



institute of
contemporary
art

BALTIMORE

INTERVIEW WITH TLaloC by Beki Basch

BB: First off, I want to repeat my congratulations. This was clearly a large, seemingly ever-expanding, exhibition to mount. Since we spoke before this now written format interview, I feel like we were able to take a deep dive into the work and talk about how it has progressed over the years— a project which you have often described as a kind of 'joke', but which you have lovingly nurtured into your own universe with a combination of intuition, flexibility, deep commitment, occasional self-analysis, and general enthusiasm for this mystical journey.

Can you first start off by talking about the origins of the appliance/apparatus-like forms (found on your Elgreenproject.com website) you have been creating, enlightening us a bit as to their roots and how you have built up a universe around them?

TLaloC: To respond to this question, I should first address the "joke" through a funny story that depicts a weirdly specific situation that, *I bet*, everyone has encountered at some point in their life. It really starts as a question:

"Has it ever happened to you, that you are in your basement unsuccessfully trying to find something -your Christmas tree ornaments, for example- when suddenly, you become absolutely sidetracked by inadvertently encountering an unidentified contraption that, no matter how hard you try, you are simply incapable to recognize?" Well, THAT is the basic premise (or the joke) that influenced all the shapes and objects that inhabit my universe.

It was circa 1998 when I decided to give a tangible shape to this "fun idea" by illustrating an ongoing catalog of weird objects with "unidentifiable use or certifiable existence." Basically, it is a tribute to every forgotten/obsolete kind of artifact that has had its purpose erased by time, provoking an inevitable itch or desire to decode its true function. In short, my goal was to design a large catalog of "nothing". Of course, this aimless endeavor eventually started to take shape on its own, as the collection expanded way

more than I expected. I guess I realized that, after designing and illustrating too many "nothings", I had created "something". So, what started as a light-hearted exercise of form and color, eventually evolved into a more complex project as I started to question my personal fascination with these objects. Many years later, I realized that my deep interest in them could be traced back to my childhood.

I might have been 5 years old (an only child at the time), and I recall having a big cardboard box filled with many classic didactic toys from the 70's and 80's, mixed with an infinite number of displaced items, like plastic juicers, kitchen containers with strange symbols, plastic caps, lids, utensils, etc. I used to tip over the box to scatter every single one of its contents on the floor. Then I remember the joy of rearranging everything over and over, constructing different worlds and characters with a different set of rules each time. I catalogued its colors, its shapes, and bestowed new meanings to them. Among this vast collection of toys and weird "lost and found" items, I distinctly remember the strangest of them all. It was a large yellow trumpet-like plastic grooved cone with a red rounded bellows tip —a "toy" that was a complete mystery to me. I vividly remember the absolute fascination that its inherent strangeness and unknown purpose used to cause me. This is the earliest memory I have of my first ever encounter with a "strangely familiar artifact".

This is the seminal moment that came back many years later to give shape to Elgreen Project. It framed the unique taxonomies of its objects, eventually building and designing the space, aesthetics and peculiar architecture that contains them, finally giving birth to the strange characters that populate this universe.

BB: Tell us how you found yourself so personally, perhaps even mystically, connected to the writing of Jorge Luis Borges; particularly the short story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* (maybe you can explain this a little), from which your exhibition borrows ideas.

TLaloC: *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* tells the story of a secret society of intellectuals called "Orbis

Tertius" that takes the impossible task of creating a world (Tlön) from the ground up. Their plan consisted of documenting this complex endeavor into a gigantic clandestine encyclopedia, describing Tlön's unique taxonomies, geographical formations, architectural edifications, complex languages and even the specific behavior of the people that inhabit it.

Hlaer To Jangr (a title written in a mysterious Tlön language) refers to the name of one of the numerous volumes that are part of the secret encyclopedia that holds the extensive contents of Tlön.

The story explains that, at some point, the fictional world of Tlön becomes SO vast by its incredibly rich description and documentation, that suddenly many of its illusory elements start to materialize in real life. Eventually, this fictional universe that started as an imaginary project, progressively takes control of reality, until finally it engulfs the world we know.

