

A Temporal Architecture

Carlos Bunga's installation transforms an entire gallery space at National Museum Cardiff for his contribution to *Artes Mundi 6*. He tells **Ric Bower** about his shift from painter to sculptor and his fascination with demolition and decay, construction and destruction.

The Portuguese artist Carlos Bunga began his career as a painter, but his practice evolved into the building of constructions which, although they are often towering and complex, consist of only three materials: cardboard, packing tape and emulsion paint. His confidence in this limited palette of materials engenders an awareness both of the subtle relationships that develop between the materials themselves, and of the relationships that come about between the constructions as a whole and the built environments in which they are housed. In recent years he has been invited to build in a myriad of high profile venues as far flung as New York, São Paulo and Bogota. Many artists, faced with the task of installing an exhibition, have little more to deal with than the opening of a few packing crates and the hooking up of a couple of hard drives. Not so for Bunga. I met him after a solid day's labour at National Museum Cardiff, exploring the very limits of what can be achieved using cardboard as a material of construction, for what is, in essence, a fully-fledged, civil engineering project. *Exodus* is a Doric temple structure, dominating a significant proportion of one of National Museum Cardiff's galleries, and it forms the major part of Bunga's contribution to *Artes Mundi 6*. Away from the cardboard, Bunga's delightfully affable demeanour and inherited Catalan passion (he has settled in Barcelona) bubbled energetically in the answers he gave me. Over a well-deserved beer, I began by asking about his artistic journey.

Carlos Bunga: I started with painting, but, little by little, my work began to change. I think it is a problem with most art schools

that you need to choose between painting and sculpture.

Ric Bower: So you started with traditional representation. Was this useful?

CB: In the beginning, yes. We worked with a life-model for much of the first year, but in the final two years we could make what we wanted. There was an opportunity to study whilst on placement too, which opened up new possibilities. This came at a time when I was very frustrated with my painting, in spite of trying desperately to push the medium by working on different supports. I was always left with a sense of dissatisfaction. The process of asking questions became increasingly important to me. I became particularly interested in urban space. I was fascinated by empty lots, torn-down houses and the marks they left behind on adjacent buildings; the remnants of demolitions; the residue of the city. I started looking for spaces that specifically resembled my paintings and I hung the works on the walls there so they would be exposed to the weather. I wanted to see how they would decay with the passing of time. I wondered how I could explore the sensibilities embodied within these structures. In my studio I constructed small cardboard 'houses' to explore notions of spatiality and I began to work with video too. I was still frustrated, but this time it was specifically with scale. Architectural maquettes began to interest me. I started asking myself 'What would it be like to experience a maquette, but on a different scale? What would happen if we could walk around inside it?' I built a large-scale maquette in one of the corridors at my

school. It was a hard task to build, for the first time, a cardboard structure of those dimensions using just adhesive tape, but I was finally able to realise the ideas carried within the architectural maquettes, the video work and the demolished buildings across town.

RB: I guess there is no such thing as a ready-made artist.

CB: I didn't go to university to be an artist, really. I went because I loved painting and didn't think much beyond that. I certainly had no idea about galleries and commerce — that all came much later. My school was a relatively new one in a small Portuguese municipality called Caldas da Rainha. Unlike other schools of higher status, located in large cities like Lisbon or Porto, from where most leading Portuguese artists come, this one was considered parochial. Paradoxically, what made it interesting was the absence of any symbolic responsibility, or the weight of expectation that I might have felt if I had gone to a more well-known school.

RB: I loved the piece you did in the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo. Your work already engaged with its own ephemerality, but there you were responding to a mausoleum, a space that invites us all to consider our own mortality. Physically, your structure mirrored the mausoleum space. Was this an entirely intuitive response? How then did you respond to National Museum Cardiff with its own particular history?

