Visual Disobedience:
The Geopolitics of Experimental Art in Central America, 1990-Present

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
Art, Art History and Visual Studies in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation centers on the relationship between art and politics in postwar Central America as materialized in the specific issues of racial and gendered violence that derive from the region’s geopolitical location and history. It argues that the decade of the 1990s marks a moment of change in the region’s cultural infrastructure, both institutionally and conceptually, in which artists seek a new visual language of experimental art practices to articulate and conceptualize a critical understanding of place, experience and knowledge. It posits that visual and conceptual manifestations of violence in Central American performance, conceptual art and installation extend beyond a critique of the state and beyond the scope of political parties in perpetuating violent circumstances in these countries. It argues that instead artists use experimental practices in art to locate manifestations of racial violence in an historical system of domination and as a legacy of colonialism still witnessed, lived, and learned by multiple subjectivities in the region. In this postwar period, artists move beyond a cold war rhetoric of the previous decades and root the current social and political injustices in what Aníbal Quijano calls the ‘coloniality of power.’ Through an engagement of decolonial methodologies, this dissertation challenges the label “political art” in Central America and offers what I call “visual disobedience” as a direct response to the coloniality of seeing. I posit that visual colonization is yet another aspect of the coloniality of power and indispensable to projects of decolonization. It thus offers an analysis of various artworks to show how visual
disobedience responds specifically to racial and gender violence and the equally violent colonization of visuality in Mesoamerica. Such geopolitical critiques through art unmask themes specific to life and identity in contemporary Central America, from indigenous genocide, femicide, transnational gangs, to imprisonments and social cleansing. I propose that Central American artists—beyond an anti-colonial stance—are engaging in visual disobedience to construct decolonial epistemologies in art, through art, as art and as decolonial gestures for healing.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents. Your life has been an example and model of what courage, sacrifice and love for others can attain.
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................ iv

List of Figures .............................................................................................. ix

Acknowledgments ....................................................................................... xiii

Introduction ................................................................................................. 1

  War and Art, 1970s-1980s ........................................................................ 2
  Postwar Experimental Art and Visualities .................................................. 12
  A Decolonial Framework .......................................................................... 15
  Chapters ...................................................................................................... 19

Chapter One. “Fuzzy Logic”: Initiatives from Within and the Transformation of Artistic Structures in Central America .................................................. 23

  I. Introduction .......................................................................................... 23
  II. The Creation of New Institutional Art Spaces ....................................... 26
  III. Influential Regional Exhibitions and Events ....................................... 33
  IV. Biennials .............................................................................................. 52
  V. Alternative Publications, Collectives, Spaces, and Pedagogy ................ 62
  VI. Conclusion .......................................................................................... 77

Chapter Two. Un Grito: Visual Disobedience and Indigeneity in Guatemala 82

  I. Introduction .......................................................................................... 82
  II. The Coloniality of Seeing and Visual Disobedience ............................. 90
  III. Performance as Corporal Critiques of Coloniality and Healing .......... 101
  IV. Objects and the Underside of Modernity ........................................... 113
  V. Religion and Spirituality in Video and Installation ............................. 122
  VI. Visual Codes of Indigeneity ................................................................. 126
## Chapter Three. Postwar Social Cleansing: Femicide, Criminalization, and Captivity

I. Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 136

II. Gendered Violence .......................................................................................................... 139

III. Transnational Gang Visual Culture ............................................................................... 153

IV. Prison Captivity ............................................................................................................. 170

V. Making the Non-human ................................................................................................ 188

VI. Considerations ............................................................................................................... 206

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 210

Bibliography ........................................................................................................................ 221

Biography ............................................................................................................................. 240

Figures .................................................................................................................................. 242
List of Figures

Figure 1. Carlos Cañas. Testimonios del 72 series, 1972 ....................................................... 242
Figure 2. Esperanza Guevara. The Betrayal, 1975................................................................. 243
Figure 3. Boanerges Cerrato Collective. The Birth of The New Man, 1980 .................. 244
Figure 4. Juan Fuentes, Romero Presente!, 1991................................................................. 245
Figure 5. Regina José Galindo. Quien Puede Borrar la Huellas, 2003 ......................... 246
Figure 6. Danny Zavaleta. Lección ”M,” 2008 ................................................................. 247
Figure 7. Habacuc Guillermo Vargas. Exposition #1 (detail dog), 2007 ............. 248
Figure 8. Priscilla Monge. The Series The Lessons: Lesson No. 1 How To Put
Make-Up, 1998 ........................................................................................................ 249
Figure 9. Jonathan Harker. Postales de Panamá, 2001 ..................................................... 250
Figure 10. Patricia Belli. Pelo, 2001 ............................................................................... 251
Figure 11. Yasser Musa. Banana Boy, 1999-2001 ................................................................ 252
Figure 12. Jonathan Harker. Mas que un canal, 2001 ..................................................... 253
Figure 13. Simon Vega. Cuidades Perdidas, 2006 ............................................................. 254
Figure 14. Ronald Moran. Brevedad Inmaterial, 2009 ..................................................... 255
Figure 15. Walterio Iraheta. Migration is always a matter of space, 2006 ........... 256
Figure 16. Patricia Belli. Vuelo Difícil, 1999 ..................................................................... 257
Figure 17. Wilbert Carmona. Peluchitoul, 2002 ............................................................... 258
Figure 18. Rodrigo Pacheles for Los niños de mi ciudad, 2002 ..................................... 259
Figure 19. Regina José Galindo. Himenoplastia, 2004 ....................................................... 260
Figure 20. Ernesto Salmero. Auras de Guerra (on original wall), 2006 .................. 261
Figure 21. Ernesto Salmeron. Auras de Guerra, 2006 ....................................................... 262
Figure 22. Abigail Reyes. *Radio Mujer*, 2011 ................................................................. 263

Figure 23. El Nuevo Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (NuMu), Guatemala City, 2014 .................................................................................................................. 264

Figure 24. Federico Herrero Retrospective at Numu, 2012 ............................................ 265

Figure 25. Regina José Galindo Retrospective at NuMu, 2013 ......................................... 266

Figure 26. Víctor Rodríguez. *Untitled*, 2014 ................................................................ 267

Figure 27. Kimbell Panel, Classic Maya Period, 300-800 AD ........................................... 268

Figure 28. Benvenuto Chavajay. *El Grito*, 2002 .............................................................. 269

Figure 29. Jorge de Leon. *El Circulo*, 2000 ................................................................ 270

Figure 30. Alejandro Paz. *El Genocidio*, 2000 ............................................................... 271

Figure 31. Alejandro Paz. *El Genocidio*, 2000 ............................................................... 272

Figure 32. Sandra Monterroso. *Rakoc Atin*, 2008 .......................................................... 273

Figure 33. Sandra Monterroso. *Rakoc Atin*, 2008 .......................................................... 274

Figure 34. Ángel Poyón. *Letanía*, 2008 ...................................................................... 275

Figure 35. Ángel Poyón. *Letanía*, 2008 ...................................................................... 276

Figure 36. Benvenuto Chavajay. *La Suave Chapina* series, 2007-08 ......................... 277

Figure 37. Benvenuto Chavajay. *La Suave Chapina*, series, 2007-08 ......................... 278

Figure 38. Benvenuto Chavajay. Untitled, 2013 ............................................................... 279

Figure 39. Andres Curruchiche. Untitled, date unknown ............................................... 280

Figure 40. Angel Poyón. In Estudios del Fracaso Medidos en Tiempo y Espacio, 2008 .................................................................................................................. 281

Figure 41. Fernando Poyón. *Contra la Pared*, 2005 ....................................................... 282

Figure 42. Antonio Pichillá. *Ku'kul'kan*, 2011 ............................................................... 283

Figure 43. Antonio Pichillá. *Lo Oculto*, 2005 .............................................................. 284

Figure 44. Sandra Monterroso. *Lix Cua Rahro/Tus Tortillas Mi Amor*, 2002-2004. 285
Figure 45. Sandra Monterroso. *Meditando El Error*, 2008................................. 286
Figure 46. Sandra Monterroso. *El Matador*, 2011............................................. 287
Figure 47. Regina José Galindo. *Perra*, 2005....................................................... 288
Figure 48. Regina José Galindo. *Mientras ellos siguen Libre*, 2004....................... 289
Figure 49. Artería Collective. *ZIP 504*, 2001-2005............................................. 290
Figure 50. Artería Collective. *ZIP 504* (detail), 2001-2005................................. 291
Figure 51. Regina José Galindo. *Ablución*, 2007.................................................. 292
Figure 52. Danny Zavaleta. *Retrato Hablado*, 2009........................................... 293
Figure 53. Danny Zavaleta. *Retrato Hablado*, 2009........................................... 294
Figure 54. Danny Zavaleta. *Retrato Hablado*, 2009........................................... 295
Figure 55. Danny Zavaleta. *El Tur*, 2006............................................................ 296
Figure 56. Simon Vega. *Ciudad Encajada*, 2001............................................... 297
Figure 57. Simon Vega. *Ciudad Encajada*, 2001............................................... 298
Figure 58. Danny Zavaleta. *Made in*, 2008......................................................... 299
Figure 59. Danny Zavaleta. *Lección M*, from alphabetization series, 2008......... 300
Figure 60. Robert Yager. *Mad-dog challenging stare*, 1992................................. 301
Figure 61. Isabel Muñoz. *Untitled* from “Maras” series, 2007............................ 302
Figure 62. Gabriel Galeano. *100% Catracho*, 2004............................................ 303
Figure 63. Giles Clark. *Untitled* (72 hour holding cell in El Salvador), 2013...... 304
Figure 64. Jhafis Quintero. *Words disappear, writing remains from INDUBIA TEMPORA series*, 2004................................................................. 305
Figure 65. Jhafis Quintero. *Beast of Pray* from INDUBIA TEMPORA series, 2004 .......................... 306
Figure 66. Jhafis Quintero. *the body of crime* from INDUBIA TEMPORA series, 2004................................................................. 307
Figure 67. Habacuc Guillermo Vargas. *Exposition #1*, (detail Sandinista Hymn), 2007 ................................................................. 308

Figure 68. Habacuc Guillermo Vargas. *Exposition #1* (detail, incense burner), 2007 ........................................................................ 309

Figure 69. Habacuc Guillermo Vargas. *Exposition #1* (detail dog), 2007 ............ 310

Figure 70. Habacuc Guillermo Vargas. *Exposition #1* (detail, dog food, view from entryway), 2007 .................................................................. 311

Figure 71. Habacuc Guillermo Vargas. *Exposition #1* (detail, blog), 2007 ........... 312

Figure 72. Natividad Canda, from blog *Exposition #1*, 2007 ................................. 313

Figure 73. Habacuc Guillermo Vargas. *Dos Nombres*, 2010 ................................... 314

Figure 74. Habacuc Guillermo Vargas. *Dos Nombres*, 2010 ................................... 315

Figure 75. Habacuc Guillermo Vargas. *camisETA*, 2010 ................................. 316

Figure 76. Regina José Galindo. *Soy una piedra*, 2013 ............................................ 317
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Introduction

This dissertation is a personal act of disobedience that departs from normative histories of art, and a treatise that explores, while it encourages, what I have called visual disobedience. It began as an attempt to fill a void in art historical narratives in both Latin America and the United States that continuously overlook artistic contributions emerging from modern and contemporary Central American artists. It simultaneously began as a personal exploration into the social political phenomenon in Central America that forced thousands to migrate as political and economic refugees into the United States, as my parents did, and the anti-immigrant sentiment experienced in the country and near Mexican and United States borders. The aims were to understand the phenomenon that created an inescapable and continuous violence, whether in Central America or in Latino neighborhoods in the United States, and to understand how race, class, and gender politics connected these experience in the US and Central American, and more specifically, how art today evinced this phenomenon. My early research confirmed Central American artists’ pedagogically and politically active production of art, how they exposed historical secrets, and forcefully aimed to change the present for a different future. Their activism was visual, sensorial, and theoretical. It also differed from what was commonly understood as forms of political art—painting, drawing, murals and posters—during previous decades of armed conflict, especially during the liberation movements and revolution of the 1970s and 1980s where
civilians resisted domestic oligarchies and foreign intervention. And yet, while artists offered the most critical reflections and commentary on contemporary sociopolitical conditions in Central America, the international circuits of the art world, as well as in media and scholars in academies afforded them little to no attention. Artists of the 1990s and 2000s engaged in politics and activism on the isthmus, using new forms and techniques from performance and installation to interventionist tactics. The lack of knowledge and attention to such vibrant art across disciplines, led me to question the circumstances behind its exclusion and the stakes involved in countering its omission. I asked: what were artist resisting in a postwar period? I questioned whether the traditional way of understanding ‘political art’ would still be appropriate for the region. I wondered whether post revolution Central America was now experiencing worst violence, and impunity, and what an art historical study might contribute to understanding the violence that never ceases? What could a decolonial framework that challenged and reconceptualized the relations between contemporary art, visual culture, and socio-political themes in postwar Central America today contribute to the real challenges facing the region?

**War and Art, 1970s-1980s**

I use the term “postwar” throughout the dissertation, not to address a singular civil war, but to refer to the spilling over of violence across borders and the complex interconnectedness that comes from a small region. While not every country in the region officially experienced a civilian war during the 1970s or 1980s, each Central American country nonetheless was touched by violence in
some way, each time emanating from a single source—intervention by the United States. US involvement goes back to the 19th century and extends to the 20th century with the United Fruit Company and the expansion of the Monroe Doctrine. Yet the most violent intervention began mid 20th century, creating perpetual circumstances for poverty, illiteracy, violence and dependency. In Nicaragua, the US government supported the brutal Somoza dictatorship, and once that was toppled through the leftist Sandinista revolution in 1979, the US initiated and established the counterrevolutionary group known as the CONTRAS, short for contrarrevolución (counter-revolution).¹ The CONTRAS consisted of former National Guardsmen and former Sandinista revolutionaries and farmworkers betrayed by the new Sandinista government and its land policies, and who sought to initiate counterrevolution. Meanwhile, Salvadorans had already experienced mass murder and brutality by military force, and in 1980 the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) began a civilian war against the right wing Military ARENA that lasted twelve years. With revolutionary Nicaragua next to El Salvador and the proximity of Communist Cuba, the US took extreme measures to impede another leftist victory in El Salvador that could potentially spread throughout Central America. Consequently, US Contra funding sponsored the formation of the death squads,

armed and trained in the School of the Americas, then located in the US state of Georgia.²

Beginning in the 1980s, Honduras became both a training camp for US-trained Salvadoran military and a launching site for US-backed Contras attempting to topple the Sandinistas in power in Nicaragua. By the mid-1980s, civilian political unrest led to the closing of CONTRA training camps, yet the Honduran government continued its support of US anti-insurgent tactics to combat guerillas in exchange for economic aid. Meanwhile rightwing death squads and military forces committed human rights violations and forced disappearances of Honduran civilians throughout the 1980s.

In Panama, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) put military leader Manuel Noriega on the payroll, and gave him a secure position in control of the Panamanian National Guard, in exchange for his alliance and allegiance in supporting CONTRA training (and despite his involvement in drug trafficking). Nevertheless, in 1989 then President George H. W. Bush sent 24,000 US soldiers on a surprise three-day attack to Panama City to remove what the US deemed the “evil” dictator General Manuel Noriega and, putatively to “protect” American lives. The clear the motivation was to ensure that the Panama Canal remain under US imperialist power.

² The School of the Americas (SOA) was founded in 1946 and located at Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia. During its operation it trained more than 60,000 soldiers in counterinsurgency and combat-related skills, in the United States and in Latin America. Because SOA training in torture and killing became so public, SOA changed its name to the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation in hopes to diminish attention in 2011, and still operates today. For more see Lesley Gill, The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
Guatemala’s 1954 coup, also backed by the CIA, set the stage for the thirty-six-year long civil war from 1960 to 1996. Rightwing militias fought leftist rebels, who were mostly Mayans fighting for social justice, while government-supported death squads targeted labor leaders, political opponents, students, and would-be communists. By 1977 US President Jimmy Carter passed a bill to cut funding to the Guatemalan government. But a year later intelligence reports confirmed that the number of massacres continued to increase, and President Ronald Reagan augmented economic support to the Guatemalan military in the early 1980s.

Meanwhile Costa Rica became known as the “Switzerland” of Central America during times of conflict, a neutral country with no active military. Costa Rica also hosted exiles from the rest of the region. Right-wing military personal, leftist guerillas, and thousands of refugees sought exile in Costa Rica. While the country became a destination for thousands of migrants, it simultaneously hosted anti-insurgent training. For Noriega in Panama, Costa Rica became a gateway to smuggle drugs and arms for US training of Contras.³ Thus, the series of events in the 1970s and 1980s convey a shared history between countries in the region, in which its geographical location, a bridge connecting North and South America, made it a target of US imperialist intervention. The conflicts of each

³ Understanding the historical context during the decades of armed conflicts is crucial in order to understand a postwar context for Central America and for the subsequent art and visual production in the region. The role of imperialist intervention on behalf of the US cannot be ignored in the postwar period, as it as it is still present in the memories and traumas of peoples in both the US and in Central America, and present in the post-memory consciousness of a new generation of artists.
nation in Central America crossed borders as people did, and became the conflicts of the entire region.

While these historical and political events dominated the media, leading to Hollywood films and documentaries, little attention was paid to artists’ activities, experiences, and testimonies. As military repression increased, artists throughout Central America began to testify to specific concrete events. During the conflict some artists even destroyed their artworks in order to prevent death and punishment for subversive ideas and expression, yet other works of art were preserved and provide a small sample of art that denounced military and political oppression. For instance, a now iconic artist, Carlos Cañas, painted the 1972 student massacre at the National University in El Salvador, where he was a student at the time (Figure 1). A limp body lies diagonally across the forefront of the composition. At the bottom right corner, one sees a military figure, discernible by the combat boots, who stabbed the victim in the ribs, while a crowd of adults and children observed in horror. Increasingly, the depiction of lifeless bodies became a common subject matter in art during the conflict, as the military habitually disposed of tortured bodies in public spaces as a strategy for instilling fear among the population. I refer to such imagery as the production of an “aesthetics of violence.” The military created visual imagery to torment civilians enough to instill fear and invoke self-censorship from them. The tortured bodies were meant to be visible. One can see in the so-called postwar period, that old strategies of fear and control never ceased but increased.

Cañas represents one type of artist active during the armed conflict. He was trained in European art schools and versed in modernist movements, a
professor of art that trained a later generation, and an artistic leader in his
country. Other artists were self-taught and worked with the resources available
to them. Such is the case of the well-known group of *campesinos* (farmworkers)
in the island of Solentiname, located in the Lake of Nicaragua. Under the
guidance of the poet, Catholic priest and revolutionary Ernesto Cardenal, the
*campesino* groups organized as Christian Base Communities.⁴ They followed
Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire’s educational methods of consciousness-
raising and would meet to read the bible and analyze it within their own
context.⁵ Many were prolific artists whose small paintings often conveyed
parallels between Christ’s persecution by the Roman State and the military
persecution of their families and neighbors for speaking on behalf of the poor.
*Campesino* depictions echoed Christ-like figures, and every moment of his
persecution, torture, and crucifixion were represented within the tropical context
of the island. Such art testified to actual events occurring to Nicaraguans at the
hand of the Somoza Regime (Figure 2). While the small, paintings appeared
nonthreatening and similar to traditional landscape paintings made for tourist
consumption, the artists’ awareness and systematic questioning, logic and critical
analysis led many other artists to join the guerillas or organize social programs in
service of the Sandinista revolution.⁶

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⁶ For more on painting in Nicaragua see, María Dolores G Torres, *La Modernidad en La Pintura Nicaragüense, 1948-1990* (Nicaragua: IHNCA-UCA, Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica de la Universidad Centroamericana (UCA), 2009).
Similar to the small and personal artwork of the school in Solantiname, the mural movement in Nicaragua likewise became a tool of consciousness-raising for the Sandinista revolution, inspired in part by murals of the Mexican revolution.7 Yet in contrast to Mexican murals commissioned to one artist, Sandinista murals were created by individual, local collectives, and international artists, and were often located in the countryside as opposed to national buildings. The subject matter ranged from scenes of insurrection, to health and social campaigns, to the role of women in the revolution. In a well-known mural in Managua, *Birth of the new man* (1980), figures surround a newborn child positioned in the upper half center of the wall (Figure 3). Above him, full figured, brown-skinned angels hover over, bearing gifts, while below and to the side, men, women, and children bring additional native offerings to the land, such as flowers and fruits. The nativity scene includes the presence of four revolutionary figures, Che Guevara, Agusto Sandino, Carlos Fonseca and the archbishop Oscar Romero—all martyrs of revolution. The Sandinista revolutionary government declared a rule that artists could only depict portraits of martyrs for the art was to heroicize the common day Nicaraguan people.8 Such mural ethics attributed the same holiness to an average baby boy as to the newborn Jesus Christ, imbuing viewers with ideas of Liberation Theory that argued for a holy kingdom

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Images of repression throughout the region equally contrasted images that aimed to empower masses. Accordingly, coinciding with the golden age of the political poster in Latin America, (1960-1990s) Central America also experienced an abundance of poster production and diffusion. The posters typically called for self-determination, they idolized martyrs and charismatic leaders, celebrated feminism in revolutions, and advocated literacy, cultural programs, and film.\footnote{See Russ Davidson, ed., \textit{Latin American Posters: Public Aesthetics and Mass Politics} (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, in association with University of New Mexico Center for Regional Studies, UNM University Libraries, and National Hispanic Cultural Center, 2006).} Various posters came from the Taller de Gráfica Experimental in Nicaragua, while others were made clandestinely. Yet international organizations simultaneously offered a myriad of posters in solidarity with Central America. One of the biggest supporters was the Cuban-based OSPAAL, Solidarity with People of Asia, Africa and Latin America.\footnote{The non-governmental publisher, Solidarity with People of Asia, Africa and Latin America was founded in Havana Cuba in 1966 and focused on producing posters of anti-capitalist and neoliberalism nature. For examples of posters see the organization website, <http://www.ospaaal.com/>} Posters linked the fine arts with popular culture and reclaimed the earlier modernist traditions of cubism, dada photomontage, and later styles of pop art. The mother breast-feeding her child became an iconic image, such as in Juan Fuentes’ serigraph \textit{Romero Presente!} (1991). There a woman breastfeeding her
child stands in the forefront against a photographic backdrop of protestors (Figure 4). The crowd holds images of the Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar A. Romero, who, with a gunshot to the heart as he delivered mass was assassinated for speaking on behalf of the poor and demanding an end to military violence. Bold color accentuates the figure of an isolated woman in the foreground with a powerful gaze that confronts and connects the viewer to the scene, conveying the message that nurturing a new nation preempts mourning death.

Despite such art production amid wars and revolutions, art historical scholarship—both in Latin America and in the US—continues to exclude Central America from Latin American Art History. Generally, most art historical scholarship on the region centers on the art and architecture of the historical pre-Columbian Maya, and on other ancient societies—ironically, an art historical space denied to the contemporary indigenous communities in the region. The few books written on twentieth-century Central American art primarily consider Nicaragua and the 1979 revolution, with little to no significant attention given to the post-revolution and postwar art practices of the entire region in the beginning of the 1990s. This is the case with the work of David Kunzle and the late David Craven, both of whom discuss the mural movement and

12 This is the case in the Latin American Art survey texts of Damián Bayón, Leopoldo Castedo, Dawn Ades, Valerie Fraser, and Jacqueline Barnitz. Although only a handful of universities in the US offer courses or degrees on Latin American art, the only available texts assigned offer limited information and thus perpetuate the erroneous idea that only a few select countries in Latin America produce art works. Although a young field in the US academy, Latin American art history is rapidly advancing and more inclusive and comprehensive textbooks are essential to the development of the field.

revolutionary art of Nicaragua. In Edward J. Sullivan’s edited edition *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century* (1996) only one chapter is devoted to Central America. Authored by Monica Kupfer, the text is only allotted two pages for each Central American country.\(^{14}\) Exhibitions like *Art Under Duress* curated by Marylin Zeitlin, have explored painting, drawing, and sculpture during the Salvadoran conflict.\(^{15}\) Even still, these efforts have failed to examine the region comprehensively.

The international media attention to Central American politics during the 1970s and 1980s brought exposure to the paintings, posters, and murals mentioned above. This moment of publicity occurred mainly because of international solidarity groups that protested US intervention in Central America, but it still requires deeper art historical investigation and analysis. Once the war ended, and media attention ceased, Central America and its artistic scene fell from the map as if the region remained frozen in time. The consequent notion that Central America remained that small conflict-ridden “third-world” impedes consideration of its contemporary artistic scene, preventing knowledge to extend beyond stereotypical notions of war and revolution in a tropical context of volcanoes and banana plantations. Now in a postwar period, I ask: What are the artistic and political strategies that artists turn to as they address the current socio political situation in the region? How does a region that lived though decades of violence, and more specifically, centuries of conquests and


interventions, move forward and deal with painful memories and traumas? How, and was, justice achieved? It is my conviction that apathy and indifference to justice and history is another form of violence, often present in the aftermath of atrocities, as is the case for decades in Central America. While hundreds of thousands were killed and disappeared for thinking, speaking, and just existing during the wars, the last twenty-four years has been a transition to talking and shouting in a new and critical way. Artists are at the forefront of this new strong voice, through the use of their bodies, spaces, ideas, and visual disobedience.

**Postwar Experimental Art and Visualities**

This dissertation shows how the postwar period marks a moment of change in the region’s cultural infrastructure, both institutionally and conceptually, in which artists seek a new visual language to articulate and conceptualize critical understanding of *place, experience, knowledge, activism, violence, and being*. In Guatemala a woman steps into a basin of human blood and walks before a line of military men from one government building to another, leaving behind a trace of bloody footprints (Figure 5). In El Salvador, a man makes school children literate by teaching them gang signs (Figure 6). In Costa Rica, a man ties a stray dog inside a gallery, forbidding anyone to feed the animal (Figure 7); a woman teaches others how to use make up to cover domestic violence (Figure 8). In Panama, a man reconfigures the tourist postcards of tropical Panamanian scenes (Figure 9). In Nicaragua a woman removes her wig to expose her bald head (Figure 10) and in Belize, a man photographs a small ceramic “banana boy” across 700 locations (Figure 11). These examples are but a
few in which Central American artists today produce visual culture that both challenges notions of art and history and reflects the current socio-economic political context of their lives—a very strong contrast and addition to the art that has come to represent the years of conflict decades earlier. Whereas art from the armed conflict used traditional art mediums to represent Marxist perspectives of class liberation and struggle figuratively, the postwar period artist uses experimental art to reveal how various manifestations of violence remained rooted in the legacy of colonialism. What social and political concerns do such artists address through these artist mediums that differ from art in the previous decades? How do artists in a postwar period negotiate memory and trauma of wars and aggression from the 1980s with the current manifestations of social and state violence? How do they achieve these ends while in dialogue with global contemporary art? How does such art both contribute to, and interrogate, what is understood to constitute art, art spaces, artists, and Central American politics, knowledge, and conditions of being?

The decade of the 1990s serves as the starting point for this dissertation as I suggest that it marks a transitional moment with two interconnected dialogues: 1) a new understanding of historical violence rooted in coloniality instead of the Cold War or left/rightwing rhetoric of the twentieth century; and 2) a new visual language of experimental art and visual culture in which contemporary artists offer the most critical and revealing analysis of the current Central American political context. In the last quarter century, modes of communication and information have been revolutionized; imperial powers and capitalist corporations have produced an even greater inequality through globalization;
and we are immersed in the destruction of our own planet, producing both tragedies and new resistance movements. These contemporary conditions are common subject matter for artists who reflect on them as global concerns from their own local, geopolitical spaces. Central American artists also increasingly participate in the global dialogue, and they do so through an emerging visual language of experimental practices that has participated in an alternative critical examination of geopolitical conditions of being in time. This dissertation brings Central American art into art historical discourse for the first time, as well as into contemporary social and political debate.

By experimental practices in Central America, I refer to a wide range of mediums that depart from historically traditional art practices utilized on the Isthmus such as drawing, painting and sculpture. The experimental media introduced to Central America during this period include the use of the body in performance, and the relation between ideas presented in conceptual art to creations of space, via installation and objects, as well as the use of new technologies. This expansion of art mediums also includes more ephemeral phenomena such as sound and human relations, as well as attention to and concern for animals and the environment. Although while such approaches have been practiced in Latin America and elsewhere in the world for decades, and precedents exist do also exist in Central America prior to the 1990s, one must remember that, in the process of historicizing contemporary art, these are still recent developments. During the end of the twentieth century and still in the beginning of the twenty-first century, these experimental practices have changed
the course of art dramatically, as well as what it means to create critical art. Thus contemporaneity has become part of the narrative frame.

This dissertation also rethinks traditional definitions of art and seeing, including what constitutes the visual, or visualities. I use visuality as a broader umbrella that includes art and visual culture as co-existing entities that enable agency and influence, and that engage and contextualize each other. Together both contribute to expanding the meaning of the term artist to include visual culture producers and visual thinkers. I emphasize the epistemic aspect of visuality evident in many of its manifestations—art, cultural production, signs, symbols, designs, architecture, color, composition, dress, space, etc. I also reinforce the fact that Latin American art and visual culture have always been carriers and transmitters of histories, identities, thoughts, scientific discoveries, concepts of time and space, and memories, even before coloniality/modernity became global models of power. Now in a postwar period, the social and political context of Central America and its Diaspora requires a transnational, hemispheric, and decolonial approach to new socio-political concerns that have emerged as a result of decades of US intervention, war, and mass migration.

**A Decolonial Framework**

The violence wrought upon the region in the 1970s and 1980s has left dire consequences resulting in the loss of human life, the separation of families, the disappearance of children, the widespread occurrence of psychological and spiritual traumas, and the lack of justice, such that the killers and perpetrators of violence now walk free among their victims. But when it is understood that such
violence belongs to centuries of colonial violence, one realizes that the
temporary wound is not a recent one. The wound is a centuries old colonial
wound. Such a wound requires a different treatment if healing is an option. No
longer does a Marxist approach to liberation suffice, as it emphasizes primarily
class struggle while overlooking the sexism, racism, and homophobia that has
long plagued and damaged Central Americans. Nor does a post-colonial
approach function as it is ever more clear that colonialism never ended. Rather,
colonialism continues to exist through what the Peruvian sociologist Anibal
Quijano called “coloniality”: a system of domination in which the
European/Western colonization of political and economic spheres continues to
be linked intricately to the colonization of knowledge systems on a global scale.16
An anti-colonial framing acknowledges that the colonial encounter is trans-
historical, persisting across time and nations, thus taking an “anti” position
towards this oppression. Building on a body of post-colonial theories and
frameworks, an anti-colonial and decolonial position view decolonization as
necessary and urgent and through praxis reconfigure what we understand as
colonialism to show its contemporary presence and work towards
decolonization. The lack of history, the lack of justice, and the on-going
manifestations of violence through increased poverty, lack of health and
educational resources, and neoliberalist policies that normalize violence and
maintain people in oppression is evidence of coloniality at work.

