

Chronicle of an Exhibition: Contemporary Art and Indigenous Peoples

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Los huecos del agua. Arte actual de pueblos originarios (The Hollows of Water: Contemporary Art by Indigenous Peoples) arose with the intention of understanding the contemporary production of “Indigenous artists.” This category seemed contradictory to me, and so my research was based around the following questions: Who determines the contemporary? What does it mean to be Indigenous? As contemporary art is defined in accordance with Western categories, it was complicated to determine what could be included in this equation, and so the decisive factor was often a recent production date. The framework was therefore temporal, under certain parameters that became representative, that is, their contemporariness. Furthermore, as has been written, discussed and reflected upon in excess, “the Indigenous” is a colonial category that, as Guillermo Bonfil Batalla has argued, obeys the condition of the marginalized, of the oppressed, of those peoples and cultures that the Spaniards found upon their arrival in the territory now known as Mexico.¹ Every country has different criteria for categorizing the Indigenous, and they are all questionable. In Mexico, linguistic criteria predominate; in Chile, ancestry, along with sociocultural criteria and self-identification. In the United States, to be recognized as a Native American and have all the corresponding rights, one must live on a reservation or close to one, be enrolled in a tribe and have 25% or more native blood. For this exhibition, we selected artists with connections to Indigenous communities due to “self-identification,” place of residence, birth or language.

On the other hand, self-identification has an enormous complexity to it. In her text “Éëts, atom. Algunos apuntes sobre la identidad indígena,” the Mixe linguist, activist and thinker Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil wrote: “I am Indigenous to the extent that I belong to a nation besieged by a state that has fought, and still fights, the very existence of my people and my language, that denies the existence of my people in the classroom, that has attempted to silence the contrasting elements of my experience of being Mixe through the mestizo project, which aims to make me Mexican.”²

One of the core intentions of this curatorial work was to break with the homogenizing idea of the “Indigenous,” which functions as a cultural unit without differences or particularities, and so the title of the exhibition made reference to the archipelagic thinking of the poet, novelist, playwright and essayist Édouard Glissant (Martinique, 1928), which is based on the diversity of the world, proposed as a counterweight to the unitary nature of Western systems of thinking:

Archipelagic thought, the thought of the attempt, of the intuitive temptation, which could be apposed to continental thoughts, which would first be system-thoughts. With continental thought the mind sprints with audacity, but that fact makes us think that we see the world as a bloc, taken wholesale, all-at-once, as a sort of imposing synthesis, just as we can see, through the window of an airplane, the configurations of landscapes or mountainous surfaces. With archipelagic thought, we know the rivers’ rocks, without a doubt even the smallest ones, and even imagine the hollows of water they cover, where freshwater crabs take shelter.³

The present of Indigenous communities and peoples is framed by the threat of extractivist projects promoted by the state, the disappearance of Indigenous languages, extreme poverty, immigration, ecocide and racism, among other problems that put in jeopardy their rights and autonomy. One expression of racism is reflected in the 2017 National Discrimination Survey (Encuesta Nacional de Discriminación, ENADIS), according to which 36% of men and 33% of women above the age of 18 agree with the following statement: “The poverty of Indigenous communities is due to their culture.”⁴ Racist and discriminatory thinking are based on ignorance, but they have their origins in the process of disindigenation and the construction of a unified nation in which the Indigenous is subsumed into the mestizo.

¹ “The category of Indian, in effect, is a superethnic category that does not denote any specific content of the groups that it covers, but a particular relationship between them and other sectors of the global social system of which the Indians form part. The category of Indian denotes the condition of the colonized and necessarily makes reference to the colonial relationship.” Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, “El concepto de Indio en América: una categoría de la situación colonial,” in *Anales de Antropología*, Mexico, vol. 9, 1972, p. 110.

² Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil, “Éëts, atom. Algunos apuntes sobre la identidad indígena,” in *Revista de la Universidad de México*, Mexico, September 2017, p. 22.

³ Édouard Glissant, “Pensamientos del Archipiélago, pensamientos del Continente,” in *Revista Aleph*, no. 146, Manizales (Colombia), July–September 2008, pp. 2–12.

⁴ The INEGI conducted this survey in coordination with the Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación (CONAPRED), the Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH), the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and the Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (CONACYT).

When conducting curatorial work, it is imperative to distance one's self from any form of cultural extractivism, colonization, placation, idealization or folklorization, instead opting for pieces that bear witness to the complexities that trouble this group of young artists. It is assumed that each one constitutes a universe in themselves, but each seems to engage in negotiation between a past that they recognize as their own and the construction of a present saturated by cultural dilemmas and social problems.