CB: In a pre-existing architectural space I am interested in the temporal and emotional →



process, as well as in the possibility that the imposing character of architecture may somehow exist as experimentation. In the process of conceiving the installations there is no prior plan, which is why becoming familiar with and directly confronting a physical and mental time period is so important for the process of construction. The context is always important. I am very aware of the narrative of a space, of its identity, as I make work in it. I think all museums, in the classic conception, are mausoleums. They are guardians of a nation's patrimonial legacy, and we have a need for this. Today, museums are a reflection of the complexity of our times and the need to find new strategies for cultural survival. The process of making the work is very important to me; I have to remain open-minded so I can learn through the process of working. I travel to the places I am hoping to work, before starting a project, to pick up the story of the building, the city and even the country. The Pinacoteca São Paulo and National Museum Cardiff have a lot in common: they are traditional structures, national state museums, which have incorporated new spaces specifically for contemporary work.

RB: You're working in spaces where different worlds meet then?

CB: I'm not sure it is the contrast between those different worlds I am interested in, as such. Instead, I feel it's important to revitalise the

energy of these sacrosanct spaces by bringing in the complexity of the contemporary world from outside. We have a tendency to see museums as separate, on a pedestal and to do with the past, which is not helpful. The museum's concern is to conserve, at all costs; but my work is about fragility and an ephemerality that does not end in death, but, instead, represents an ongoing process, an ecosystem. To build and to destroy are inherent actions in relation to a material that can be defined by its transitory nature.

RB: Can we talk about the legacy of the work for a moment and the place of documentation? Thomas Demand evidences what he does through a large format photograph, for instance, which ensures the legacy of a particular piece.

CB: It is interesting you mention Thomas Demand; for me the photograph separates us from the ephemerality of the work – it's just too comfortable. Documentation is a very important part of legacy though, of course; it represents a shift of the focus from reality and the immediacy of experience. In our developed society, we are afraid of death. It is normal but we still panic about it. A photograph becomes commodified; we can buy the very thing we are afraid of, we can tame it and then take it home.

RB: Is this specifically a phenomenon of Western culture?

CB: We become conscious of this natural fragility, not just when we witness a natural catastrophe, but just by looking in the mirror and seeing a white hair, or when something we care about breaks, our perspective on life changes. We feel quite comfortable, here in this bar now, in spite of the fact that there is no suggestion that this feeling will last. When a work is overtly ephemeral, it is like a mirror; that is why we feel so uncomfortable with it. But the fact is that it's the ephemerality itself that is permanent. Impermanence is an abstract concept, which brings with it certain disquietude; it challenges many of our pre-established behaviours. But impermanence is constantly with us, it is constituted within our genetic inheritance.

RB: You use a very limited palette of materials. For me, this introduces a subtlety and a complexity to your constructions. How did you come to decide that paint, cardboard and packing tape were enough?

CB: I am often asked about how I come to these kinds of decisions, but the truth is it's entirely intuitive. It is like asking a painter whether he starts on the right or on the left of a canvas. My process is architectural, but it has much in common with painting. I don't work from models. The basis of the work is the concept and the work continues to develop, in

many ways, after I have finished working it; it is never truly finished. There is no finalised form in the structure of these objects. The drawings that I make always happen after the site-specific projects. The usual work process is inverted, and the drawings correspond more to an investigation of thought rather than a process of observation. The ones here on show in the museum are interpretations of the constructions.