Unlike a post colonial approach, which reveals neo-colonial structures through a revision of history but does not undo them, a decolonial approach is an active insertion and a writing of histories (plural) that were never told, from a different point of departure, from the perspective of the subjugated peoples upon whom this violence has been bestowed. Hence, my dissertation roots the current political situation of the region in the coloniality of power and undertakes a decolonial approach to the production of knowledge about this subject matter. I argue that artists begin to re-conceptualize violence and art in a postwar period in which the consequences of coloniality are increasingly visible, and in which they engage in decolonial gestures. Theirs are the stories that are not told. I therefore view their visual and corporal documentation of history, along with my research and analysis of it, as a collective writing of history, a joint decolonial gesture, from both a Central American and diasporic perspective.

My work takes into account feelings, together with visual and corporal knowledges, as much as it does intellectual thought because a decolonial approach places affect as one and the same with events; knowledge extends beyond the traditional text and instead centers on the visual and corporal experiences and expressions as legitimate ways of knowing and thinking about and with subjugated peoples. Furthermore, as Walter Mignolo has explained, this methodology represents a form of delinking from the very logic of coloniality embedded in knowledge as “universal.” Thus, it is another way of thinking, of doing, and of being that rejects a single point of departure, a single history, and single ways of knowing. Thus, I argue that any project of epistemic decolonization should include a visual decolonization to the coloniality of seeing.
that initiated with the erasure of ancient indigenous visualities and the racialization of other ways of seeing to deem them inferior an invalid. The coloniality of seeing thus functions in the service of colonialism. Visual decolonization means delinking from the coloniality of seeing by reasserting the visual and corporal as valid ancient systems of knowing and transmission of knowledge that continues to exist today.¹⁷

I center on the relationship between art and politics as manifested in the specific issues of racial and gendered violence, immigration, and environment, which derive from the region’s geopolitical location and history. More specifically, my dissertation asks how racial and colonial violence is visualized in contemporary artistic practices in the region? Thus, it is specifically concerned with artists’ challenges to Eurocentric notions of contemporary Central American identity and life and the decolonizing ways in which art functions as a form of activism in the region, both as political resistance and in the creation of alternative epistemes in a postwar period.

I argue that in a postwar period, artists actively challenge their “peripheral” Central American status while incorporating social-political critiques that extend beyond regional and national issues to address questions of ontology and epistemology as a global concern. I further suggest that visual and conceptual manifestations of violence in Central American art extend beyond a critique of the state, and beyond the scope of political parties in perpetuating violent circumstances in these countries. I assert that artists use experimental

¹⁷ I will discuss in more detail in the second chapter.
practices in art to locate manifestations of racial and gendered violence in an historical system of domination and as a legacy of colonialism still witnessed, lived, and learned by multiple subjectivities in the region. Such geopolitical critiques through art unmasks themes specific to life and identity in Central America, from femicide, transnational gangs, immigration, and captivity to the long history of racial, geographical, political and identity differences, and violence within the region’s seven countries. I propose that Central American artists—beyond an anti-colonial stance—are undertaking what may be described as decolonial projects, and specifically, constructing decolonial epistemologies in art, through art, and as art.

Chapters

The first chapter, entitled “‘Fuzzy Logic’: Initiatives from Within and the Transformation of Artistic Structures in Central America” sets the stage for the dialogues, interventions, and structural changes that followed decades of war and unrest in the region. As several artists defined their careers in a postwar period, gaining international attention, there were also countless curators, artists, and cultural promoters that participated in changing the artistic scene in the Isthmus and that forced the world to look at Central America once more. They acted this time not as victims of US intervention but as critical contemporary artists concerned with local and global issues of humanity. This narrative is key to understanding that Central American artists were not passively discovered, echoing the centuries old colonialist narrative but rather that they actively created an art scene that is continuously unfolding. In that process Central
American artists and cultural promoters aimed to define the region. The first chapter therefore focuses on the conversations, major events, new art spaces, biennials, and pedagogical initiatives that originated in Central America during a postwar period as participants questioned the geopolitical borders of a supposed Central America art.

The subsequent chapter, “Un Grito: Visual Disobedience and Indigeneity in Guatemala,” centers on contemporary indigenous artists in postwar Guatemala whose installations, videos, and performance art analyze the current state and violence within a greater system of coloniality. I especially discuss the work of Benvenuto Chavajay, Angel Poyón, Fernando Poyón, Antonio Pichilla, and Sandra Monterroso. Through what I theorize in the second chapter as “visual disobedience,” indigenous artists in Guatemala challenge Eurocentric and national representations of indigenous peoples and connect the current genocide of Guatemala Mayans during the war with the genocide of native peoples brought on by the Spanish conquest. Even as they engage in experimental art, they root their thinking in a Mayan episteme, delinking from Eurocentric definitions of contemporary art. I show how in this process, these artists bring forth notions of indigeneity, spirituality, and gender to the forefront of decolonial visual thinking.

In the third and final chapter, “Postwar Social Cleansing: Femicide, Criminalization, and Captivity,” I confront the notion of a postwar period by addressing the current manifestations of violence. I focus on selected artists whose work exposes the current forms in which violence in Central America surpasses the rates of violence during the war years. Importantly, the artworks
discussed reveal the logic that allows such aggression and disregard for human life to exist, a logic rooted in coloniality where the non-human is figured as undeserving of basic human rights. The work by Regina José Galindo reveals how race, gender, and colonialism intersect in the current wave of femicide and other forms of gendered violence. While artists like Danny Zavaleta, Gabriel Galeano, Jhafis Quintero, and Habacuc Guillermo Vargas show in their objects, installations, and performances, how the criminalization of the body is a growing issue for the region and why perpetuating fear functions as a new form of control in the region that leads to mass captivity in prisons. Together these artists have advanced a new form of disobedience in visualizing social cleansing in Central America and specifically that it is one rooted in coloniality. Specifically, they expose the colonialist non-human logic today that condemns bodies as rapable, criminal and disposable. They resist such this logic by reasserting humanity of the most subjugated in Central America- women, the deprived of liberty, and migrants.

With these chapters and a decolonial framework of Central American art and politics, this dissertation aims to contribute to understanding the historical legacy of violence that ties peoples across the hemisphere in shared struggle, from victims of imperial war to anti-immigrant sentiment across borders. Moreover, it aims to redefine how knowledge, culture, and social justice may be viewed in a contemporary global society, where humanity’s ability to produce ideas and art that reflect the world requires interconnection. Through the analysis of art, the histories of spaces and ideas, and the urgent issues affecting Central Americans today evidence in this work, I will show that the following
Central American artists can be understood as in dialogue with various decolonial thinkers across time. They theorize life, experience, and thought as knowledge and as contribution to decolonial projects though their visual disobedience.
Chapter One.
“Fuzzy Logic”: Initiatives from Within and the Transformation of Artistic Structures in Central America

I. Introduction

Since the late 1990s, a generation of artists from Central America has emerged in the contemporary global art world. Their critical artworks challenge prior notions of history and visual culture in the Isthmus, reminding viewers that the small strip of land connecting North and South America is alive. Whether through performance, installations, or conceptual art, works by Regina José Galindo (Guatemala), Ronald Morán (El Salvador), Adán Vallecillo (Honduras), Ernesto Salmeron (Nicaragua), Guillermo Habacuc Vargas (Costa Rica), Yasser Mussa (Belize), Jonathon Harker (Panama), among others, have commanded global attention. These artists have been exhibited in high profile biennials like the Venice Biennial; their works are in art collections from the Museum of Latin American Art in California to the Tate Modern in London; galleries all over the world represent them; and various Central American artists have received prestigious national and international recognition. Artists from a region formerly invisible to the art world, and habitually unnoticed even within a Latin American art context, are attracting attention from curators and scholars who seek to insert them into a developing history of global art, exhibitions, and frameworks. However, it has been Central American artists themselves who have made such a
shift possible by challenging Eurocentric canonical art paradigms that either ignored or excluded them from the dominant art history and spaces.

Efforts from within the artistic communities of Central America resulted in various initiatives, exhibitions, publications, symposia, and debates precisely at a time when the Isthmus transitioned into a post-war period of reconciliation and reconstruction. This history, although recent and continuously unfolding, is essential to grasp the context within which the recent emergence of Central American art has occurred and to understand the coincidental rise of experimental practices in the region.

The recent artistic changes in Central America did not emerge in a vacuum but rather in reaction to the conditions and challenges of previous decades. Yet within this temporal framework, major art historical shifts encouraged the rise of new visual languages in the region. Such new forms were often met with controversy and debate, challenged especially in the Central American media. Nevertheless, the collaborations among Central American artists, curators, critics, and scholars within and outside of the region resulted in positive growth that led to new directions and global perception and recognition. The late Costa Rican artist and art historian Virginia Pérez-Ratton was at the forefront of these initiatives:

Strengthening our regional links, documenting our present, knowing ourselves better, and creating the awareness for the need of local support is a major issue if we aspire to participate in an international arena of confrontation without becoming once more another bad copy of the central system. Our time and space is different, it is one among many others, and artists are trying to define it, to find the elements of their
‘belonging’ and to work in this particular time and space, which is at the same time local and global.\(^1\)

Pérez-Ratton’s vision of a Central American art from within, one devoid of folklore, primitive references, or exotic stereotypes, propelled new artistic directions about which she wrote and curated.

Pérez-Ratton’s work, as I discuss below, was as foundational to drawing attention from the outside world to Central American art as it was influential in inspiring initiatives from within.\(^2\) In coming to terms with these changes, this chapter discusses four key factors beginning in the 1990s that shaped the current artistic context today: 1) the creation of new institutional art spaces; 2) influential regional exhibitions and events; 3) the role of biennials; and 4) alternative publications, collectives, spaces, and pedagogy. With these initiatives from within, Central American artists created a world of inter-regional dialogues and international alliances, and set forth a series of questions that remain in continuous debate today: what is Central America, and where does it begin and end? What does it mean to be a Central American artist? Is there a Central American Art?

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\(^2\) The contribution of Cuban art historians and curators, trained in their home country but relocated to Central America, cannot go unmentioned. A notable few played crucial roles in the changing art scene, such as Maria Victoria Veliz though her art historical teaching in Guatemala as well as her contribution to the theoretical aspects of the Central American biennials; Ernesto Calvo as former Director of the MADC and current professor and curator in Costa Rica; Valia Garzon, the most active art dealer for contemporary art in the region who resided in both Guatemala and El Salvador for a number of years before moving to Miami; and the curator Tamara Diaz who co-curated many projects with Pérez-Ratton. Diaz offered significant work to TEORéTica and continues her curatorial work in Costa Rica.
II. The Creation of New Institutional Art Spaces

The early part of the 1990s was a propitious time to initiate new cultural projects in Central America. The region was in a hopeful state of rebuilding and of promoting culture as it entered a post-war period in which organizations and individuals were willing to invest money and energy in its future. Many of the initiatives were made possible with the economic contributions of organizations like Humanist Institute for Cooperation (HIVOS), the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Getty Foundation, the Prince Claus Foundation, and the Cooperación Española, but the initial conceptualization, labor, and direction came from artists and cultural promoters in Central America. One of the first initiatives of the decade was the 1994 inauguration of El Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo (MADC) in San José, providing a museum specifically dedicated to contemporary art in Costa Rica. Pérez-Ratton, then a practicing artist, was appointed as the museum’s first director, a role she served until her resignation in 1998. Although she had just been awarded the prize for the First Bienal de Escultura en Costa Rica, she weighed the possibilities of her new position as director against her promising artistic career and chose the former in order to

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3 The broad presence of Pérez-Ratton’s curatorial work and texts throughout this dissertation are a testament to her active role in the development of contemporary Central American art. For an essay about her professional trajectory from the personal account of Brazilian curator and mentor Paulo Herkenhoff, see “Virginia Pérez-Ratton y la reinvención de Centro América” in *Istmo: Revista Virtual de Estudios Literarios y Culturales Centroamericanos*, no. 22 (2011); for a personal account by Spanish curator Santiago Olmo, see “Como compartir un viaje” also in *Istmo: Revista Virtual de Estudios Literarios y Culturales Centroamericanos*, no. 22 (2011); and for a personal account by Guatemalan curator Rosina Cazali, see “Virginia Pérez-Ratton, aportes a la noción de lo estrecho y lo dudoso” in Guaza, Luisa Fuentes, *Lenguajes Contemporáneos Desde Centro América*. Translated by Marta Caro. (Madrid: Turner, 2013), 338-345.
become a cultural promoter.\textsuperscript{4} She viewed her initiatives as “creative projects” rather than administrative work, and under her direction the museum defined a clear mission: to function as a “lecturer and witness of its time.”\textsuperscript{5} Thus Pérez-Ratton established the museum as the first Central American institutional space dedicated to the conservation, investigation, and diffusion of contemporary art and design.\textsuperscript{6} Yet while the MADC began as an initiative to place national artists within a global art dialogue, soon the limitations of working within a solely national paradigm led it to broaden those artistic conversations to a regional scope.\textsuperscript{7} By expanding its focus to all the countries of the Isthmus, the museum could draw from and unite each country with a shared historical point—their colonial past—and current experimental visual language.

Pérez-Ratton also insisted that the MADC document and archive all exhibitions and activities. The museum, therefore, created the Centro Regional de Documentación e Investigación de Arte (CRDIA) to formulate a memory and history and to promote investigative initiatives. Later, under the direction of Rolando Barahona-Sotela from 1998-2004, the museum gave special attention to emerging artists and new technologies in contemporary art. Ernesto Calvo,

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\textsuperscript{4} Virginia Pérez-Ratton in an interview for Red Cultura, found in the blog of Independent curator, Pablo León de la Barra: \url{http://centrefortheaestheticrevolution.blogspot.com/2010/10/virginia-perez-ratton-1950-2010.html}


\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.

director from 2004-2008, further reinforced the Central American focus by instituting new projects and art competitions for emerging artists while diversifying a program to include conferences talks, workshops, and activities relating to cinema and music. Now, under the direction of its most recent director, Fiorella Resenterra, the museum continues to expand and exhibit its Central American collection, as well as art from across the Americas and the Caribbean. What could have been an isolated initiative quickly became a point of reference and a catalyst for Central American art events and exhibitions that were inclusive of the experimental artistic practices of the time. In 2014, the MADC celebrated its twenty-fourth anniversary with a regional exhibition and symposium.

In 1999, one year after she resigned from her position as first director of the MADC, Pérez-Ratton created the most historically significant non-profit organization and art space for Central American art: TEOR/éTica. The title reflected her creative play on the words teoría, estética, ética, and tica, and referred to the need for a theoretical approach to aesthetics, the ethical concerns of artists, and the nickname used for Costa Ricans. She located a geographical identity that emphasized “space” as an enunciation from within, a position from which regional and international curatorial projects would emerge and in which ideas and investigations would be published. From this space, academic conferences...
would reflect and theorize the contemporary and history would be documented 
and investigated. TEOR/éTica became that space from *within*, while 
simultaneously functioning as a reference point for international agents.

It was imperative for Pérez-Ratton that the art world consider Central 
American artists as producers of art of the same caliber, knowledge, and 
innovation as artists throughout the world, rather than as exotic and violent or 
criminal. Thus Pérez-Ratton invited Chicano art scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, 
Mexican critic and curator Cuauhtémoc Medina, Swiss curator and art historian 
Harold Szeeman, Brazilian curator Paulo Herkenhoff, and a host of other 
international critics, curators, and scholars. All were invited to TEOR/éTica to 
share their knowledge and to exchange ideas with local artists. In this manner, 
Pérez-Ratton created an international network of solidarity, adding to the 
aforementioned curators and scholars: Rosa Martínez, Rosina Cazali, Santiago 
Olmo, Hans Michael Herzog, Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, Nikos Papastergiadis, 
Okwui Enwezor, Hans Ulrich-Obrist, Osvaldo Sanchez Crespo, Kristine Stiles, 
and many others. Today TEOR/éTica continues to serve as an institutional space 
of reference for contemporary Central American art.

Meanwhile, Honduras had already witnessed a small but steady number 
of institutions that managed and promoted national art events in the early 
1990s. Theses institutions included: Instituto Hondureño de Cultura Interamericana (IHCI), founded in 1939; Portales Gallery, active from 1987-2004; Fundación para el Museo del Hombre Hondureño, founded in 1989; The Spanish Embassy-Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional (AECI) founded in (YEAR); La Pinacoteca Arturo H/ Medrano, 1993.

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10 Theses institutions included: Instituto Hondureño de Cultura Interamericana (IHCI), founded in 1939; Portales Gallery, active from 1987-2004; Fundación para el Museo del Hombre Hondureño, founded in 1989; The Spanish Embassy-Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional (AECI) founded in (YEAR); La Pinacoteca Arturo H/ Medrano, 1993.
especially for women artists, the most marginalized artists in Honduras. As a response, in 1995, Mujeres en las Artes Leticia de Oyuela (MUA) was created under the coordination of the artists Bayardo Blandino and America Mejia. A year after its founding, MUA proved true to its original focus to promote female artistic production and launched the exhibition *Mujeres del Arte Contemporáneo*. Eventually the objectives of MUA expanded to contemporary art practices beyond the gender specific. By 1999, with a well-defined Board of Directors, MUA offered a more concrete projection of its advanced mission with the formation of the Centro de Artes Visuales Contemporáneo (CAVC) and El Punto de Información Artístico (PIA), as well as the room Sala Mujeres del Arte Contemporáneo (Sala MAC). Under MUA’s umbrella, these new projects and spaces extended into the realm of artistic investigation, documentation, and information, shared with Honduran artists and eventually with regional and international artists. As Ramón Caballero has observed, MUA concentrated on “providing the new generations of emerging artists a theoretical and technical basis to develop their artistic abilities and knowledge.”\(^\text{11}\) Thus a focus on production, reflection, and exchange gave way to further developments such as the artist collective Projecto Artería,\(^\text{12}\) whose work traveled to various Latin American countries, and Espacio Emergentes para el Arte Contemporáneo.

While still under Blandino’s direction, MUA became the Honduran art

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\(^{12}\) This collective included artists such as Adán Vallecillo, Alejandro Durón, Byron Mejía, Ernesto Rodezno, Fernando Cortés, Johana Montero y Leonardo Gonzales, and occasional participation by Gabriel Núñez, Jacob Gradiz, Dina Lagos y Ana María Zelaya.
institution with the authority and knowledge to assume selection coordination for national biennials, as well as national representation in international biennials, and it became the liaison between Honduran art and the outside.\textsuperscript{13}

The same year as the inauguration of MUA in Honduras, Belize celebrated the founding of The Image Factory, a non-profit organization under the direction of the artist Yasser Mussa. Belize, having recently gained its independence from British colonial control in 1981, emerged in a specific context that placed particular pressure on artistically defining itself nationally while simultaneously promoting Belizean art in a global context. Today Mussa continues his interest in promoting international avenues for Belizean artists and making the market accessible for artisans and artists from remote locations of the country. He states: “This duality has become policy at the Factory, as one road tells the world who we are, and the other keeps the soil fertile at home.”\textsuperscript{14} Since then Mussa has coordinated various exhibitions and has collaborated with the Catalan curator Joan Duran, who has promoted Belizean art internationally for four decades.

Prior to the 1990s, El Salvador had several gallery spaces devoted to promoting modern art. El Museo Forma, the country’s first gallery established in

\textsuperscript{13} The Portales Gallery, already in existence since 1987, played a key role in promoting Honduran art internationally but doing so by selling art locally, thus promoting the artists that would then participate in the national and international biennials. Owner and director Bonnie Garcias was concerned with bringing international curators and researchers as an education component of the Portales program. As a result, Cuban historians Luz Merino Acosta and Denisse Rondón, and the Venezuelan historian Bélgica Rodrígues, made their visits to Honduras and gave workshops and conference talks that specifically focused on theoretical, methodological, and historical discussions. See, Ramón Caballero, “Canales de tránsito: Las cercanías del arte contemporáneo” in \textit{La Otra Tradición: Un Encuentro Con El Arte Contemporáneo En Honduras, 2000-2010} (San Salvador: Talleres Albacrome, 2011), 128.

\textsuperscript{14} Musa, Yasser, \textit{Image Factory 10th Anniversary Catalogue} (Belize: Image Factory Art Foundation, 2005).
1958 by the artist Julia Diaz, and converted into a museum in 1983, presented primarily painting and sculpture.\textsuperscript{15} The gallery El Laberinto, under the direction of the late Janine Janowski, was one of a few other spaces presenting art during the period of civil war.\textsuperscript{16} In 2003, eleven years after the official peace accords ended the twelve-year-long civil war, El Museo de Arte de El Salvador (MARTE) was inaugurated in the city of San Salvador.\textsuperscript{17} Designed by Salvadoran architect Salvador Choussy, MARTE became Central America’s first and only building intentionally designed and built to function as a contemporary museum. Under the direction of artist Roberto Galicia, the museum holds a national collection with galleries allocated for international traveling exhibitions and has implemented an education program with conferences, workshops, and events catering especially to youth. One of its programs, MARTE Contemporáneo, is specifically designed to work with national and international emerging artists and provides a space to work and exhibit experimental practices. The museum also hosted the Central American Biennial in 2006, recognized by many as the most well organized biennial in the region.

\textsuperscript{15} El Museo Forma has a significant history to the art of El Salvador prior to the 1990s and continues to operate to this day. For a detailed history and documentation see \textit{Museo Forma: Pintura Salvadoreña Del Presente Siglo}, edited by Museo Forma (San Salvador, El Salvador, C.A.: Impresos Litográficos de Centro America, 1985).

\textsuperscript{16} The important role of Galería el Laberinto in El Salvador during the 1980s remains unexplored. Upon Janowki’s death in 2013, her daughter, Muriel Hasbun, inherited her mother’s archive of documentation and artwork. Muriel Hasbun (artist, and chair of photography at Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington D.C.) aims to preserve her mother’s legacy and make the archive available for researchers.

\textsuperscript{17} This same year The Museum of Belize was inaugurated, making it the country’s first museum. The building was a1857 prison that housed inmates until 2002, when it was restored with the support of the Taiwanese and Mexican governments.
Varying in programs from country to country, these new art spaces have promoted traditional mediums and contemporary experimental art practices by providing both exhibition and reflective spaces in the form of conferences and workshops, uniting artists and the general public. Such art spaces were not entirely free of institutional limitation and challenges, and, many artists opted for the streets, occupied houses, and sought other alternatives spaces created by artists in response to institutional challenges. While artistic production in the region predated these institutions, the aforementioned art spaces offered certain validity to the artists exhibited during the post-war period and became reference points for each nation, the region, and the world. In addition to hosting exhibitions, discussions, workshops, seminars, and other events, these institutions provided a location and a professional group with organizational skills, cognizant of the need for dialogue and documentation in the region. These spaces do not operate in isolation. Over the years they have built a regional network in which spaces for each nation have become places for the region and beyond.

III. Influential Regional Exhibitions and Events

The international relation between imperial countries and so-called peripheral countries has influenced the reception of and interest in Latin American and Latino art. To begin examining the key exhibitions and events that catalyzed change in Central American art during the 1990s, one must consider

18 These occurrences will be discussed in more detail in the last section.
the context of Latin American art exhibitions in the United States and Europe at the time. As Mari Carmen Ramírez wrote about in the 1990s, acceptance and interest in Latin American art came in three waves.19 The first wave, between 1940 and 1945, was driven by an “international style” preference, favoring art from Latin America that represented, and thus could be measured by, European and North American Modernism. The main goal in promoting Latin American exhibitions at that time was to strengthen allegiance and counter growing sympathy in Latin America for German, Italian, and Spanish fascism.20 The second wave, between 1959 and 1970, followed heavy investment in Latin American cultural affairs, once again led by the self interest of the United States to reinforce its emergence as an economic, political, and cultural super power following the Cold War and Cuban Revolution. The third wave in the 1980s coincided with the growing interest in multiculturalism in the United States and its attempt to address the growing Latino populations, erroneously through the promotion of Latin American art. Rather than promote Latino artists in the United States, mainstream museums purchased Latin American art. Consequently, for both Latino artists in the United States and Latin American artists, representation in exhibitions was reduced to difference.21 Thus, the moment Central America began inserting itself internationally, coincided with a time when debates on multiculturalism and defining Latin American modern art


20 Ibid., 28.

21 Ramirez, 33.
permeated art historical discourse. Still, Central America continued to be overlooked in these conversations.

Following this wave of multiculturalism and interest in breaking the Latin American art stereotype and canon, a number of traveling exhibitions emerged such as *Latin American Artists from the Twentieth Century* at The Museum of Modern Art New York, *Space of Time: Contemporary Art from the Americas* at the Americas Society, and *Ante América*, curated by Gerardo Mosquera, Rachel Weiss, and Carolina Ponce de León. After inaugurating in Bogota in 1991 and traveling to the United States in 1993, *Ante América* traveled to Costa Rica where it was hosted by the MADC in 1994. This exhibition was of particular interest for Central America because its curators presented it as one of the first Latin American exhibitions curated from the “inside.” Moreover, the exhibition proposed an expanded geographical vision of what constituted Latin America. *Ante América* exhibited works of artists from South America, the Caribbean, of African decent, together with Chicano artists and of Cherokee origin. Central American artists, however, were excluded. In a critique, the curator Dan Cameron explained:

Having offered such a promising curatorial thesis, it is disappointing that Mosquera, Ponce de León, and Weiss were not able to extend their research into any one of America’s three most predominantly indigenous regions: the Andes (Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador) Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua) and northern Canada (mainly Quebec, Saskatchewan and Northwest Territories). [...] Still, considering the sensitivity with which this show treats difficult cultural issues, it seems that one should take particular pains not to limit the discussion of problems inherited from colonialism to only those persons (or their heirs) who came from Europe to conquer, and those who were brought from Africa to work under them.22

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When the exhibition traveled to Central America, many in the region also noticed the void. During the exhibit’s theoretical encounter, audience members questioned the exhibition curators and participating artists on the absence of Central America in *Ante América*. When curator Mosquera was specifically asked why the exhibition—which was notable at the time for attempting to portray the diversity of Latin America—omitted Central American artists, he pointed to a lack of documentation and information regarding the art scene in the Isthmus; they were merely unaware of any artistic activity taking place in Central America.\(^{23}\) This statement made clear that the isolation from which the region attempted to emerge, following decades of political conflict, was far from over. Despite the artistic production in the region extending back decades, without documentation and investigation process from within, the region would remain invisible to scholars, institutions, and the wider art world, as well as susceptible to misrepresentation. Exacerbating the situation, this isolation was also internal. For even within such a small geographical region, countries were isolated from each other. The question of invisibility and visibility of the region began.\(^{24}\)

Central America directly responded to *Ante América* with MESóTICA II, which took place in 1996. As the second in a series of annual exhibitions conceived by the MADC under Pérez-Ratton’s leadership, the term MESóTICA played on the words “Mesoamerica” and “exotic.” The first MESóTICA

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\(^{23}\) Pérez-Ratton, Virginia and Castellano, Rolando, editors "Mesótica II: Centroamérica-Re-Generación." (San Jose, Costa Rica: Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo, 1996).

\(^{24}\) Consequently, that same year the MADC inaugurated its Centro Regional de Documentación e Investigación en Arte (CRDIA).
exhibition centered on abstraction and on uniting artists from the continent around a common artistic approach, rather than on the basis of national origin.\textsuperscript{25} Paradoxically, the play on words deliberately made clear a geographical point of departure, a point between North and South. In this sense the series MESótICA alluded to space, “al sitio, al soporte, a una gigantesca pared geopolítica sobre la que (llegan) a actuar las diversas facetas de (una práctica (dada).”\textsuperscript{26} MESótICA was to function as a point of encounter, a point between North and South.\textsuperscript{27}

Reflecting on Mosquera’s justification for Central America’s exclusion from\textit{ Ante América},\textsuperscript{28} Pérez-Ratton realized it was crucial to unify the Isthmus. She contemplated, “from far away it seems impossible that countries so close to each other in a such a small region of the world, have isolated so much from each other.”\textsuperscript{29} MESótICA II then, also retook the idea of a geopolitical wall, this time eliminating national borders and focusing on the regional instead. The exhibition was the first to be entirely curated and organized by professionals in and from

\textsuperscript{25} According to Virginia Pérez-Ratton, this was the first time a museum in Latin America mounted “an exhibition that would embark, without national or regional references, a group of artist pertaining to the entire continent” (my translation). See, Pérez-Ratton, Virginia and Castellano, Rolando, editors. “Mesótica II: Centroamérica- Re-Generación.” (San José, Costa Rica: Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo, 1996), 16.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{27} Consistent with the original definition of Mesoamerica, the exhibition did not include Panama or Belize.

\textsuperscript{28} Although it can be noted, as Herkenhoff has done, that the exhibition also excluded other countries despite their abundance in documentation. Moreover, Central America was already included in the Havana Biennial because the curators traveled to Central America to investigate the artistic scene.

Central America, making it the first contemporary exhibition of the region “from within.” Not only did this exhibition engage the commonalities of a geopolitical situation shared by Central American artists, it extended the discussion beyond non-traditional artworks by exhibiting photography and installation.

MESóTICA II made it apparent that many artists throughout the region shared a concern with the political situation of the time. The subtitle “MESóTICA: re-generación” tells of its intention: a new generation of artists beyond the “bananeros” but still from a specific geopolitical location, one concerned with both local and global issues articulated through the visual language of an international contemporary art. In addition, the MESóTICA II organizers expected it to function as the launching of a platform for communication, contact, and dialogue between artists in the region, but perhaps more importantly they intended to offer an other perspective: “otra mirada, la nuestra.”

MESóTICA II, Central America’s response to Ante América, was specifically dedicated to the curator Gerardo Mosquera, who since then has been described as an enthusiastic follower of Central American art.

MESóTICA II then traveled throughout Europe where it presented its own view of Central American art and allured interest and solidarity along the way.

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30 Bananeros loosely translates to “banana people.”


32 In the opening to the catalogue essay Virginia states, “La respuesta de Mosquera relativa a lo poco que se escuchaba sobre la actividad regional, y nuestra propia dificultad en suministrarle mayor información evidenciaron la falta de documentación y de difusión del arte contemporáneo de Centroamérica. MESóTICA II se plantea como un primer paso en darlo a conocer. Dedicamos esta exposición a Gerardo MOSQUERA.” Ibid., 11.
For instance, upon viewing the exhibit as part of the Maison de l’Amérique Latin in Paris in 1997, Brazilian curator Paulo Herkenhoff decided to include Central America in the São Paulo Biennial he was preparing for the upcoming year. During MESóTICA II’s various inaugurations abroad, and during its theoretical events in 1997 and 1998, Pérez-Ratton also became acquainted with Sebastián López, Artistic Director of the Gate Foundation in Amsterdam; Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, Associate Director of Art and Creativity of the Rockefeller Foundation; and Susana Rochna, of the HIVOS Foundation. Soon after, Pérez-Ratton, along with this network of international support, began discussing the possibility of a formal critical encounter. As a result, in 2000 the first regional symposium was held in Costa Rica, “Temas Centrales: Primer Simposio Centroamericano De Practicas Artísticas Y Posibilidades Curatoriales Contemporáneas,” bringing together for the first time artists, curators, and historians in Central America to report on each nation’s artistic scene.