Their practice, of course, is not necessarily connected to the pre-Columbian. The thought and ways of life of Indigenous peoples are not static or isolated: they conserve idiosyncrasies, attitudes and activities that date back to before the Spanish invasion, but they continue to generate knowledge, cultural expressions, communal perspectives and intellectual, political and social exchanges in the present.

Ana Hernández (Santo Domingo Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, 1991) has developed her initiatives around the recuperation of the dress and ornaments of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. *Lluvia dorada* (2019) is a vertical piece that utilizes the process for making headdresses with golden paper, a technique that has fallen into disuse (Plate 1). To create it, the artist turned to the two last living women who know the technique, and who had to teach it to others so that the large-format piece could be created. This action revitalized traditional knowledge in a new generation. In another artwork, the embroidery piece titled *Rutas de ausencia* (2013), the feelings of loss and suffering that accompany migratory processes are present. Here, Hernández created a crocheted map of Mexico, marking the distance that separates her from her mother, who has migrated to the United States. The only reference she has for her is her U.S. ZIP code, which is an abstract spatial reference for both Hernández and her mother (Plate 2).

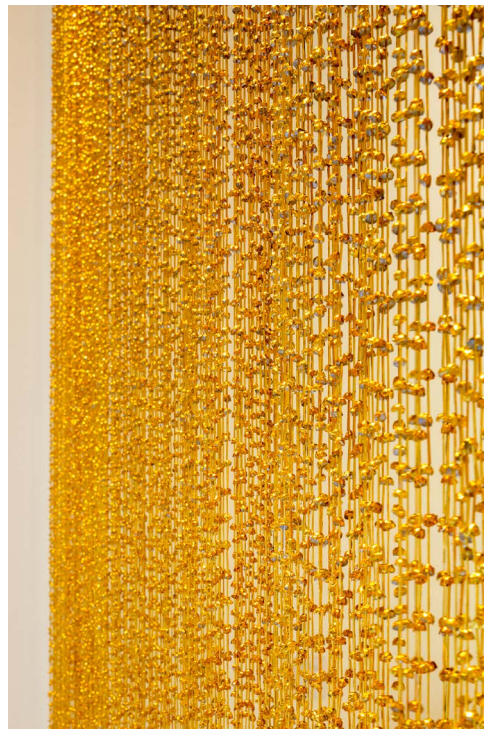


Plate 1:
Ana Hernández. *Nisaguié Yaachi / Golden Rain*, 2019. Metallic Paper. Courtesy of the artist. Image, courtesy of Museo Universitario del Chopo.

Plate 2:
Ana Hernández. *Routes of Absence*, 2013. Needle Knitting on Canvas, 191 x 251.5 x 90.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Image, courtesy of Museo Universitario del Chopo.

There are an infinite number of ways to approach one's connections with one's roots. Noé Martínez (Morelia, 1986) studied art in Mexico City before returning to Michoacán, seeking to reconnect with his family and his land by exploring the region's ancestral cultures. He studied material that records the struggles of different Indigenous communities against the erasure to which they have been subjected since the colonial era, and has incorporated topics connected to slavery, healing rituals and the disappearance of Indigenous languages, among others, into his work.

Fernando Palma (San Pedro Actopan, Mexico City, 1957), in turn, creates robotic pieces out of found materials and organic elements in order to combat ecocide, developmentalism, the loss of Indigenous languages and violence. After living for more than a decade in Europe, where he studied art and engineering, including postgraduate studies in robotic sculpture, he returned to Mexico City's rural Milpa Alta borough to configure discourses, using art and technology, on the need to return to Indigenous forms of knowledge as the only path to undoing the damage that humans have done to the planet. He is also the founder of Calpulli Tecalco, an initiative that, for over 20 years now, has promoted "research and preservation of the cultural and natural heritage of Indigenous peoples." Its primary objective is to revitalize the ancestral knowledge of the Indigenous peoples of the Valley of Anáhuac with regard to their interaction with the environment, encouraging nature reserves and sustainable agriculture.⁵

This connection with the environment is also present in the concept of communality developed by the Zapotec anthropologist Jaime Martínez Luna and the Mixe anthropologist Floriberto Díaz Gómez.⁶ Reyes Joaquín Maldonado (Sinanche, Yucatán, 1994) is another artist who addresses environmental destruction. His piece *Horizontes, IV* (2019) makes reference to the vertical structure of the subsoil, known as the *profile*, which is formed out of layers known in Spanish as *horizontes* (Plate 3). These elements are connected to the drilling in the Chicxulub crater in Yucatán, considered to be the impact site of the meteorite that extinguished 75% of the planet's living beings, including the dinosaurs. Reyes Joaquín explores the recovery of ecosystems after this extinction event and, through his sculptural compositions, alludes to human intervention in the creation of new, anthropogenic layers out of accumulated waste.



