

interview_santi_vernetti

Santi Verneti is a Curatorial Assistant at Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. I talked to him about bad trips and making moves. - Nicolas Bermeo

Nicolas: I guess we will first start with how we know each other. We know each other through Billy Feldman. Maybe you can talk about how you first met Billy and what was interesting or significant about the experience?

Santi: Well I could say how I first met Billy which is a kind of a boring story. We were both going to Ithaca College at the time to study film and we met in, I think, like the very first class that we had. One of the first films that our teachers exposed us to was *Scorpio rising* by Kenneth Anger. And I remember halfway through the movie looking around because my mind was so completely blown by the experience that I was searching in the crowd for someone else who was sharing the same kind of mind altering shockwaves that I was and I think I looked over at Billy Feldman who was 2 or 3 seats away doing the exact same thing as I was doing. It was our first time watching a Kenneth Anger film and luckily we got to do it together. But the more interesting story is when I first took mushrooms with my friends Nathan Maxwell Cann and David McNayr and they were both very psychedelically experienced and I had never taken psychedelics before and they ended up having to baby sit me through this wild rampage that I was on throughout the city of Ithaca, in upstate New York. At one point we landed on Billy's front lawn on the south hill going up on Cornell University and I remember reaching the apex of the trip and Billy Feldman being there and like being the greatest psychedelic shepherd of all time and totally calming and comforting. He brought me back from a potentially dark trip and took me to a really, you know, lead me by the hand to a really beautiful place.

Nicolas: Yeah, I think that is really great because so much of human connection is about a shared interest in something, like liking the same thing is such an important bond. Was there a transition period between just liking movies and art and deciding that you wanted to take a more active role within the scenes?

Santi: Yeah, no I think there was an exploratory moment in school when I was hanging out with people like Billy Feldman.

Nicolas: You know Zia right?

Santi: Yeah Hanging out with Zia Anger and Ashley Connor and people like Evan Meaney who were all making really beautiful radical cinematic pieces. I had never really got into the mode of trying to write a piece and go out with a camera and try to make something. All I ever really wanted to do was make home movies and I had no interest in developing a story or even exploring the fringes or experimenting on the fringes of what was possible artistically in that form. I think at some point my friend was like "oh you should try to sit in a studio and pick up some paint or clay and fuck shit up and try to see where those mediums take you" And they didn't take me anywhere and I was just kind of bored with the entire project. At some point I realized that I have no interest in being an artist at all and I just have a total fascination with the art world or with the little art worlds that I was existing in at the time. I was spending all of the time that I liked either reading art history, reading critical theory, attending comparative literature conferences or having visits with artists. I found all these things incredibly fulfilling and they left me with the desire to try to form constellations between these artists or try to find ways to facilitate the making of their projects or try to find ways to build some sort of structure or space to allow the possibilities for artists to collaborate and work together and so I think naturally I sort of fell somewhere into the profession of curating because curating has those sympathies but, I guess, if I were to claim a kind of practice it would be my writing practice. But outside of writing I just needed to be apart of the situation

Nicolas: So you were first in Ithaca and now you are in LA. Can you tell me about that transition?

Santi: My last year of Ithaca, I had to fulfill an internship requirement, maybe my second to last semester, I can't remember. But I came out with Zia Anger to Ithaca College's satellite school in Los Angeles and I needed to fulfill a nonfiction film theory credit and a film fiction theory credit and I could knock both of those out in Los Angeles over one summer. Because I was also minoring in art history, I needed to bulk up my art history credits. So I thought why don't I just go to Los Angeles, take two theory intensive history classes and just see what LA is like and being out here for a summer, I fell completely in love with this city and after graduating I basically packed up all my belongings and just moved out west. But between where I am now, at MOCA, where I have been for about a year and change, to when I moved to LA, I spent a number of years just kind of working in the film industry as a camera technician and camera assistant. But those previous jobs became unfulfilling because I really have no interest in Hollywood or film making and I have much more interest in those who approach cinema as an art form or those who engage in moving image art practices. I would be constantly going to the LA Film forum, Red Cat to see experimental video programs and I would be going to the Echo Park Film Center to see 15 year old kids pick up a bolex for the first time and hand develop 16 millimeter film in trash

bags or I would go to the farthest reaches of the video stores in the valley and try to find lost or forgotten Avant-Garde cinema classics or other orphan cinema works. Then about a year or two into LA, I sort of stumbled upon a little gallery in Echo Park called Show Cave and there was this artist slash director Hazel Hill McCarthy III and this other director Eric Nordhauser and this other person named Keenan Marshall Keller basically putting on amazing art shows anywhere from a show of very rad crude art brut drawings from here to France and then the next weekend Hazel would do an amazing video art program where she would get everyone from Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim to our amazing friend Alejandro Garcia from Mexico to send over weird stop motion animations about aliens and celebrities. So I just sort of fell in with that scene and helped them out with the space first with cleaning up or tending bar in the back where we sold beers for a couple bucks and cocktails for three dollars and then after a while I began to curate or organize shows with New York and LA artists in the space. And that is where I got my first curatorial merit badges.

Nicolas: Do you think, because some of our readers don't really know what a curator is, could you please just explain to us what does it mean to be a curator?