The format consisted of an invited guest from each country with established knowledge to report on the country’s artistic condition.33 Additionally, the symposium included a series of presentations on specific topics, artist roundtables, general discussions, as well as artists’ presentations and video viewings. Among the international guests was Ybarra-Frausto who in his opening speech emphasized the importance of communication and

33 Among the presenters were: Adrienne Samos discussing Panama; Bayardo Blandino discussing Honduras; Janine Janowski discussing El Salvador, and Rodolfo Molina later offering a text; Rosina Cazali on Guatemala; Porfirio García Romano on Nicaragua; and Rocio Fernande on Costa Rica. Belize was absent. See, Pérez-Ratton, Virginia et al. Temas Centrales. Primer Simposio Centroamericano De Practicas Artísticas Y Posibilidades Curatoriales Contemporáneas. Translated by Erick Diaz (Costa Rica: Impresión, Imprenta y Litografía GRAFOS).
knowledge between what he called “our” Latino communities. He asked, where is Mexico in the United States, and where are Puerto Rico and Central America in the United States? He explained: “The artists from these regions are not known in the United States and, although we have many ties, we ourselves don’t know each other, either. Then, what we have to do at this seminar is start that deep knowledge: what is it that links us together? who are we? where are we headed? in those cultural networks and corridors that are established between nation and ‘transnation.’”

Paralleling the diverse Latino population in the United States with the diverse population in Central America, Ybarra-Frausto underlined the role of artists in creating the “new cartographies of the imagination.”

The symposium revealed that the common threads uniting Central American artists, addressed by speakers from each nation, were the impoverishment of organizations, critical traditions, and art education as well as individual efforts in artistic production. However, after the first day of panels, the Mexican curator Cuauhtémoc Medina, who was invited as moderator to the symposium, noted the lack of theoretical analysis in relating each nation’s local issues to mass migration and the art’s global scene. Most speakers, he explained, offered a narrative of the social conflicts of the 1980s; however, “it was hard, if not impossible for all of them to clearly express the correlation between the

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34 Tomás Ybarra-Frausto in Temas Centrales. Primer Simposio Centroamericano De Practicas Artísticas Y Posibilidades Curatoriales Contemporáneas. Translated by Erick Diaz. (Costa Rica: Impresión, Imprenta y Litografía GRAFOS), 302. (I have kept the capitalization in this quote as in original publication)

35 Ibid.
works they were showing and that traumatic political atmosphere." At that time, artists and cultural promoters in Central America were beginning to come to terms with their own national histories, only then could they take a wider macro perspective at the region and world.

In the following days of the symposium, speakers addressed what they perceived as concerns in their national artistic production. The rise of performance and its relation to poetry in the 1990s; the aesthetics of violence; the artist as author and national community building; the invisibility of Afro-Caribbean visual culture in Nicaragua; the role of the State and institutionalization; challenges in art pedagogy; and the artist as curator and cultural promoter were among the “central themes” discussed and debated. The title of the symposium, “Temas Centrales” spoke to the organizers hope in defining what the central themes, concerns, and state of being was for contemporary art in the Isthmus and to challenge the marginalization by the dominant narratives of art and of Latin America, un-doing the de-centering of what is geographically the center of the Americas. The continuity concerning place was as clear here as it was with MESóTICA, which proposed there was no Latin America without a Central America.

Without a doubt, MESóTICA II and “Temas Centrales” marked key points in the history and development of contemporary art in the region in the post-war period. No longer was each nation’s artistic situation and context an isolated

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case, for now the national extended to the regional, and finding those common concerns created a foundation for a network of solidarity and communication that continues today. Like MESóTICA II, “Temas Centrales” initiated a questioning of place that rejected the stereotype of the Isthmus as a marginal banana plantation, land of jungles and volcanoes, or a zone of conflict and violence. The agenda was clear from the beginning of the symposium, “We must assume to a complete membership in the international artistic community, and act responsible, respecting our own context and conditions; understating them and starting out from there, not pretending to situate ourselves elsewhere, rather, working from within a context which makes us different, yet equal, which defines us specifically, but that in no way should conduce us to perceive ourselves as subaltern.”37 The symposium refuted victimization yet simultaneously was aware of its own historical and political context and, in this manner, aimed to position the Isthmus as an active agent in the art world.

The unique geopolitical issues pertaining to Central America became the prominent ideas thought out in exhibitions. Urban space, particularly, and its configuration during a post-war and globalized time, became a growing issue of interest for artists in the region. This became evident in the small and large-scale curatorial projects addressing the relation between art and a global urban city through diverse approaches. One large-scale exhibition, Ciudad Multiple: Arte>Panamá 2003. Arte Urbano Y Ciudades Globales, Una Experiencia En Contexto

focused on the unique aspects of Panama City. Curators Mosquera (who since 
Ante América became much more interested and involved in Central American 
art projects) and Adrienne Samos invited national and international artists to 
offer both local and visitor experiences with the city. They did so by considering 
its geopolitical location and history. Mosquera and Samos described Panama 
City as a “global city before globalization,” “the epitome of transit and 
movement,” and as a “Caribbean island wedged into the mainland.”38 With this 
conceptualization, they challenged artists to advance experimental examples of 
urban art in a simple and direct way that would prove accessible beyond an elite 
public and to a broader audience. One of the participating artists, Ecuadorian 
born, Panamanian resident Jonathan Harker, is especially known to focus on the 
issues related to urbanism and tourism in Panama. His well-known postcards 
from the Panama series, originated from trips throughout Panama with a friend, 
requiring them to experience their own country through a tourist’s lens. All 
photographs were taken by strangers and friends and, from them, the artist 
created postcards using popular locations and humor to question stereotypes 
associated with the country, as in the postcard “Mucho más que un canal” (Much 
more than a canal) (2001) (Figure 12). When exhibited, the postcards are sold in 
the museum shop.

The following year, the exhibition Todo Incluido: Imágenes Urbanas de 
Centroamérica (2004), organized by Santiago Olmo and Pérez-Ratton expanded

Urbano Y Ciudades Globales, Una Experiencia En Contexto [in spanish, english]. Edited by Gerardo 
this focus on the urban to include all of the capital cities of the Isthmus.\textsuperscript{39} The stereotype of Central America as a violent third-world country is only contrasted by its opposite extreme—a tropical paradise designation as a tourist attraction with exotic fruit and hammocks. With the title “\textit{todo incluido}” (all included) the exhibition offered a sarcastic reference to the tourist resort slogan of “everything included” by including all those images of urban Central American cities that are ignored and omitted from tourist brochures.\textsuperscript{40} Staggering rural conditions forcing rural peoples to immigrate to cities, along with displacement, urban gangs, street vendors, and beggars, are all themes increasingly addressed by a new generation of artists. These artists, producing in a postwar period, experience the city differently than during times of conflict. Whereas \textit{Ciudad Multiple} focused on the city and its unique geopolitical history, \textit{Todo Incluido} exhibited artists from the region and gave the historical context of each capital city in the Isthmus. The exhibition travelled to Costa Rica and Spain and offered a position on urban issues from within Central America. As certain mediums have proven more useful for documenting these urban settings, the exhibit also revealed an artistic interest in video, photography, and performance works. Other exhibitions included \textit{Ciudad (IN)visible} (2002) curated by Tamara Díaz, and \textit{Trans-sitios} (2004) curated by Ernesto Calvo, two Cuban curators residing in Costa Rica.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{40} For an analysis on Caribbean art and the role of tourism in maintaining colonial and neocolonial conditions see, James, Erica Moiah. "Re-Worlding a World: Caribbean Art in the Global Imaginary.” Dissertation, Duke University, 2008.

\textsuperscript{41} For more on these exhibitions see Tamara Díaz, "Ciudad (in)Visible." edited by TEORéTica. (San Jose, Costa Rica: Publicaciones TEORéTica, 2002); and Calvo, Ernesto. "Trans-Sitios." edited by TEORéTica (San José, Costa Rica: TEORéTica, 2004).
The altered urban space of postwar Central America has led artists like Simon Vega to engage specifically with the social production of public space, especially the city of San Salvador. As part of his Ciudades perdidas series, in the installation entitled Shanty town, (2006), Vegas address aspects of urban space such as overpopulation, forced globalization, and alternatives structures as by-products of political and social inequalities (Figure 13). Whether through Shanty Towns, or Shanty malls, he describes them as “cities within cities.” Using garbage cardboard boxes, wood, plastic, and other discarded items he juxtaposes brands and logos associated with global north consumption with a visuality of shantytown communities. In using solely discarded items, he points to consumption in US culture as a superficial aid to the social inequalities of the country, and its negative impact on the environment. These works also address the social relations the cities produced. Installations representing shopping malls as sites of congregation and consumption then evoke the markets places and pyramids of ancient civilizations that once held such social and political value in Mesoamerica.

In Belize, two key exhibitions set a catalyst for a project aimed at connecting art in Belize with other global contexts. In 1999, the exhibition Contemporary Belizean Visual Culture opened at the Fine Arts Museum of Taipei, Taiwan, and was at the time the largest exhibition of Belizean art exhibited outside of the country. The following year ZERO: New Belizean Art opened in Yucatán, Mexico and as its title implies, offered a platform for exploration of
Belizean art, starting from scratch. From these exhibitions, the organizers began envisioning a more ambitious project with artists from the region and the Caribbean. After three years of planning, the first LANDINGS exhibit was launched in 2004 in Conkal, Yucatán, Mexico. The series of exhibitions was a pioneering project in Central America, curated by the Catalan artist/curator Joan Duran. LANDINGS, consisted of ten different exhibitions and took place in various cities and countries, each producing a high quality full color exhibition catalogue as documentation. Artists traveled to the various sites up to a year prior to the exhibition to explore the space and envision their works. Duran, emphasizes the importance to learning as a process of LANDINGS. In an interview he stated:

Artists worked together, travelled all over, and in many cases fought the most unexpected battles in order to keep the project alive and therefore to keep learning every day, not only acquiring knowledge and experiences that we didn’t have but most importantly, learning about the power of fighting for what we believe in versus the standardized conduct of playing the game of those who lure you with a giant shiny plastic cleaner in the art career and market scene that ironically and maliciously is the cause of the disaster our societies are in as we speak.

With the understanding of one’s own reality at home, traveling to various spaces facilitated learning about outside contexts, specifically the outside art world,

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42 See Andrew Steinhauer, “Contemporary Belizean Visual Culture.” edited by Taipei Fine Arts Museum. Taiwan: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 1999; and for a review by the critic Rosina Cazali at time ZERO: New Belizean Art see was shown in Guatemala in 2002, see Cazali, Rosina. “Zero: Starting from Scratch” in Art Nexus, October/December (2002), 94-98.

43 See, Joan Duran, editor. Landings Ten (the Black Box). (Belize, Central America: five-one art projects, 2009).

learning not from books or classes but from the artistic scene. Over 100 artists participated from the Caribbean, Central America, and Yucatán, Mexico, traveling and exhibiting in three continents over ten years. In addition to creating a group of renowned artists and producing a trail of collectible catalogues, the series also took the discussion of region and art from within to another level of projection and internationalization.

In 2006, a decade after MESóTICA II responded to the invisibility of the region, Ante América, another regional exhibition returned to the issue of place. The exhibition was titled Estrecho Dudoso (dubious strait). Although it was another effort at self-representation from the Isthmus, Estrecho Dudoso perhaps was more an attempt to prove to the world the organizational capacities of Central Americans, in this case similar to the ambition of LANDINGS. Not only were Central Americans producing art in contemporary mediums, the region successfully coordinated and produced a major project that included eighty cross generational artists from twenty-eight countries and five continents. The exhibition, financed by numerous institutions including the Ford Foundation, HIVOS, and SEACEX,\(^\text{45}\) consisted of six exhibitions in fourteen different venues throughout San José.\(^\text{46}\)

Beyond visibility for artists, the project brought credibility to local organizers and institutions in the eyes of international galleries, collectors, and

\(^{45}\)SEACEX (The State Corporation for Spanish Cultural Action Abroad).

\(^{46}\)The two individual exhibitions were for the work of Chilean artist Juan Downey (1940-1993) and Guatemalan Margarita Azurdia (1931-1998). The group exhibitions were titled: Rutas Intangibles; Limites; Tráficos; and Noticias del Filibustero.
donors. At the same time, the exhibit showed a continual process of defining “place” for Central American artists. The exhibition’s title “the doubtful strait” foregrounded the geopolitical role of Central America as a bridge that connects two continents. The exhibition posited the region as a place of convergence, which is what the exhibition also proposed itself to be—a place of intersection, linking distant and local artistic practices and sensibilities. It further conveyed that the region remains “doubtful,” in that it is simultaneously a place of destabilizing boundaries and of multiple borders, and a place of transition self-analysis.

If initial curatorial projects and events began with a self-definition of place, of making Central America visible to Central Americans as well as to the international art scene, the next question “¿Dónde termina Centro América?” (Where does Central American end?) was taken up by another important regional exhibition Migraciones: Mirando al Sur (2008). This exhibition addressed the phenomenon of mass migration, which albeit not a new phenomenon, was of magnified concern in the post-war period. Not only was mass migration a consequence of the conflict, which caused political exile for thousands, but it was also a symptom of global processes. The preoccupation with migrant conditions must take into account city and rural migration, inter-regional migration, and the concerns related to organized drug trafficking in Mexico as well as new migrant communities from migrants who never reached their destination. Artists responded to the complexities of migration in the post-war period with

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experimental art. *Mirando al Sur* exhibited works from Central America that used experimental practices not only to reflect on migration as a geographical and political journey but also, as curator Rosina Cazali explains, to take an inward look that dealt with journey as an existential journey, both individual and social.\(^48\) The exhibition began in Guatemala in December 2008 and from there traveled to Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Mexico, The United States, and concluded in Costa Rica in February 2010. The exhibition was the first in the region to focus on the phenomenon of migration.

Since then, artists continue to address the issue of migration to and from Central America. Among the best known are Salvadoran artists Ronald Moran and Walter Iraheta. In *Brevedad Inmaterial* (2009), Moran creates a dark room installation, a black light reveals a maze of strings where viewers are invited to enter and navigate the space to become aware of their bodies (Figure 14). Moran is concerned with how the body can create new boundaries and reconfigure territories and spaces as it navigates and appropriates in the process. The lack of walls in this labyrinth allow viewers to see others in their journeys, making relations to others ghostly visible, just as migrants are always liked to the people and communities they leave behind and those they move towards. In contrast to the video installation that represents these abstracted paths, the labyrinth is directly designed to make corporeal, phenomenological, experience the basis of this artistic work. Moran counters the influx of violent imagery associated with

the mass migration related to the war period in El Salvador, and without dismissing the reality (as he has addressed this subject in other works), he highlights the beauty, dignity, and poetic journeys that also can mark the bravery of migrants, who have embarked on this journey.

Walterio Iraheta has shown that migration, not only to the international border but also from rural to urban spaces, reveals a loss and ghostly disappearance. In his video installation *Migration is always a matter of space* (2006), Iraheta shows a still photograph of a community of youth posed in a typical school group (Figure 15). During the duration of the video, slowly, one at a time, figures disappear from the group photo, without a trace, until the group is drastically diminished. The missing void formed by the missing highlights young people who migrate not only across national borders, but from rural to urban spaces, in a search of a better life. The video ends with no trace of the individuals, providing the sense of melancholy, emptiness and a desire to recover memories. The video speaks not only to this banishing of bodies that migrate, but also to those left behind and the communities faced with the painful loss—a void materialized in time and space.

By 2010 so much had occurred in the art scene of Central America that it required discussion and analysis. Thus the idea of a Temas Centrales II, a decade after the first symposium, was already in the works for 2010. Pérez-Ratton was undoubtedly a key protagonist in the region’s artistic scene in the previous two decades. Her commitment and strength was ever more significant considering her achievement while she struggled with cancer. It was a sad blow to the region when in 2010 her battle came to an end. Immediately, a meeting was held at
TEORéTica with invited artists and curators from the region to discuss collectively the next steps for Central American art. Should TEORéTica close? If it remained opened, who could step in and fill Pérez-Ratton’s shoes? Artists from each country contributed to the discussion from their own national contexts. They agreed that TEORéTica should remain open to produce new projects and events for the region, as there was still much work needed to support the region’s artistic scene.

The following year, after an extensive search, Colombian curator Inti Gutierrez was appointed new Artistic Director of TEORéTica and Temas Centrales II took place in April 2012. Since his appointment as artistic director, Gutierrez has taken a strong position in pushing TEORéTica in a new direction, one no longer preoccupied with being the “guardian of ‘Contemporary art in Central America and the Caribbean,’” as he explains, but rather one that functions as a new form of “internationalism.”49 Describing more recent curatorial projects in TEORéTica, such as Edificio Metálico, Novo Museo Tropical (curated by Pablo León de La Barra) and Hombre Entre Las Ruinas, Gutierrez emphasizes the “international experience” these projects include but clarifies: “It’s very important that the new international program is not understood as a neo-colonial process to “globalize the scene” and “bring it up to date” but as a will to create situations to de-construct what, up until that moment, has been

considered as ‘local.’” This approach shows a conscious contrast to earlier waves of interest in Latin American art to promote an international style, one measured by European and North American modernisms.

IV: Biennials

Major structural changes to Central American biennials took place in the postwar period, even as regional biennials had already emerged in Central America prior to the 1990s. In 1971, The Consejo Superior Universitario Centroamericano (CSUCA) organized the first Central American Biennial, preceding the Havana Biennial (one of the most important Latin American Art biennials) in 1984. The first biennial was an academic and intellectual initiative under the direction of Nicaraguan writer Sergio Ramírez Mercado. Though it was not repeated, it was envisioned as an interdisciplinary arts biennial that incorporated poetry, music, writers, and dance. It also included a panel of jurors with international recognition: the Mexican artist José Luis Cuevas, the Peruvian artist Fernando de Szyszlo, and the Argentinean art critic Marta Traba. Artists in Costa Rica were already familiar with Cuevas’ work, as he had visited San Luisa Fuentes Guaza. Languages Contemporáneos Desde Centro América. Translated by Marta Caro. (Madrid: Turner, 2013), 154-155.

Virginia Pérez-Ratton noted that among the reasons for its discontinuity was the prize-giving system that disfavored many artists. This system consisted of one grand first prize in addition to a prize per country. Moreover, Marta Traba put into question the “authenticity” of a well-known Costa Rican master Manuel de la Cruz González. While the artist had lived in Caracas for a while and subscribed to the Venezuelan school of abstract geometry, as had an entire generation of artists seeking alternative language to modernity, Traba claimed his visual language was imported and not “authentically Central American.”


51 The Consejo Superior Universitario Centroamericano was founded in 1968, see http://www.csuca.org/.

52 Virginia Pérez-Ratton noted that among the reasons for its discontinuity was the prize-giving system that disfavored many artists. This system consisted of one grand first prize in addition to a prize per country. Moreover, Marta Traba put into question the “authenticity” of a well-known Costa Rican master Manuel de la Cruz González. While the artist had lived in Caracas for a while and subscribed to the Venezuelan school of abstract geometry, as had an entire generation of artists seeking alternative language to modernity, Traba claimed his visual language was imported and not “authentically Central American.”
José on previous occasions, and the art critic Marta Traba already held authority in the field of Latin America art even before publication of her famous book *Dos Décadas Vulnerables* several years later.\(^{53}\)

As jurors with international authority, their assessment had a lasting impact on Costa Rican artists, especially after the country (along with El Salvador and Nicaragua) was left without receiving any prizes. The Guatemalan artist Luis Díaz was awarded the first prize for *Guatebala* (1971), a word play on Guatemala and bullet, which reflected the violent state of militarism that Guatemala endured.\(^{54}\) Costa Rica was then in a relative state of progress compared to the region, and its visual interests were elsewhere. Several Costa Rican artists submitted abstract geometric works to the biennial. Many having resided in Venezuela for a period of time, still subscribed to the Venezuelan school of geometric abstraction. Traba, who claimed that such an imported style was “inauthentic” to Central America, denied a prize to Costa Rican artists, and set into motion what may be described as an identity crisis among local artists. While their search for alternative modern languages in art was criticized as illegitimate, they did not consider the heavy political content of Costa Rica’s neighboring countries appropriate or fitting. Thus, unable to locate their work in a supposed “Central American art” the shock and disapproval with the jurors’


\(^{54}\) While the art work *Guatebala* is well known by artists in Central America, and mentioned in various documents, only a few have actually seen the work. There is no visual documentation of the artwork besides the commentary by curators and artists.
decision caused an angry reaction. This was especially expressed among artists who believed Lola Fernándes, whom they viewed as the expected winner, was cheated from recognition. Evidently since the first Central American biennial in the early 1970s, the idea of a supposed Central American art identity, and its limitations, had already crystalized.

Unfortunately, and even with its international jurors, again the first Central American biennial produced little documentation and preceded a wave of invisibility for the region. It was not until the 1990s that a proliferation of biennials emerged in the region, once again initiating in Costa Rica due to its less politically hostile environment. The Bienal Experimental, organized by the Centro Cultural Costarricense Norteamericano took place in 1991 but was never repeated. It did, however, set the stage for the Cervecería Costa Rica Sculpture Biennial in 1994, a biennial that reoccurred until 2002 and provided support for three-dimensional works, marking an opening for assemblages, installations, and video art.55

Steadily, national biennials emerged throughout the region in the 1990s. In 1992, sponsored by the Cervecería Nacional, Panama held its first Biennial de Panama under the direction of Monica Kupfer and Irene Escoffery, later under the direction by Walo Araújo. Like the others, the Panama Biennial originated with the participation of three international jurors who selected three prized winners, yet in the following years it became the first biennial in Central America

to re-conceptualize its structure for more cogent, critical communication of meaning, and became a curated biennial. The first guest curator in 2005 was the Guatemalan Rosina Cazali, and the most recent, Mexican curator Magalí Arriola, further changed its structure by opening the biennial to international artists. For the Eighth Panama Biennial, Arriola included international artists such as Francis Alÿs, among others, to join the eight Panamanian artists whose work would center on the theme of the Panama Canal. Emphasizing an investigative process, Arriola proposed that artists address the topic from a contemporary perspective. The Biennial included parallel activities, including exhibitions, academic conferences, and documentary screenings.56

The most significant biennial for Central America however, one that most influenced the artist direction, took place in 1997, when Nicaraguan art collector and banker Ramiro Ortiz Mayorga organized the first Nicaragua biennials, the Artes Visuales Nicaragüenses Ortiz Gurdian Bienal. The first biennial of Nicaragua was inaugurated as a painting biennial. However, two years later, the artist Patricia Belli was awarded first prize in the II Bienal de Pintura Nicaragüense Fundación Ortiz-Gurdian for her piece “Vuelo Difícil.” The piece, which included an assemblage of cloth and photographs intervened with paint and evoked the artist’s experience with memory, identity and questions of gender, sparked a heated debate on the parameters of painting as a medium. (Figure 16). Critics argued that works of mixed media, such as “Vuelo Difícil,”

56 See Magalí Arriola; Walo Araújo and Mónica Kupfer, editors. 8ª Bienal De Arte De Panamá: El Dulce Olor a Quemado De La Historia, Entrar a La Zona Del Canal (Panamá, Republica de Panamá: Fundación Arte y Cultura, 2008).
did not constitute a painting and should therefore not qualify for a painting biennial. Other dissenters claimed the work did not fit with the national art culture of Nicaragua for it was more aligned with foreign, Western styles and did not represent a “true Nicaraguan identity.”

In the work’s defense, some noted that a pure notion of painting had long ago been broken with the initiation of collage in the twentieth century. Others argued that even painting itself in the style of caballetismo was a result of Spanish influence, and that while indigeneity was always a theme addressed in identity painting, there was by no means an indigenous painting in the biennial. These debates, which played out in the local press, forced a historical reflection that questioned originality, influence, and identity in the art of Nicaragua at that time, asking “¿Qué es lo propio y qué es lo ajeno?” (What is ours and what is alien?) in experimental art.

Like the first Central American Biennial in 1971, the biennial in Nicaragua sought to exhibit national artists on the world stage, yet it also exhibited art of Nicaraguans to other Nicaraguans. Fueled by the debates and controversy, the Nicaraguan biennial changed its format and name, opening the painting biennial to include experimental mediums. This change opened the venue to a wide range of other artists who were already producing installations, performance, and video art but who were marginalized from more conservative art spaces.


58 Ibid.
Consequently, in 2002, for the first time, the jurors for the Nicaragua Biennial, Virginia Pérez-Ratton, Osvaldo Sanchez Crespo, and Kristine Stiles, offered the first prize to a video work by Wilbert Carmona for his video piece *Peluchitoul* (2002) in which the artist addresses his personal experience of living in a poor neighborhood heavily associated with gangs (Figure 17).

The jurors gave the second prize, the first awarded for performance in Nicaragua, to a controversial performance piece *Los niños de mi ciudad* (2002), by Rodrigo Pacheles. The performance highlighted the urban plight of children who enter buses on a daily basis to pass out little flyers asking for a cordova (Figure 18). Pacheles brought this social phenomenon directly into the 3rd Nicaragua Biennial, confronting its elite audience directly with four children (ambulantes), who moved about through the crowd distributing their flyers to attendees during the Biennials’ inauguration. The artist intention was to sensitize attendees via an encounter with the children, the message on the flyer and the Q-tips the children distributed, so that by cleaning their ears attendees could hear the children. The work was awarded a monetary prize, which the artist used to help finance the studies of the participating children. The action confronted one social space, the informal market of children vendors/beggars, who constantly navigate the urban city, while being overlooked or ignored, with attendees of a national biennial held in the country’s national theater. Since then, 

59 When the wife of a prominent family related to the Biennial instructed guards to remove the children, unaware that they were in the performance, to her shock and chagrin she was informed that they were part of the artwork that had been awarded second prize. Later she had to share the stage with the very same children and Pacheles, who received his prize.” Kristine Stiles in conversation with the author, June 2014.
installation, performance, and video art are commonly included and prized in Central American biennials.

Similar to the Nicaraguan biennial, the Bienal Paiz in Guatemala has been in existence since the 1970s but also saw major changes in its structure in 1998 when for the first time it invited a panel of international jurors that including Shrifra Goldman and Marianne Tolentino. Moreover, though never without its critics, the invitation of international jurors was a strategic choice that organizers believed would help place Central American artists on the international radar. Authority figures in contemporary art were now forced to take notice of what Central American artists produced and to offer a professional formal criticism and validation. On the other hand, some resented the idea of a foreign influence with minimal knowledge of the social and historical context of the region, as “a make or break” authority.

That same year, in 1998, the Fundación Ortiz Gurdian from Nicaragua, the Empresarios por el Arte in Costa Rica, and the company Paiz in Guatemala, joined forces to sponsor the first Bienal del Istmo, which has successfully held continuity until today, having taken place at least once in each country. This was the first attempt at a regional biennial since the 1971 Central American Biennial by the CSUCA. The emergence of national and regional biennials in the 1990s not only created a greater awareness of what artists produced between nations but also fostered a connection between countries. Artists from Guatemala

60 Guatemala in 1998; Costa Rica in 2000; Nicaragua in 2002; Panama in 2004; El Salvador in 2006; Honduras in 2008, Nicaragua in 2010; and due to complications, the 2012 Bienial was postponed and held in January of 2013 in Panama. The next Biennial will take place in Guatemala. Belize has not yet participated in the Central American Biennials.
down to Panama were now coming together, exhibiting their work in the same space, and partaking in the same conversations and debates. Inevitably, a Central American artists’ network ensued, one nurtured by the latest technologies, establishing connections as well as friendship and camaraderie.

The new and restructured biennials and their international jurors undoubtedly provided much international exposure of Central American artists beyond the Isthmus borders, opening a range of opportunities in the exterior. For instance, the same year the region organized its first Bienal del Istmo in 1998, Central America was also represented in the twenty-fourth São Paulo Biennial, directed by Herkenhoff. As a result of MESóTICA II in the Maison de l’Amérique in Paris in 1997, the Brazilian curator invited Pérez-Ratton to prepare the curatorial project that was to give special visibility to Central America and the Caribbean. Consequently, the exhibition Centroamérica y el Caribe: Una Historia en Blanco y Negro was considered an important step in creating visibility and defining space, but specifically, from within.61 Two years later, when curator Harold Szeemann visited TEORéTica and sorted through much visual documentation, he decided to invite six Central American artists to participate in the 2001 Venice Biennial: Luis González Palma, Aníbal Lopez (A1-53167) and Regina José Galindo from Guatemala; and Federico Herrero, Priscilla Monge, and Jaime David Tischler from Costa Rica, in addition to Pérez-Ratton who

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62 The Guatemalan artist Aníbal Lopez has used his Guatemalan issued identification number (A1-53167) since 1997 to sign his artwork with the purpose of questioning codes of identity and information, such as state control of native identities.
served as part of the international jury.63 Two of the artists, Herrero and Lopez won awards. Soon after, in 2004, fifteen artists from Central America and the Caribbean participated in the VIII Bienal Internacional de Pintura de Cuenca, held in Ecuador. The exhibition, titled Iconofilia, was co-curated by Pérez-Ratton and Tamara Diaz.64

That same year, the MADC launched the Biennial de Arte Emergente in San José under the direction of Ernesto Calvo offering a younger generation of artists the opportunity to exhibit their work beyond the restrictive spaces of biennials. Undoubtedly, with the increased visibility of national, regional, and international biennials, Central American artists soon gained international recognition. In 2005, Galindo was awarded the Golden Lion award for an artist under the age of thirty at the Fifty-First Venice Biennial for her piece Himenoplastia (2004) in which she underwent an illegal, but popular, surgical procedure to reconstruct her hymen (Figure 19). The following year, after winning first prize at the Central American Biennial held in El Salvador, the Nicaraguan artist Ernesto Salmeron was invited to participate in the 2007 Venice Biennial. That same year the Tate Modern purchased the documenting video and wall for El Muro (2006), part of the Auras de Guerra project for which the artist extracted a wall with the image of Augusto Sandino and transported it to El Salvador for the Fifth Central American Biennial before it was transported to the 2007 Venice Biennial via ship


(Figure 20 and 21). Women artists in Central America were also recognized in the 2007 exhibition *Global Feminism: New Directions in Contemporary Art*.65

Three years later in 2010, the art critic and curator Santiago Olmo, who was already familiar with contemporary art of Central America through his participation in various projects such as the exhibition *Todo Incluido*, coordinated the XXXI Bienal de Pontevedra. The entire exhibition concentrated on art of Central America and the Caribbean. The title *Utrópicos* played on notions of ‘utopias’ and ‘tropics’ to showcase art of Central America and the Caribbean with the specific intention to “reconstruct a geography of visibility”.66 More recently, in the Fifty-Fourth Venice Biennial of 2011, six artists represented Central American countries in the Latin American Pavilion67 and four more artists for the Fifty-Fifth Venice Biennial in 2013.68

The increased insertion of Central American artists into international biennials, however, should not be mistaken as “success” or as proof that Central America is out of the periphery. What is clear is a growing interest in exhibiting artists from a traditionally marginalized region, or what could be understood as

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67 Sila Chanto (Cost Rica), Walterio Iraheta (El Salvador), Adán Vallecillo (Honduras), Ronaldo Castellón (Nicaragua), and Humberto Veléz (Panama).