Plate 3:
Reyes Joaquín Maldonado Gamboa.
Horizons IV, 2019. Concrete, coal, animal bones, crusts, ash, sea sand, red earth, oxides, glass, tree leaves, tar, plastic, plastiglomerate, stone, white earth and fossils. Variable measures, diameter 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Image, courtesy of Museo Universitario del Chopo.

I am particularly interested in the case of Abraham González Pacheco (San Simón el Alto, Malinalco, Mexico State, 1989), whose work I got to know after organizing the exhibition. This artist questions and reflects on the truthfulness of official history and the intervention of the state in its construction. Confronting the lack of historical records on the place where he was born, his work addresses the construction of identity, incorporating pre-Hispanic iconography into his large-scale drawings. In Mexico City's Buenos Aires neighborhood, he produced the project *Yacimiento 34* (2018). He spent twenty days excavating a 7 x 7 m hole, "with pick and shovel," creating a fictitious archaeological dig and installing artificial ruins surrounded by scaffolding. Imitating a site museum, he exhibited the objects found to the public for six months, inviting other artists to intervene in the space (Plate 4).

⁵ Calpulli Tecalco, A.C., "Quiénes somos." Retrieved from <https://calpullitecalco.wordpress.com/quienes-somos/>.

⁶ "Each one of the elements of nature plays a necessary role within the whole, and this concept of wholeness is present in every other aspect of our lives [...] human beings are no greater or lesser than other living beings; this is because the Earth is alive. The difference, not the superiority, of people essentially lies in their capacity to think and decide, to order and rationally use the existent." Floriberto Díaz Gómez, "Comunidad y comunalidad," in *Diálogos en la acción*, México, 2004, p. 368.

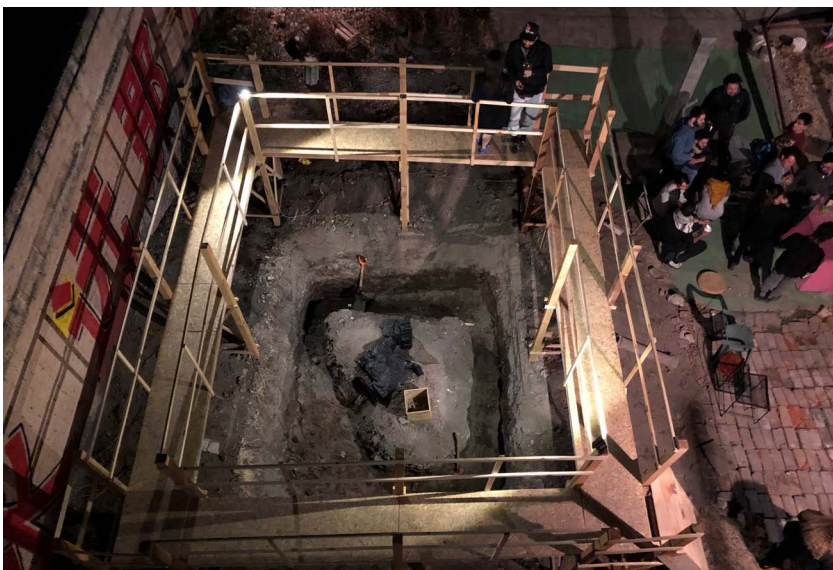


Plate 4:
Abraham González Pacheco.
Archeological Site 34, 2018.
Excavation, scaffold, find objects.
Image, courtesy of Andrew Birk.

