It's easy to underestimate the role that language plays in shaping our perception of the world. Language is more than ‘information transaction’, the describing of objects, situations and instructions. It is a socially acquired system with which we construct and categorise every concept, in all its permutations. Through it we organise notions of identity; we learn about what is wrong and is what is right; we inevitably assume a history, with all its weight and biases.

When his son was three years old, Héctor Zamora reacted as any parent would when he saw him hitting plants and tearing them out of their garden bed in São Paulo. After trying to explain to his toddler why he shouldn’t damage the plants, he reflected for a moment. Why was he trying to stop his son's inquisitive behaviour? At what point does society deem an action good or bad? After all, it's this same naïve curiosity that drives artistic work.

This exchange drove Zamora to ponder more broadly on the role of history and context in his practice as an artist, and this would later become the basis for The Abuse of History. Why does a public artwork have to be a certain way, always connected to locality and acknowledging history, to be accepted or absorbed by the art machine? How can an artist bypass what one of Zamora’s colleagues deemed a ‘necrophiliac’ propensity to use the work of previous famous artists/writers/thinkers as a support for creating new artworks? Is it possible to start from a place without history, devoid of politics?

Three hundred plants in clay pots are thrown out from the third-storey windows of a building, crashing loudly into the ground of its internal plaza. As fragments of pots, soil and the palms scatter across the floor, you can see the audience inside the building flinching. Their reactions are physical, immediate and wonderful. Even when presented as video documentation in the ‘Civic Actions’ conference, the audience appears as fixated and affected by The Abuse of History as if they were they were witnessing the chaos unfold first hand. In the auditorium, a shared sense of childish, cathartic satisfaction is followed by incredulity, as if we were all now somehow implicated in this ‘forbidden’ act by allowing our desire for destruction to be fulfilled.

Zamora created The Abuse of History in São Paulo in 2014 as an attempt to ‘expunge context’ and create a universal experience with no reference to the specificity of the site. As he often does, he combined only a few elements to make the work – in this case the plants and the 20 or so men who helped throw them. Even in selecting the type of plant he was mindful of avoiding any sense of locality; he used the most common signifier of homogenised experience – the office-style palm.

Despite his efforts, the search for meaning was inevitable. All possible connotations were conjured up by the audience, interpreting the piece as a possible criticism of the local landscape, or the particularities of the space and its architecture, or even an attempt to throw Brazil’s Tropicalism art movement out of its frame.
Although he is always receptive and interested in the public's response, Zamora intended none of these meanings.

In fact, Zamora's intention is reactive to the most conventional or prevalent strategy in public art: to engage with the local community/history/architecture etc, to respond to such context and deliver a 'socially engaged' work that ties back to that context. A public art veteran, having presented major projects in over 21 countries, Zamora increasingly resists these conventions. In *The Abuse of History*, he intentionally directs his focus to a universal language that can be meaningful and have a more immediate effect on a wider public without the need to use history as a crutch. The audience does not need to have any knowledge of contemporary art, nor any affinity with the local context, to fully engage with the piece. In this way, Zamora’s audience is effectively global.

It’s important to note Zamora’s ability to speak to the art world – and more specifically the museum – and yet stretch far beyond its realm. Similar to pidgin languages, which usually arise from the need to communicate for trade, his vocabulary is streamlined and uses only the essential to create a bridge between two groups that may not have a language in common: the art world and the public domain. This is especially significant in the context of his work in Brazil and other countries in Latin America, since the enormous socioeconomic divide has meant for decades that art has been the reality of a privileged few. Frequent adversity in the economic and political spheres of most Latin American countries has resulted in a stilted modernisation, making it difficult for cultural and educational institutions to sustain the same rate of development and public engagement as First and Second World countries. As celebrated Mexican writer Octavio Paz points out, ‘The elite enjoys poetry and avant-garde art while the masses are illiterate’.1

An example of Zamora’s ‘pidgin language’ is *REViraVOLTA* (loosely translated as ‘turn around’ or ‘overturn’), a work that took place at the CCBB, Brasilia in 2015, which typifies his engagement with a wide public. For this piece he collaborated with Brazilian composer André Hosoi to create a musical score based on an ice-cream making technique. Forty-eight musicians play out the score, their instruments replaced with a type of ice-cream tub (timber tubs full of ice and salt with a metal tub in the middle containing the liquid mixture made of water, fruit pulp and sugar) commonly used by street vendors in Mexico. On the director’s cue, the musicians spin and shake their tubs as they chant in unison ‘lleve lleve su nieve’, which is the song usually chanted by the street vendors and a common sound in the Mexican vernacular. The piece became a form of uplifting ritual or hymn, and all sorts of people from the streets and the favelas joined in to share the experience with the musicians. The score lasted roughly 20 minutes – about the time needed to make the actual ice-cream. For Zamora the process was an intimate moment, interacting with and encouraging each musician, checking whether the ice-cream inside their tubs had achieved the right consistency, and communicating with the director to gauge the length of the score.