68 Lucía Madriz (Costa Rica); Simon Vega (El Salvador); Marcos Agudelo (Nicaragua); Jhafis Quintero (Panama).
a diversification of the art scene as it turns toward the Global art paradigm.\footnote{The artist Luis Camnitzer has stated: “A clear symptom of colonization is the tendency to see the shift from subordinate to hegemonic culture as a sign of progress and success.” See Luis Camnitzer. On Art, Artists, Latin America and Other Utopias. Edited by Rachel Weiss. (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2009), 38.} The problem then is no longer the insertion of artists, but the void of socio-political and art historical analysis in the context of its own history. Without such broader consideration the result is token inclusion that erases the very geopolitical concerns and experiences from which the artwork emerges. Moreover, this rise in regional and international exposure and recognition of some artists working with new mediums simultaneously made evident how little knowledge exists of their practices at local levels where often the work’s validity is undermined by the general public and other art agents. Debates over performance, conceptual, installation, and other experimental practices are still questioned as “valid art,” as awarding the prize to Pacheles for performance art at the 3rd Nicaragua Biennial was hotly debated, and yet such practices remain some of the most critical and innovative today. Lack of critical analysis leads to the fourth factor that has contributed to the changing visual language of contemporary art in the Isthmus.

V. Alternative Publications, Collectives, Spaces, and Pedagogy

The radical transformation in the postwar context of Central American art and institutions demanded and received much reflection and criticism. Two pioneering magazines, Talingo and Artefacto, disseminate critical thought on Central American art from the region. The art and culture magazine Talingo
(1993-2003) originated in Panama, was edited by curator Adrienne Samos, and was published as part of La Prensa Panama, a popular Panamanian newspaper. While the country supported great critics in literature, film, and other art genres, the visual arts lacked a space for serious criticism. The magazine continued publication for ten years and was awarded the Prince Claus award in 2001 before it ceased publication in 2003. In Nicaragua the collective Artefacto, created by artist Raul Quintanilla, produced its own alternative space, Artefactoria, as well as its own publication, the art magazine Artefacto (the title changed to Estrago in 2001). From its inception in 1992, the magazine Artefacto, edited by Quintanilla, became the most comprehensive cultural magazine in Nicaragua and was distributed freely to individuals as well as to local libraries. The magazine spread nationally and regionally. Initially, its publication was made possible with the monetary funds of commercial enterprises, but the funders withdrew their financial support once they discovered its political and critical content. Nonetheless, Artefacto continued publication for ten years, with a collaborative support by artists who donated artwork and contributions of poetry, short stories, and critical essays. The last issue was published in 2002. For the editor, in the decade of its publication, the magazine Artefacto accomplished its

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70 For a personal account and reflection by one of the early members of Artefacto, the Nicaraguan artist Alicia Zamora, see “La construcción de la escena de arte contemporáneo en Managua: Pesadilla o sueño húmedo?” in Luisa Fuentes Guaza, Lenguages Contemporáneos Desde Centro América. Translated by Marta Caro. (Madrid: Turner, 2013), 66-75.

71 The last ArteFacto Publication included texts by the late Art Historian David Craven who was a supporter of the magazine for years, as well as text by Rosina Cazalli from Guatemala and Adrienne Samos from Panama. See: Adriene Samos, “Good Morning Panamá: La Década Clave, Arte Panameño De Los 90.” and Rosina Cazalli, "Post Issues En Un Lugar Post-Apocaliptico” in Artefacto, No. 20, Septiembre-Diciembre (2002).
objectives by offering critical analysis of art practices in the 1990s. With the onset of another decade, the context required new approaches, and all of its contributors were already creating new projects.72

From the discussions and critical analysis of the Nicaragua artistic context with the collective Artefacto, one of its participants, artist Patricia Belli, took the next task of addressing the lack of pedagogical training for young artists. With no resources and almost inexistent governmental support for art schools, the idea of professional training in the visual arts rarely was perceived as a fruitful career in Nicaragua or the region. Belli, therefore, created TAjo (Taller de Arte Joven) in 2001 for artists under the age of thirty. As a permanent seminar-type workshop, Belli created a space in which young artists could discuss each other’s work in a critical and honest way. All participants’ art was collectively analyzed as a methodological training and they did so within the framework of the current Nicaraguan context and contemporary visual language. At that point, such an approach was rare, since the art school system in the region held on to notions of traditional art practices such as painting and drawing.73

However, Belli did not stop there. More would be required to produce a new generation of artists with all the educational tools for successful careers and

72 For more on ArteFacto, including interview, see Lindsay Jones, "ArteFacto in Contemporary Nicaragua." *Third Text* 13, no. 48 (1999): 17-28.

artistic practice. From TAjo, Belli created an alternative art school, which, in addition to seminars, included its own space of exhibition, a library, and guest instructors. EspIRA (Espacio para la Investigación y Reflexión Artística) has since enrolled young artists from all over the region. Then, from the EspIRA projects emerged the idea for ESPORA (Escuela Superior de Profesionalización Artística) to ensure that the national and regional talent would not be wasted, providing a space where it could be cultivated without forcing the artists to leave the country. Traveling abroad to art school, as Belli did for her artistic education, is not a possibility for the majority of young artists.

EspIRA/ESPORA has since become a recognized art school from Central America for Central American artists. Its students are forming the new generation of artists with the vocabulary, understanding, and techniques that enable them to participate in a contemporary art world while addressing issues from their own context. Former students such as Dalia Chevez (El Salvador), Natalia Domingues (El Salvador), and Celeste Ponce (Honduras) continued their artistic education, participated in key regional exhibitions like LANDINGs and regional biennials, and in some cases have chosen to contribute to the regional artistic pedagogy.\textsuperscript{74} Even with art institutions and museums, art spaces in the region are minimal, especially for younger and emerging artists. Like the

\textsuperscript{74} For instance, Natalia Dominguez is one of the directors of la Escuela de Jóvenes talentos de la Universidad Tecnológica de El Salvador, and Dalia Chevez, a member of MARTE Contemporáneo, is know by her peers and other artists as a catalyst of her generation. Both Dominguez and Chevez are among the artists on the editorial board that created the magazine \textit{Ordinaria} from El Salvador—a visual arts magazine designed to exhibit and analyze critical art matters from a Salvadoran and Central American context. The digital magazine \textit{El Ojo de Adrian}, is a publishing initiative organized by artists from El Salvador. The majority of alternate spaces and initiatives are organized by artists from all generations in an attempt to fill the lack of resources, training, exhibition spaces, and criticism.
important work that resulted from the Artefacto in Nicaragua, many grass root artistic initiatives began from art collectives with little to no resources.

Other artists who work with experimental practices have also created alternative initiatives that cater to more traditional forms of art and in some cases have offered training to rural communities. Through the creation of *artesanías* they are able to use their creative efforts to create a sustainable life and community. Such is the case with the Honduran artist Regina Aguilar, a key artist in the emerging and changing contemporary art scene of the 1990s, who participated in many prominent events of the decade. In the rural town of San Jacinto, Aguilar established a workshop where she trained the community to assist in her large-scale installations and restorations as well as to create works with which they could sustain themselves financially. In the urban setting of San Salvador, the cultural bar and restaurant La Luna was created as an alternative space during a time of war. Its doors opened in December 1991 after a group of artists returned from exile abroad and sought not a gallery space but a place where artists from all venues could meet, share their work, and discuss art. Since its opening, La Luna has hosted hundreds of musicians, dancers, mimes, and other performances in addition to displaying visual art work on its walls. Moreover, it became a social art space for visitors across generations until its recent closing in 2013.

More recently, outside the urban setting, La Casa Alegre was founded by dance and performance artist Paola Lorenzana and visual artist Guillermo Araujo, both Salvadorans. This art residency/gallery is located in the small village of Alegría on the side of a volcano, surrounded by coffee plantations and
its own enchanting lagoon. Created in 2005, this alternative space continues its mission to promote art in the small town of Alegría and to bring national and international artists into a program of cultural exchange and art production. All exhibitions and projects have benefited the small town whose inhabitants posses a critical sensibility of contemporary art practices and have eagerly participated in all projects and the national discourse on experimental arts. One such action included the participation of young girls and women from the community, who discussed their concerns and dreams, and included a singing performance. The action was part of artist Abigail Reyes’s piece, titled Radio Mujer (2011), for which she coordinated a radio show for women of all ages (Figure 22). Internationally known artists like Ronald Moran and Walterio Iraheta have collaborated with La Casa Alegre in these experimental art projects and workshops for emerging artists.

For Guatemala, collective groups and their initiatives became the catalyst for much of the country’s artistic context since the 1990s, which benefits from a more structured art scene and projection for contemporary artists than other nations, with the exception of Costa Rica. Through their participation in collectives, artists agreed on the urgency of creating their own spaces. The collective Grupo Imaginaria opened the Galería Imaginaria in Antigua Guatemala in 1986, amid a time of war. Artist directors Moisés Barrios and Luis González Palma planned to decentralize the artistic activities from the city, and to address the emerging contemporary visual language at the time. Shortly after, artists Pablo Swezey, Isabel Ruiz, Daniel Chauche, Sofía González, and Erwin
Huillermos joined the group. Another Guatemalan collective, the *Colectivo de Arte Urbano* inhabited its own alternative art space, the *Casa Bizarra*. Though the house is now nonexistent, the collective went on to organize the *Festival Centro Historico* and then the *Festival Octubre Azul* in 2000, which will be discussed in further detail in the following chapter. The *Casa Bizarra* with other alternative collectives at the time, including the contemporary dance group Momentum, the Collective *Caja Ludica*, and *Contexto*.

With its own unique style of operation, all collectives were led by their desire and commitment to promote and support contemporary art and to encourage younger artists. For instance, members of the *Casa Bizarra* were distinguished by a spirit of marginalized youth, who perceived themselves as “from the urban margins,” and so chose to operate through raves, underground gatherings, graffiti art, and rock music. In contrast, the collective *Colloquia* was more interested in organizing formal training and discussions such as workshops, seminars, and exhibitions that were informed by theoretical conferences with participants like Gerardo Mosquera, Catherine David, Santiago Olmo, Ticio Escobar, Virgina Pérez-Ratton, Patricia Mendoza, and others. Despite their different profiles, both collectives attracted young artists with a sense of independence. This commitment was further reiterated by the presence

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of non-governmental organizations in the country at the time, and an independent spirit that sought to take art to non-traditional spaces.

Rosina Cazali has acknowledged how quickly the presence of collective art initiatives, and its artistic potential, was noted by Guatemalans, especially considering the general consensus that art belonged in a glass bubble exclusive to elite circles.\textsuperscript{76} Cazali pays special attention to \textit{Grupo Colloquia}, the first collective in Guatemala to establish a contemporary art project interested in the global and producing critical reflection on the internal.\textsuperscript{77} Just a few months after its formation, the group had already secured collaboration from the Patronato de Bellas Artes that administered the Museo de Arte Moderno in Guatemala at the time. Participating as a committee, \textit{Grupo Colloquia} offered to help shape a more concrete cultural program that would include the peripheral activities. For instance, during this stage \textit{Grupo Colloquia} organized: Fotojornada, the first festival dedicated to photography of Guatemala; a workshop dedicated to graphic design with the Mexican artists Silvia Gruner and Re Diseño; and a publically accessible local library that held important national and international art catalogues and publications. \textit{Grupo Colloquia} also has ventured into negotiations with local business in exchange for their inclusion of a cultural agenda in those spaces.

In addition to initiatives that created alternative spaces for reunion and discussion, exhibition of experimental art, alternative art education, and

\textsuperscript{76} Rosina Cazali, \textit{Pasos a Desnivel: Mapa Urbano De La Cultura Contemporánea En Guatemala} [in Spanish]. 1 ed. (Ciudad de Guatemala: Artgrafic de Guatemala, 2003), 43.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 44.
contemporary art theory and criticism, and curatorial initiatives required a deeper understanding when dealing with the regional, institutional, and social context. La Curandería in Guatemala was created precisely as an initiative that theorized new approaches to curatorial proposals. As such, it proposed strategies that accounted for ethical, social, and aesthetic concerns for Guatemalans. One of its key exhibitions was titled *Vivir Aquí* (2000) for which artists were called to reflect on what it meant to live in a country like Guatemala. The exhibition invited viewers to do the same. Today it can be said that *Colloquia, Imaginaria, Curandería* and *Octubre Azul*, which started as alternative initiatives organized and led by artists, has shaped the contemporary art scene of Guatemala.

While the aforementioned collectives in Guatemala produced projects that changed the region when it had recently entered into a post-war period, they were mainly led by a generation of artists that lived during the period of war. More recently, new initiatives are created by younger artists who endured the wars as children but, as traumatized by the violence, may recollect very little of life under fire. Between 2007-2014 alone, a new wave of collectives emerged in Guatemala, El Salvador, Panama, Costa Rica, and Honduras that are no longer only concerned with redefining Central America, its limits, or boundaries or putting Central American art on the map. In contrast, they depart from aesthetic and theoretical concerns with contemporary art and instead seek dialogues and experimentation that allow a critical understating of current world social conditions. Unlike artists who experienced the war years as adults, they are not isolated in the confines of nationality, but already find strength and solidarity with their counterparts throughout the region by building on the efforts and
risks taken by the earlier generations. Similarly, they work from existing connections with artists and curators from across the globe.

The more recent collectives in Guatemala take advantage of an already strong history of collaborative work. Emilio Valdés, Stefan Benchoam, and Lord Byron Marmol lead *Projectos Ultravioleta*, a collective they founded in 2009 in Guatemala City. The collective describes itself as a multifaceted platform for experimentation. In addition to curatorial projects, the members engage in forums and collaboration with other spaces and collectives throughout the region and beyond to foster critical debates on contemporary art including forums, art happenings, public interventions, and concerts. Among the most active artists exhibited through *Projectos Ultravioleta* include Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa, Jessica Kairé, and Federico Herrero. The collaboration of these artists cross boundaries from exhibitions to creating alternative art spaces, such as The Nuevo Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (NUMU), founded in 2012 (Figure 23). Created by Benchoam and Kairé, the NUMU is the first museum dedicated to contemporary art in Guatemala and is located in an urban corner of the city. Its nontraditional egg shape and appearance is a result of its original design when the space functioned as an express stop for the sale and purchase of eggs. Now as a museum recently finishing its first cycle of exhibitions, the design blurs the line between indoor art space and public installation. Because of its unique size and shape measuring 2 x 2.5 meters, the NUMU offers micro exhibitions of artists’ works. For instance, the Costa Rican artist Federico Herrero is known for painting vivid colors onto a myriad of public surfaces (including windows, building and streets) to create color and spatial tensions that evoke the tropical
urban feeling reflective of Central American cities. For Herrero’s retrospective exhibit, the artist covered the interior and exterior of the egg shaped museum with overlapping bright hues (Figure 24). For a retrospective exhibit of Regina José Galindo, whose body of work consists of body actions and performances, the NUMU displayed a series of documenting photographs both inside and outside the museum (Figure 25).

News of new collective endeavors quickly spreads and inspires others throughout the rest of Central America. Following the same concerns and approach as Projectos Ultravioleta, La Pycyna Collective (2012) in Heredia, Costa Rica includes members Edgar León, Stephanie Williams, Oscar Figueroa, Guillermo Vargas Habacuc, Javier Esteban Calvo, Fabrizio Arrieta, Anabelle Contreras Castro, Héctor Gamboa, Sergio Villena, Ernesto Calvo, and Concepción Padrino. Like the Gallery Des Pacio, created by artist Federico Herrero in 2007 in San José, La Pycyna Collective also holds a focus on contemporary art and reflection. In Nicaragua, the Taller Imagen Tiempo, led by artist Ernesto Salmerón, is one of the most recent alternative spaces designed to promote a new understanding of experimental, documentary art in addition to experimental music. In addition, in Guatemala, KAMIN in the rural area of Comalapa also serves as an experimental platform for interchanging ideas, knowledge, and the visual arts. It caters to a Mayan population with members Ángel and Fernando Poyón, Edgar Calel, and Hermelindo Muxin in the visual arts; Luis Cali, Josué Perén, I’x Chumil, Sara Curruchich and Nicolás Telón in music; Edgar Sajcabun in film; and Rony Otzoy, negma Ixnoj and Esdras Cumez in literature. With its cross-disciplinary approach to art and culture from an
indigenous perspective, the group describes itself as “a movement that is more philosophical than political, and more spiritual than material.”

Acknowledging the lack of curatorial presence in El Salvador, artists Ernesto Bautista and Mauricio Kabistan started a platform of collective curatorial projects titled The Fire Theory (initiated in 2009 and formalized in 2011). They claim that the initiative was needed because the country lacks a strong curatorial presence, one with a concentration on the national art practices and history. This observation had been a constant concern across generations in El Salvador but became even more imperative when two of El Salvador’s art experts, Rodolfo Molina and Janine Janowsky, passed away suddenly in 2013. Molina, an artist turned curator from a generation of artists active during the 1980s civil war, was one of the first artists to experiment with installation art and address the issue of transnational gang culture in his installation. Much of this work took place in Laberinto, owned by Janowsky, who offered the only space for experimental art during the war. It is amid this greater absence of curatorial opportunities that a young generation of artists born during the war has taken up collective curating, or what Bautista has called a “guerrilla curating.”


Rodolfo Molina, Interview by Kency Cornejo, San Salvador, El Salvador, June 17, 2011. More recently, Molina participated in curating the MARTE national collection exhibitions and was responsible for curating the national biennials as well as selecting the Salvadoran artists for the Central American biennials.

Rodriguez) organize a series of projects as reflective spaces for debate. Often set in the Salvadoran Museo Tecleño in Santa Tecla, the collective draws from the museum’s political history to question the war’s aftermath. Originally the museum was a wartime prison used to hold political prisoners, where many of today’s politicians were once detained and tortured. The detaining cells have been converted into small galleries where The Fire Theory curatorial department has curated video work and installation as post-war critiques of art and political institutions. The museum also hosts lectures and workshops, led by museum directors and guest curators like The Fire Theory. Though the Fire Theory members concentrate on the local scene in El Salvador, they are known to hold exhibitions and include artists from throughout Central America.

Under the idea of a “cultural invasion,” several cultural art groups in Honduras—including MUA, Pop Versus, Escuela Experimental de Arte (EAT), Walabís/Arte Educación, and Arte D Barrio—have chosen to come together as the Colectivo Acción Hormiga to invade the Old Central Penitentiary in Tegucigalpa and transform it into a cultural art space. Because the building is in shambles but protected under cultural patrimony, the five cultural organizations aim to prevent it from soon becoming another shopping mall, or other space of consumption, and instead aim to transform a place formerly used to perpetuate repression into one that promotes peace, liberty, and creativity. The collective’s members are especially concerned with rescuing the public space of Tegucigalpa through actions and performance, for which the artist Jorge Oquelí, Cesar Manzanares, and Gabriel Vallecillo are among the most active. Through their actions they also promote an environmental awareness among youth and
incorporate found objects and recyclable material into creative and cultural activities, often using mimes for pedagogical initiatives like workshops.

From Belize, a combination of alternative publication and collective has emerged with the Container Collection, spearheaded by Duran and Mussa, taking the LANDING exhibition to the next step. Because the ten exhibitions originally planned were executed successfully, the collective is now concerned with producing ten high quality publications. The first was launched in 2013 in Belize, Spain, and Mexico and consisted of an experimental narrative of the LANDING Projects composed entirely of personal emails and statements by the participating artists. Through this personal correspondence gathered over the span of a decade, the first edition of the Container Collection books presents an array of title-less images intertwined with personal reflections, complaints, and observations by the artists. The topics range from accounts of personal challenges in completing an artwork to frustrations with the contemporary art scene both locally and regionally. Additionally, it includes retrospective artist reflections about personal significance of the LANDING exhibition and their perceptions of the challenges or failures in the exhibitions. One artist from The Fire Theory, Victor Rodriguez, who has also been part of the Container Collection group, was photographed holding the first Container Collection book during a performance in San Salvador. The performance, Untitled (2014) took place at the voting ballot where, instead of casting his vote during the most recent 2014 elections in El Salvador, Rodriguez ate the piece of paper in protest and disdain to the way the electoral process in El Salvador remains corrupt (Figure 26). He currently faces up to six years in prison if found guilty of the crime of electoral fraud.
An important aspect of these alternative initiatives in Central America is how they relied on a “fuzzy logic,” referring both to their spontaneity in planning and their dependence on personal trust rather than institutional structures. “Fuzzy logic” is the term that artist and director Adán Vallecillo coined to describe the small gallery space, La Mancha De Tomate in Tegucigalpa. What began as an alternative artist-run gallery in 2009 soon became “fuzzy” in its purpose, agenda, and the identity of those who participated. Even its hours of service became unpredictable as the political climate following the coup d’état that same year produced a series of state imposed curfews. In order to function, La Mancha de Tomate could not rely on a stable agenda and structure. It was only able to function and produce a series of varied events—including exhibitions, workshops, book projects, and conferences—because of the will of collaborators and the virtual tools that connected them. Vallecillo explains, La Mancha de Tomate “is an initiative that moves from pure will, that has an uncertain future, blurry, and undefined, like its logic of operation and context.”

From the entire region, artists, curators, critics, sociologists, philosophers, and anthropologists collaborated at different times and with different projects as part of a citizens’ contribution and not a career move.

Vallecillo’s connection of an operative “fuzzy logic” to the logic of its social context alludes to the fact that Central America has produced an (un)certain way of doing things. Despite instability, spontaneity, and lack of

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structural support, this wave Central American initiatives was not illogical. In fact, the idea is not a lack of logic, rather, a different logic, under which artists live and produce. One major exhibition, +/- Esperanza (translates to +/- Hope), was created as part of this “will.” It united twenty-nine artists, from eleven Latin American countries, who reflected discursively on the ontological, political, social, historical, and ecological dimensions of their reality in order to extract hope from their complex realities.\textsuperscript{82} From this exhibition, the artists maintained a social network, facilitated by the Internet, that has given continuity to that will and collaboration in order to materialize artistic initiatives.\textsuperscript{83}

VI. Conclusion

The late Virgina Pérez-Ratton once stated:

The insular feeling is general, even within the Central American isthmus. Each of these countries looks up to the North, but hardly ever extends its hands to its neighbors. It has been just recently, after the political war has ended, that we are beginning to recreate the broken bonds. The feeling of isolation in the Caribbean artists is the same one encountered by their Central American colleagues. The post-colonial fragmentation has made us all islands.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{82} Adán Vallecillo in "La Mancha De Tomate, Una Productora Fuzzy Logic." In BAVIC 7 Evento Teórico: Nadie Sabe el Pasado que le Espera, Arte Hoy desde Centroamérica. (Managua, Nicaragua: ARDISA, 2010), 62.

\textsuperscript{83} One of the precursors to the Mancha de Tomate was the collective group, La Cuarteria, also led by Adán Vallecillo. In addition, the Honduran art collectives Manicomio, Arteria, El Circulo and Lacrimògena, are among some of the art collectives in Honduras from which have emerged the most notable contemporary artists today such as Adán Vallecillo, Leonardo Gonzalez, Gabriel Galeano, Darwin Andino, Lester Rodriguez, and others. For more see La Otra Tradición: Un Encuentro Con El Arte Contemporáneo En Honduras, 2000-2010 [in Spanish, English] (San Salvador: Talleres Albacrome, 2011).

Since the 1990s, Central Americans (artists, curators, cultural promoters) have questioned the shape of the Central American art landscape, its boundaries, its strengths, and its weaknesses. As a result, in a period spanning over two decades, they have executed investigations, developed networks, and created spaces through projects and initiatives from Central America and for Central America. These efforts were not driven by nationalism but by the necessity to heal colonial wounds that isolated peoples from the region from each other in the first place: once through conquest and more recently through foreign intervention, wars, and a continuation of colonial violence. These alternative initiatives have not only revolutionized art practices within these countries, but have served as an interconnecting bridge for the region and from the region. As Cazali notes of Guatemala, the communication formed between these entities “has helped in many opportunities as a sturdy bridge so that artists and theoreticians from other countries can conduct research in a didactic manner in several points of interest, which has motivated a departure towards external dynamics and reduced the isolation that was becoming the custom even 10 years ago.” 85 Beyond transforming the contemporary art scene in Central America, the labor and efforts put forth by the artists and curators mentioned throughout this chapter have reconnected a region of “islands” forming a network of solidarity within that then was able to extend outwards.

It is for the above-mentioned reasons that alternative initiatives in the realms of curatorial work, art pedagogy, and experimental collectives have been

85 Rosina Cazali, Pasos a Desnivel: Mapa Urbano De La Cultura Contemporánea En Guatemala 1 ed. (Ciudad de Guatemala: Artgrafic de Guatemala, 2009), 49. (My translation).
imperative in the region since the 1990s, and it is these that are taking the forefront in shaping the contemporary Central American art scene for the rest of the world. While some initiatives were short lived, and others morphed into renamed projects and collectives, the experience of trial and error has been key in the growth of art spaces and activities as well as a critical understanding of the role of art in the region and the world. Amidst this process, Pérez-Ratton also stated:

Strengthening our regional links, documenting our present and knowing ourselves and knowing ourselves better, and creating the awareness for the need of local support is a major issue if we aspire to participate in an international arena of confrontation without becoming once more into another bad copy of the central system. Our time and space is different, it is one among many others, and artists are trying to define it, to find the elements of their “belonging” and to work in this particular time and space, which is at the same time local and global.86

The most successful initiatives have been based on local knowledge, whether generational, national, gendered, etc., on the needs and concerns of a groups of artists and not on imported formulas from outside the region. Though the interactions from visiting curators, artists, and scholars were certainly influential in gaining an outside perspective on questions of identity and collectivity, the most effective initiatives began with the intention of producing art and knowledge that would increase participation for a general audience, one not familiar with global biennials or national legends. Instead, Central American audiences mostly view art with skepticism and are often more concerned with the increasing rate of urban and rural violence and surviving economic hardships than the contemporary art world, whose colonial models of art and

aesthetics have historically marginalized and displaces those outside its realm. This reception remains a continuous challenge, and especially collective initiatives have sought to address both the socio-political concerns of citizens, as well as the goals and challenges of contemporary artists.

The broader issues in the institutional art world, however, still need to be critically questioned. The formation of institutional spaces has been key to offer certain “validity” to Central American art, mainly as it opens opportunities for local artists, facilitates foreign institutional funding, and creates national spaces that convey a serious institutional commitment to citizens who may otherwise not relate to artist practices or experimental art. Despite the accomplishments of institutional spaces as national and international references for outside Central America, a certain degree of detachment persists on behalf of the general local population, especially among the most marginalized of each country. Moreover, the increasing but relatively new institutional spaces pose another challenge, that of inclusion/exclusion for artists, a position that promotes competition with very limited space for insertion. These limited spaces then become filters for foreign curators, biennials, and galleries who turn to the institutions when searching new talent and where those left outside the institution do not often benefit. Furthermore, while some artists have received invitations to international exhibitions, the reality remains that most can only participate when they are able to pay their own travel and expenses. Rarely do national governments offer this type of monetary support to their artists.

A decolonial analysis and discussion of artist’s individual artworks and contributions to the changing art scene in Central America over the last twenty-
two years is the content of the following chapters. The four factors discussed in this chapter however are significant to demonstrate the transitional structural context of post-war Central America in which artists emerged or solidified their careers. Artists attended the events, participated in the conferences, exhibited in the news spaces, and were part of the search, discussion, and debates that sought to update a structure and production of knowledge for art in Central America. These local initiatives propelled the careers of certain artists into international recognition and simultaneously created new debates and concerns that are still unfolding and clearly supported the rise of experimental art in the region. What is certain is that beginning in the postwar period of 1990s, Central America began a transitional phase that informs the art produced in this time together with the people behind the scenes, with “voluntad” and “fuzzy” logic. This stage formed today’s most recognized artists. Any recognition of Regina José Galindo as a key performance artist that ignores the influential role of Rosina Cazali and Octubre Azul in her life, or the similar influence of the older generation on the younger artists in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, or the role of Virginia Pérez-Ratton on an entire generation of artists in the region, would be an incomplete history and only partial analysis, one that eliminates the complexities, places, and the dialogues that continue to take place in Central America today. Worst of all, such exclusion or oversight would erase the key factor I highlight in this chapter, that is, la voluntad, the will of the people, for whom there are clear political and aesthetic reasons in that “fuzzy logic.”
Chapter Two.
Un Grito: Visual Disobedience and Indigeneity in Guatemala

I. Introduction

In early twentieth century modernist art of Latin America, Indigeneity emerged as a celebrated topic, a popular theme with which to strengthen nationalist discourse, yet it also relegated Indigenous peoples to a romantic past. Public figures celebrating indigeneity included artists and intellectuals who were inspired in large part by European modernism. The artists who had recently arrived from studies in Europe introduced avant-garde trends very reminiscent of an Indigenous aesthetics/style from centuries before: flat spaces, abandonment of linear perspective, use of saturated bold colors, anatomically abstracted bodies, and overlapping depictions of space. While these stylistic choices echoed already existent pre-conquest representations of space and bodies, forcefully prohibited during colonization, they were now credited to European artists and labeled as cubism, expressionism, fauvism, surrealism, and other European modernist styles that were supposedly inspired by non-European cultures.

Several artists in Latin America embraced these avant-garde styles but used them to question a Latin American identity and cultural nationalism that in some cases (as in Brazil, Mexico, and Uruguay) looked back in a nostalgic and idealized way at an indigenous identity, or sought to appropriate only the useful
elements of other cultures and discard the rest in an act of agency. Such is the case of Oswald de Andrade and Raul Bopp’s *Antropofagia* Movement.\(^1\) Similarly, in Central America, artists and intellectuals such as, Rubén Darío (b. 1867 — d. 1916) in Nicaragua and Carlos Mérida (b. 1891— d. 1984) in Guatemala argued for a modernism that addressed Latin American contexts and realities. However, the majority of artists and thinkers throughout the hemisphere, who celebrated the theme of indigeneity, were *mestizo* or *ladino* men with greater economic mobility and access to formal education abroad, rather than the indigenous peoples of the time.\(^2\) Indigeneity was thus an exalted leitmotif but not one from an indigenous body, geopolitical position, or episteme.