The photographer Maruch Sántiz Gómez (Cruztón, San Juan Chamula, Chiapas, 1975) has captured the worldview of her community and its neighbors by creating a photographic registry of superstitions, propitiatory actions and traditional remedies, as can be seen in her famed photo series *Creencias I* (1994-96) and *II* (2000) (Plate 5). Her photographs are framed by texts in Spanish and Tzotzil: “Don’t Sit Children Down on a Log or a Stone” (1994), “To Cure Someone Who Snores Too Much” (1994) and “Don’t Squeeze the Dog’s Muzzle and Don’t Give It Tamales” (1994) are just a few examples. In contrast, Abraham Gómez (San Juan Chamula, Chiapas, 1977), in the series *Lik Xchuvajil I* (*Le comenzó la locura*, 2013), created a set of self-portraits of himself engaging in activities that, according to superstition, threaten his safety (Plate 6). This constitutes a challenge and a questioning of those beliefs that, with the goal of avoiding evil, illness or death, form a guide to life to protect one from the supernatural and ensure one’s good fortune. In turn, Octavio Aguilar (Santiago Zacatepec Mixe, Oaxaca, 1986) establishes a parallelism between the founding myths of the Ayuuk community and punk ideology. The Ayuuk consider themselves to be “the unconquered” and, in this sense, the do-it-yourself and autonomous nature of the punk movement is intertwined with the community’s history through patches and stencils with such disparate imagery as pre-Hispanic iconography and a portrait of Gandhi (Plate 7).

Linguicide forms part of the personal narratives of several artists, independently of their particular geographies. José Chidzul turns to calligraphic aesthetics derived from signage to write a series of phrases in Mayan and Spanish as a way to reaffirm identity through language: “We Are in a World of Words,” “We Are All Maya, We Are Alive,” “See Us Writing” (Plate 8). Andy Medina, for his part, created the video piece *Torre de Babel* (2016) using archival images of the construction of New York’s Twin Towers while a voiceover in Mixe recites the story of the Tower of Babel from the book of Genesis as a reference to the use of language as a mechanism of power.

One of the most confrontational pieces in the exhibition is undoubtedly Medina’s installation *Lii Qui Gannalu / Ignorante* (2016) (Plate 9), composed of a schoolroom desk, its uneven legs supported by publications representative of the state educational system: *El niño politizado*, the Mexican Constitution and a Spanish-English dictionary. On the facing wall, like a blackboard, there is a phrase written in Zapotec: “LII QUI GANNALU,” which translates to “you don’t know.” One’s



Plate 5:
Maruch Sántiz Gómez Cruztón. Ten
photographs from the series *Beliefs I* (1994-
96) and *II* (2000). Silver gelatin and C-print
with texts on Tzotzil language. Works
courtesy of Galería OMR. Image, courtesy of
Museo Universitario del Chopo.

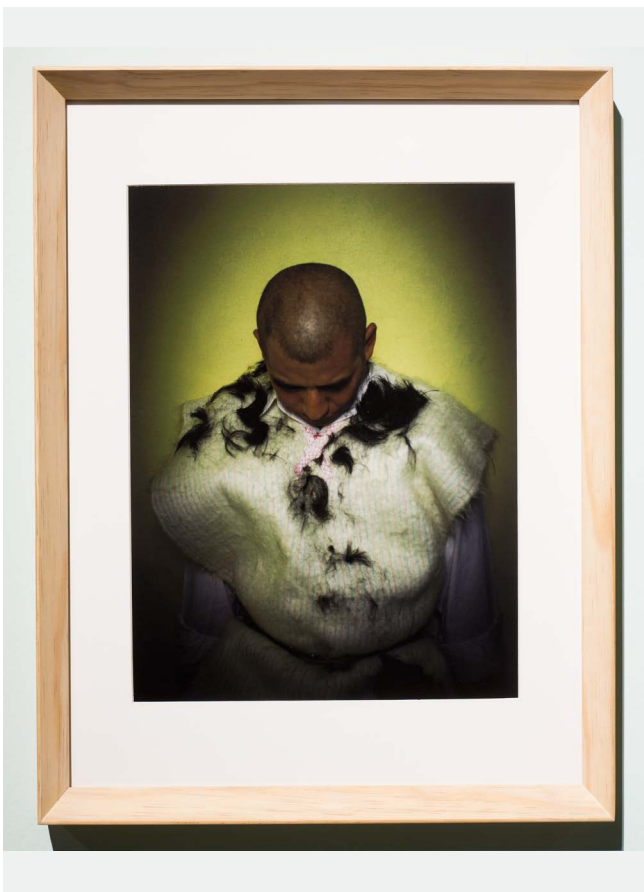


Plate 6:
Abraham Gómez. *Lost of Ch'ulel*, 2014. From the series “Lik Xchuvajil I” (And the craziness started). Print on cotton paper. Courtesy of the artist. Image courtesy of Museo Universitario del Chopo.