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1. Octavio Paz, *El ogro filantropico*, Joaquin Mortiz, Mexico City, 1979, p. 64

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Once the musicians stopped playing, the ice-cream was laid on a large circular table and the audience was invited to eat, scooping out the multi-flavoured ice-cream with a cone.

Once again, Zamora was employing a universal language (food and music) as a means of fostering meaningful engagement with both the public and his collaborators (the musicians). It’s important to note that Zamora is not articulating universality here as a negative, the ‘monochromatic’ experience typical of globalisation, but rather as an expression of liberation from the historical and contextual biases of language. What he proposes is the expression of the present as uncategorised experience.

REviraVOLTA was an experiment – a new direction with a considerable amount of risk. As an artist, Zamora is well aware of and often pressured by institutional expectations, as he remarked at ‘Civic Actions’: ‘The more you work as an artist the more you become one with curators, institutions and art criticism – the more famous you are as an artist the less you can experiment.’ But he has remained truthful to his curiosity. For him it is important to feel that a project is out of his hands, that it has its own life – that’s when he knows it’s going in the right direction.

In practice, maintaining this philosophy has enabled Zamora to remain nimble in a time when artistic genres are becoming increasingly rigid. He has frequently tested these boundaries – between the walls of the gallery and the world outside, and between the architectural and the social. His work Material Inconstancy illustrates his ability to operate between such thresholds. The first iteration of the work took place in 2012 at Luciana Brito Gallery, São Paulo, after Zamora was asked to make a work that was ‘in touch’ with the building’s architecture; it was later expanded for the 13th Istanbul Biennial in Turkey in 2013. In this work 36 local bricklayers, positioned in a continuous loop across the school of architecture at Mimar Sinan University, throw over 3,000 bricks to one another from various piles stacked throughout the building. As bricks are tossed between the architecture – from the ground to the upper levels and vice versa; up and down the stairs and down from the mezzanine – many slip from the recipients’ hands and smash onto the ground. One can see the bricklayers smile as they chant and communicate with each other. The atmosphere is chaotic, celebratory and full of energy; the audience is consumed by the sensory overload.

Material Inconstancy is effective (and affecting) on so many levels. In line with Zamora’s convictions, the work literally stretches beyond the walls of the white cube and has the input of reality, of the bricklaying trade. The work is also democratic and accessible, a joyful experience shared by all those present – bricklayers, public, art world. This work is a good example of a crossing of two lines of inquiry that have come to characterise Zamora’s practice. On the one hand it continues his investigation of urban and architectural environments, and on the other it incorporates a social, participatory dimension that involves the body and its relation to space. The unified body of bricklayers alludes
Héctor Zamora, Material Inconstancy, 2012, performance documentation, Luciana Brito Galeria, São Paulo, Brazil
to systems of construction, of labour and its stratification, and exemplifies the importance of collective action.

In terms of his choice of materials, although Zamora remains consistent in combining only a few elements (bricks, bricklayers, and the physical characteristics of the building), his use of the brick is of special significance as it has become a recurring motif. In previous bodies of work, such as Protagéométrías and BRASIL, he has subverted the role of the brick, teasing out its sculptural qualities and focusing on its potency as a signifier. As a unit, the brick is elemental (soil, sand, fire) and the most reducible unit, the binary code or DNA, of the modern world – and as a system it symbolises civilisation. As he remarked at ‘Civic Actions’: ‘Partly the seduction with bricks comes from their simplicity. They are made with earth and by burning them – it’s a basic element that has been with us for centuries and, thinking universally, bricks are a very basic unit full of human culture.’