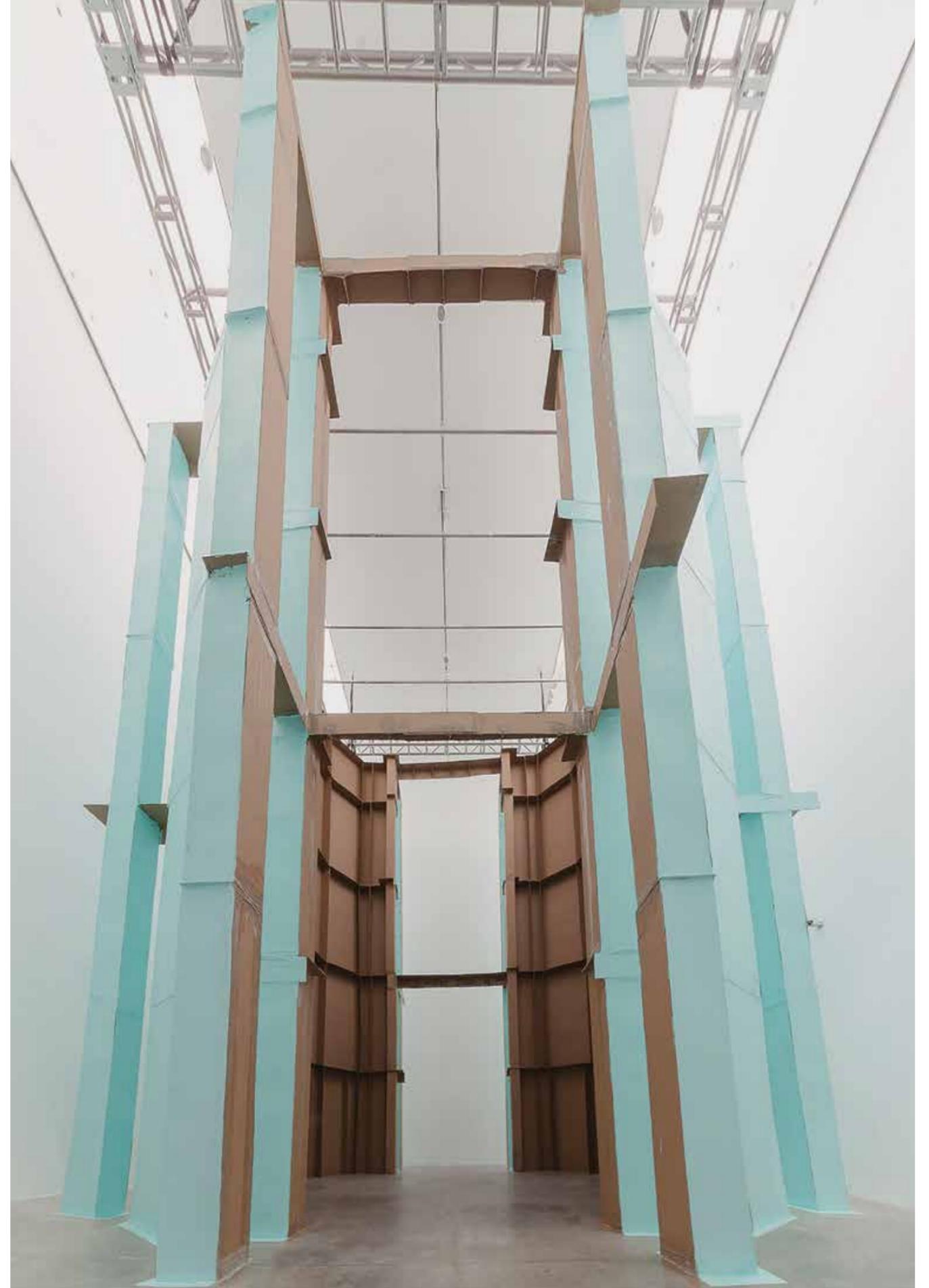
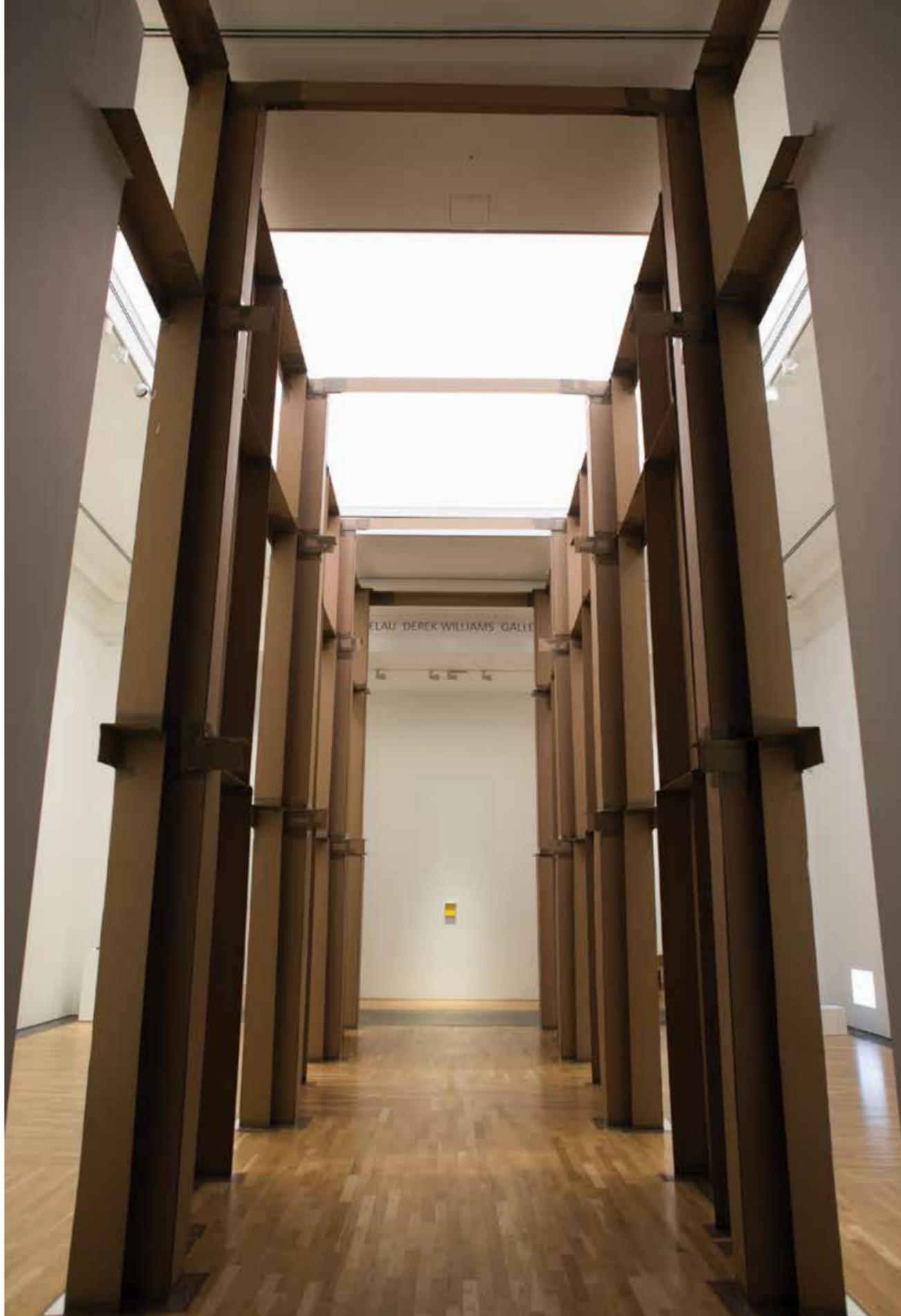
RB: So the drawings become your legacy?