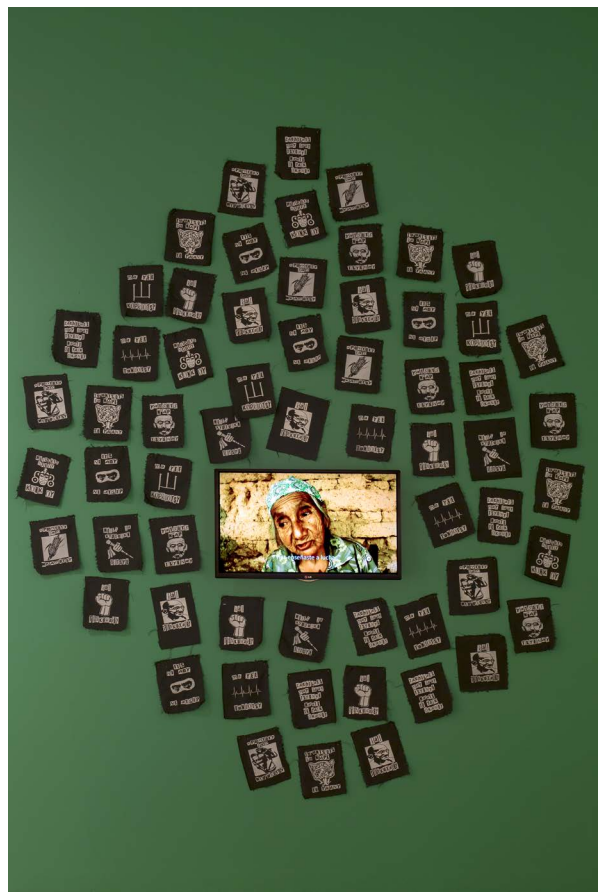


Plate 7:
Octavio Aguilar. *Ayuuk not dead*, 2017. Patches, bone scans and video (title: “Konk Oy”). Courtesy of the artist. Image courtesy of Museo Universitario del Chopo.



Plate 8:
From left to right:
José Chi Dzul. *Tulàakalo'on maaya'on, kuxa'ano'on* (We are all mayans, we are alive), 2016; *Ila wilo'on ta'an ks-iib* (Look at Us, We are Writing), 2016; *In yaax t'aan* (My First Word), 2016; *Táan k tu jum'peel kaabel t'aano* (We are on a World of Words), 2016. Acrylic on canvas. Variable measures. Courtesy of the artist. Image courtesy of Museo Universitario del Chopo.



Plate 9:
Andy Medina. *LII QUI GANNALU / IGNORANT*, 2016. Painting on wall, table, school bench, and books. 127.5 x 2.76 cm (wall painting) 80 x 59.5 x 60 cm (school bench). Courtesy of the artist. Image courtesy of Museo Universitario del Chopo.

mother tongue constitutes a framework for understanding the world and the negation of this right is one of the most atrocious forms of violence committed against entire peoples. This piece is a critique of the government policy to impose Spanish as the sole official language, while non-Zapotec-speaking spectators, upon learning the translation of the phrase, become more open to empathizing with those who have been discriminated against and forced into a foreign form of communication, constructed to conceptualize the world of others.

Los Tlacolulokos is a pair of artists from Tlacolula de Matamoros, Oaxaca, Darío Canul (1984) and Cosijoesa Cernas (1992), who address conflicts such as the teachers' movement and drug and arms trafficking in the state of Oaxaca. The primary protagonists of their canvases and murals are women, always with a combative attitude, dressed in regional attire but with tattoos, American sneakers and cellphones. This mixture of unexpected references cultivates the representation of these territories that lie at several intersections. This can be seen in their sculptures of AK-47s made out of chocolate or stones from near the ruins of Monte Albán (Plate 10).⁷



Plate 10:
Tlacolulokos. Untitled, 2015. Assemblage of wood tools. Variable measures. Courtesy of the artists. Image courtesy of Museo Universitario del Chopo.

The artists selected allude to existing tensions between Indigenous communities and the state, indicating a continual history of resistance to the exploitation and minoritization of their peoples. The undue appropriation of their heritage, to benefit a univocal nationalist project, implies the folklorization and idealization of their cultural expressions and reflects an asymmetrical relationship with the state. We must keep working on listening, unlearning certainties and formulating questions about what we assume about others. There are no “natural” disadvantages and it is necessary to move forward on the basis of equality, rather than a uniform, supposedly shared Mexicanness, because it, too, is an invention. Our point of departure should be diversity as a series of archipelagos or nations that coexist in the affirmation of their differences and in the autonomy of their governance.

⁷ Of Russian invention, AK-47s have become very common weapons in this region.