When I was reading this story for the nth time, I suddenly made the connection between Borges' story and my work. In a very humbling way, I realized that I had also been creating a fictional world from scratch. I had built a peculiar world with its own set of rules, a place composed by discarded artifacts plagued with impossible architectures and ruled by strange anthropomorphic characters with an unknown purpose. A universe that, comparable to Tlön, started on a sheet of paper, and later became tangible. I thought that, through this allegory, I could successfully intersect Borges' story with mine at the gallery space. Phrases like "transparent tigers and towers of blood" describe the landscape of Tlön as a world so impossibly strange. That is what truly opened the possibility to let my artwork blend with the rest of the elements of Borges story.

As a personal tribute to the story, I borrowed the name "Orbis Tertius" to embody the role of one of the members of this secret society and a keyholder to the portal containing this secret universe. Finally, I appropriated the "Hlaer To Jangr" volume of the encyclopedia of Tlön and I expanded its existing contents with the elements I proposed at the gallery.

BB: When I first visited the exhibition, the main gallery space felt like a brief waiting room/gathering space for the scheduled timed-entry tour through your semi-secret installation spaces. It even reminded me of a theme park where there's this lead-up area to the ride or main event that is decorated to be a sort of minor hall-of-fame. This didn't feel intentional at all, but more of a product of the covid-based restrictions on visitors. The work in the exhibition space is clearly meant to be taken in on its own, but I did feel that there was a certain bubbling-over excitement about the installations (Lou Joseph, the ICA director and yourself were there leading the groups through) that overshadowed this more static gallery-based work. Were the installations revelatory for you? How do you feel about these two different modes of presenting the same ideas?

TLaloC: The peculiar arrangement of the whole exhibition is intentional and crucial to create a narrative of "progressive decay" or "dimensional shift" from one reality to another.

I decided to present the first section of the artwork in a traditional art gallery context first, to "ground" the viewer into its immediate surroundings (ICA Gallery North Ave, Baltimore, MD). The intention was to gradually immerse the audience into a completely "unknown territory." To further contextualize this allegory, when the reader embarks into Borges' *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*—the very first page of the story opens with a scene of two colleagues having dinner in a country house, located in Ramos Mejía, Buenos Aires. What happens after this ordinary scene reveals a sinister turn of events that takes both protagonists on an unexpected journey to secret societies and mysterious phenomena. By consequence of this deliberate progression, the exhibition "white cube" space pales in comparison to the unexpected secret areas that manifest beyond the gallery walls.

It is also worth mentioning that, when I proposed the exhibition, I was completely unaware that all these historical "secret" spaces even existed. I was absolutely blown away when I was introduced to these areas for the first time. So, I think that, in many ways, I wanted to replicate the profound (almost

visceral) impression that this first encounter with the spaces caused me.

I dare to say that the planning of the whole show was entirely driven by organic conversations between these locations and the art. The placement of the artwork, even the creation of new work, was a direct result of the physical spaces at the exhibition and their inherent architectural narrative. The fog, the scent, the sound, the projected videos, all of them were a direct reaction to the space.

BB: As an artist-run-space, you've been chipping in a lot of time to hold gallery hours and give installation tours. When I visited, and as we have been talking, you've often referred to this as your 'new job'. You're spending a lot of time with your work, acting as a docent, or a sort of travel guide in your fictional universe. How do you feel this has helped you to reflect on the work and/or immerse yourself more deeply in its fiction?

TLaloC: As you mentioned, ICA Baltimore Gallery is run by artists, helping artists. Each amazing person involved in the gallery works as a volunteer. I was very aware of this, and I thought it was important to be an extra pair of hands to help to prepare / guide the tours. The breadth of the exhibition involves too many components that are necessary to create its distinct atmosphere: sound, scent, fog, lights, etc. It is particularly challenging to set the show to be fully operational each time we open the doors. I work as a full-time faculty in First Year Experience (FYE) at MICA, but as we are on summer break at the moment, I thought of committing myself to be regularly present at my "new job" conducting the gallery tours. This is my fifth solo exhibition, but my first one in the United States. It was especially important to be involved as much as possible, to learn from this experience for further iterations. A great experience that has been the result of being "close to my work" is to further the narrative of the project itself. I didn't plan a script for the tour exhibitions, so the opportunity of being present at most of the shows has allowed me to personally witness and collect the reactions and feedback from the distinct audiences of each day's presentations. Thanks to this, the

storytelling and the way we have conducted the tours has naturally become more robust. In parallel, the experience has provided me with a new, unexpected perspective for my work, helping me find new pieces from the never-ending puzzle that gives shape to Elgreen Project universe.

