unless they have a big gallery behind them, but even then it's only about their work, and artists are amazing collaborators. Every single version of INPUT has shown that, and often that never gets explored in a book format because it's just not profitable.

**AR:** It's interesting to think that if an essay can open up a topic in the way that a review never can, in some ways INPUT is like a visual essay in ways that couldn't happen otherwise.

**RV:** I think museums are trying to balance that more proactively, but you also have the flipside where museums move more and more to these blockbuster shows with big distribution because books are expensive to produce. I am interested in having an online component, but we had to get some traction first and play both worlds a bit.

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Marc Bijl, *Modern crisis*, 2009. Photo: Nils Klinger. Courtesy of the artist.

**AR:** This publication is focused on entrenchment, which by definition is an active response to a crisis of some kind, either internal or external. It's also something that's felt acutely by everyone today, in one form or another. What led you to this idea for INPUT#5?

**RV:** Well, I think because Avelino Sala and I worked on *Waterways* in 2005, which I curated, we were dealing with the idea of the global warming crisis. This was before it became topical with Al Gore, and we were trying to bring back this nostalgia of a political activist project. I always look back on that as a particularly romantic moment for American artists who wanted to be political activists. The Peace Tower that was featured at the Whitney Biennial about four years ago existed in real space. So that's where Avelino and I had a basis for working on projects about crisis, and then the Istanbul Biennale in 2005, with *Waterways*. I was publishing and Avelino came to me and said 'I want to do something' and so we sat down. It's usually pretty collaborative but I gave a tremendous amount of freedom to how the artists want to say something. Our last issue got censored by the Canadian government, because they said one of the pieces was pornographic. Since we were printing it in Canada, the printer refused to print it for us. That was *Second Skin*, which was difficult because that issue was handmade. I refused to take the piece out. So the Art Director has a tremendous amount of freedom, and almost always the artist themselves choose what's brought to the table. In a couple of cases I might have said this isn't playing right, in terms of the format or printing, but it's pretty liberal. The artists can do whatever they want. I have seen artists try to censor each other, in a way. Some artists really care about the quality of the output, while others are more fluid about it. A few artists thought that there should be a certain standard everything should appear at, and I had to hold my ground on that the submission quality was up to each artist.

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**AR:** The included essays expound the idea of crisis: one that is decidedly beyond postmodernism, one that is more acutely glimpsed through a variety of lenses, whether social or economic or political. It is a crisis so large we barely understand its parts as they spin in different but equally pressing directions. Instead we feel its whole gravity and witness its repercussions. The ideas put forward in the essays are that artists build something, an object, a practice, that puts us away from and bolsters us against this crisis. Do you think that the artists' role has always been like this because we are working within a system inside a civilization that has certain parameters?

**RV:** No, I don't think so. I think the advent of Post-War economy in America did the opposite – it's taken them out of their studios, the places that were their sanctuaries and bunkers and put them forthright as celebrities or idols, or heroes and heroines. Maybe now, there is a reaction to that, and I don't think it's just the crisis but also as an ideological response to finding a different alternative to capitalism. What is consistent in INPUT #5 is that many of the artists are thinking like that, and maybe it's because of the political relationships existent in Spain. There are a lot of artists today who are more interested in persona and less about reflection. But I think those moments of artistic reflection are helpful, helpful to society. The problem is the machine of capitalism and technology doesn't really allow for those moments of timely reflection. In that way I think we're always in a moment of crisis because things like flash trading and shock finances, these things that are so extreme and exacerbated, which have been reverberating since I've been an adult. But now the highs and the lows are exacerbated by technology, the banks and the governance, and those extremes are maybe creating more space to have that moment of reflection, because you can't even keep pace with the highs and the lows. But I think it's up to the artists how they respond. Hilary Clinton just said that diplomats cannot live in a bunker and be out in the world, but maybe artists are the ones that can. I think it's a self-made situation.

**AR:** In his essay curator Avelino states that art is about 'telling things as they are' - you could say that that in itself is a decision to ignore the high and low exacerbation and allow the bunker to be built. As we've been talking, we've been trying to figure out what the new model is, and I think perhaps it's ignoring the situation to avoid being trapped in it. I think it means finding a way to be supported, which would afford a freedom if you're willing to take it.