Ironically, the symbolic celebration of indigenous roots masked and ignored the harsh living conditions and violence perpetrated against indigenous peoples. During the same period, even as artists elevated an imagined Indigenous identity, various government-led military campaigns executed brutal repression of Indigenous Central American peoples. In 1932, under orders of General Martínez Hernández, 30,000 people in El Salvador were killed in what is now known as *La Matanza* (The Killing). Consequently, many people desperately eliminated public signifiers of their indigenous identity, including dress and language, in order to escape a similar fate. This use of terror to provoke self-erasure resulted in the invisibility of indigenous peoples in the country. El

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2 The terms *mestizo* refers to a persona of mixed European and Native American decent. In the Isthmus, especially in Guatemala, the term *Ladino* is commonly used to refer to people of European and Native American decent.
Salvador, paradoxically, is now perceived as the most “mestizo” nation in Central America despite its strong Nahuat-Pipil presence. More recently in Guatemala, a U.S. backed massacre led by ex-dictator Efraín Rios Montt resulted in 1,771 Mayan-Ixil killed and 29,000 displaced over a seventeen-month reign of terror (1982-1983). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission reported that up to eighty percent of deaths during the conflict were of Mayan Indigenous peoples, many more of whom were terrorized, tortured, and disappeared.

In the postwar period, amidst the aftermath of the wars and revolutions initiated by socialist and liberation movements, the greatest targets of cruelty and repression still remain the indigenous population. In some cases, well-respected and well-intended artists in Central America address the Indigenous plight in their artworks, but the indigenous body remains merely an aesthetic representation from another’s gaze. Currently, the tourist consumer market, along with the State, celebrate and support only those indigenous artists whose works consist of figurative paintings of village life, representing religious rituals, and quotidian scenes. They promote art typically devoid of political content, which satisfies tourist consumers who seek exotic mementos. The State’s promotion of such art to foreign consumers is a national strategy by which it profits economically by promoting a romanticized idea of indigeneity (including

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towns, sacred landscapes, and ancient sites and temples) as a cultural commodity with which to propel a tourist economy. Such was the case during the much-anticipated Baktun 13 on December 21, 2012, which to the Mayan people signifies the beginning of a new era for humanity. But for the State, the event meant the opportunity to profit, as the government invested over six million US dollars to lure the over 200,000 foreign tourists for the official State celebrations at the ancient Mayan temple of Tikal. Meanwhile, sacred sites were off limits to indigenous peoples forcing them to celebrate the sacred event, as indigenous leader Rigoberta Menchú observed, “in silence [and] in the intimacy” of their spirituality and cosmovisión. Only priests and spiritual guides conducting ceremonies were allowed on the Mayan sacred temples.\(^5\)

This strategy, of maintaining the indigenous body as one to be seen but not heard, continues since the time of conquest to the present. Indigenous artists are continuously excluded from both Eurocentric and Latin American art historical narratives, that is, unless their artworks figuratively depict subject matter that fits within an already accepted folkloric style of art. Moreover, as the void in scholarly work shows, they are dismissed as creators of contemporary or experimental art or as contributors to an intellectual or philosophical artistic debate. Simultaneously, government-sponsored repression of indigenous peoples persists. Why is Indigeneity relegated to an enchanted past, one that is to be depicted, that serves to inspire artists, and that is only to be seen, while

Indigenous peoples in the region are continuously subjected—through the same logic of seeing—to racist and colonialist treatment, dehumanization, and murder?

The traditional narrative of war and conflict for Guatemala has been constructed as a revolutionary/counter-revolutionary framework between right-wing governments and left-wing guerilla opponents. Yet, while national independence movements acquired a political decolonization from Europe, the colonization of knowledge persists through contemporary institutions producing oppressive conditions for indigenous peoples. Marxist-led studies on Central America since the liberation movements of the 1960s allude to a neo-colonial state, but “class struggle” remains the central concern, and these studies do not prioritize a historical legacy of race and racism in the region. The idea of a “post” in a post-colonial approach similarly fails to recognize that since the Spanish conquest in the Americas, indigenous peoples continue to suffer the legacy of colonialism. The problem remains that “celebrations” of indigeneity in art decontextualize the concurrent political struggles of indigenous communities as consequence of coloniality.

It is impossible to ignore the clear connection between the genocide of the Spanish conquest and twenty-first century genocide. These two historical moments have been customarily treated as independent events rather than as linked, constructed, and executed through the same conceptual framework that perpetrates a hierarchical view of race that also informs and shapes the core of coloniality. Fortunately, more recent scholarship acknowledges the recent violence in terms of geopolitics and the role of racism in what is not merely
guerilla and counterinsurgency violence but instead a deliberate attempt to exterminate the indigenous population of Guatemala. For instance, historian Virginia Garrard-Burnett has noted that, “The counterinsurgency campaign of the early 1980s was the worst calamity to befall Mayan life and culture in Guatemala since the sixteenth century Spanish conquest.” In her recent book, *Global Coloniality of Power in Guatemala*, sociologist Egla Martínez Salazar contextualizes the war in Guatemala as a contemporary manifestation of coloniality.

Key to Martínez Salazar’s argument for contemporary coloniality is her crucial observation that Mayan children were also military targets for destruction for being indigenous. She notes that authorities often dismiss the assault and bloodshed of indigenous infants, toddlers, and young children as “unexplainable” and “unthinkable.” They thus rationalize these deaths as unfortunate casualties, or consequential victims, due to their misfortune of being the children of anti-establishment and subversive parents—the military’s real targets. Yet as Martínez Salazar discerns, the death and killings of Mayan children “was not a secondary casualty of state terror, but a clear object of destruction within the context of genocide.” In fact, she explains, the State defined Mayan babies, toddlers, and children as “bad seeds” for being children

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8 Ibid., 103.
of the “internal enemies,” a term defined in the 1983 Manual of Counter-
subversive War by the Center for Military Studies of the Guatemala Army as:

All those individuals, groups, and organizations who through illegal
actions want to break the established order...who following direction
from internal communism develop so-called revolutionary war and
subversion in the country. Those individuals, groups and organizations
that are not communist but that want to break the established order are
also considered internal enemies.9

Mayan children thus constituted these “internal enemies” and a menace to the
State. A testimony by a former civil patroller further clarified: when asked by the
Commission of Historical Clarification (CEH) “Why are you killing children?” he
responded “Because those sons of bitches one day will get revenge and fuck us
up.”10 In other words, Mayan children, free of communist ideals, were defined as
anti-establishment for their mere existence as indigenous peoples and were
considered a future threat. However, anti-establishment should not be mistaken
to equate anti-state but rather to being when that being and existence has been a
target of destruction for over 500 years. To simply be indigenous, in
contemporary Guatemala under Rios Montt, was an act of disobedience against
the establishment. But what happens when these “bad seeds” resist elimination
and grow up anyway?

Benvenuto Chavajay and Antonio Pichillá (Tz’utujil artists), Ángel Poyón
and Fernando Poyón (Kachikel artists), and Sandra Monterroso (a descendant
Q’ekchi) all belong to a generation the government labeled “bad seeds,” yet they
also belong to a postwar generation of artists who have recently brought global

9 Ibid., 103.

attention to the Guatemalan contemporary art scene and to a Central American art context more broadly. These artists, however, do so specifically from an indigenous identity and perspective.

What does the contemporary art scene in postwar Guatemala reveal about contemporary indigenous struggles when the subject matter is no longer the figurative representation of an indigenous body, but rather self-representations of indigenous embodiments and knowledges through installation art objects, video, and performance by indigenous artists who claim a philosophical and decolonial position? As they actively participate in global contemporary art, as emerging artists, how do they challenge local colonialist notions of Indigenous peoples as mere silent sources of inspiration while rooting the current violence in a continuous legacy of colonialism, that is, coloniality? What is at stake today when indigenous artists engage in visual disobedience as ongoing efforts of decolonization? Through visual analysis of selected works, I argue that the aforementioned artists challenge the very logic of coloniality as they take on its historical legacy of racism. They thereby expose the failure of independence movements, nationalism, and even notions of liberation and independence in “post” colonial times, “post” war nations, or “post” racial societies. To do so, they root the current racial, class, and gender oppression, not in the current governments or current political figures, but in the continuity of the conquest and colonization of 1492. Their works enact what I call a visual disobedience as it 1) undermines the coloniality of seeing, that is, the manner in which the visual can and has been used for the purpose of colonization; 2) re-affirms political and epistemic nature of the visual and other senses in decolinization; 3) connects the
currents political struggles with historical conquest; and 4) defies colonialist notions of the non-human by asserting the humanity of peoples and knowledges. Through visual disobedience they shift the geographies of reason and work from a different point of departure, in this case a Tz’utujil and Kachikel worldview, and broadly, a view from Central America.

II. The Coloniality of Seeing and Visual Disobedience

Under the premise that the inferiority of certain people could be scientifically proven as objective “truth,” Indigenous cultures, knowledge, and ways of seeing have been deemed inferior and primitive—that is, in contrast to ideas of Western linear development and progress. Notions of the Other already existed in European imaginaries, but, through the framework of Enlightenment philosophies and modernity, the construct of ‘race’ was regarded as a scientific “truth” and used to categorize and place peoples within racial hierarchies. The belief that non-Western peoples were less than human, sub-human, or not human at all was especially espoused through the act of research on indigenous peoples.11 Through ‘research’ indigenous peoples were labeled, categorized, photographed, and even exhibited as specimens that represented them as a sub-species. As Maori anthropologist Linda Tuhiwai Smith has noted, “[i]mperialism and colonization are the specific formations through which the West came to ‘see’, to ‘name,’ and to ‘know’ indigenous communities.”12 As the West invented

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12 Tuhiwai Smith, 60.
notions of progress and modernity, it required the opposite—notions of inferiority and decay with which to measure and to colonize.

The Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano discusses in detail how the racist logic that colonization and enslavement enabled eventually became the Coloniality of Power, a system of domination in which the European/Western colonization of political and economic spheres continue to be intricately linked to the colonization of knowledge systems at the world scale. For Quijano, the idea of race and the control of labor—both of which permeated the conquest and colonization of the Americas—continue to shape oppressive conditions for indigenous peoples no longer through colonial institutions but through modern institutions. It is important to note that coloniality is not synonymous with colonialism, though their historical relationships are the same. That is, coloniality emerges with colonialism as the logic of colonialism. When colonialism is thought to end through independence movements, coloniality remains as an ideological and epistemic tool of domination embedded in systems of power and extends beyond the removal of previous colonial governments and administrations. The consequences of coloniality are not abstract. The constructs of race enforced during the Enlightenment and the logic of coloniality continue to inform policies and state laws affecting indigenous peoples, whether to justify the forced sterilization of women, the theft of sacred lands under government administration.

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control, the placement of indigenous communities in under-resourced reservations, the erasure of indigenous histories in school books, and the prohibition of language, or to rationalize genocide.

Anti-colonial and decolonial scholars have long noted that internal colonialism and the colonization of knowledge remain the most difficult challenges to overcome. With the dissemination of new knowledge founded largely on colonialist underpinnings, decolonization is an ongoing project rather than a goal that can be achieved in the near future. I propose that if delinking from the colonization of knowledge remains one of the tasks of decolonial projects, so should delinking from the coloniality of seeing through visual decolonization. By the coloniality of seeing I refer to the way the visual and notions of seeing (which are also ways of knowing) in certain groups have also been racialized and deemed primitive and inferior. It further entails recognizing that visual production and the significance given to certain forms, colors, and expressions were also a target for colonizers and often prohibited and destroyed. The imposition of Western ways of seeing then became a tool with which to further subjugate and colonize peoples. Furthermore, the coloniality of seeing was not an innocent consequence of the coloniality of knowledge. On the contrary, the epistemic value in architecture, murals, calendars, codices, and performances clearly indicated a system of knowledge and transmission essential to the order of indigenous ways of being and cosmologies. Precisely for its value, full colonization entailed controlling ways of thinking and seeing, which along with the colonization of bodies was a strategic requirement for the colonization of knowledge.
Before conquest and colonization, historical and visual documentation (such as in ancient Egypt, China, and Japan) was a highly valued and respected responsibility assigned to a selected few. The ancient Maya highly regarded scribes for their ability to produce written texts and illustrations, making writing, painting, and sculpting of one and the same importance. They were known as *ah k'u huns*, meaning “he of the writing” and are depicted with a unique dress in a myriad of reliefs, murals, and cultural objects accompanied by individual signatures and names, thus indicating a prestige and importance attributed to them by the Mayan court. Moreover, scholars have shown that the nobility and royal house recruited these men and women and took them to special academies that trained them in calligraphy and the visual arts before they could become *ah k'u huns*. With such high prestige, along with the warriors who also belonged to the nobility, high-ranking scribes even became common targets for captive seekers. Such cases were historically documented as was proven with the famous Kimbell Panel (Figure 27). The ancient panel depicts a specific historical event that took place in 783 and invites the viewer to witness a warrior presenting three captive scribes to a seated lord. The significance of scribes as producers of texts and art has been well documented, deciphered, and interpreted for decades. Results of this research show the surfaces, tools, and calligraphic techniques of how the Maya represented and documented significant and historical events,

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15 The specific dress includes short hair wrapped in a haircloth, a stick bundle held to the forehead with a cloth, brush pens and other writing instruments placed in the headdress, and a wrap-around sarong bundled at the waist.
and above all, the equal regard for those in charge of writing, painting, and sculpting history.  

Yet, as Walter Mignolo has noted in *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, the Spanish conquerors wrongfully described the Indigenous as a people without a written language and thus without intelligence, memories, and histories. The dismissal and rejection of Mayan visuality as systems of knowledge was tied to the fact that the Renaissance value on the book as the only repository and disseminator of knowledge emphasized alphabetical writing as an indicator of civilization and intelligence. Thus, conquerors perceived cultures lacking familiar forms of alphabet, writing, and books as primitive and incapable of historical record keeping. Perversely, engaging in a self-proclaimed duty to record Indigenous histories enabled the Western colonizers to use the alphabet as a tool for colonization of language, memories, and space. This led to the deliberate destruction of codices, records, murals, and other visual material.

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18 Mignolo has shown that the classical revival in the European Renaissance and its understanding of written text as the only form of civilization and knowledge allowed for the colonization of languages. However, the revival of classical thought, such as the humanist model of learning, was also deeply implicated in art and art theory as it was in the literary realm. It is no coincidence then that the history of art and art theory, as disciplines, are often located within the Renaissance. It was then that Giorgio Vasari is accredited with writing the *Lives of Artists*, considered the first written history of Western art. In it, Vasari provides an encyclopedic biography of Italian artists whom he qualified as the most skilled and talented and conveys that what was perceived as artistic skill during the Renaissance was based on a mathematical and geometrical ability with which artists could “capture” and depict space, perspective, nature, and anatomy. Subsequently, the artist’s desire to study and imitate nature—which could only be accomplished by the mathematical mapping of space through a geometrical system of perspective—attributed God-like status to those who were skillful enough to accomplish such task, *artists*. See Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of Artists* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
during the process of colonization, which was one of the major forms of violence used to erase an indigenous visual archive, representative of the ancient Mesoamerican episteme, in what is now called Central America.¹⁹

The threat of indigenous epistemologies was so great to the colonizers that they even prohibited ephemeral practices of performance and rituals in order to cease the transmission of knowledge to future generations. In destroying these histories, colonizers could better inculcate Eurocentric ways of seeing and knowing. Such was the case throughout the colonial period when the Spanish forced Indigenous artists to practice European styles of art and visual representation. This included imposing their own use of perspective and anatomical portrayals of the body that contrasted the symbolism and visuality of the Mesoamerican culture. The Catholic Church used Eurocentric and religious visuality to repress indigenous imagery across continental America, making the depiction and worship of Aztec and Mayan gods and goddesses punishable by death, while forcing the production of visual imagery in the service of Christian conversion and colonization. Such European practices were in clear contrast to indigenous ways of representation before the conquest. Moreover, the church, as the major patron of art, dictated Christian themes and subject matter for indigenous artists throughout the colonial period. Since then, the complex Mayan systems of knowing have been relegated to a romanticized past, and the

¹⁹ The term “Mesoamerica” has changed over time and originally was used to describe the areas from Central Mexico down to Costa Rica based on the observation that various native groups held certain characteristics in common. In 2002, the exhibition “Mesoamérica: Oscilaciones y Artificios” showcased recent contemporary art, including artists from Mexico and Central America. See Mesoamérica: Oscilaciones Y Artificios. Centro Atlántico de arte moderno, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. (Madrid: Gráficas Deva, 2002).
indigenous peoples remain “subject matter” to be represented and seen, maintained that way through the coloniality of knowledge and seeing—a strong contrast to the importance of ancient Mayan scribes.20

The coloniality of seeing continues to function through institutions, academic fields, and art systems. While some forms of indigenous visual expression were destroyed, others were stolen, sold, collected, labeled, and exhibited in museums as if to convey the extinction of a civilization. Remains of the dead were exhibited just as living indigenous peoples were displayed in world fairs. During the Enlightenment, philosophers such as Immanuel Kant further extended a racialized division by proposing that only certain groups were capable of having an aesthetic experience and that others were incapable of perceiving art and beauty, which Western standards already defined.21 Kant reinforced this dualism when he attributed virtue, mental capacity, and intellect to European populations, and barbarianism, savagery, and false taste to non-Western groups. He based all of these characterizations on perception, or seeing,


21 See Immanuel Kant, Observation on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960). For Kant, the French, the English, the Germans, and the Spanish all experience slight variation on the feeling. Some people may experience a blend of the beautiful and the sublime, while others encounter more of the sublime. Yet in his discussion of North Africa, the Orient, and North American Natives, he refers to them as “savages” and argues that they are without the capacity to even experience a degree or minute combination of the beautiful and the sublime. His racialization of aesthetics is bluntly expressed in his claim that because all “savages” have no feeling for the beautiful, they thus have no moral understanding or nobleness. He extends this so-called inner inability of artistic experience to an exterior aesthetic inferiority as he places dark skin/dark eyes within the irrational of the sublime and white skin/blue eyes within the beautiful. By relegating women and non-Western peoples to the realm of “nature,” and Western men to the realm of reason, Kant’s Observations produces the type of dualism between divine reason and nature that Quijano describes. See pages 108-112.
and through feeling, additionally arguing that the aesthetic experience is tied to moral conduct.

So-called examples of racialized behavior and moral conduct were often visualized in the Americas during the colonial period through Casta paintings, which were used to visually control racial mixing between Natives, the Spanish and Africans. The paintings depict couples with their offspring, portrayed as scientific objects, with each racial combination labeled with illogical names that pointed to multiple combinations and ranged from labels like *chinos, moriscos, mestizos, zambaigos, lobos, retorno atras*, and many more. The Casta paintings were the visualization of an already existing *sistema de castas*, a system of racial hierarchy, that were commissioned by Criollo elites for collectors in the Colony and for exportation to Europe, communicating to Europeans abroad that, despite the endless creation of new colonial identities, the Other remained under the control and gaze of the colonizer. Soon, photography became a dangerous tool with which to categorize, label, and criminalize indigenous peoples. Combined with phrenology studies, photography was used to argue that criminal behavior could be identified in a person merely by looking at their physical traits and skull

22 Edward Sullivan claims that casta paintings offer valuable historical and sociological data into the colonial period, providing insight into colonial divisions of labor and “societal prejudices of the time.” He further notes that scholars who have seriously studied casta paintings, mostly anthropologists, identified these as a product of the Enlightenment. See Edward J. Sullivan, “Un Fenomeno Visual De America,” *Artes en Mexico, Nueva Epoca*, (Summer 1990), 58-71. For instance, Teresa Castelló Yturide has shown that artists of casta paintings were fully aware of the dress regulations enforced at the time, noting one sixteenth-century Royal Tribunal clearly states: “No Mestizo, Mulato or Black woman shall dress as an Indian Woman, but as the Spanish woman do, under penalty of arrest and being beaten through the streets with 100 blows and a fine for 4 reales paid to the arresting officer; the foregoing is also applicable to the Mestizo, Mulatto and Black women, married to Indians.” A century later, proclamations were still issued, indicating “Indians [are] to wear their own dress, go barefoot and refrain from using capes, and Mestizos to appear without swords.” See Yturide, Teresa Castelló. “La Indumentaria De Las Castas Del Mestizaje.” *Artes en Mexico, Nueva Epoca*, (Summer 1990), 73-80: 87.
shape, using the visual to criminalize the Other. Furthermore, recent scholarship has shown contemporary examples of how photography became a tool to further foster racist notions between the Self and the Other implicated in tourist postcards, lynchings, and even how whiteness developed into a racial construct.²³

More can be said of the role of art, visual culture, and academic production in further creating racial divisions of superiority and inferiority between Western and non-Western peoples, but that is beyond the scope of this project. What has been overlooked in these various cases is the greater scheme of how coloniality is also linked to the senses, and visualities in particular. What I suggest is that in the coloniality of power it is not sufficient to control how the Other is seen but further to control the way the Other sees. For it is only by refuting the Other’s way of seeing that the imposition of Western ways of seeing are made possible. For the West, the dominated must not only think from a Eurocentric perspective. They must see from that perspective as well. In controlling one’s sense of vision, coloniality further controls knowing, and by extension, the production of knowledge.

My point here is that the visual was also colonized, and that Western disciplines have utilized and theorized visual practice to racialize native peoples of the Americas. Tuhiwai Smith, who critically analyzes the cultural evolution of the Western concept of ‘research’ in her important book Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples, recognizes that “in their

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foundations, Western disciplines are as much implicated in each other as they are in imperialism. Some, such as anthropology, made the study of us into ‘their’ science, others were employed in the practices of imperialism in less direct but far more devastating ways.” 24 I argue the colonization of seeing is one of those less acknowledged yet devastating ways through which coloniality persists, and it is a contemporary issue to deal with because the colonization of knowledge persists in contemporary political, educational, and cultural institutions, and thus, is continuously perpetuated.

The decolonization of knowledge requires more than exposing the racist and hidden logic of coloniality. A decolonial methodology demands the opening of a space, with alternative perspectives and voices that will depart from silenced histories, theories, and other geopolitical embodiments and ways of knowing. An incomplete approach will only unveil those silences, whereas a decolonial approach re-inscribes and affirms epistemic rights. My goal is not to ignore the current Western knowledge but, through what Mignolo calls an “epistemic disobedience,” to challenge what has been accepted as universal knowledge by creating a pluri-versal of epistemes and thus make “inter-cultural communication” possible. 25

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24 Tuhiwai Smith, 11.

25 Walter Mignolo’s main premise is: “[The] geo- and body-politics of knowledge has been hidden from the self serving interest of Western epistemology and that a task of de-colonial thinking is the unveiling of epistemic silences of Western epistemology and affirming the epistemic rights of the racially devalued, and de-colonial options to allow the silences to build arguments to confront those who take ‘originality’ as the ultimate criterion for the final judgment.” See Mignolo, Walter D. “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom.” Theory, Culture & Society 26, no. 7-8 (2009): 4.
Engaging in epistemic disobedience by shifting the geographies of reason and enacting geo-body politics, (an inverted displacement of the theo- and ego-political knowledge production, with geo-historical and body-graphical politics of knowledge) can then lead to forms of civil disobedience that bring about transformation, not just reform.26 Yet as long as the same notions of racism remain hidden in Western knowledge, and in art history, alternative voices will only be included superficially. Through such superficial inclusion indigeneity became a “theme” to promote indigenous roots in art and to strengthen nationalism but it did not emerge from an indigenous perspective. Consequently, this generated a paradoxical celebration and genocide of indigenous peoples.

What does it mean then, to decolonize seeing and visuality? How can the arts and visuality contribute to projects of decolonization? In the spirit of “talking back,” “writing back,” or “researching back,”27 art and visual culture of groups most affected by coloniality also “visualize back.” These groups claim ownership over images, ways of seeing, knowing, and therefore, reclaim histories and knowledge and reaffirm visual epistemic rights. I argue this may be done through a “visual disobedience.” Visual disobedience is a decolonial gesture that undermines the logic of the coloniality of power and unveils the coloniality of seeing while reaffirming the political and epistemic nature of the visual and other senses. Moreover, visual disobedience is a method of theorizing


27 Tuhiwai Smith, 7. Tuhiwai Smith describes part of the project of her book as “researching back.”
through the senses, an act that rejects the claims of Western authority through theory that constructs the rules and framework to study colonized peoples. It is a decolonial gesture by both artists and academics.

At its core, visual disobedience defies the logic of the non-human in the coloniality of seeing. Intellect, history-making, and creation are the human abilities that comprise our humanity, the same abilities colonizers invalidated in indigenous peoples to determine them non-human, partially-human, and inferior and thus without human rights and outside of society and justice. Therefore, visual disobedience is an action that asserts humanity through that which is rejected—that very intellect, history-making, and expressive creation evidenced in art. Acts of visual disobedience reflect on the historical and contemporary struggles, transmit information and knowledge through their materialization, and specifically convey the junctures of a historical past with its contemporary consequence; it is a sensorial theorization of time and space.

III. Performance as Corporal Critiques of Coloniality and Healing

In the capital city of Guatemala, amidst the fast-paced walking pedestrians and loud traffic noise, an Indigenous man dressed as an elder from his Mayan-Tz’utujil community intervened in the chaotic urban space, making all nearby stop and take notice of his performance El Grito (2002) (The Scream) (Figure 28). The artist, Benvenuto Chavajay, paced back and forth on the busy sidewalk swinging a matraca (a rattle or noisemaker used during processions) around and above his head. With this religious instrument and symbol of Guatemalan identity from his hometown, he echoed a sound very familiar to his
community during the 36 year long armed conflict—the sound of gunshots. By projecting this sound into the city and its pedestrians, he evoked a memory, reminding citizens of the war and all its unresolved injustices, but he did not speak a word. Instead, Chavajay evaded and exceeded the limits of a sound associated with repression and with his bodily presence transformed the sound into a visual and corporal scream of resistance, of condemnation—one that cannot be expressed or experienced in the same way with a word or through text, as it requires the full embodiment and presence of both the artist and his viewers. While Chavajay’s gesture evoked sound, his traditional dress and indigenous body assigned it meaning. The public may have viewed this action as a theatrical performance, a social protest, or even as a work of performance art, but how can one understand and analyze Chavajay’s performance as a form of visual disobedience? Through his performance, Benvenuto Chavajay recognizes how sound and language remain implicated in coloniality, and intervenes in public spaces with his body to enact visual and corporal screams of denunciation. I suggest his interventions can be understood as corporal critique of contemporary systems that continue to uphold notions of race, superiority, and inferiority to deem a group of people non-human. There are no representations of the indigenous bodies here, but the active presence of the artist’s own body as a decolonial gesture of embodiment and knowledge, not one represented under the gaze of another, but one that enunciates and speaks as it intervenes in the public space. Chavajay is one of several artists in Guatemala who are at the forefront of delinking from a coloniality of visualization and who enact decolonial gestures through their bodies.
The postwar period in Central America has given way to performance art as the most notable art form in the country, and consists of public interventions and acciones. Though this practice emerged in 1990s in the region, there have been precursors that due to little or no documentation are less known. Pérez-Ratton has acknowledged such artists but noted that at their time their actions were rarely considered “art” and became isolated cases.\textsuperscript{28} It is not surprising then that the emergence of performance as an experimental practice follows intense decades of violence. In her analysis of performance art through the lens of trauma studies, Kristine Stiles has revealed the link between historical, social, and individual traumatic experiences with the use of the artist’s body as a creative form that gives testimony to the incomprehensibility of tragedy. She has noted: “This fury is a condition of the post-Holocaust, post-atomic bomb, post-biological, post-modern world that carries with it not only the old sexism and racism and classism and ethnic divisions of the past, but the new ‘post’ human condition. Action art is an aesthetic practice that specifically presents the most threatening and delighting conditions of human experience.”\textsuperscript{29} Hence, like other parts of the world the impact of war in Guatemala provoked an exploration of the fragility and strength of the human body that sought to reconcile the trauma of death with the relief and guilt of survival. Guatemala specifically, by contrast


to the rest of the region, became a catalyst for emerging performance artists and
significant in the development of performance art in Central America, mostly in
part due to *Octubre Azul* (Blue October)–the first performance festival dedicated
to public interventions in the country.

Peace accords in 1996 concluded the thirty-six-year war, and in 2000 the
country was still in a process of reconciliation and investigation that resulted in
increased financial support for cultural activities. An urban art collective group,
*el equipo de arte urbano*, created the festival *Octubre Azul* to celebrate recent trends
in contemporary art that acknowledged the new urban context in Guatemala.
They looked to the city as a space of anarchy and contradictions. Spaces
originally designed for official and national functions, closed off to citizens, were
now full of street vendors, beggars, performers, and rural to urban migrants as a
result of the recent violence. Over two hundred artists participated in a series of
events that ranged from actions and happenings to installations, poetry readings,
and even punk rock performances. As a result, participants created new images
to insert into the collective imaginary of Guatemala, while blurring the line with
the current political demonstrations that occurred simultaneously.\(^30\)

The month of October was specifically chosen for the festival to
conmemorate “*La Revolution del 44*” [The Revolution of 1944], a protest by
university students, professors, and workers against the oppressive regime of

\(^{30}\) Cazali, Rosina *Pasos a Desnivel: Mapa Urbano De La Cultura Contemporánea En Guatemala*. 1 ed.
(Ciudad de Guatemala: Artgrafic de Guatemala, 2003).
dictator Jorge Ubico Castañeda.\textsuperscript{31} The historical significance of the month, therefore, is crucial to understanding the act of resistance the urban collective attributed to the festival \textit{Octubre Azul}, highlighting not only the new revolutionary generation and artistic practices but also the new forms of political demonstration that overtook the same, yet transformed, public space. This public space became the stage for the two hundred artists who executed performances in the markets, parks, church atriums, and of course the streets, including buildings like the arch of the \textit{Edificio de Correos}.\textsuperscript{32} The festival launched a creative space for internationally recognized performance artists Regina Galindo, Aníbal López, and Jorge de Leon (who will be discussed in the following chapters) but also for less known artists Benvenuto Chavajay, Sandra Monterroso, Angel Poyón and Fernando Poyón. Thus, \textit{Octubre Azul} is understood to have influenced a generation, igniting a movement in performance art in the Isthmus where artists took to the public spaces as a way to reconcile with memories of military presence and public massacres that occurred in the streets and plazas only a few years prior. Among the most memorable performances was Jorge de Leon’s \textit{El Circulo} (Figure 29) in which the artist inserted a needle and thread though his lips in a circular motion to seal his lips shut. Metaphorically, he enacted the

\textsuperscript{31} The government retaliated with violent repression that led to the death of a teacher, Maria Chinchilla. With their new martyr, protesters continued their struggle, resorting to hunger strikes until Ubico was forced to step down from power. During those political manifestations, an intense surge of artistic and intellectual growth transpired in Guatemala. For more on the Revolution of 1944 and the professors involved, see: Yagenova, Simona Violetta. \textit{Los Maestros Y La Revolución De Octubre (1944-1954)}. (Guatemala: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales 2006).

repeated cycle of silencing that, despite the postwar period, remained a common form of repression through fear tactics. Jorge was not only physically drawing and visualizing, but feeling this painful act—the act of forced self-censorship. His reference extended into the past, into the continuous muzzling of history pain, and beyond that, into scarring on the collective body. Alejandro Paz’s *El Genocidio* (Figure 30 and 31) created an image of small corpses to address this violence. For his performance the artist scattered dolls all over the plaza in front of the Court of Justice reenacting a massacre of small bodies. For three hours pedestrians walked through the plaza at times taking a close look at the dolls or whispering something to each other, but rarely did anyone stop long enough to enquire about the details. The artist thus alluded to the existing impunity in the country towards the many testimonies that remain unheard and cases of violence that remain unresolved. One less acknowledged result is that *Octubre Azul* also facilitated a space where performance first addressed indigeneity and violence to critique the repressive structures of the state, which targeted indigenous peoples.