BB: As this work unfolds, it also seems to devour. Actually 'devour' was a word used in the press release. It implies that this universe you are creating is a living organism— and perhaps this organism is you— or perhaps you're merely the first host and the organism will extend beyond you, much like the Orbis Tertius secret society had intended for when creating the fictional world of Tlön... The installations allude to that as well. There is a sense of death and growth, the readymade detritus mingling with your highly fabricated objects. The musty smell of water damage, peeling paint, generations of construction debris and storage, alongside slick tech, hollywood-like effects (or video-game-like; whichever cinematic reality one prefers) and a booming, dust-unsettling, body shaking ambient soundtrack coming from speakers strategically placed throughout. Given the parallels between your work and Borges' story, what do you suspect is the future of this work? Can you share an idea you might be throwing down the field to one day meet up with it? Respectfully, I understand this may be a secret...

TLaloC: I consider *ORBIS TERTIUS -Hlaer to Jangr-* to be both the closing of a huge circle that has been open for years and the very beginning of a new one. In it, I was finally able to articulate the tangible universe that contains my world, and to be able foresee what lies ahead in my artistic practice. Your "living organism" metaphor referring to the project is incredibly on point, as it truly captures the essence of the way *ORBIS TERTIUS -Hlaer to Jangr-* took its final shape. As I previously mentioned, Elgreen Project is an ongoing personal project that has been the vessel from all the experimentations of my artistic practice. The resulting components of this endeavor —the shapes, the architecture, the anthropomorphic characters— have been the result of a perfectly autonomous evolution, unrestricted even from

my own purview. Unfortunately, every time I had the chance to bring my work in a gallery setting, I felt like the narrative I wanted to translate to the public was there, but for some reason, it felt incomplete. Eventually, I realized that I was being taken hostage by a self-imposed set of rules, outside the world my art normally inhabits.

What made *ORBIS TERTIUS -Hlaer to Jangr-* so groundbreaking for me is that I was finally able to let the gallery space *organically* express the story I wanted to communicate. I abandoned any effort to control the outcome of the exhibition from the very beginning (or maybe, I surrendered?). It was the physical space and its architecture that challenged me to tell this story as loud as possible, and through every possible layer. This is how the collaboration with other artists occurred. The ominous spellbinding soundtrack, created by the incredible Mexican jazz drummer and composer Miguel Soto, was a direct result of merging Borges' short stories with the atmosphere of the gallery space and the extended areas of the exhibition. The immersive result of his exploration is absolutely responsible for taking the spectator to a completely different dimension. The same can be said about the mind-blowing dynamic animations that reference the mysterious candy-colored wall symbols at the gallery, made in collaboration with artist Braulio Dominguez; and the cryptic language animated video by graphic designer Hayelin Choi, perfectly referencing the secret language of Tlön. Even "Funes", the intimidating character that inhabits the abandoned Bowling Alley. The project was developed in teamwork with the architect Salvador Amaro, a collaboration between countries (México-US) that successfully captured the distinct eeriness of the pivotal character of the show. Finally, a huge acknowledgement to the one and only Pete Karis and Paradise Labs, who made possible the creation and restoration of many of the artworks in the exhibition. All these amazing alliances were an inherent response to the massive architecture of the space, effectively creating an inescapable immersive experience for the spectator.

It would be impossible to talk about the future of my work without mentioning the importance of collaboration.

So, in addition, I think that —learning from the biggest lesson from the show— I will seek to take my narrative even further, definitely challenging the wall spaces of the gallery. I'm thinking of intervening in larger spaces; even remote spaces with their own set of rules, capable of challenging the way my work behaves. To let my work find its place, or even to let my work be unearthed and discovered by someone else.

BB: The introductory wall-text to your exhibition, which as I've learned was written by a friend, casually picks up on Borges' short story, and with that same narrative mystique, delivers it right inside the ICA gallery door. It suggests that Baltimore is a new and integral part of this story, prefacing the exhibition, building hype by referencing spaces as-yet unknown (the upstairs bowling alley installation) and known (Penn Station).

Though this was written by a friend, he seems to have a deep understanding and even an almost collaborative hand in this. Since you've been in Baltimore on and off, now a full-time faculty member at MICA, how do you see it fitting into your life and therefore your work, either in the realm of fantasy, or logistically, or anything in between?

TLaloC: I like to think that everything about the show has been the direct result of an incredible stroke of luck, unexpected coincidences, improvisation, and just being in the right place at the right time. I can say the same about my experience in Baltimore (first, back in 2012-2014) and of my return to the city in 2018.