Santi: I don't know. It's a term that has recently become very hip to use. You see it pop up in a number of disciplines. You see it pop up in like KCRW will have a guess DJ curate a session or you will have someone guess curate a magazine or you will have a chef curate a number of restaurants at his food fest. Not so long ago, a very wise person told me that curating should not be thought of as a verb because it comes from the Latin root curar which means to care for and traditionally and historically, to curate references this idea that "the caring for" is for a collection or a preexisting collection. And I guess a lot of independent curators or contemporary curators are people who are self identifying as curators to try to extend that caring into like a social circle or a group of friends or a number of things they feel are very important. But growing up, most of those people were called programmers, editors or organizers and it's only recently that the word curator has become a kind of blanket terminology for all of it. And I don't know if I agree with this one wise person who told me that there is no such thing as curator as a verb, like you are a curator as a noun which means you work for a museological institution that cares for a specific curation of the specific collection of objects artworks of antiquities, yadayadayada. I think that if I were to flex a definition for curator, right now, in the position that I am at, I would probably say that it's a term that is best avoided because of its difficulty in defining it and that if you put together a series of film or video works, you should call yourself a programmer. I don't know if I even consider myself a curator yet. My official title at the museum is curatorial assistant. And I am very happy with that term because it takes a lot of pressure off of being called a curator, but a lot of people have called me a curator and I think I have called myself a curator at a number of gallery shows that I did in LA in the last 5 years. I maybe stuck with the term?

Nicolas: I don't know you that well, but it seems that you are really good at socially connecting and that you have the personality that makes people want to hang out with you. Do you feel that curating is a social thing or is there any connection between your job and what you do after work? Is there a difference between working and not work?

Santi: I think a curator requires a level of socialization and I think that especially because, for someone who is interested in contemporary art, the only way to find out about artists is to go seek them out. Most artists are not going to come to your door step and in fact it's the responsibility of people working in museums or galleries to go out there to do studio visits and kind of do what your project is attempting to do, dive into the lineage. Ask a person who else to see and then ask those 5 people who else to see and branch the network out as large as humanly possible. I get off on it, meeting a lot of exciting people and seeing all of the exciting projects that they are interested in and also feeding off of their energy and excitement about their friends' projects or the people they are interested in. I don't see the thing about what I do for a living as so much as work. I have to understand that what I do as a vocation and so a vocation, for me, has to encapsulate the entirety of one's being. You dedicate or devote yourself entirely to an idea and it's not to my advantage to separate labor and leisure. It's only to my advantage to try to find a way of living where the two, work and leisure, intertwine for me. I know that is dangerous to say, especially now in the time where those in power are finding ways to dominate our everyday activity as work related and thus keeping us within the confines of what they deem valuable and non valuable labor. But for me, I would love to live in a reality or exist in a state where everything that I am doing in my times of leisure and my times of labor are all for the same cause and that I am devoting all of my energy to a project that is larger than myself.

Nicolas: What advice would you give someone who wants to become a curator?

Santi: My advice for people who find curatorial labor desirable for themselves or who are "wooned" by the idea of becoming a curator, my advice for them would be to sit down with a stack of paper and like a pen, their favorite pen, and really write down what it is they want out of their lives, why it is they want to be a curator and then to do that exercise again and again until they have gotten close to the root of why they really want to do what they want to do. I think for me, at

least, I did that exercise because someone had recommended that I do it and by the last page that I was writing, I wrote something to the effect of "because there is nothing else that I could see myself doing and being happy." It's almost not a question of whether or not I wanted to do the kind of work that I do, it's that it's like the only way for me to be happy. So I do it because I seek fulfillment and I seek happiness and I seek the community that I want to be a part of.

Nicolas: How does someone get into the art world?

Santi: Some people are born with access to the art world and if they really care about being in it they should use that to the fullest extent. But for those like me who that access is hard won, and I am not saying that my access to the art world is as hard won as others, it's a large spectrum, but for me, it was, you know, I moved here ten years ago and I was like at MOCA and I was like "I want to work there" but it like took me ten years to get into the door. And when I got in the door, I started working in the bookstore and I was there for six months knowing that a new chief curator was going to be coming in soon and that there would be an opportunity to apply to a position to assist them in a capacity. I planted myself in the book store and worked another job bartending at night and was finishing another job that I had worked for 5 years doing these outdoor movie events with this company and losing every Saturday that I had of my life to this event company and a bartending gig which meant not going to shows and not doing studio visits which was devastating to me for 5 years. I almost can't imagine I spent 5 years of my life not really going to art openings. I almost lost it. I planted myself at the bookstore, I waited for an opportunity to apply and I had my friend lend me a hundred bucks to buy a nice jacket to go into the interview to really convince the person who was hiring me that not only was this something I was interested in, but that this is something that I have been after for a long time and that I really do care about it. So My advice is to just hustle hard and if it means doing shows in alley ways with two artists who are like down to do a show in an alleyway with no money or honorarium attached, like doing that and keeping busy. Just constantly doing studio visits and I think that if you do enough studio visits and if you do enough gallery visits and if you go to enough openings, this gets back to the socialization, a squeaky wheel gets the grease. If you constantly say to the world "this is what I want to do," hopefully like a door will crack open just enough for you to launch a crowbar into there and jimmy that fucker open and like dive in.

Nicolas: It actually reminds me of this Charlie Chaplin quote where they asked him "how are you so funny" and he said, "I just try really hard and care."

Santi: haha, when I think of that, I also think of William Eggleston, like I forget what the exact quote is but someone is speaking to him and saying "like ohh this portfolio of photos that you have taken is fantastic," the portfolio is around 20 photos. And William Eggleston like laughs and shrugs and says "yeah I guess one out of a million ain't bad."