While many of these artists were increasingly recognized as performance artists in the postwar period, the use of the body and performativity has a long and unique history in the hemisphere. Artist and scholar Coco Fusco has pointed to the unique influences and context that differentiate the emergence of performance art in Latin America from other parts of the world that constitute the “canon.” They include popular cultural influences such as *cabaret* or *carpa* with their non-narrative structures, gestural vocabularies, and anti-bourgeois sentiment. They further include rituals and religious sources, which offer corporeal vocabularies derived from pre-Columbian, colonial, African and...
catholic traditions, and transmit collective histories through dance.\textsuperscript{33} The importance of the ephemeral to symbolically confront the state, as opposed to the art institution, is additionally significant due to the history of the State in Latin America. For Latin American the state has been experienced as “harsh, if not excessively physical” due to the forced disappearances, military and police brutality, and repression of protesting voices.\textsuperscript{34} Fusco thus challenges the assumption that performance art in the Americas stems from similar European and Anglo developments in the late 1990s. Locating the history of performance in a non-Eurocentric point of departure, within this greater historical system of Latin American coloniality, is a way to recover the idea that embodied acts and behaviors have a long history as systems of learning, storing and transmitting knowledge that extends to pre-conquest times.

In addition to its aesthetic and political qualities, performance can be understood as a knowledge system that include what what performance studies scholar Diana Taylor coins as the “archive” and the “repertoire.”\textsuperscript{35} Unlike the archive—knowledge as it exists in documents, maps, bones, videos, film and anything resistant to change— the repertoire enacts embodied memory (gestures, performances, orality, movement, and dance) and includes ephemeral acts considered non-reproducible knowledge. Additionally, performance art creates scenarios, which Taylor views as “meaning-making paradigms that structure


\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 9.

social environment, behaviors and potential outcomes.” 36 Like a sketch or plot of a play, the scenario conveys particularities of a scene or setting, communicating images, and concepts and information that pertain to an environment, and more specifically convey a “repeat”. Thus for Taylor, “the scenario makes visible what is already there: the ghosts, the images, the stereotypes.” 37 The scenario, Taylor proposes, can be used as an alternative to the privileged text and narrative as systems of knowledge. Keeping these terms in mind further helps understand the epistemic value in performances while not losing sight that these are aesthetic acts, for the men and women using their bodies as sites of political critique and meaning-making are also conscious of the aesthetic experience and images they create: they are artists. They create scenarios not only through the actual performance but through the multiple images produced that are ultimately read and interpreted in a myriad of times and spatial contexts.

Chavajay’s El Grito, offers and irreproducible embodiment of testimony, a protesting scream. By bringing el Grito to the urban space, Chavjay creates witnesses that must hear the sound. The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by “being there,” being a part of the transmission. His scream thus becomes a testimonial outburst, brought from the rural areas where most atrocities to indigenous peoples were unreported or ignored, and into the fast-pace urban city. His scream is a reminder, that despite the postwar period, the wounds of violence remain an

36 Ibid., 28.
37 Ibid., 28.
agonizing pain and the garment he wear (used by Tz’utujil elders) locate this scream specifically from an indigenous embodiment. In addition to his performance, Chavjay created an archive of photographic images that cannot reproduce the sound of the *matraca*, but offer a visual manifestation of the scream. While the *matraca* reiterates the connection to gunshots from the war, the visual dress connects the war with the indigenous target, creating a scenario for viewers of resistance. Together these offer an alternative epistemic system that challenges Western ways of knowing. Thus there is not one singular scream, but instead two *gritos*—the echo of the military scream, and the scream of the Tz’utujil contesting the scream of the military. Despite the lack of words, Chavjay provides the ingredients for a protesting memory, inviting viewers to reflect on the lack of justice that remains after the war. Through his visual disobedience, he exposes the racist structures of war and simultaneously offsets Western representations of indigenous peoples as passive. In the archive he creates, there is no peaceful indigenous body from an ancient civilization, but rather, an active and able body, present in the urban space and that demands to be heard. His visual disobedience allows one to view these works not only as activist interventions but also as aesthetic contributions forcing viewers to challenge the parameters of what we view as activism, as knowledge, and as art.

Also using public spaces, the artist Sandra Monterroso occupied the plaza in front of the Supreme Court of Guatemala both as a condemnation and as a healing process. During her performance titled *Rakoc Atin* (2008), she wrote out in large-scale the words *Rakoc Atin* with sea salt on the ground (Figure 32). In Maya Q’ec’chi’, *Rakoc Atin* means *hacer justicia*, or “to make justice.”
Montt rule it was common that military forces disposed of indigenous people by throwing them from helicopters into the Pacific Ocean. Some bodies returned with the tide, but most were never to be seen again, which impeded both a proper burial ceremony and rituals of mourning. By using sea salt, Monterroso condemned the inhumane military practice while simultaneously calling on the significance of salt in many indigenous rituals and practices for healing and cleansing.

As part of her performance, however, various intravenous machines, which are used to transfer liquids (blood, medicine, or drugs) into a main artery as a form of medical treatment, slowly leaked liquid onto the words, diluting them (Figure 33). This subtle watering down of the phrase Rakoc Atin spoke to the fact that when victims or their families reported crimes of violence in their native languages to police authorities, they often went undocumented due to a lack of translators. The same silencing occurred during a peace process that sought testimonies to initiate healing and reconciliation processes but lacked translators to communicate in various languages. In simulating the disintegration of words with a machine intended to keep people alive and heal them, Monterroso not only implicated language within the power of coloniality but also the failures of the peace process as a superficial healing.

The brief and superficial healing becomes all the more relevant considering that ten days after the historic guilty verdict for the U.S. backed military dictator Rios Montt in 2013, by which he was sentenced to eighty years for genocide and crimes against humanity, the Guatemala Constitutional court
annulled the jury’s verdict.\(^3\) Constantly, when there appears to be signs of justice in the horizon, it becomes evident that the racist structures of the governmental institutional systems remain intact. Moreover, the series of brave testimonies given by indigenous men and women who either suffered direct violence under Riot Montt, or lost a family member under his rule, opened wounds that were left exposed rather than healed. Monterroso’s performance reveals that contradiction through the site of her work, in front of the Court of Justice. Her choice of location further contributes to her visual disobedience, as it publically challenges the key judicial institution. Through her performance she exposes the judiciary’s culpability in perpetuating a violence that extends from the physical to the psychological and spiritual traumas that come from the erasure of victim’s testimonies.

While Chavajay produced sound as a scream and Monterroso physically shaped words, both artists offered gestures of communication that break through a silence. This silence, however, should not be limited to the current repression of indigenous peoples under Rios Mont, for it further summons a sound, voice and gesture that depart from centuries of repression, evoking a collective call for remembrance and justice.

This notion of collectivity in memory also forms a component of Ángel Poyón’s performance, Letanía (Litany) (2008) (Figures 34 and 35). While Poyón conceptualized the performance, he invited a member of his Kachikel community in the town of Comalapa, Carlos Poyón, to assist in carrying out the

\(^3\) As these events are developing, we have yet to see the outcome of the annulment.
action. With a machete, a tool used by campesinos for agricultural work, Carlos dug a hole in the ground, creating a portal, or “window,” into the depths of the earth. With a lighted candle, a jar of water and a list with hundreds of names of those disappeared during the conflict in Comalapa, Carlos spoke into the pit, communicating with the souls of the disappeared. One by one, he read out their names and posed a series of questions: “what happened to you, what did they do to you, where are you now?”

For the performance, Ángel referred to a Mayan Kachikel ritual of calling the names of the deceased whose souls were suspected to still wander in the realm of the living, and encouraged them to transcend into another cosmological dimension. Carlos, whose father was among the disappeared, was an active member of the mobilization to search for the disappeared and to exhume their cadavers when they were located in clandestine graves. Originally, Ángel imagined Carlos to carry out the ritual for his father, whose death was a “cold” death, that is, unwarranted and unexpected, and thus offering Carlos the opportunity for a desahaogo, to vent and relief pain. Yet, as he explained, Carlos felt he could not ignore the other victims and chose instead to summon a dialogue with all of the disappeared from Comalapa, offering a collective remembrance and healing. Ángel agreed.

Chavajay, Monterroso and Poyón show that healing is a collective effort and a historical process. They have developed experimental forms not only to create art but also to give continuity to a way of living based on indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies. While performance has relatively recently been

39 Ángel Poyón, Skype interview by Kency Cornejo, December 12, 2013.
accepted as an art form in Guatemala, especially after *Octubre Azul*, as artists they conjure ancient Mayan practices and elements that center on the body as a vehicle for healing, for transmitting knowledge, for seeking justice—and one that transcends from the corporal to the spiritual. As artists, they depart from these indigenous ways of being to offer decolonial gestures that publicly attack the legacy of coloniality in current governmental, military, and legal institutions. Their visual disobedience becomes a collective critique of coloniality and a method of communal testimony and healing.

**IV. Objects and the Underside of Modernity**

Artists like Chavajay, Pichillá, and Ángel Poyón and Fernando Poyón form a generation of Maya who grew up in a period of war. In the postwar period, their interventions, installations, and performances reveal and denounce the injustices toward indigenous peoples and simultaneously re-inscribe ways of seeing from their indigenous communities in their artistic practices. In addition to their performances, their object-based works offer a decolonial critique of Eurocentric modernity and its underside, evoking what the Argentinian-Mexican philosopher of liberation Enrique Düssel calls for in his utopic concept of “transmodernity.” Düssel locates the beginning of Eurocentric modernity with the discovery and conquest of the Americas in 1492, in which Europe defined a single version of modernity, one elevated as a center amongst a periphery, and then imposed it onto the world as a global design. While Europe expanded into other parts of the world as a “center,” it required the creation of this binary—the underdeveloped, the backwards, the neo-colonial—which for Düssel constitutes
the “second moment” of modernity, or its underside. In the project of transmodernity, Düssel calls for a multiplicity of critiques of modernity by colonized peoples around the world. He views this task necessary to truly complete the 20th century project of decolonization.

Chavajay and Poyón perform acts of visual disobedience and materialize transmodernity by abandoning the “accepted” and expected style of art now dominant in their hometowns. Unlike the traditional style of painting practiced by local artists in San Pedro and Comalapa, they eliminate representations of indigenous bodies and instead allow these works to convey Tz’utujil and Kachikel understandings of modernity/coloniality. Their ways of seeing materialize through a resignification of objects: Chavajay re-inscribes Tz’utujil ways of seeing the sacred in the earth, and Poyón challenges concepts of time associated with western modernity. Through these nonfigurative, object-based works they bring forth current political issues of the environment, borders, and migration as the underside of modernity.

San Pedro La Laguna is one of several indigenous towns located at the edge of Lake Atitlán in the department of Sololá, Guatemala.40 It is home to the Tz’utujil community, one of twenty-one Mayan ethnic groups in the country that made up the ancient Mayan civilization. Today, an influx of foreign travelers has turned the town into a tourist site with an overflow of backpackers, hostels, and

40 For more on the indigenous communities surrounding Lake Atitlán see Morna Macleod. Santiago Atitlán, Ombligo Del Universo Tz’utujil: Cosmovisión Y Ciudadanía. (Guatemala: Oxfam Gran Bretaña, Oxfam Australia, Novib, 2000).
restaurants run by foreign retirees. While the town is known for its strong artistic community, in particular paintings of quotidian life in a traditional folkloric style for tourist consumption, a new generation rejects this artistic tradition to engage in practices rooted in indigenous ways of seeing.

Chavajay, who resides in both Guatemala City and San Pedro La Laguna, links the lake’s environmental deterioration to the arrival of a foreign modernity. In his La Suave Chapina series, the artist transforms local rocks, stones, and other objects from Lake Atitlán by attaching to them plastic straps of the popular Suave Chapina brand of sandal (Figures 36 and 37). The brand’s name is a merger of the words soft and chapina, the informal name used to refer to a Guatemalan woman. As Chavajay has noted about plastic, “This material marked Guatemalan society, above all the indigenous world. With its arrival everything changed. Modernity inplasticated our culture.”

This brand of sandal became both an inexpensive commodity of desire and an alternative to going barefoot. While the lightweight material of the sandal should project comfort and convenience, Chavajay has replaced the “sole” of the sandal with the natural rocks from San Pedro La Laguna, bringing forth the weight, heaviness, and

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41 Away from the shore, or what art historian Maria Victoria Véliz has called the “downtown” of San Pedro, and up the steep slope of the volcano, tourists become less visible and the Tz’utujil community becomes more present. See, Maria Victoria Véliz in “Seguir hacia delante, volver la Mirada hacia atrás” in Suave Chapina: Benvenuto Chavajay, exhibition pamphlet. (Ciudad de Guatemala: Centro Cultural Metropolitano, 2007).


43 Benvenuto Chavajay, in “A los chunches no los transformo, los transfiguro, no hay nada que hacerles” interview by Beatriz Colmenares. May 12, 2013: wwwelperiodico.com.gt/es/20130512/domingo/228140/
plight of the Tz’utujil community. This juxtaposition and relation between materials, in which plastic represents a foreign modernity and the rocks represent the lake and the Tz’utujil people, go beyond a critique of environmental destruction of land from tourist invasion of San Pedro. Instead, modernity as “inplastication” of indigenous culture summons in the artist’s own terms what scholars like Düessel and the modernity/coloniality group have noted as the underside of modernity.\textsuperscript{44} The series asserts resistance and survival despite European modernity.\textsuperscript{45} Chavajay maintains a Tz’utujil epistemic connection through the base and sole of the artworks—pieces of earth that have existed for centuries as witness to Tz’utujil journeys.

The stones, moreover, are infused with a definition of art and the sacred that delinks from Western definitions of art. In the Tz’utujil community the word art or arte in the Spanish colonial idiom emerged only fifty years ago.\textsuperscript{46} For artists like Chavajay, the closest equivalent to the meaning of ‘art’ in Tz’utujil is “the sacred” which applies especially to nature, from the tallest trees to the smallest stones.


\textsuperscript{45} Resistance can also take the shape of intervention and thus to referencing other modes of modernity as Esther Gabara explains with the concept of errant modernism, where she theorizes ethos as the intersection of ethics and aesthetics to show a “formulation of modernist aesthetics as a practice of formal intervention into the forms of every day life, rather than formalism only as artistic purity...” In this manner, Chavajay presents quotidian objects that are representative of a historical moment, style, and an intervention tactic that simultaneously raises environmental concerns, all while producing a unique aesthetic, thus conveying the intersection of ethics and aesthetics. See, Esther Gabara, \textit{Errant Modernism: The Ethos of photography in Mexico and Brazil}. Durham: A John Hope Franklin Center Book, Duke University Press; 2008; 6.

\textsuperscript{46} Benvenuto Chavajay, interview by Kency Cornejo, San Salvador, El Salvador, May 29, 2011.
rocks. This notion extends beyond a mere belief and into a daily praxis and relation with Mother Earth based on respect, sustenance, and reciprocity. It is significant to note that indigenous relations with nature continue to contrast and challenge the ill-treatment and violent disregard of nature prominent in the coloniality of power, capitalism, and Western ways of living—especially as they entail the destruction of Indigenous bodies and sacred lands and plants. Accordingly, the conviction that the sacredness of life in nature’s objects is the most accurate definition of art; it challenges the notion of art as commodity while maintaining a fundamental spiritual connection to visual culture and life that has survived for over 500 years.

Chavajay also utilizes other sacred materials such as maize, tortillas, and guacales to address the process of transculturation from the perspective of modernity/coloniality. For instance, in the 2013 exhibition at the “Feria Internacional de ARte Contemporáneo” in Madrid, Spain, Chavajay submitted a black mazorca (corn cob) with wooden wings attached to its side as his art piece (Figure 38). The work stemmed from Chavajay’s personal memory: the first time a plane crossed the skies over San Pedro La Laguna and across Lake Atitlán. Chiefly, he responded to the community’s reaction by looking at the sky with a clear conscience that this object above all of them marked an upcoming change, one spoken of by the elders and ancestors. This was a “dark consciousness,” as Chavajay sees, making the color of the maíz all the more relevant in connecting an arrival of modernity with a dark future, thus linking the impact of past

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47 Ibid.
colonization with current coloniality. Moreover, the black *maiz*, already instilled with sacredness and historical and cultural significance tied to life and spirituality for indigenous communities, is hard to cultivate, making it both sacred and rare. When colonizers came to the Americas in search of riches and wealth, they were shocked to know that indigenous communities ascribed more value to *maiz*, chocolate, and other natural items than gold, and colonizers belittled this significance as ignorance. Sending *maiz* back to Spain, as an art object no less, and the cultural value it entails, conveys a visual disobedience, reinforcing the resistance, persistence, and preservation of indigenous spiritual and cultural values, despite colonization and coloniality. The arrival of modernity/coloniality did not fully impose its own values, as indigenous communities have resisted them for centuries through epistemic and visual disobedience.

By contrast, the Kachikel artist Ángel Poyón, who also makes object-based artworks, conveys the failures of modernity in Guatemala by making a connection to displacement. Poyón is from the town San Juan Comalapa, located in the department of Chimaltenango, inhabited by the Indigenous Maya Kachikel and widely known for a tradition of folklore painting that extends back to the 1940s with the master Andres Curruchiche (b. 1891-1969). As a young boy, Curruchiche worked as a farmer during which time he acquired an interest in painting objects and local scenes onto feathers, wood, *jícaras* (gourds), and later cloth panels. Once “discovered” by a local priest, he gained international recognition and went on to exhibit in the United States, consequently initiating the artistic tradition in Comalapa where he taught others his style of painting.
Hundreds of artists reside in Comalapa today, including his daughter María Curruchiche who, along with several women artists, continues painting in the traditional style of Comalapa. While the style is respected in the community, it is also a more acceptable national style for what is considered a “naïve” and de-politicized style representative of a non-threatening indigeneity in Guatemala. Ángel Poyón and his brother Fernando Poyón mark a clear departure from this traditional style into experimentation with conceptual, installation, and performance art.

In Estudios del Fracaso Medidos en Tiempo y Espacio (2008) (Studies on failure measured in time and space), Ángel Poyón recovers old-fashioned twin-bell alarm clocks, eliminating the numbers as a reference to Western concepts of time, instead depicting in their place paths of movement, migration, and displacement (Figure 40). The lines—evoking one of the most notable modernist artists in the West, Piet Mondrian—offer a contradictory journey, with overlaps, repetitions, and an unclear directionality that propose an oppositional framework of time and space brought on by modernity’s failures. As the Guatemalan curator Rosina Cazali has argued, “these studies suggest a useless pathway, as was the project of modernity.” Moreover, the vintage clocks further evoke an element of nostalgia to the passing of time and movements in space, but in the context of

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49 A younger generation follows in their footsteps, like Edgar Calel.

Guatemala, nostalgia is offset by recent memories of forced migration—either rural to urban, or across national borders, as a result of the Guatemalan conflict.

In a similar way that maps of world have located indigenous lands on the periphery, including the renaming of native lands, Poyon’s work brings to mind how concepts of western time have also located indigenous peoples in a pre-history time. In western modernity, time becomes a linear chronology of development with a point of “discovery” from which actual and real time begins. In such manner, an event becomes factual only when located within that western time frame of development and progress. Anything left out of such chronology, including people and their visions of the world, are deemed backwards and incapable of self-actualization. In modernity, histories are written as one large chronology in contrast to indigenous concepts of history and time.

Poyon’s piece disrupts measurements of time and space associated with Eurocentered modernity by inverting its western concept of the line. Tuhiway Smith has noted:

There is a very specific spatial vocabulary of colonialism which can be assembled around three concepts: 1) the line, 2) the center, and 3) the outside. The ‘line’ is important because it was used to map territory, to survey land, to establish boundaries, and to mark the limits of colonial power. The ‘center’ is important because orientation to the center was an orientation to the system of power. The ‘outside’ is important because it positioned territory and people in an oppositional relationship to the colonial ‘center’…”

With this in mind one can understand Poyon’s replacement of numbers (representing measurements of time) with broken and undecipherable lines as a clear confrontation to the spatial vocabulary of colonialism. That is, his clocks

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subvert the line to convey instead movement, migration and displacement that in turn blur the epicenter of power. Both the sleek shape (the clocks outer form) and the unruly lines (on the inner clock) create a visual juxtaposition that allude to two co-existing modernities—the former presented as keeper of time, and the latter, its underside.

Furthermore, only when space is compartmentalized can it be measured and defined as it has in eurocentered modernity where social activity in relation to space and time produces binaries as work/home, public/domestic, and city/country. With these concepts of Western time and space, Western modernity has represented and radically transformed indigenous worldviews in the spatial image of the west, to the west. Thus when indigenous social activity did not fit within these concepts, notions of laziness were inserted into Western views towards indigenous peoples.

Thus, La Suave Chapina series, like Ángel Poyón's Estudios del fracaso medidos en tiempo y espacio, expose the relation between an imposed modernity and its underside, coloniality. On the one hand, Poyón’s piece conveys that space and time exist relationally. The zigzag, incomplete, and overlapping lines in Poyon’s clocks visually disrupts western notions of time and history associated with a Eurocentered modernity. On the other hand, Chavajay departs from Tz’utijil notions of the sacred to create art objects that tell a history of modernity for Mayan Tz’utujil. Both insert other histories covered under the cloak of Western modernity, a visual disobedience to both Western notions of time, space and history, as well as to the figurative representations of indigenous life customary in their hometowns.
V. Religion and Spirituality in Video and Installation

Studies have shown that Indigenous artists trained in Western styles of art during the colonial period inconspicuously incorporated symbols and imagery of indigenous significance unknown to the Spanish colonizers and priests who supervised the works. While Indigenous peoples took on Christian religious practices, they also subverted them to incorporate and preserve indigenous cosmologies and spirituality. In Guatemala, artists like Fernando Poyón and Antonio Pichillá depend less on figurative associations to address the spiritual and instead use installation and video to critically reflect on Christianity’s consequences and to reinforce an indigenous spirituality today.

In the fifteen-second video *Contra la Pared* (2005) (Against the Wall), Fernando Poyón presents a close-up shot of three Mayan women in their traditional dress (Figure 41). Poyón frames the lower half of the women’s faces while they speak words not heard by viewers. Instead, the only sound heard is the classical Catholic hymn “Ave María” that plays throughout the duration of the video. The camera zooms out, never showing the women’s faces but merely expanding the screen shot to frame their torsos to present a broken figuration. One then sees the women repeating a gesture customary of the Catholic prayer “I Confess to You.” In the Spanish version of this prayer, during the phrase “por mi

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52 For example, the Virgin of Guadalupe was secretly worshipped as Pre-Columbian Goddess Coatlicue. This imagery has been especially central to Chicana/o artists in the United States who root their spirituality through the incorporation of pre-Columbian imagery in their artwork. For a study on this relation between spirituality and indigeneity in Chicano Latino art, see Laura E. Pérez, *Chicana Art: the politics of spiritual and aesthetic altarities* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007); and Guisela Latorre, *Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indigenist Murals of California* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).
culpa, por mi culpa, por mi gran culpa” one is to repeatedly take the right fist to the heart as a gesture of guilt and remorse. Poyón associates this act as being “backed against the wall,” as the title indicates. In removing all context and isolating the act of self-blame as the focus of the video, the artist highlights that there is no justification for the confession, conveying solely the robotic gesture of guilt as an internalized colonialist act. Rooted in the imposition of Christianity as a method for colonization, and specifically the slaughter of those who refused conversion, Fernando Poyón points to this self-blame as a forced, but also internalized, mode of survival to coloniality. The lack of facial expression or visible eyes, and the mere mechanical manner in which the women repeat the gesture, conveys a dissociation from its meaning, differentiating between a compromise to evade death and that of complete submission. In this manner, the artist reveals the role of Christianity from an initial colonization to one that extends into contemporary coloniality manifested through self-blame. Moreover, the concepts of blame and self-blame remain a prevalent concern for indigenous communities because there is no outside accountability for the oppression and injustices indigenous peoples experience. Women, in particular, often suffer domestic violence in silence; their perpetrators convince them that they are responsible for “provoking” the violence. Similarly, a large portion of the elite population in Guatemala including current president Otto Pérez Molina, refuse to acknowledge that the military agenda to kill hundreds of thousands of Maya-Ixil constituted genocide. All parties implicated reject accountability and instead relegate blame to the indigenous communities.
Conversely, Pichillá departs from a Mayan Tz’utujil spirituality in his installations and videos. In the large-scale installation titled *Ku’kul’kan* (Feathered Serpent) (2011), Pichillá utilizes massive amounts of red cloth in a sculptural representation of the ancient fire serpent god Quetzalcoatl (Figure 42). The serpentine form includes a series of large knots. The artist then placed the sculpture across the wall to simulate its movement. Visually, Pichillá works with the concept of the knots and bundles from a strict Tz’utujil spirituality and energy. In the Tz’utujil community of San Pedro La Laguna, the artist is also known as a spiritual guide (or shaman) called upon by the community to heal individuals on matters of the spirit. Thus, his artistic practice departs explicitly, as he has stated, “from experience, from life, and life is spiritual.”53 By incorporating knots into his installation, Pichillá embodies notions of the body, spirit, mind, and energy into the sacred.

Pichillá’s *bultos* further allude to the private domestic space as a reference to the safeguarding of the valuable and the sacred. This idea is present in the installation *Lo Oculto* (2005) (The Hidden) consisting of two *bultos* in a triangular shelf (Figure 43). Common in Tz’utujil homes, items of value are hidden in tied bundles, kept veiled for protection in various locations throughout the home, or at times on the body. For Pichillá, in addition to the sacred and domestic, knots are symbols of Tz’utujil aesthetics and concepts of beauty, and they recall the braided hair of an Indigenous woman secured with cloth and knots as a visual

Gesture becomes equally important for the artist as he explains the process of creating and unraveling a knot, (like covering and unraveling a bundle), is a continuous cycle in life. In the process, one knot leads to another and another like a cycle of time that intersects states of knowing, being, and the sacred, where an “end” is actually a beginning. With this idea, Pichillá refers to the Mayan calendar and the Baktun 13 as sources for his Nudos. While many people inaccurately interpreted the Bakctun 13 as the Mayan prediction of apocalypse, it in fact indicates an end to a Mayan era and the beginning of another era rooted in Mayan cyclical concepts of time that oppose the linear notions of time in Western thought.

The video *Contra la Pared* by Fernando Poyón raises the question of an internalized mentality made possible through religious conquests and the persistence of coloniality. Governments constantly evade responsibility for the plight of Indigenous peoples—including extreme poverty, severely inadequate educational resources, rape, and genocide—and rather attribute responsibilities to notions of ignorance, uncleanliness, and promiscuity, thus resorting to colonialist racial discourse for impunity. From a direct Tz’utujil spirituality, Pichillá points to the hidden and the sacred as resistance survival strategies for Indigenous episteme, with a critical awareness that like Christianity and modernity, disciplines of Western knowledge have sought entry into Indigenous

54 Ibid.

55 Antonio Pichillá, Skype interview by Kency Cornejo, November 29, 2012.
cosmologies under the guise of objective research. Key to the concept of the hidden is that which is being protected, indigenous cosmologies and knowing, from the acquisitive desire of Western researchers. Poyón’s video and Pichillá’s installations make a clear distinction between the role of religion in coloniality and the protection of spirituality as a decolonial strategy.

VI. Visual Codes of Indigeneity

Sandra Monterroso is known to work in both public and private spaces for her performances and video work. Unlike Rakoc Atin, which took place in the public space of the city, Lix Cua Rahro/Tus Tortillas Mi Amor (Your tortillas my love) (2002-2004), her best-known piece, takes place in a private space. In the video, Monterroso obsessively bites into several ears of corn, spitting out from her mouth and into the pot a mixture of chewed corn with her own saliva (Figure 44). Mixing the maiz and her own bodily fluid, the artist first creates the masa. She then enacts the ancient tradition of tortilla making as she fuses gesture and fluids into the staple diet made with the sacred maiz which has always held cultural significance for indigenous peoples. She only disrupts her hypnotic ritual act to recite lines of a poem in Q’ekchi.’ Tus Tortillas Mi Amor offers an act of enchantment and seduction in the creation of food and sustenance for the artist’s love. By showing a common practice of women in Guatemala and elsewhere, the work subsequently raises issues of gender and relationships, which are a uniting thread in many of Monterroso’s video pieces. But here, the desire to seduce

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extends beyond her partner and toward a seduction of the culture that is skeptical of the artist’s indigenous identity.

Unlike Chavajay, Pichillá, and the Poyón brothers, Monterroso only became aware of her indigenous roots when, in the late 1990s, her grandmother disclosed a hidden secret at her deathbed. She revealed to the family that she had an unconventional life (for societal standards), having never married but taking on three lovers and most importantly having been expelled from the finca where she lived along with other workers. Consequently, she migrated to the city, repressed her indigenous roots, quickly ceased wearing her traditional dress, changed her religion, and never uttered a word in Q’ekchi’ again until that moment in her deathbed. Even Monterroso’s mother was unaware of this well kept secret. Upon the revelation, Monterroso’s mother began a process of family reconciliation by seeking out aunts, siblings, and family members she never knew existed. Following her grandmother’s death, Monterroso experienced a series of dreams in the Q’ekchi’ language that were indiscernible to her and that increased in frequency. She interpreted her dreams as a sign that her grandmother wished for her granddaughters to recover their indigenous identity.

For Monterroso, this marked an emotional and philosophical catalyst into an exploration of her own identity, one fueled by a desire to recover the Mayan roots and culture that her grandmother had buried, yet consciously aware that

57 Sandra Monterroso, Interview with Kency Cornejo, Guatemala City, Guatemala, June 1, 2011
58 Ibid.
this recovery could be interpreted as an appropriation of a culture she was not born into. In artworks like *Tus Tortillas Mi Amor*, Monterroso begins a dialogue with herself and others, in which the act of enchanting a culture for acceptance parallels with intimate partner relations. This connection is also visible in the gender roles of culture preservation, a social responsibility typically attributed to women as keepers and caretakers. Committed to recovering her family and indigenous past, Monterroso began learning Q’ekchi’ and studied the Mayan calendar. She sought to be more knowledgeable of issues affecting the indigenous community, in particular women, but she did so through an anthropological lens that situated hybridity and indigeneity as central issues, highlighting fluidity in identity politics as well as historical and cultural accuracy.