Before coming to Baltimore for my MFA in the, at the time, incredibly young, Illustration Practice Program, where I can say without exaggerating, that I spent two of the best years of my life— I wasn't even contemplating coming to the United States in the first place. My original plan was to get accepted at a university in Europe and study art there somehow. It was truly an incredibly complex set of circumstances that brought me here instead.

It all happened thanks to the unconditional support of my family and a Fulbright Scholarship; an opportunity for which I'm still incredibly grateful. Honestly, it was the only way I could come to the US and pay for my studies. At MICA, I met some of the most important figures and role models I had for my artistic practice. I NEVER expected to feel so welcome, and this was enough reason for me to wait for the right moment to return.

Now that I'm back as a full-time teacher in FYE (First Year Experience), Baltimore feels like a different place. Without a doubt, it is a way more complex city than the one that existed back when I studied at MICA. It was incredibly hard in the beginning, but eventually Baltimore opened for me, letting me see it closer, and allowing me to get inspired by it again. This time, I did it by focusing on its architecture and the inherent misunderstood beauty that surrounds it. Without a doubt, it was an unexpected event that eventually shaped the exhibition itself.

In the same spirit, the wall text displayed at the entrance of the exhibition, created by MICA's MFA Curatorial Practice program graduate Rodrigo Carazas Portal (hence the mysterious acronym "RCP"), was the consequence of another great coincidence. At one time, in a conversation we were having, I mentioned to him that Borges has been one of the biggest influences in my work. He immediately expressed to me that he shared the same love for Borges, and even added that he references him to his students in the syllabus of the classes he teaches at Kansas City Art Institute (where he works as a Visiting Assistant Professor). Finally, he told me a hilarious story about a moment where he got a horrible eye infection that left him unable to open his eyes for days, so he decided to listen to Borges's audiobooks. Just to understand the full joke: Jorge Luis Borges was blind. The fact that he referenced Borges in this seemingly unintended analogy, is a perfect example of his expertise on blending reality with the myth, that later is clearly exemplified in the wall text of *ORBIS TERTIUS -Hlaer to Jangr-*.

BB: Lastly, you have said that your Elgreen Project objects (is there a better word for these?) could materialize into anything from small toys, to buildings, to forgotten monuments. You've also mentioned that people *love to tell you what they are* (even what they might smell like!) and it can be occasionally revealing, like a Rorschach test, to hear what they come up with. Illustrations of your universe feel cross-cultural (architectural influences, multiple written languages, etc.) and almost beg for interactivity.

Have you considered the Elgreen Project in more user-based formats where participants can filter themselves through your algorithm, perhaps in a similar way you have done through Borges? I'm thinking a computer game (floppy disk?!), user-generated apparatuses, AR environments...

TLaloC: To surrender the entirety of the project to the public and let it be a *living entity*, definitely is an incredible idea that could be on the horizon. As I previously mentioned, Elgreen Project is indeed the result of a collective enterprise (friends, colleagues, strangers, YOU, as you just proposed this idea) and every component of this endeavor has been the result of an autonomous evolution, unrestricted from my own purview.

User-generated apparatuses sound like a perfect application to Elgreen Project. I just wonder how many variable "parts" and permutations I should create to achieve this with the ongoing collection of objects in my universe. Also, to respond to your question, I refer to the *strangely familiar artifacts that* populate my universe as "greenes" (/grēn-əs/). The concept of designing an infinite series of objects through a distinctive set of variations, certainly evokes the work of Allan McCollum. I remember discovering his work a few years back and thinking how similar the aesthetics of his work are when compared to mine. I guess the difference between his objects and my "greenes" is that the shapes of my universe are way more unpredictable (hence the difficulty to automate their creation). The plan also reminds me of Brian Eno's genius "77 million paintings". I'm definitely taking notes on these thoughts for sure.

In the meantime, every road seems to be taking me back to materials and manufacturing processes that require more practical work, like laser-cutting, CNC Routing, 3-D printing, etc. I feel like I need to stay committed to the tangible space of my universe, at least at this moment, as I finally identified how to successfully address this important component in my work. Having said that, this doesn't mean that it could not change entirely, because if I really want to put in practice what I learned when putting together *ORBIS TERTIUS -Hlaer to Jangr*, then I will finally let my work *organically express the story I want to tell*. So, wish me luck, Bekí!