When Zamora was invited in 2015 to create a work for the 12th Havana Biennale, he could not resist Vittorio Garatti’s brick-and-terracotta School of Music and quickly proposed it as his preferred site. From an aerial view, Garatti’s building is a snake-like structure comprised of several rehearsal rooms interconnected by a central meandering hallway. Zamora was drawn by the building’s unique architectural beauty, as well as by its history. Conceptualised by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara in 1961 over drinks after a game of golf, the five buildings that comprise the National Art Schools (School of Music included) reflect at once the euphoria and enormous ambitions felt during the Cuban Revolution. Consequently, through the project’s sudden abandonment, they also reflect the country’s heroic demise; only a few years after construction began in 1961, the project fell out of favour for political and ideological reasons and the buildings were never completed. For decades these buildings were a reminder of unrealised hopes, a space used by students as a toilet, or, as Zamora noted, ‘a place to fuck’. That was until the artist gave it a renewed, albeit brief, life.

For his piece An Essay on Flow, Zamora collaborated with Cuban songwriter and composer Wilma Alba Cal to create a score that would traverse the whole Music School. Seventy musicians were strategically distributed inside rehearsal rooms throughout the serpentine building. Without being able to hear or see each other, the musicians played their own parts of the score; only the public, by moving from room to room, could piece it together. As visitors entered, they were welcomed by the softer notes of an all-female choir, and as they progressed inside the building they could hear the winds and later the strings—all in a disjointed crescendo.

Although the ephemeral and the participatory are increasingly becoming important parts of his work, Zamora has sustained a strong interest in notions of architecture and urban design. At university he studied graphic design, and in many of his earlier works he used mathematics and geometry to experiment with lightweight structures, which he would eventually use to

† Héctor Zamora, An Essay on Flow, 2015, performance documentation, 12th Havana Biennale, Havana
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disrupt the spatial patterns of pre-existing architecture. These transgressions shift the viewer’s perception of fixed space and architecture, highlighting the relativity of how we perceive the world. As Zamora remarked during ‘Civic Actions’, a short burst of time, a minute in the arms of a lover, can last in your memory forever – but permanent things, whole concrete cities we drive past in our daily commute to work, may be instantly forgotten.

*Essays on Flow* beautifully articulates this paradigm, forcing the permanence of architecture to fold and curve, as if the flow and variation of tone come from the building itself.

Like many public works, *Essays on Flow* could have not come together without an intricate set of negotiations and moments of failure. Little could be done to the building since it’s now protected, meaning that the human waste had to be washed out without damaging bricks or tiles. Public art has become increasingly implicated in the world of ethics, and bringing people into the equation, both as audience and collaborators, adds complexity to the process. Zamora, however, with the same ease and warmth that characterises him as an individual, seems to effortlessly navigate the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. Evidence of his strong ethical bearings can be seen in how he uses only materials that are available in the country he’s working in, and also in his interactions with local communities (composers, musicians, bricklayers, audiences), which are always collaborative and built around mutual benefit. Far from any sense of exploitation, he gives back something that is joyful, euphoric and celebratory. He creates an experience that he can share – with his collaborators, with the audience, with the community – and he acknowledges that ‘it’s not the work of one person’ but a coming together of many.

His contribution to the 9th Havana Biennale in 2006 is a good example of his generosity and his desire to connect with people. Prior to the Biennale he spent time in Havana; in conversation with locals he discovered their concern and yearning for freedom and their feelings of isolation – geographically, from living on an island, but also culturally and ideologically as part of a communist country. As a response, using his knowledge of geometry and light architectural structures, he built 11 custom net-like structures which he then wrapped around trees in public parks across Havana. Most curators and Biennale enthusiasts hadn’t ventured outside the art-designated venues and did not witness the memorable moment when children from the street flocked to climb the net structures and bring the works to life. This marked an important moment for Zamora as he realised ‘this was something that had been growing in my practice; that this is the sort of reality I am trying to touch’.

Labelling Zamora’s practice as ‘socially engaged’ or ‘relational’ falls short. His work is an act of generosity; it shows the potential of creative practices to reach wide audiences in a changing field that is migrating into a social sphere. Always positioned on the outside, he is able to bring things forward
that, without distance, others may fail to see. He shows us the malleability of the physical and ideological borders that contain us, and he inhabits the liminal space between the local and the universal, the permanent and the transient, the walls of the museum and the outside. This is perhaps one of Zamora's greatest contributions to the realm of public art – the possibility of an ephemeral breach, untethered from history, from context and from art.