Monterroso expands on the symbolic and historical connections that tie humans to history but also to other human relations. Her later video *Meditando El Error* (2008) opens with a split mirror screen and remains throughout even as the latter half takes the viewer to another location in an open rural area (Figure 45). An indigenous man and a woman tied together through an umbilical cord struggle to part ways in a tug of war but constantly fail to escape each other. At times it may seem that one gains more strength than the other in a pulling struggle that echoes the existing give and take of partner relationships. But again, the subject of human relationships serves as metaphor for Monterroso’s dialogue with indigenous culture and the colonial legacy. Though the *huipil* is traditionally made in a variety of colors that pertain to specific ethnic groups, in
the video the couple wears black huipiles as reference to colonial legacy, similar to Chavajay’s black mazorca.

The artist’s grandmother’s decision to take on multiple partners was a personal choice that retook agency and functioned in opposition to the dominant view of indigenous women as submissive, especially in regards to sexuality. For this she was punished and expelled. This personal story, in fact, reverberates with countless cases in which “moral” disobedience came at the cost of cultural and historical annihilation as a repression tool of coloniality. One can understand Monterroso situating her grandmother’s painful story within this legacy of colonialism. The red, on the other hand, equally prominent as the color black in the video, references blood and death in ancient Mayan sacrificial practices and as the resistance to that colonial legacy.

One could further reflect on this duality—emphasized through the split screen, the man and woman, the red and black, the private and domestic space, coloniality and resistance. There is a constant impossible struggle to be simply on one side or another. For Monterroso, there is the challenge of identifying as a ladina or an indigenous woman. She thus highlights the unfeasibility to speak only from one space, acknowledging the intersection of race and gender in the loci of enunciation.

The artist has explained:

I am not from here and I am not from there—well then, that puts me in complicated situation because I want to understand my past, because it is my grandmother’s past, and my mother’s past, and it is mine. And it makes a difference to comprehend this from the position of a male or female because in indigenous cultures, and in the occident as well, men are usually in a better social position to speak. So I had to confront two situations: on the one hand, to speak of an indigenous identity and
history, and on the other hand to speak as a woman, and like the women of my past, like my grandmother who never married, but had three lovers, who was forced to migrate from the interior of the village to the city, which is a story that many women have lived, and continue to live.\textsuperscript{59}

Monterroso’s videos thus question the role of acceptance and negation of indigenous identity in a context where thousands have been violently forced and coerced into giving up visible connection to an indigenous identity out of fear of discrimination, or the threat of physical harm. Her work further questions whether identity can be measured or confirmed through visible dress and language or whether a desire to preserve cultural history and knowledge can override visual codes.

She further makes visible the relation between visual codes and identities in her installation \textit{El Matador} (2011) in which the \textit{huipil} stands juxtaposed to a black t-shirt with Milton Glaciers’ popular logo, I ♥ NY (Figure 46). The same lines that were voiced over in the \textit{Meditando el Error} video are now written in Spanish and Q’ekchi’ and printed in the bottom edge of the garment. The two garments are connected via an umbilical cord, which Monterroso uses as a metaphor for human relationships. If the \textit{huipil} is the epitome of indigenous identity, history, and ethnic identification, then the iconic I ♥ NY t-shirt draws in notions of a world center, tourism, consumerism, US patriotism and popular culture. Moreover, New York City is a global art center with a historical reputation as a driving force and desired destination for artists all over the world that also functions as a system of marginalization for artists from the Global

\textsuperscript{59} Sandra Monterroso, Interview by Kency Cornejo, Guatemala City, Guatemala, June 1, 2011. (my translation)
South. Because Monterroso is trained in design, like many Central American artists due to the lack of art schools, she has a deep understanding of the effectiveness of design, making each artistic choice carefully calculated. Moreover, the *huipil* in the installation is unique to Valapraiso, her grandmother’s indigenous hometown. In this way, her cultural identity nourishes her artistic identity through the umbilical cord, bound together and inseparable, yet like the *Meditando el Error*, in constant struggle.

The absence of color in the *huipil* once more makes present the colonial legacy in which the artist situates her exploration of indigeneity, art and human relationships. Like the reference to colonialism in the black *huipil*, the black t-shirt implies the dark side of modernity, making the connection between modernity and coloniality as two interdependent phenomena held together by the umbilical cord. Like Ángel Poyón’s reference to migration in his clock, in Monterroso’s installation one can also consider the push and pull forces that lead to mass migration and transnational communities, increasingly on the rise since the wave of wars in Central America. While many, like her grandmother, migrated from the rural to the city, thousands have migrated north to the United States lured by dreams of opportunity and prosperity as the I ♥ NY t-shirt summons. Others have been pushed out by the forces of coloniality in Guatemala. For indigenous peoples who migrated to the United States during Guatemala’s war, Monterroso’s grandmother’s experience is a common reality. Through performance, installation and video, Monterroso challenges visual codes of indigeniety historically upheld in traditional figurative art depictions of indigenous bodies or essence.
VII. Conclusion

In alignment with the scribes of the ancient Maya, who were highly regarded for their ability to both produce text and knowledge, to sculpt, paint and illustrate, I position these artists along a genealogy of Mesoamerican visual thinkers. In this manner, the visual testimonies and critiques that Chavajay, Monterroso, Pichillá and the Poyón brothers offer in their work deserves an equal consideration and analysis both critically and aesthetically as that of the great ancient Maya architecture, murals and sculptures. This consideration should be devoid of the colonialist nostalgic look back to a past society and instead seen with the artistic urgency of contemporary peoples, who in the last decades, continue to resist systematic genocide and elimination. Drawing strength from visual and corporal knowledge, these artists contest the recent governmental perception that labeled indigenous children “bad seeds.” Rather, through visual disobedience, these artists critique the State and above all the logic of coloniality that views Indigenous peoples as less than human in order to justify violations against entire communities. Their works are not in the service of nationalism, but instead expose the nations perpetual violence.

In the works discussed, these artists show that exposing the hidden is as crucial as refusing to expose it all. In their critiques of coloniality, Chavajay, Monterroso and Poyón used their bodies in public spaces to expose hidden sounds, language and memories of the disappeared during the armed conflict. These hidden gestures, as consequence of coloniality, became corporal screams transmitted through the artists as collective decolonial gestures of healing.
Similarly, in their object-based works, Chavajay and Poyón expose the hidden underside of modernity, revealing Tz’utijil and Kachikel views and experiences of history, time and space, materializing what Düssel has called for as transmodernity. In his video, Fernando brings to light the hidden function of coloniality in contemporary religion through the idea of internalized self-blame, a colonial tool impeding justice for indigenous peoples since the conquest. While Pichillá’s work reveals that indigenous peoples use their own practice of the hidden as self-preservation, through the spiritual—a decolonial gesture evidenced in his nudos, but one that extends to indigenous artist since the time of conquest. Finally, Monterroso’s work departs from her grandmother’s hidden secret past, from which she questions both hidden and visible signifiers of what constitutes indigeneity and identity in postwar Guatemala. Because western academic research thrives on exposing indigenous knowledges, traditions and bodies for observation, as Tuhiwai has noted, through visual disobedience, these artists are inverting colonialist tools of seeing and representation.

Their works bring to mind a history of “negation” through which colonialism attempts to split indigenous peoples from their languages, their lands, their religious beliefs, their ways of seeing and relating to the world, by negating these very ways of being. The works of the artists here individually and collectively reject the binaries of body and mind to convey their unification as a whole, as it has always been in Mayan visualities; and use the visual to connect and re-connect with the ancestors, their local communities, and to global communities.
Visual disobedience, however, is not limited to the artist as a creator of art and visual culture, but rather, extends to the viewer, the observer, and the writers of histories, all of us who read the work, consume the visual, and ascribe it meaning based on our own geopolitical, racial and gendered embodiments. The artists invite the viewers outside the indigenous experience to question one’s own point of departure. In other words, visual disobedience is as much a task and responsibility for the artist as it is for the viewer and the critical thinker of culture and knowledge. To engage in visual disobedience in an effort to decolonize art and knowledge, it is important to recognize that which is being disobeyed, mainly a hegemonic set of rules that function as logic or a rational way of understanding visuality. It does not mean rejecting western art and narratives. Rather, decolonial visualities launch from, *within,* and *with* other ways of thinking. I find fitting the Zapatista motto, “We want a world in which many worlds fit,” and borrow it to argue for a world in which many visualities are possible. This entails rejecting a singular universal, or global perspective, and making way for pluriversal ways of seeing and art histories, and being conscious of the fact that not all knowledges can be or should be deciphered, and to accept that the hidden is also self-preservation for indigenous communities.

Here I’m compelled to dismiss any notion that the artists’ involvement in the contemporary art world, including museum exhibitions and biennials, would somehow negate their visual disobedience. Audre Lord, has noted that, “you

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cannot destroy the masters house with the masters tools.”61 The artists here are doing neither. To suggest such, would be to imply that the artists are using Western tools to destroy Western ways of seeing, an assumption that in itself follows the logic of coloniality and concepts of ‘original and ‘derivative.’ On the contrary, these artists re-insert, re-inscribe, re-connect, and re-validate a Mayan visual episteme that has been dismissed and silenced through coloniality. If there is a destructive or violent aspect to this process that offends Western ways of seeing, if their acts are perceived as a threat, it will be because “Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world,” as Franz Fanon pointed out, “is clearly an agenda for total disorder.”62 Their visual disobedience constitutes a process of construction to undo the destruction perpetrated against them in an effort to heal the colonial wound.

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62 Fanon, Frantz. The Wretched of the Earth. Translated by Richard Philcox. (New York: Grove Press, 2004); 2.
Chapter Three.
Postwar Social Cleansing: Femicide, Criminalization, and Captivity

I. Introduction

The brutal violence during the armed conflict produced and circulated countless images of tortured bodies in public spaces, creating a culture of terror and censorship, a common political war strategy of control, resulting in what must be described as an aesthetics of violence. The images of guerrillas as killers and campesinos, peasant farmworkers, as casualties were used by the various military powers up and down the Isthmus to convince the population that there was a clear perpetrator and victim, or an enemy to fear and a defenseless people to protect. This strategy further deflected attention from the cause of real social and economic inequality in the region: the vast economic and military support of the United States, and the equally vast wealth of a few families and corporations in the region. Both initially contributed ingredients for the making of civil unrest.

Now in a postwar period, new images circulate in the media worldwide that continue to fuel notions of enemies and victims, and new postwar cultures of fear for the region. However, now the old 1980s unpatriotic image of a leftist guerilla has been replaced by the new marked and criminalized body, especially manifest in the image of the marero, or transnational gang member.

The new postwar Central American criminal body has become the object of interest in anthropological, sociological, psychological, historical, art historical,
and cultural studies, as well as photography, Hollywood film, and documentaries such as the *National Geographic: World’s Most Dangerous Gang*, which documents the Salvadoran gang known as the *Mara Salvatrucha 13* (MS 13 Gang). This is fed by governments and media that continue to portray Central America as backward, savage, violent, uncivil, and therefore in need of protection. With the advance of technology since the decades of conflict, the diffusion of such images reaches the entire globe, further perpetuating violence and insecurity throughout and about the region, decades after peace agreements. This is not to say that the violence is a mere construction of Central American identity. A 2010 study showed that homicide rates (per one hundred thousand people) in Central America are among the highest in the world, especially in the northern triangle, with Guatemala at forty-one, El Salvador at sixty-six and at Honduras eighty-two, to compare, the US homicide rate was at less than five.\(^1\) Moreover, cases of organized crime, including Narco Terror and groups like the Zetas, and the increased rates of kidnapping, homicides, and femicide in countries like Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, are receiving international attention. The sole attention on violence however, without a critical analysis of the forces that produce it, perpetuate the view that such “uncivilized” space can produce working bodies, bananas, uprisings, and revolutions—but not contemporary art. The continuity of these stereotypes extends for decades and centuries, offering ever more reasons to intervene to “protect” Central Americans from themselves. As I have been arguing, violence is an ever-present, ever-

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growing issue in the region but not one that can be reduced to or explained by recent wars and conflicts, or one that stems solely from urban youth, but is one rooted in colonial legacy of violence and at the intersections of race and gender.

Contemporary artists in the region are now concerned with the increasing normalization of violence that has emerged from a period of intense intervention and war, where impunity offers no sign of ever diminishing. Some contemporary Central American artists use their art to expose the current rationalization of the colonial logic of the non-human in postwar Central America. By this I refer to the same logic of colonialism that labeled a group of people as inferior, sub-human, or non-human based on race and gender and supposed intellectual abilities, and thus not only on the fringe but outside society and underserving of human rights or justice. This racist marginalization is accomplished through the disposal, elimination, and criminalization of brown men and women’s bodies, a systematic practice facilitated by the prison system and its trauma of captivity, which must be understood as a new, form of ethnic cleansing. In acts of visual disobedience, artists like Regina José Galindo (Guatemala), Proyecto Artería Collective (Honduras), Danny Zavaleta (El Salvador), Gael Galeano (Honduras), Jhafis Quintero (Panama) and Habacuc Vargas (Costa Rica), among others, denounce the new wave of violence as a continuous form of social destruction, bringing attention to the intersection of race, gender, and coloniality it represents.

In their works these artist show that like the earth-scouring practices that burned indigenous peoples during conquest and war, inmates are now literally burned alive in prisons, and the same racist logic that labeled indigenous children “bad seeds,” now labels urban youth “internal enemies” of the state.
These artists also critique femicide and its repugnant gendered violence, which as Galindo has shown, extends to conquering the body, as the land once was, for the exploitation of its resources. Such artists also reveal how such criminalization is fueled through media manipulation, impunity, and fear in order to eliminate unwanted human beings. Through their visual disobedience, the following artists denounce contemporary manifestations of the non-human logic of coloniality, which makes criminalization and captivity a postwar tragedy throughout the region. They show how the logic of coloniality, manifested through governments and media, condemn bodies as *rapeable, criminal* and *disposable*, consequently enacting a postwar social cleansing.

**II. Gendered Violence**

The performance artist Regina Galindo is known for using her own body to critique manifestations of violence against women, including those brought on by the legacy of war, neoliberalism, and social standards of Western beauty, but overall, as a legacy of colonialism. Today Galindo is the most well-known and recognized contemporary artist in Central America. Though she is often compared to other women artists like Marina Abromovich and Ana Mendieta, due her explicit use of her naked body in often compromising situations, Galindo began as a poet, is a self-taught artist, and her involvement in contemporary art is influenced more by haunting deaths and raw emotion than by the desire to
develop a professional artistic career. Her work is often considered within a political-activist framework despite the artist’s flat rejection of “activist” labels.\(^2\)

Years after one of her most important, early performances, *Quien Puede Borrar la Huellas* (2003) (Figure 5), in which the artist walked barefoot from the Supreme Court of Justice in Guatemala City to the National Palace, stopping only to soak her feet in a bowl of blood and leaving behind a trail of bloody footprints, Galindo recollected:

> When it was announced that Efraín Ríos Montt had managed to win acceptance as a presidential candidate, I was in my room, and I suffered an attack of panic and depression. I shouted out, I kicked and stomped my feet, I cursed the system that rules us. How was it possible that a character as dark as this would have such power with which to bend everything to his will. I decided then and there that I would take to the streets with my shout and amplify it. I had to do it.\(^3\)

With her small body clothed in a black dress, walking as if in a trance, leaving her footprints behind in a bloody trail to stand for the 1,771 Mayan-Ixil killed under Montt’s command between 1982-1983, Galindo evoked and visualized a history of genocide in Guatemala that extends centuries into the colonial conquest. She asks: “Who can erase the traces?” Her impulse to do the action, as she explains, was a physical reaction to the pain and injustice in this violent history, where a murderer takes advantage of the democratic system to take power over the country. Galindo’s act of visual disobedience may be described as her power to amplify the physical and emotional *shout* rooted in the pain of the memory of Montt’s past crimes and current assault on a vulnerable society.

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\(^3\) Ibid., 134.
Galindo marshaled the combination of raw emotion and creativity as a source of healing the colonial wound. Rooted in Guatemalan experience and reality, Galindo expresses her performances within the geopolitical circumstance and physical embodiment of a Guatemalan woman, where her body becomes not only the medium in the traditional artistic sense, but the wound in the historical sense of legacy transformed by the artist into a healing gesture. Thus her body signifies simultaneously as site, evidence, and agent.

From the 1970s through the 1980s the term “femicide” came to define the systematic killing of women by men because they were female. Since those decades Central America continues to have one of the highest rates of femicide in the world. Recent studies reveal that rates in Guatemala, Honduras, and Belize are among the highest, while El Salvador tops the list. Scholars Marina Prieto-Carrón, Marilyn Thompson, and Mandy Macdonald highlight the 2006 Amnesty International investigation, which concluded that more than one thousand women die per year in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica collectively from gender–based violence. They also concluded that only 70% of cases were investigated, and in 82% of the cases no suspect was ever identified, while in 97% of the cases no arrests were made. Moreover, in their discussion of the precursors to femicide in Guatemala, scholars David Carey Jr. and M. Gabriela Torres argue that there is a long historical record of acceptance

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by the military government in normalizing misogyny and gendered violence.6 Femicide exists precisely due to “culturally accepted practices that promote gendered violence, including the socially tolerated forms of sexual abuse, physical and emotional battery, and sexual harassment.”7 These practices become normalized when there is no punishment for perpetrators or justice for victims.

Poverty and racial discrimination are also key barriers that impede women from seeking justice, as judges often ignore their cases with the result that the women become disillusioned. Often they are even accused of provoking the violence, or are forced to abandon legal procedures due to death threats. As a result, fear and distrust of the judicial system, as well as lack of financial means, discourage women from reporting cases. The failure of the state to provide adequate support and services for victims “represents a form of institutional violence, compounding the violence exercised by the state in allowing femicide to be committed with impunity.”8 As such, the state is largely responsible for the widespread violence against women at the hands of individual men. Prieto-Carrón, Thompson and Macdonald further emphasize that state authorities “dismiss claims that these murders have anything to do with unequal gender relations, but it can be argued that the failure of state authorities to investigate violent crimes against women is itself evidence of gender discrimination, and of discrimination on the basis of class and ethnicity, as victims are often poor,

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7 Ibid., 143.

indigenous or migrant women.”9 Thus, the phenomenon of femicide is another example of the violent intersection between race, gender and coloniality in the region. When one considers this triad as constitutive of an interdependent system of domination and colonization, it is no surprise that femicide is allowed to occur in countries with colonial histories whose purposes it serves.10

Galindo’s performances root femicide in gender-coloniality. She makes evident what scholar María Lugones defines as the “modern/colonial gender system.” In her seminal article, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System” Lugones combines two central frames of thought: one is Aníbal Quijano’s coloniality of power discussed in the previous chapter, and the other is the framework conducted mainly by third world feminists and women of color that focused on the intersectionality of race and gender. Central to this framework was Patricia Collin’s paradigmic shift of ‘intersectionality’ which rejected analyzing women’s experience from the basis of gender alone, only to subsequently add layers of race, class, sexual orientation, disability, among others.11 Instead she began from an understanding that all these forms of oppression interlock with each other, allowing for an analysis of how the intersection of race, class and gender create an overarching system of oppression.

9 Ibid., 31.

10 Some scholars locate the war years in Central America as the precursor to femicide for the region. This would include imperialism and intervention in military training of the gruesome strategies of torture and killing practiced on Central American peoples. The special aesthetics of violence created during the conflict indeed helped make such unique violent acts unsurprising for Central Americans. However, the current aesthetics of violence in the region extends back to violent practices during the conquest when people were decapitated, tortured, burnt alive, and massacred in public.

De-centering one experience of oppression—gender—challenges the grounding feminist theory that gender is the oldest and most fundamental oppression. Intersectionality therefore reveals that being woman is not a universal female experience but one tied to race and class ideologies. Analyzing the intersectionality of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc., thus allowed the inclusion of other experiences in the struggle for equality, specifically the experiences of women of color, which were marginal in white feminist theories.

With these two frameworks, Lugones historicizes gender and heterosexualism in coloniality in order to break down the political and conceptual barriers encountered in liberatory/decolonial projects, namely the indifference by men and by women regarding the violence endured from the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Noting that gender is also a construct in the service of colonialism, she explains that coloniality could not exist without the additional construct of gender imposed on colonized peoples. Citing among others, Oyéronké Oyeyúmí’s work on the transformation of society in Yorúbá culture after colonization, Lugones argues that during colonizat...

For females, colonization was a twofold process of racial inferiorization and gender subordination. The creation of ‘women’ as a category was one of the very
first accomplishments of the colonial state.”\(^{12}\) However, colonialism created and imposed a new gender system for colonized men and women that was different from that of an already existent European gender system. This new imposed gender system was meant to function differently for colonized men and women than for the men and women colonizers.\(^{13}\) Therefore to consider race only within a system of coloniality is to continue allegiance to the colonialist gender system. “It is only when we perceive gender and race as intermeshed or fused that we actually see women of color,” Lugones explains.\(^{14}\) When considering the intersectionality of both race and gender in the current wave of postwar violence in the region, we see women of color but also how race and gender continue to function in the oppressive circumstance of the normalization of violence for both men and women.

While scholars and activists work diligently to bring attention and justice to gendered violence in Central America, artists like Regina José Galindo and others make intersectionality visible through acts of visual disobedience that exposes the mechanism of contemporary coloniality in Guatemala. In her wide range of performances, Galindo roots femicide within a legacy of coloniality, using her nude body to denounce the historical use of women’s bodies as a colonizing territory. In her performance *Perra* (2005), the artist sits on a chair in the middle of an empty room (Figure 47). She lifts her black dress exposing her


\(^{13}\) Ibid., 2

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 193
leg and on the flesh of her thigh begins to carve the word “perra” with a very sharp knife. The performance referred to the common practice of perpetrators to dispose of their victims’ bodies after having carved the motive for their attack onto the victim’s flesh. The word perra, which translates as “bitch,” is often used as a derogatory accusation that a woman is “loose” and promiscuous. Thus when a cadaver is found displaying the word perra, it is clear her killer intended to convey that the woman’s life was taken as a punishment for her supposed active sexuality. This alludes to how even when women are the recipients of violence, they are often criminalized by authorities in order to justify the violence enacted on them as a form of punishment. Moreover, such act implies the perpetrator, as a man, is entitled to judge a woman and execute the punishment, displaying her body as a warning to others. Prieto-Carrón, Thompson and Macdonald explain that for seeking employment away from home in maquilas (sweatshops) and working late hours, poor women are “labeled by society as ‘sexual subjects lacking value’, worth and respectability as a result of their structural position in the global economy’, and therefore ‘worthless, temporary and disposable’. As a result their violent deaths as regarded by the authorities as not worth investigation.”

Like Quien Puede Borrar la Huellas, Galindo’s performance Perra came out of her personal rage and sorrow, emotions brought on by witnessing violence and juridical impunity in Guatemala. In her hopelessness, Galindo counters by turning to the one thing she can control: her own body. She deploys her body

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through act of visual disobedience. Feeling the pain of others, the artist does not claim she is a victim, but empathizes with the victims as she is herself a woman, a daughter, a mother, a wife, and a female artist. Because the trauma of femicide may be also considered a collective pain for women and society in general, which witnesses its occurrence and judicial unconcern, femicide creates an unsafe, terror filled, and traumatic living experience that causes women to live in a constant state of fear and hypervigilance.

While the visual display of bodies that have been disfigured by carving into their flesh warns of terror, Galindo also exposes the irrational contradiction imposed on women through coloniality, the whore/virgin dichotomy that is especially dominant in Latin America imposed though colonialism and upheld through Christianity. In an earlier performance *Himenosplastia* (2004), the artist underwent a clandestine but popular operation in which doctors surgically reconstructed her hymen (Figure 8). The performance was later exhibited in video form at the 2005 Venice Biennial for which she was awarded the Golden Lion award for category of “Artist under 30.” Galindo conceived the idea for the performance after watching a television commercial advertising the surgical procedure to restore a woman’s virginity, an advertisement she had previously seen in paper format. The surgical procedures are often conducted in hidden environments, with unsanitary tools, often resulting in complications leading to death. Galindo herself experienced uncontroled bleeding after her surgery/performance and had to be taken to her gynecologist who then checked her into a hospital for medical emergency. Like a cosmetic or gym membership, hymen reconstruction surgeries are sold to Guatemalan women with the
argument that restoring their virginity will better increase their chance of marriage and bring about higher social status. Yet sex traffickers who abduct and sexually abuse young girls also use this surgery, so they can charge higher prices for “virgin girls.” While Galindo was fortunate to receive appropriate medical attention, countless women and young girls suffer grave consequences, including death after their operations. Galindo subjects her own body, showing how the same gender colonial system encourages sexuality for the service of men in a patriarchal system, pushing women to extreme surgeries that endanger their lives, while it simultaneously punishes women for ideas of promiscuity as in Perra. In both cases, sexual pleasure and desire do not belong to, or for, women but exist only in the service of men.

Just as during the Spanish conquest, rape was among the most common weapons used against women during the armed conflict as it caused both physical and emotional trauma while stripping victims of dignity. The most common victims were indigenous women revealing how race made some women targets. Race and class discrepancies remain very clear, as the majority of rape victims during the thirty-six-year-long war were Mayan women according to the Commission of Historical Clarification.16 As Andrea Smith has stated on the gendered violence of Native American women, “Because Indian bodies are ‘dirty,’ they are considered sexually violable and ‘rapeable,’ and the rape of

bodies that are considered inherently impure or dirty simply does not count.”

In her performance, *Mientras Ellos Siguen Libre* (2004), Galindo, who was eight months pregnant at the time, lies nude on a bed (Figure 48). Her legs and arms were spread open and restrained to the corners of the bed with umbilical cords in the same way that soldiers restrained indigenous pregnant women in Guatemala to rape their pregnant bodies. Even a woman’s pregnant body was no deterrent to soldiers, who would violate a woman’s pregnant body. In certain cases, gang rape of pregnant women by soldiers had another motive beyond objectification, humiliation, and violence, extending to the termination of life and reproduction. As Inés Hernández-Avila has stated about the Native American women, it is because of sex, “that she is hunted down and slaughtered, in fact, singled out, because she has the potential through childbirth to assure the continuance of the people.”

In Guatemala, testimonies like the following were countless: “I was raped consecutively, approximately fifteen times, just as much by the soldiers as by the men dressed in civilian clothes. I was seven months pregnant, in the next few days I aborted.” In another testimony a woman states: “They tied me and bandaged my eyes, I was three months pregnant, they placed their feet over my body to immobilize me. They locked me in a small room without windows. All of a sudden they entered the room, they hit me, and they raped me. I began to

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In more gruesome ways, it is known that throughout Central America that pregnant women’s abdomens have been cut open and their fetuses ripped from inside them. Controlling not only a woman’s body, her sexuality, her pleasure, but also her reproduction abilities and choices is another way that the gender colonial system continues to affect women today. But specifically rape maintains a colonialist logic that certain bodies are “dirty,” “impure” and do not count, unless for the use of men. Even after the war, these cases have continued, especially targeting indigenous and poor women. What specifically conveys the continuation of this logic is the fact that these cases are investigated infrequently and if they are, rarely is anyone punished or held accountable. Such impunity and lack of concern reiterates to women that their brown bodies do not count.

With her own body and emotions, Galindo makes visible the intersectionality of race, gender and colonialism, showing how in addition to patriarchy, it formulates the power of coloniality that allowed the rape and killing of women during the conquest that also continues today. Through visual disobedience Galindo contributes to the epistemic disobedience of scholars like Lugones, and Andrea Smith who states, “[I]n order to colonize a people whose society was not hierarchical, colonizers must first naturalize hierarchy through instituting patriarchy. Patriarchal gender violence is the process by which

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colonizers inscribe hierarchy and domination on the bodies of the colonized.”

Thus while Galindo’s performances have often been compared to other women artists’ work in Latin America and other regions, her performances have always referred to the Guatemalan context and Central America broadly, yet her medium and her delivery make it possible to speak to a global concern regarding violence against women everywhere.

While Galindo situates her performances in specific cases of public humiliation and violence toward women, aggression toward women also exists in less visible manifestations including the domestic space and labor settings, thereby adding to the coloniality of violence. In Central America, as in many other Latin American countries, a proliferation of sweatshops in the 1990s as a result of neoliberalism generated conditions for exploitation and violation of the rights of women workers; these sweatshops often became sites of violence in the workplace or for women who work long hours and are subjected to violence on their way home. The Honduran collective Proyecto Artería, one of the first collective initiatives in the postwar period, has addressed these working conditions and sweatshops through an investigative process, art objects and intervention. In ZIP 504 (2001-2005), the collective commissioned women workers to make 1,000 small white t-shirts as part of the piece for distribution in the exhibitions (Figure 49). The small t-shirts consisted of a logo “ZIP” the acronym for Zonas Industriales de procesamiento para exportacion, or as known in English, Free Trade Zones. The number 504 is the country code dialed to reach

21 Andrea Smith, Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide, 23.
someone in Honduras. The collective traveled to various cities like Tegucigalpa, Cuenca, La Havana, and San José, where members of the collective handed out flyers in the streets, announcing the arrival of an exotic product that could be obtained free of charge.

In each of the cities in which ZIP (504) was distributed and exhibited, the collective Artería also held a series of lectures, debates, public interventions with the participation of workers, social workers, philosophers, and economists. They also held the public conference interventions at sweatshop sites where they interviewed the women who participated. Printed on the t-shirt labels was a poem that read: “Wash my soul with cold water, machine dry, that with time you don’t consume my fibers. Iron out my fears at medium temperature, but don’t iron out my faith. 100% human. Care instructions inside” (Figure 50). With the label, the collective reinforced the human aspect of labor often disregarded in a system of neoliberal policies, centered more on production and exportation than the livelihood of its workers. It also acknowledges economic inequalities as a continuous form of violence in the region. The products were thus presented as material witness of neoliberalism.

With these works, one should consider that it is also in those who benefit from patriarchy and coloniality to encourage fear of the rapist/murderer/torturer of women and to allow it to continue to exist in people’s imaginary. Creating fear and unsafe environments becomes a strategy with which to argue that women need to be protected from men but not just any man, for rapists are never assumed to be judges, lawyers, politicians, or upper class ladinos of Central America. Instead, there is an implicit racialization and
criminalization of the invisible referent that the man who does the raping is of a certain criminal, class, and economic status, out on the loose like a barbarian. Therefore, the colonial matrix of gender functions to reinforce fear, racism, and patriarchy. And it further affects men as well.

