

HOW

House of Words

How to 'Host' History-Making | *House of Words (HoW)*

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The Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art (GIBCA) 2015 – *A story within a story...* embodied the notion of history as a collective and radical act. History here was not framed as something that can be found in a textbook, or told by 'the winners.' Rather, it was framed as a communication by all who partake in its experience, thereby declaring history *itself* as intrinsically a participatory experience. In order to ignite the fundamental spirit of storytelling and togetherness distinguishing this edition of the biennial, GIBCA and the Public Art Agency Sweden/Statens konstråd presented *House of Words (HoW)* – a temporary, site-specific pavilion designed by architect Santiago Cirugeda/Recetas Urbanas and activated by artist Loulou Cherinet.

House of Words refers to 'la Casa de la Palabra' – a traditional meeting place common in some African and South American communities providing a hub for oral history, storytelling, performance, and ritual. GIBCA 2015's *HoW* functioned as a social platform for multidisciplinary discussion, exchange, and collaboration throughout the course of the biennial and beyond. Its construction, led by Santiago Cirugeda, consisted of a collective process engaging individuals and local communities from Gothenburg and elsewhere. *HoW* was built with recycled materials and was temporarily physically attached to the Röda Sten Konsthall. Within it, Loulou Cherinet organised a relational community project hosting a series of roundtable dinner conversations. Cherinet's project was complemented by a public programme created in collaboration with GIBCA 2015 curator Elvira Dyangani Ose, addressing ideas about how participatory practices may create an activated social space whereby the notion of 'publicness' is ultimately framed through a powerful sense of 'togetherness'.

HoW strived to be one of the most socially engaged features in the eighth edition of GIBCA, remaining accessible, critical, and reactive. It involved not only cultural producers, but also members of civil society and public authorities. It also specifically engaged groups considered living in 'utanförskap' (outsiderness) – a label popularised by the Swedish media that constituted the subject of Cherinet's research and programming. This social concept includes an ever-growing array of people, including the homeless, unemployed youth, the elderly without computers, housewives, gaming addicts, asylum seekers, women wearing niqab, and scientists, amongst many others. By providing a place for diverse individuals and communities from Sweden and across the globe to participate in genuine, relevant, and hands-on history-making, *HoW* hoped to create an environment that questioned radical contingency by fuelling collective agency.

Through its intention to facilitate an activated space for participatory experiences, *House of Words* entered into a discourse of cultural institutions, events, and exhibitions focusing on socially engaged platforms and instigating a whole new assembly of socio-politically loaded questions pertinent to audience engagement today. Of particular relevance to *HoW*, and the contemporary social context of Sweden, was the question of how to encourage diverse groups of people to genuinely participate in a space where they feel welcome and empowered rather than ghettoised or exploited. How can we 'host' a space in which people contribute through sincere agency rather than just contrived performance? How can all who partake – architect, volunteer, artist, curator, host, audience – be equal? Who is 'hosting' whom?

A story within a story... embarked upon answering these questions by first acknowledging the site-specific context in which *HoW* would operate: as a container/prosthesis occupying a public space while attached to the Röda Sten Konsthall in the working-class neighbourhood of Majorna, Gothenburg. Moreover, the pavilion aimed to address Sweden's current political climate with regards to national politics and its vital impact on society and culture by focusing on the shifting relations between centre and periphery. It strived to provide a productive and safe platform for some of these topical and essential conversations to take place.

This very gesture started with the methodology in which *HoW* had been conceived and then constructed: bottom-up by professionals, volunteers, and instructors from local communities working together a month before the biennial's official opening. A key starting point was Cirugeda's architectural practice, based on developing subversive projects that address the urban realities and negotiations between legal and illegal zoning in order to realise ambitious outcomes, from new housing models for the socially disadvantaged to temporary sites for community discussion and cultural intervention. Good music, good food, and a sense of celebration were prioritised throughout *HoW*'s building process as much as proper footwear, safety, and finding the right job for everyone who wanted to be a part of the team.

Furthermore, this ethos of physically and communally integrating the role of the public into the creation of *HoW* beyond the official course of the biennial was also essential to Cherinet's artistic activation of the pavilion. During the months leading up to GIBCA 2015, she lived in Gothenburg and collaborated with individuals and local communities in order to establish a context for people to voice their social, political, and cultural concerns through multiple forms of expression. Cherinet's artistic practice often involves video installations that stage spaces for storytelling and dialogue that examine the impact of state policy and media rhetoric on the fabric of specific communities. In order to engage local audiences and international visitors in Gothenburg, she sought to initiate *HoW* as a space that was at once informal in its relevant usefulness and usability, but also formal in its programmed discussions, screenings, and performances.

A series of weekly filmed roundtable storytelling sessions were organised by the artist alongside curator Dyangani Ose, a series of *HoW* hosts, and the audience themselves. This initiated an evolving medley of sessions in which the hosts, storytellers, and participants were never limited or static. The reoccurring format of these sessions included a roundtable studio setting with a seating area, camera, and microphones, enabling all interactions to be recorded and accessible online as an expanding archive.

In keeping with the biennial's integral inspiration of history as an 'open work', *HoW* sessions specifically addressed history-making through acts of collective storytelling that intervened in the public sphere of Gothenburg and activated ideas of participation and collaboration. Leading themes included the following:

- **Postcolony**: de-constructing the notions of decolonisation, after-colonialism, post-colonialism, and neo-colonialism
- **Participatory Architecture**: engaging notions of the public space, public sphere, urban ethnography, and the participatory ethos behind structures like *HoW* itself
- **Community and Participatory Politics**: focusing on various notions of community, the dissolution of an individual's agenda in the collective act, and ideas of democracy, political identity, power relations, and participatory decision-making
- **The Museum**: analysing the institutional framework of art institutions and questioning the inherent hierarchies of such framework
- **Environment**: addressing geo-politics through sustainability and locational framings of ecology
- **Anti-University**: addressing subversive learning initiatives and the collective refusal to conform to a canonised education, as demonstrated by platforms such as the Anti-University
- **Queerness**: interrogating the politicisation of identity and celebration of non-conformist ambiguity

All of these themes, however, were leading points of departure rather than mandatory arguments.

The roundtable discussions, like *HoW*'s own construction, were conceived as actions of involvement, endowing the project with an ongoing sense of dynamism and transformation. *HoW* envisioned gathering people together to talk about ideas pertaining to collectivity, publicness, collaboration, and participation – there were no hierarchies. By engaging in an energy as subversive as it was accessible, and as radical as it was collective, *HoW* aimed to directly activate the potentially paradoxical ideas of 'outsiderness' and 'togetherness'. It provided a participatory platform in which distinct national and trans-national perspectives could be discussed and challenged.

Yet how did this initiative create something substantial and sustainable, despite its time and site-specific nature? Ultimately, the point of *House of Words* was to create an assembly – a space for everyone to galvanise a distinctly collective and democratic identity, together. This open platform worked to create a completely new kind of institution – a space for genuine social dialogue focusing on all aspects of life, expanding beyond the status of art and high culture. *HoW*'s creation was dependent on research and collaboration initiatives that started long before *A story within a story...*, and it was therefore our aspiration that the storytelling it enabled would last long after. *House of Words (HoW)* is thus not only a place for hosting and history-making – it is ultimately a place for hope.