CB: In some ways, yes. I have worked with photographers to document the constructions but... It is a possible option, among others...

RB: ...but they bring their own ideas!

CB: Yes, but more to the point, the experience derived from the documentation of the work will always be separate and distinct from experiencing the work in the flesh. The actual work is like a mirror; the feelings it will engender in us are as varied as we are. The space and the work are the experience. The pristine white walls of the gallery are unreal. I want to celebrate the cracks in the paint as I apply it to the cardboard. Documentation of artwork is often manipulated, just as is documentation in the political or economic realm. Thomas →





Demand is interesting because the result of the work is a single picture that survives after he has destroyed the physical work it is representing. What is the difference then between the picture that survives and the work he destroys?

RB: He is fixing the relationship between the work and the audience. I guess writing too can become a barrier to experiencing the work?

CB: In life we try to make concrete answers that provide us with security. It's natural that, when approaching art, we want it to be definite. We give it a title. We attach it to a genre. We are rational. We want to understand everything. The abstract is regarded with suspicion and we need standards to base things on so that they can be categorised and then accepted. This is our natural response. When we are confronted by something that we do not understand it encourages us to ask questions. The complexity of the contemporary art world is fantastically rich, but that complexity, to some people, is also a little scary. Living in that scary in-between space is maybe what it means to be an artist.