↑ Héctor Zamora, Untitled, 2006, 3000 metres of vegetable rope, 6th Havana Biennale, Havana
**Brook Andrew**

Brook Andrew is known for his investigation of dominant western narratives, specifically relating to colonialism, placing Australia at the centre of a global inquisition. He frequently travels internationally, working with communities and private and public collections to create new work relating to historical object display and perception. In 2012 Andrew organised the exhibition TABOO at the MCA, in 2014 he worked closely with the collections of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía for the exhibition **Really Useful Knowledge**, and in 2016 worked with the collections of the Musée du Quai Branly, Paris.

**Zanny Begg**

Zanny Begg is a Sydney-based artist whose work focuses on political activism and community. Her work uses humour, understated drawings and found cultural artefacts to explore ways in which we can live and be in the world differently. Her work is often collaborative, inviting engagement with key themes such as resilience, financial disobedience and the unthinking of borders. Begg has an experimental and research-driven practice that works across film, performance, sculpture, public art and video. Known for his examination of risk, pleasure and participation, Cross often uses inflatable structures to negotiate interpersonal exchange. As a curator he developed, with Claire Doherty, the One Day Sculpture project across New Zealand, featuring 30 international artists such as Thomas Hirschhorn, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Paola Pivi. More recently he developed Iteration: Again: 13 Public Art Projects Across Tasmania with Contemporary Art Tasmania. Cross has edited internationally published books and writes regularly on contemporary art.

**David Cross**

David Cross works as an artist, curator and writer, with a practice extending across performance, installation, sculpture, public art and video. Known for his examination of risk, pleasure and participation, Cross often uses inflatable structures to negotiate interpersonal exchange. As a curator he developed, with Claire Doherty, the One Day Sculpture project across New Zealand, featuring 30 international artists such as Thomas Hirschhorn, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Paola Pivi. More recently he developed Iteration: Again: 13 Public Art Projects Across Tasmania with Contemporary Art Tasmania. Cross has edited internationally published books and writes regularly on contemporary art.

**Claire Doherty**

Claire Doherty is Director of Situations, which she initiated in 2003 following a ten-year period investigating new curatorial models beyond conventional exhibition-making. She has worked with a diversity of artists, including Katie Paterson, Theaster Gates, Alex Hartley, and Ivan and Heather Morison. In 2008–09 she directed One Day Sculpture with David Cross across New Zealand. She lectures, consults and publishes internationally and in 2009 was awarded a prestigious Paul Hamlyn Foundation Breakthrough Award as an outstanding cultural entrepreneur.

**Peter Johnson**

Peter Johnson is Assistant Curator, C3West at the MCA. He is an early career curator, writer and researcher interested in aesthetic and conceptual strategies of resistance, with a focus on socially engaged and online practices. His independent curatorial projects include The Fraud Complex (2016), presented as part of the Next Wave Festival at West Space, Melbourne, and The Future’s Knot (2014), presented as part of This Is Not Art at The Lock-Up, Newcastle.

**Ash Keating**

Melbourne artist Ash Keating has maintained an interdisciplinary contemporary art practice since 2004, working within Australia and internationally. In 2009 Keating delivered an ambitious public art project, Activate 2750, as part of the MCA’s C3West program, in partnership with SITA, Penrith Performing & Visual Arts, Penrith City Council and Westfield. Activate 2750 comprised a sculptural mountain of commercial and industrial waste, as well as live performances and actions throughout Penrith by young artists and performers from Western Sydney.

**Janet Laurence**

Janet Laurence’s practice examines the interconnection of life forms and ecologies and observes the impact that humans have on the threatened natural world. She has been a recipient of Rockefeller, Churchill and Australia Council fellowships, as well as the Alumni Award for Arts, UNSW. Laurence has been a trustee of the Art Gallery of NSW and is currently a visiting fellow at UNSW Art & Design. Her work is included in many museum, university and corporate collections, as well as within architectural and landscaped public places.

**Anne Loxley**

Anne Loxley is Senior Curator of the MCA’s C3West program. As a curator and writer, she works with contemporary artists both in and outside gallery contexts, in communities and in public spaces. A founding member of the City of Sydney’s Public Art Advisory Panel, a member of the City’s Eora Journey Working Group and a former Sydney Morning Herald art critic, she has previously been director of Penrith Regional Gallery, the Olympic Co-ordination Authority’s Public Art Program and the S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney.

**Elizabeth Ann Macgregor OBE**

Elizabeth Ann Macgregor OBE is Director of the MCA. Since 1999 she has consolidated the MCA’s position as one of Sydney’s best-loved institutions by engaging audiences with living artists. Macgregor’s contribution to the visual arts was recognised with an OBE in the Queen’s Birthday honours list in 2011, as well as the 2011 Australia Council Visual Arts Medal. In 2014 she was named Cultural Ambassador for Western Sydney by NSW Premier Mike Baird.