**RV:** I think that's what is interesting about this notion of useful art as a paradigm. What it's doing is taking art out of the world of aesthetics, which says it doesn't have to have use value or a pragmatic application in the real world. That is a very cultural thing in the Netherlands, where artists are now bunkering down. I'm not sure of what the use is of codifying art like that, it seems very Bauhaus to me. Which is why I liked to hear about that Democracia and how they deal with the bunkering down and reflecting differently, not in a Bauhaus kind of way.

**AR:** Democracia's piece in INPUT #5, 'Eat the Rich, Kill the Poor,' and all their projects make me think more of Joseph Beuy's idea of 'acting in.' That an artwork is a social sculpture as well as a physical entity, it's an object that enacts an invisible change on the surface of culture.

**RV:** And if you think of the Avant-garde, of Marionetti and the Futurists, the Dadaists, they did have this ideology that they could create change, and they felt a responsibility to do that. I think that the movement of an artist either towards the bunker or the podium is dictated by this idea of responsibility. It sounds really

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mundane, and un-sexy for a lot of people who aren't interested in becoming the celebrity Bieber-status-tweeter. You can see a huge shift between someone like Damien Hirst and Ai Weiwei, both of them have gained those platforms with their talent and ability to navigate both worlds but in the end what do they choose to do with that ability? In a way, both of them have chosen to take the world onto themselves. Especially Ai Weiwei, whose created a physical firewall, a true bunker, and he's bunkered in. As the wall gets thicker he gets even more active. So there's this resistance and reaction with him. And I don't think Damien Hirst sees his role that way. I think those are the two spectrums, and I think that every artist has to navigate those two things. And what's interesting is that I don't think Ai Weiwei had a choice, they put him in a bunker.



Democracia, Kill the poor eat the rich, Intervención sobre una limusina hummer dedicada a transportar coleccionistas y amantes del arte durante el Armory Show 2010, New York. Photo: Rodrigo Pereda. Courtesy of Input Foundation and the artist.

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**AR:** And he built another bunker, an enclave.

**RV:** One that empowered him.

**AR:** It's funny you just said the bunker and the podium, and I was thinking entrenched versus embedded. Koons and Hirst are very much living in a very big bubble inside the situation they want to be in – they're self-embedded in a way.

**RV:** Most artists I know, most people I work with, all know that they are tied to capitalism. I think the new generation accepts that. It's almost impossible to say that you are anti-capitalist or anti-market, because we're all subject to these forces and in some ways tied to it. I think Europe has been a little bit better, and that this [issue] has come about in the worst of economic times for Spain, who upheld up their grant for its production. In a lot of European countries there is a little bit of support left, but if you look at the Netherlands, artists feel that no one respects the role of the artist any more. So maybe they feel vindicated if their art has a use function, aka they can find a value system outside of their capitalist value, and maybe that gives them a new definition for being an artist. But that doesn't sound like an ideal situation either. So whether you're entrenched or bunkered in, I think all artists understand that they have some relationship to social and economic forces. Which is how strongly they resist, or how they take from Peter to give to Paul. That freedom to do whatever they wish is amazing, I think even artists in Paris in the 1920's had that freedom to say things how they wished or take directions without considering the capital they would get. I think that's what INPUT is supposed to be

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about. But of course we're tied to the same issues, so we have to bunker down. In a way, INPUT is supposed to be the bunker.

**AR:** Obviously a large part of INPUT is the artist's work. And in this issue we see artists dealing with crisis in a variety of ways: sometimes by having a crisis themselves (Josechu Davila's *Crisis*), or they depicting the crisis itself, creating fetish objects to compartmentalize the threat (like Kendell Geers *Mondo Kane*). Artists are even defacing the crisis; most notably Democracia's EAT THE RICH/KILL THE POOR and Marc Bijl's *Modern Crisis*.

**RV:** The thing with Democracia is that they are doing both, they're becoming the victimizer and the victim at the same time. I like the way they're trying to navigate that, by balancing that fragility they give a rich and complicated viewpoint on the issue. They don't see their viewpoint as static.



Kendell Geers, *Mondo Kane*, 2002. Concrete and Glass. 120 X 120 X 120 cm.