RB: As an artist, you are both creator and destroyer, are you not?

CB: That is both true and untrue. We cannot talk about the destruction of work without discussing temporality. There have been occasions where I have spent a month constructing in a gallery space then, on the evening of the opening, I have collapsed the whole thing as a performance. It is selective destruction, in that, I am aware as to what is going to collapse and what is going to remain standing. Often there are colours inside the structure that do not become apparent until it collapses; so it is not so much about destruction as it is about metamorphosis. Nothing that I have done over the years, in a great variety of spaces, still exists anyway; all I am doing is accelerating the natural temporality of the object. The only difference between my cardboard constructions and the museums in which they are housed is that the destruction, or transformation, of my structures is immediately imminent. There is a certain relationship between what I am doing and an architect's model and, in a

sense, the site specific installations return the buildings the work is installed in to a previous condition, an architect's model, a preview almost, or an idea. The artwork as shown represents just one possibility of what the structure could be, or could have been. In some ways, the actual building is the past; we inhabit and experience the artwork in the present, and the installations (my construction) represents a possibility for the future. I make a reflection or a glimpse of what the building might have been or could be; and, then, when I destroy the work, of what it might eventually become.

RB: Your use of materials is redolent, in some way, of a favela, which, in turn, alludes to social justice issues. Is this an assessment of the work that you would welcome?

CB: I do not think the work speaks of a particular reality. I use materials such as cardboard and packing tape to emphasise ideas of impermanence. I see the whole city as a sort of manipulated and mouldable model; I am interested in the constant urban transformation that turns cities into places undergoing a continual process of reinvention. We do not live entirely in the city, yet we are a fundamental part of its structure. I believe we are very vulnerable. The city functions as a second skin; our bodies are an integral part of the urban landscape.

RB: What is the role of the contemporary practitioner, then, within society? Do you feel you carry a responsibility to communicate a particular message?

CB: We live in a complex society full of contradictions. By assuming and accepting these contradictions, art unfolds within a constant process of experimentation and questioning. In the studio, or laboratory (which can be a mental space), there exists the possibility to transform; we can add to, subtract from, multiply, mend, restore and accelerate that process of transformation. That laboratory is the space-in-between, existing continually between past and future.

RB: You won some big prizes in 2013, the Michigan Art Prize, and at Frieze New York too. And now, in 2014, you are in the running for the Artes Mundi prize. How has this affected you?

CB: It's exciting to be part of *Artes Mundi*, I like the energy. I don't think the prize is the most important part of the event, though. The process of choosing the artists for the show, or the choice of the winner, is a process over which we have no control. I think the most important thing is to focus on the work and to continue working in that laboratory. —CCQ

Carlos Bunga's work can be seen at National Museum, Cardiff as part of *Artes Mundi 6* until 22 February 2015, artesmundi.org

p25
Carlos Bunga at National Museum Cardiff, Ric Bower, 2014

p26
Landscape, Carlos Bunga, 2011, Site-specific installation, cardboard, packing tape, matt paint, glue, Exhibition view at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, courtesy of the artist and Galeria Elba Benítez, Madrid; photo: Brian Forrest

p27 & 31
Mausoléu, Carlos Bunga, 2012, Site-specific installation, cardboard, packing tape, matt paint, glue and 45 sculptures of the Pinacoteca's Collection, Exhibition view at Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Elba Benítez, Madrid

p28
Exodus, Carlos Bunga, 2014, Site-specific installation, cardboard, tape, paint, Exhibition view at Artes Mundi 6, National Museum Cardiff, courtesy of the artist and Galeria Elba Benítez, Madrid; photo: Warren Orchard

p29
Khóra, Carlos Bunga, 2013, Site-specific installation, cardboard, packing tape, glue and matt paint, Variable dimensions, Exhibition view at Museo Universidad Nacional de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC), Mexico, courtesy of the artist and Galeria Elba Benítez, Madrid; photo: Oliver Santana