**Marco Marcon**

Marco Marcon is Artistic Director of International Art Space, an organisation which he co-founded in 1998. His previous jobs include magazine editor, university lecturer and creative producer. Marcon has an extensive publication record, has curated several national touring exhibitions, and in 2012 was awarded the prestigious Sidney Myer Creative Fellowship. In 2009 he created spaced, an international...
event of context-responsive art involving the participation of regional and rural communities throughout Western Australia.

**Gill Nicol**

Gill Nicol is Director of Audience Engagement at the MCA, having joined the museum in 2015. She trained as an artist and has over 25 years’ experience in the arts, working with contemporary art and audiences. She has worked for numerous organisations across the UK, including Ikon Gallery (Birmingham), Tate Liverpool and Tate St Ives. She was formerly Head of Interaction at Arnolfini in Bristol, and for the past five years she has run her own consultancy, lightsgoingon, offering support and training for the cultural sector in the UK, such as workshops, feasibility studies, business plans, fundraising and evaluation.

**Hetti Perkins**

Hetti Perkins is a member of the Eastern Arrernte and Kalkadoon Aboriginal peoples. She was Senior Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales from 1998 until 2011. She has curated major survey exhibitions of Indigenous art, including Australia’s representation at the Venice Biennale in 1997 and the Australian Indigenous Art Commission at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. The second season of her show Art + Soul aired on ABC television in 2014.

**Amy Spiers**

Amy Spiers is a Melbourne-based artist and writer who makes socially engaged and public art both collaboratively and as a solo artist. Spiers has presented numerous art projects across Australia and internationally, most recently at the Museum für Neue Kunst (Freiburg), MONA FOMA (Hobart) and the 2015 Vienna Biennale. As an arts writer she has written for a number of publications and blogs, including for Auckland Art Gallery, the Journal of Arts and Communities, Open Engagement and Das Superpaper. Spiers is currently completing a PhD at the Centre for Cultural Partnerships, Victorian College of the Arts.

**Lara Thoms**

Australian artist Lara Thoms is currently undertaking a two-year Creative Australia Fellowship from the Australia Council for the Arts to explore socially engaged, site-specific and participatory possibilities of contemporary art. In 2013 she created a large-scale public work, Ultimate Vision — Monuments to Us, with teenagers in the Westfield Hurstville shopping centre as part of the MCA’s C3West program. Thoms has recently developed new work with Indonesian artist Wok the Rock after a residency in Jogjakarta curated by Gertrude Contemporary.

**Nato Thompson**

Since January 2007 Nato Thompson has organised major projects for Creative Time, including the annual Creative Time Summit, Kara Walker’s A Subtlety (2014), Jeremy Deller’s It Is What It Is (2009) and Paul Chan’s Waiting for Godot in New Orleans (2007). Previously, he worked as Curator at MASS MoCA, where he completed numerous large-scale exhibitions, including The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere (2004). His writings have appeared in many publications, including Bookforum, Frieze, Art Journal and Artforum.

**Michel Tuffery**

Michel Tuffery is a New Zealand-based artist of Samoan, Rarotongan and Tahitian heritage who works and exhibits throughout the Asia-Pacific region. His practice is grounded in his Polynesian heritage and his relationship to the Pacific region, its people and the environment. He often works with communities to create sites of engagement around ideas of contested histories and cultural conflict. In 2014 Tuffery led the C3West project Transforma in the southwestern Sydney suburb of Airds.

**Jun Yang**

Born in China, Jun Yang now lives and works in Vienna, Taipei and Yokohama. His practice encompasses film, installation, performance and projects in public spaces. Having grown up in various social and cultural contexts, Yang often addresses in his work the formation and mediation of identity in urban environments, the influence of media images, and the operation of public spaces. He has exhibited widely in Europe and Asia, with recent solo exhibitions in Taiwan, Japan and China.

**Héctor Zamora**

Héctor Zamora is a Mexican artist based in São Paulo, Brazil. He has worked extensively in public space over the past decade, creating architectural and sculptural interventions that enhance or highlight characteristics and patterns of social use within urban environments. Zamora often draws the local community into the process of both experiencing and creating the artwork. He has exhibited internationally, with recent exhibitions in Brazil, New Zealand and Mexico.