**AR:** I enjoyed Marc Bijl's work for so many of those reasons, because he's using all these symbols from art history and architecture and combining them with a dark sense of humor to occupy an active role as victim and victimizer. He's essentially creating a second conversation on top of the conversation that streams behind us constantly in the world.

**RV:** I think that's why it was great to do this edition. On the panel we did I asked, 'Do you believe art can make a difference, whether its social or economic or human?' and most people answered pretty affirmatively. Even if that change was only one person.

**AR:** I think it's a pretty big deal to change just one person. I feel like I experienced that at dOCUMENTA. I found myself being drawn to and taken up with work that dealt with issue that I wasn't naturally interested in.

**RV:** dOCUMENTA is traditionally an artist/activist project, but even they're balancing the commercial side of it. But you're right. I won't forget the first dOCUMENTA I went to, seeing Rachel Whiteread and David

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Hammon. It changed my life to see art do that. Because people weren't curating outside of the box in America, except for maybe artists within their own communities like Judd or Kusama.

**AR:** How do you imagine the public, who is similarly affected by the crisis reads this genre of resistant and rebellious work seen at dOCUMENTA or featured in INPUT?

**RV:** Well I think the issues are complicated and layered, it's not as simplistic as what we were saying before, anti-capitalist. I think the different types of language make it rich and deep, so there are many ways for it to be interpreted. And that's a sign of good, lasting work. I expect that the general public, especially in America, would have a variety of responses. I think a lot of people would ask 'why should I pay for this?' or 'why would I want to pay for this?' It's isolated and deals with semantics, it's inaccessible and codified with a language that is specific art and art history. So, I think most people's first reaction is to disregard it. Artists that engage their audience use a mixture of languages, like a conductor or composer, and avoid a purist method. My fear is that in America, art is always considered to be a luxury good and not history. I think artists are really adroit to this by managing this push pull with flexibility and creativity. I think they have a lot more freedom than a curator at an institution to do that.

**AR:** The work in INPUT #5 features primarily Spanish or Latino artists who work with these ideas of entrenchment and resistance. Other art scenes in China or the Middle East offer similarly potent opportunities – can you talk about the decision to focus on this artistic demographic?

**RV:** Well, frankly, INPUT isn't a compendium, we aren't trying to capture a state. Avelino wanted to work with many of the artists after working with them at the Havana Biennale. I think he was interested in how they created a voice.

**AR:** Where does it go from here? This is a limited edition of 150 books – what is your readership like for INPUT? What kind of an impact does it make?

**RV:** We could work with a distributor, but doing events helps a lot also. It helps to bring people to a place, and doing an exhibition might help as well. Without it being a blog, it doesn't have a constant push in that way. So in some ways I think it retains power for that reason. It's tremendous that the five writers and all the artists came together to do it, it's truly a labor of love. It's amazing that artists want to participate and give so much, give us the rights to publish their work just for the chance to say something. I'm amazed how quickly it all happened, how quickly it's all come together. I'm grateful to have such international participation because it allows INPUT to be so vibrant and feasible. Most artists understand this is not a profitable venture. It's fun, but it's hard work.

*INPUT #5* is printed in English and Spanish and available in a limited edition of 150 copies.

**Featured artists:**

AES+F, Marc Bijl, Fernando Bryce, Paco Cao, Josechu Dávila, Wim Delvoye, Democracia, Mounir Fatmi, Carlos Garaicoa, Daniel García Andújar, Chus García Fraile, Kendell Geers, Goldiechiari, Regina Jose Galindo, MK Kaehne, Rogelio López Cuenca, Teresa Margolles, David Maroto, Mateo Matè, Pepe Medina, Jorge Mendéz Blake, Eugenio Merino, Santiago Morilla, Antonio Muntadas, Dan Perjovschi, PJSM, Anri Sala, Avelino Sala, Santiago Sierra and Pelayo Varela.

**Featured art critics:**

Fernando Castro Flórez, José Luis Corazón Ardura, Blanca de la Torre and Imma Prieto.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Jonathan Beer is a New York-based artist and writer. He began to write critically in 2010 while attending the New York Academy of Art for his MFA in Painting. His paintings have been exhibited at Kathleen Cullen Fine Arts, Flowers Gallery, Boltax Gallery and Sotheby's in New York. Jon is also a contributing writer for The Brooklyn Rail, ArtWrit and for Art Observed.

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