III. Transnational Gang Visual Culture

Galindo’s body has become her most popular medium, yet she also puts into question the postwar violence upon the poor and racialized male body. In a video performance entitled *Ablución*\(^2\) (2007), Galindo recorded a Central American male ex-gang member in a typical cement shower found in rural houses as he cleansed himself with water from a bucket (Figure 51). But this is not a typical bathing, or washing. With the water he did not remove dirt but rather the bright red blood that covered his nude body. As if he were in private, the man does not appear distracted by the presence of a viewer. Patiently and ritually, he bends over to retrieve water with a blue plastic bowl from the white bucket placed next to him. He splashes the water on his body with one hand, while with the other he gently rubs off the excess water. As the blood drips to the cement floor, tainting the water into a red puddle beneath his feet, his body slowly reveals multiple monochrome tattoos on his front and back torso, arms, and legs. The tattooed images range from spider webs on his hands, feet, and elbows; skulls with daggers through them on his arms; old English letters and undecipherable words all over; the phrase “crazy life” (in English) depicted on a

\(^2\) All video still images from Regina Jose Galindo’s *Ablución* are courtesy of the Latin American Art Department at the Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin.
scroll on his chest; figures of women on his limbs; a lion or panther-like creature with wings; and several religious images, like the cross on his stomach and the large portrait of Jesus Christ on his back. At times he crouches down on the floor while other times he stands, but he never forgets to reach and wash every part of his body whether visible to him or not. At the end of the video performance one sees an exposed man, a clean man; this is a man who is no longer tainted with blood but who is nonetheless marked by the ink on his body.

Like the historical and physical violence by the state against the marginalized in Central America during the armed conflict, such as the violence of genocide and forgetting addressed in Quién Puede Borrar las Huellas (2003), or the gendered violence enacted by men and normalized by the state as critiqued in Perra (2001) and Himenoplastica (2004), Galindo points to a more current manifestation of violence in Central America with the video artwork Ablución. Here the issue is criminalization and the making of the gang body through violence. Certainly, gangs are not a new phenomenon, and are clearly no strangers to the suburb areas and metropolitan cities like Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago, among other subgroup locations. Nor is the American Latino body and image unrelated to the formation of a “gang identity” in the US. Criminalized stories and images of Latino gang members appear on the evening news on a regular basis. Nor can one ignore the fact that in the already overpopulated US prisons, black and brown bodies constitute the majority of imprisoned people. As such, in the US, the visual representation of the Latino gang member in both media and art has been presented, appropriated, and used
as far back as with the Zoot Suiters of the 1940s. However, now these images are not only set against the backdrop of an urban landscape or the skyscrapers of downtown Los Angeles, but also displayed against the mountains and volcanoes of the rural landscape of countries like Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador. Where does this gang body and image fit within a Central American context, as in Galindo’s work?

In his study Juan Carlos Narváez Gutiérrez notes a well-known reality: a gang dispute initiated in the West Lake area of Los Angeles can easily end with five deaths in the stadium of Cuscatlán in the capital of El Salvador. A transnational community, according to Gutiérrez, is mediated by individuals, families, or organizations that occupy two or more countries or regions. Gangs with members in constant migration between cities like Los Angeles and rural towns in Central America constitute such transnational communities. This scenario is part of what is now known as the phenomenon of transnational gangs. That is, political and economic uncertainty of marginalized countries, as a direct consequence of globalization, produce a migration from South to North.

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25 Ibid., 34.

26 The most notorious gang is Mara Salvatrucha 13. The name derives from mara, a local street-Spanish term for “gang;” salvador which is short for “Salvadoran;” and trucha, slang for “watch out.” Both MS13 and 18 Street gang originated in Los Angeles, and member from both gangs were deported to Central America where they grew with members.
and back again. In this migratory process, mobility and communication facilitate transnational relations. These relations give way to new social spaces and networks through which bodies, images, and cultural and political information travel. In this social process of international migration, the interchange of symbols and materials keeps migrants and non-migrants connected, thus forming a network or community. Two prime examples of transnational gangs are *La Mara Salvatrucha* (MS13) and 18th Street Gang—the two most dominant rival gangs in Central America.

The presence of Central American transnational gangs in both the North and South, however, is a direct result of the violence of war and the subsequent economic difficulties it created for civilians. Militaries destroyed houses, killed family breadwinners, and forced entire families to leave their homes and jobs to escape death and seeking survival. This was especially the case of Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador. Under the pretext of fighting communism, the US government fueled a twelve-year-long civil war (1980-1992) in El Salvador through both financial support and the military training of Salvadoran soldiers, including strategic and torture tactics. As a result, in addition to the thousands of deaths, 100,000 Salvadorans sought refuge in Mexico and other Central American countries, and over half a million immigrated to the US. With so many deaths the orphan population increased in the country, and many left their children behind along with their possessions as they went into exile, often with hopes of returning for their families. While some children were left behind, many accompanied their parents as refugees. Many others made the journey alone.
In the 1980s, Los Angeles alone became home to the second largest population of Salvadorans in the world, after the capital city of San Salvador. Recently arrived children settled in the city, attended barrio schools, and came to develop an “American” lifestyle, language, and culture. For some children memories of the war remained painful but faint, and for others, their young age impeded any recollection of their native country. As citizens of barrios, with inadequate schools, little to no resources, and racist structures, a portion of this youth joined local gangs and was thus introduced into a different form of violence.27

Following the Los Angeles Riots of 1992, law enforcement accused Latino youth and gangs of being heavily involved in the looting and violent activities of the riots. A series of anti-gang laws followed that allowed minors to be charged as adults, sentencing many who committed petty crimes with felony charges. Legislation such as the “three strikes and you are out” law of 1994 and the increased anti-immigration laws that followed, which increased jail time and deportation of both citizens and non-citizens, resulted in the deportation of 20,000 criminalized youth to Central America.28 Many had no family or home awaiting them, and often no memories of the landscape or the people. With their American accents and nostalgia for the fast-paced urban cities they were forced to leave behind, the recently arrived youth found themselves in a country that

27 I refer to violence here not only as the physical violence of war but also the institutional violence in racism and poverty and its psychological, emotional, and spiritual consequence.

was supposedly “home.” However, their welcome home was often far from pleasant. At times, the only connections made were with other gang members, or *maras*. Even after they established social relations with gang members in El Salvador, or befriended the country’s abandoned youth that found solace in the idea of fraternity and solidarity that gang members represented, many newly arrived youth immigrated back to the US after experiencing the extreme poverty of El Salvador.

I suggest that as a part of transnational bodies and communities, the transnational gang member of Central America is first and foremost a *recipient* of violence, before he/she actually becomes a *practitioner*. Affected by war and its traumas, the experience of migration, the racism and social inequalities endured once in the US as immigrants, the urban violence of the barrios, and the racist anti-immigrant policies that led to deportation and a second displacement, is another scenario that exemplifies the workings of coloniality. Rooted in the logic of coloniality, governmental and institutional structures created the violence that either eliminated people or displaced them into other violence contexts.

Photographers and photojournalists have increasingly found interest in the violent dimensions surrounding *maras* and have conducted various anthropological studies of gang culture in Central America.29 Consequently, the Central American gang member becomes yet another violent and exotic creature—an object of study to determine a supposed inherent violent nature. Yet, Central American artists seek less a representation of gangs and delve more

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into the social and physiological impact of living within in a region heavily marked by not only this manifestation of violence but also a new transnational gang visual culture, which includes dress, graffiti, tattoos and bodily gestures. Many artists choose to focus on individual narratives and present personal accounts of violence to expose the true roots of the so-called criminal. One of the most well known artists to address transnational gang culture is Salvadoran artist Danny Zavaleta who grounds the emergence of transnational gangs as a direct consequence of the US-funded war.

For his art piece piece *Retrato Hablado* (2009) Zavaleta interviewed gang member Carlos Portillo on the developments that led him to join MS13 and created a visual narrative of Portillo’s life in the form of a book (Figure 52). *Retrato Hablado* includes various personal documents offered by Portillo to Zavaleta. The narrative began with Portillo’s involvement in the military forces at age fourteen. The forceful recruitment of children into the military was common, but Portillo enlisted as a volunteer informant to gather information that would help the guerillas and their cause.\(^{30}\) Once the military discovered him, he was forced to seek political exile in the US. Photographs show his arrival in the MacArthur park area of Los Angeles (Figure 53).

Like many inner city youth, Portillo then needed protection from local gangs, and as a result, joined MS13, and eventually served prison time. Due to the anti-immigrant and anti-gang polices at the time, Portillo was deported,

\(^{30}\) For a film that focuses on personal experience of a young boy and how the military kidnapped and forced young boys at 12 years old to join the military see *Voces Inocentes*, based on the true story of Oscar Torres. Altavista Films. *Voces Inocentes*. DVD. Directed by Luis Mandoki. Hong Kong: Lucky Gems Group; Asia Video Publishing Co., 2005.
along with countless youth, back to El Salvador where he remained an active member of the MS13 gang and facilitated a transnational gang community. When Retrato Hablado is exhibited in a museum, viewers are encouraged to take and keep a copy. With the piece, viewers therefore take legal documents, photographs, and prison letters from Portillo’s mother, his girlfriend, and his niece that illustrate the personal journey of not just a “marero” but also a human being. This being is one whose criminalized experience initiated with a US-funded war, forced exile, and the racist polices and deportation that set him up for further criminalization in the region. He is now associated as a perpetrator of violence that controls and terrorizes rural towns and urban streets (Figure 54). The piece further counters national newspapers that are filled with images and headlines criminalizing urban youth, without investigation, in order to create a sense of fear and condemnation among citizens. Challenging notion of the criminal and savage, Zavaleta emphasizes Portillo’s human experience though a diary-like glimpse of intimate experience and relations.

In addition to the personal and intimate narratives that emphasize individual experience of violence, Zavaleta also shows how the mara experience has shaped urban experience and visual culture. In his most recognized artwork, El Tur (2006), Zavaleta uses a graffiti-inspired style to intervene in a tourist map of San Salvador in which he uses signs and symbols to mark various destinations (Figure 55). On the left, in pink, the word “Disneylandia” locates la Zona Rosa with its upscale shopping centers and clubs that cater to the Salvadoran elite. The image of the armed police references the growth of the private security business that protects certain communities from others. At the opposite far right, against
red blood stains, the phrase “Soya City” marks the municipality of Soyapango, Zavaleta’s home town and one of the most notorious areas for gang activities. Above, the number “18” stands in for 18th Street Gang and hand signs form an “M” for the Mara Salvatrucha gang. The city is important to gang visual culture as is the idea of performing identity in the street, but the concept of “streets” does not merely imply an exterior place outside one’s home. For gang members their home is the streets. It is a social space where members congregate, make a visual presence, posses a city, make financial transactions, are harassed by law enforcement, and where they often fall to violent deaths. The idea of “growing up in the streets” implies a different sense and experience of the city and home. It implies an economic understanding of the barrio, the ghetto or the hood.

Zavaleta’s El Tur points to how just as the inscribed body conveys social boundaries within the self and between others, the inscribed city can also create new boundaries and reconfigure territories and spaces. Through graffiti, or writing on walls, MS13 members and other gangs have visually reshaped the landscape of cities like Los Angeles and Central America. In addition to marking territory, the act of tagging, or writing, constitutes an artistic war and can be understood as a performative act or embodied behavior. To write is to establish a presence. Like a soldier in war, the “taggers” clandestinely mark the gang’s boundaries through identifiable and understood letters and symbols (like the “MS13” letters, written variations, or depicted MS13 hand signs) in addition to members’ names, often their own. This is further evidenced in Simon Vega’s Ciudad Encajada (2001), an installation that replicates the visual war of graffiti on a neighborhood (Figure 56). Made from cardboard boxes, the installation (which
translates to ‘boxed cities’) plays on the idea of marking territories and enclosing spaces, where breaking rules of inclusion and exclusion within these spaces and rules can result in visual and physical wars. The installation and mediums further resonates with the overpopulation of the city and the struggle for space and resources. Each box depicts the typical graffiti found on houses in neighborhoods. Yet here viewers intervene in the installation by rearranging the boxes and thus reflecting the unstable nature of urban neighborhoods (Figure 57).

The displaced urban youth must then respond to these unstable urban spaces, and survive as they negotiate space as new members and with rival gangs. I suggest that factors such as visual boundaries, marked identities, and even the presence of rival gangs and law enforcement dictate a member’s movement through the city and further alter urban space through the visual and the performative. While the visual changes are enacted though graffiti, as Zavaleta’s work shows, there is also a certain performative characteristic that must be conveyed—an act of transfer that is understood as a means of survival. This performative walk through the streets can also be understood as a tactical war strategy, as a gesture that is to be seen by others and to create an imaginary trace or a boundary, with which to claim spatial ownership.

To further understand the marked body that navigates and marks such urban spaces, I recall Michel de Certeau’s concept of pedestrian speech act. As he explains,

The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech is to language or to the statements uttered…it is a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian…it is a spatial acting-
out of the place...and it implies relations among differentiated positions...It thus seems possible to give a preliminary definition of walking as a space of enunciation.31

De Certeau’s walking as a space of enunciation in addition to Diana Taylor’s notion of repertoire, help elucidate that, as transnational identities, the city or the rural (and to this we can add the migratory process back north) are performative spaces where acts of transfer communicate knowledge and identity, incorporating and addressing all citizens.

In his piece Made in (2008), Zavaleta displays a white garment with hand-sewn symbols and imagery of a gang aesthetics (Figure 58). With the white garment, associated with a campesino working class, and the gang visual imagery sewn on its surface, like a form of branding, Zavaleta plays on visual signifiers of identity, as well as desire and consumption, or how these identities become both interchangeable and simultaneously embodied in the youth. He draws on symbols and graffiti style as visual signifiers that extend from city spaces, bodies, and identity constructions through fashion. With another installation, Lección M (2008) from his “Alfabetización” series, the artist presents a chalkboard installation that address the growing fascination among Salvadoran youth, often from rural areas, to learn and communicate with these new gang symbols and signs (while national literacy decreases among children) (Figure 59).

There are also less subtle gestures than the gang hand-signs Zavaleta highlights that also convey specific messages. For instance, how can we understand small gestures or the tattooing of the body as an act of transfer? What

is performative about a tattooed gang bodies? Diana Taylor uses the term *scenario* to define the “meaning-making paradigms that structure social environment, behaviors and potential outcomes.” Like a sketch or plot of a play, the scenario conveys particularities of a scene or setting, communicating images, concepts, stereotypes, and information that pertain to an environment. The *scenario*, Taylor proposes, can be used as an alternative to the privileged text and narrative, as systems of knowledge.\(^{32}\) One of several bodily gestures typical of gang behavior is simply the “chin up.” In a photograph by Robert Yager, *Mad-dog challenging stare* (1992), one can see such gesture in a frontal view (Figure 60). Notice the subtlety in the raised chin and straightforward stare that nonetheless manages to convey a message of animosity. With a head up, forcing the eyes to nearly close, there is a sense of superiority over the person that is stared at, as if an elevated head implies looking “down” at another. This gesture alone alludes to a scenario based on repeated behavior.\(^{33}\) The chin is used to intimidate or challenge possibly an enemy from a rival gang but sometimes can be enacted toward a fellow gang member, or upon a stranger walking on one’s street, or territory. It implies empowerment and courage that comes with experience. In other words, this simple corporeal gesture consists of an act of transfer that communicates a system of knowledge understood by members and non-members. Moreover, it carries with it a scenario also implied in the transfer, of what is happening and what could potentially happen, a scene of death.


\(^{33}\) Ibid.
I must note that MS13 members are notorious for their extreme body tattoos. In this case location means everything. While tattoos are common for all gangs, displaying them on the face and neck (the most visible areas) constitutes a high level of commitment to a gang lifestyle and identity. Moreover, one can understand such extreme choices as having a strong effect on the identity performed and received. Enid Schilkrout notes that the inscribed body has always been an interest for anthropologists, especially the question of “boundaries between individuals and society, between societies, and between representation and experiences.”

In a photograph by Isabel Muñoz, a young MS13 member in a frontal profile lifts his chin to show a series of tattoos on his chin and neck (Figure 61). On his chin he displays a word or phrase written in Old English letters that stretches from one ear, across his cheeks and chin, to the other ear. Right beneath his chin and near his throat the phrase “Primero Nosotros” is written in cursive.

In the aforementioned image, the phrase “Primero Nosotros,” which literally translates to “us first” but implies, “we come first,” communicates a societal boundary. The phrase declares a distinction between “us” and “you” as individuals. It also implies the “us” and the “others” belong to different societies. One can only point to the various levels in which this division occurs: economical, territorial, racial, etc. The division can also apply to societies within societies, such as rival gangs who share the same space but who are identified as the “other” or the enemy. Moreover, the “primero” acknowledges the hierarchies

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within societies, meaning the “nosotros” have historically come at the end of the priority list. This is evident in the low resources and investments found in the spaces the “nosotros” inhabit (the barrio, the ghetto, the hood, the school system) and the racial discrimination that fuels the disparity. In an act of transfer, by asserting, “we come first,” the gang body repositions itself against that hierarchy, in which gang identity will embody a new social space. The manner in which that body navigates through that space is related to the creation of that space. If the space is not given, it will have to be made. This cannot be done with symbols and images alone, but through a performative aspect in which these bodies move across space. In other words, I suggest that the repertoire, or performative characteristic, of the MS13 body is contingent upon the inscription on the body and its extreme nature. It is not enough to display; the body must perform its tattoos. According to Schildkrout, different groups use tattoos to cultivate a “deviant” status. “Deviancy is expressed both through the images people select in tattoos, and the degree to which they cover their bodies with tattoos, brands, and piercings,” she explains. As opposed to tattoos on other body parts that can be concealed under clothing, facial and neck tattoos become a permanent explicit statement that not only conveys a new life and identity but that hides or eliminates the previous one. These tattoos become a permanent mask, one that gives way to a new body. This further conveys what Stiles has called “cultures of

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35 Ibid., 337.
trauma,” that is, “a traumatic circumstance that is manifest in culture, discernible at the intersection of aesthetic, political, and social experience.”

Returning to Galindo’s Ablución, which means ritual bath or baptism, every tattoo on the man’s body communicates a biographical story or narrative, like Zavaleta’s Retrato Hablado. The tattooed symbols, names, portraits, words, and religious imagery all refer to an embodied identity, and each narrative was touched by blood. Although the water removed the blood, the body remains marked, and the narratives will continue on as archival memory. That he bathes in front of a viewer suggest he is aware that his inscribed body will be read and interpreted by another, and yet because he is doing the washing, taking every measure to reach all parts, there is a sense of agency and ownership over his body and identity. A single shot at the end of the performance can be read as pointing toward the future. The clean foot, the only part unmarked, over the puddle of blood, can be read as a new journey, new movements. Although the water underneath is contaminated with the memory of violence, it will soon dry out. One can read the video as the artist depicting a man who desires to wash away his gang identity and its violent lifestyle as a reference to the social cleansing by the state of that identity and the violence that body endures as a result; but the bright red blood also points to a transnationalized violence of the body. That is, a migratory violence with a journey originating in Central America fueled by a foreign imperial intervention, to the violence of immigration and loss.

of home, to the institutional violence that created the ingredient for a gang culture in barrios, to the deportation of those gangs into a country that would foster hostility and hate, to the violence used by the State to eliminate the so-called problem, that is criminals.

The rise in transnational gang visual culture as a subject matter for experimental art in post war Central America is very rooted in the new postwar social concern of eliminating the problem, in this case the transnational criminal body, which is giving way to a new state violence. In both the US and Central American news media, images of the transnational gang body have been used in an attempt to criminalize that identity, often without proper investigations. Thus, gang member bodies are now being found murdered just like death squad victims during the 1980s, often displaying the same torture techniques taught by the School of the Americas during the armed conflict. With such automatic criminalization governments gain consensus that incarceration and or elimination of criminals is justified. These public cases receive little to no outcry or protest from citizens. We can view, then, the interpretation of gang identity by the state as having political goals and implications. By making such associations and accusations, the state justifies the same system of terror and violence it used during the civil war against the leftwing revolutionary group turned political party FMLN and its sympathizers. The Salvadoran gang has come to function as what anthropologist Elana Zilberg calles a “dialectical image” that embodies a

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For instance postwar policies like *El Plan Mano Dura* (The Firm/Iron Fist Plan) which allows arrest of youth on the mere suspicion that they are gang affiliated, resembles *La Mano Blanca* (The White Hand) [1980s], in which vigilante death squads killed people suspected of engaging or sympathizing with leftist activities. *La Mano Blanca* would leaving a white hand print on the door of its victims.
“doble-cara,” an act of mimesis to replace the body of violence from the civil war, and more recently that of the state police. 38 Except now war is fought against transnational identities, who are referred to as a new social class in El Salvador—the deported class.

Artists like Galindo and Zavaleta, among many others throughout Central America, are interested in revealing the historic socio-political conditions and violence that created transnational gangs in the first place, and they do so as a deliberate stand against the stereotypes and fear instilled by recent governments and the media. In doing so they engage in visual disobedience. They expose how the State uses old strategies to reinterpret gang identities, images and narratives, in an attempt to justify a social cleansing. They also convey the irony that for many of these transnational gang youth, the same state violence that forced their migration is now threatening them with death. They thus make visible the connection between US funded wars, racist anti-immigrant laws, failed governments, and neoliberal policies that destroy and displace families, turn children into trained killers, and produced a new criminal upon whom blame is placed. In this manner they suggest that a consideration of children turned into victims requires a consideration of children turned into so-called monsters.

IV. Prison Captivity

The colonialist logic of a sub-human and internal enemy to the nation continues to perpetuate a culture of fear that proposes some bodies have no citizen or human rights and are deemed disposable. As a result, the rise of criminalization and prisons in postwar Central America convey yet another colonial wound, that of captivity and notions of the sub-human. During the 1970s and 1980s, many Central America countries underwent years of oppressive regimes, dictators, wars, and various forms of violence. The current prison conditions are also a direct consequence of oppressive authoritarian regime practices. At that time, Central American state prisons, some clandestine, were filled with political prisoners, out of which the majority would not survive the prison abuse, such as torture. Prisoners ranged from the politically involved to those with no political affiliation, to the family and friends of sought after activists. The end of wars and peace accords however, did not decrease the amount of inmates today found in Central American prisons. With the large inflow of prisoners during the 1980s and 1990s, overcrowding reached unprecedented levels. But in the current postwar period, with the increasing criminalization of bodies, prisons and captivity have become a social issue, one that many Central American artists refer to as social cleansing.

Recent regional investigations led by La Comisión para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos en Centro America (CODEHUCA) concluded that the penitentiary system in Central America, in its design, violates the human rights of prisoners. Their conclusions were based on three analytic components: 1) the
administration of justice, 2) the penitentiary system, and 3) the conditions of life for the deprived of liberty. Their investigation was also rooted in the historical account on the development of the penitentiary in Central America as they also conducted individual country investigations. They show that human rights violations in Central American prisons include over-crowdedness leading to minimal sleeping space, which subsequently increases sexual abuse and rape; poor infrastructure for food maintenance and preparation, which results in digestive illness and infections among inmates; and inefficient medical staff and supplies due to a lack of sources and poor execution by administration.\(^{39}\) Moreover, slow processing of all prisoners violates pre-trial detention limits and the right to speedy trials. This means the majority of inmates are not tried. Additionally, as crowding increases, so does prison violence. The extreme violence in these prisons is so unbearable even for the guards that they often do not bother patrolling areas. Basic necessities, such as mattresses, can only be bought at unaffordable prices. Other inmates are crammed into airless spaces or forced to sleep on stairs and hallways.\(^{40}\) Most prisons lack potable water and are infested with rats and cockroaches. According to Mark Ungar, “The systematic killing, overcrowding, disease, torture, rape, corruption, and due process abuses


\(^{40}\) Mark Ungar, “Prison Politics in Contemporary Latin America,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 25, no. 4, November (2003), 909-910.
all occur under the state’s twenty-four hour watch.” These inhumane conditions are found in every prison regardless of size or location. Scholars and activists have described the penitentiary system in Central America as a “subworld.” Given these conditions, the claim that penitentiary systems rehabilitate prisoners is farcical.

In his piece 100% Catracho (2004) the Honduran artist Gabriel Galeano presents a small sandwich bag filled with a gray ash substance and a label that reads “product made in Honduras- 100% Catracho” referring to the nickname given to Hondurans (Figure 62). The piece is in reference to the escalating number of mysterious prison fires that have been burning inmates alive in the last decade. With the overpopulation and safety violations, it is no surprise that countless die in each fire. Commonly, inmates are imprisoned for over a year in cells, or cages, originally constructed to serve as 72-hour holding cells (Figure 63). Each cell, measuring 12 feet wide and 15 feet in length, is crammed full with more than 30 human bodies. Just in Honduras alone, 61 people died while incarcerated in a prison fire in La Ceiba in 2003; 107 people died while incarcerated in San Pedro Sula the following year; and 356 inmates died in Comayagua in 2012. Similar cases are seen in Guatemala and El Salvador. The lack of investigation or empathy for the victims or their families is driven by the

41 Ibid., 909.

42 Molina, 13.

shared consensus among authorities and large segments of the population that, as criminals and sub-human, the deaths of inmates are justified. Refuting that the fires are accidental, Galeano’s 100% Catracho represents the ashes of an Honduran citizen as a deliberate manufactured product by the State, as it is the State that criminalizes and then holds captive, often wrongfully imprisoned youth.

In 1992 Panamanian artist Jhafiz Quintero had his first experience of incarceration, but it was perhaps his next stay that affected the artist the most. In 1994 at the age of nineteen Quintero was sentenced to ten years in prison, which he served in Costa Rica. Within that period, he simply describes: “bad things happened…I have 17 stab wounds…I was fortunate.” He refers to the penitentiary as a “subsociety with its own practices” where the biggest enemies are the prison guards who “act like gods.” He further describes this “subsociety” as a place of violence where “one only learns how to survive by force, that is, when the body is subjected to the [violent] circumstance.” Thus, in an attempt to bring to light all the “men and women who struggle in the shadows,” Quintero documents a series of objects created by inmates from a Costa Rican prison.

The catalogue, titled IN DUBIA TTEMPORA (2004), which translates to “Critical Moments,” displays individual art objects against a white backdrop,

44 Jhafiz Quintero, communication with the artist via telephone, October 12, 2008.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
removing any reference to their contextual origins or use. Quintero displays each one with a label and text that describes its function as well as the required materials for its creation. With the conviction that each object reflects the identity of its creator (the prisoner), the artist parodies the classification of “otherness” in the name of scientific inquiry—as was the norm in fields of nineteenth-century anthropology, phrenology, and other discourses of scientific racism. Quintero labels and classifies each object as a guide for viewers reminding them that the images in the catalogue are scientific objects to be observed: objects that are stripped of subjectivity and are simultaneously markers of identity.

The objects (ranging from tattoo machines, marijuana smoking utensils, exercise devices, sexual stimulant books, and deadly weapons) are all part of the “natural order” of prison culture and are all prohibited by the prison system. Their illegality speaks to the necessity of survival. The appropriation of discarded consumer items and their transformation into illegal tools of the barest necessities points to capital and commodity as a system that links the “free” world with the captive world, the object with the viewer, the observer with the observed, and the object with the subject. It is perhaps the discarded consumer

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47 Quintero’s original idea and investigation for the work was made possible with the collaboration of Jose Diaz (photographs), Maria Montero (texts) and Jose Alberto Hernandez (graphic design).


49 Quintero, Jhafiz., and Diaz, Jose., and Montero, Mária. IN DUBIA TEMPORA (Momentos Críticos) (San Jose, Costa Rica: Estrecho Dudoso, 2006), 7.
objects that viewers will first recognize in their initial visual encounter with the catalogue; they will have an understanding of its new function only after reading the text. For instance, the first image in the catalogue presents a child’s race-car toy with pink yarn wrapped around it that secures a needle on the side of the toy. The car also has a piece of electric wire dangling from underneath (Figure 64). The title the artist gives to the object is written below in Latin: VERBA VOLANT, SCRIPTA MANENT, translated in Spanish and then in English to “Words disappear, writing remains.”

In a path from the visual to textual, the viewer first utilizes her own lens of consumerism as she recognizes herself in the items. She then observes using the lens of the law, for which the Latin language serves as signifier, that is, Latin as it pertains to the language of Ancient Rome, to the tool of an Imperial Dominating culture, and to the verbalization of law and authority. Next, through the scientific lens, the viewer can read the common name of the object (tattooing device), its materials (toy car, wool needle, and electric wire), and its use (marking the skin permanently, using a child-like procedure). I suggest it is this scientific lens, through its classification, that convicts the object of illegality, in this case the unnatural use of a child’s toy to mark the criminal body, or the forbidden union of a binary, innocence and guilt. The threat is contamination

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50 The correct translation from Spanish to English would be “words fly, the writings last” but here, and from now on, I refer to the English translation as it is offered in the catalogue unless otherwise indicated.

51 Quintero et al, 9.
and one that governments use as a potential threat if the criminal is not imprisoned.

The presentation of the objects in the catalogue recalls the classification of humans into objects by projecting only scientific observations. The result of such classification is to reinforce a de-contextualization of the objects, thus abolishing references to the creator, user, and recipient of the objects as well as to the circumstances and conditions surrounding their functions. Who did the tattooing, who was tattooed, and what was tattooed? They are rootless objects with no origins, no history, and no past, thus with no potential for a future.

On another page, the viewer once again sees common commodities. In this case, parts of spoons, forks, and empty lighters are used in the creation of new objects (Figure 65). The long ends of the forks and spoons have been altered and pointed by sharpening them and then inserting them into empty lighters where they are secured with either melted plastic or surgical tape. The name of this new creation is RAPACES BESTIAE, translated from Latin to English as “Beast of Prey.” Like the other objects, the text informs the viewer of its common name (knives), its materials (metal spoons and forks, empty lighters, surgical tape, and melted plastic) and its use (set of weapons of defense for responding to unexpected attack). While these objects exist in multiples, they are unique, ranging in color, adhesive devices, and various lengths of the projecting metal that displays different decorative designs. Yet, language and classification strip them of their individuality, reducing them to bare components and fundamental functions.
Even the objects’ utility is described in scientific terms as is the case of the object CORPUS DELICTI, or “the body of crime,” in which its function is described as “To tone the parts of the male body that are implicated in courtship, with the exception of the reproductive organ” (Figure 66). The materials include: a broom handle, plastic soda bottles, water, and nylon string. The description states the object’s common name: weights. Although the object is used for exercise, the language presented reduces its function and purpose to its most essential scientific terms: modeling the body for courtship and thus, reproduction. What the classification excludes, but what the object’s title clearly indicates, is that this object is also a weapon. There is greater need to become physically strong and visually intimidating for survival in prison than there is to become sexually alluring. A strong healthy body can be more dangerous than a sharpened fork or spoon.

For the artist, the object conveys an obvious identity, or reference to its maker, and Quintero suggests that after viewing an object alone one can identify its creator. Although the use of the objects serve the basic needs of prison culture (exercise, sexual stimulant, self-defense, entertainment, etc.) they are prohibited in prisons and are thus radical, criminal, and clandestine objects, like their creators. Every object was created, used, and concealed at risk and thus the function of each object speaks to the most personal priorities of the inmate; each

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52 In this case, I used my own translation, as there is an inconsistency from the Spanish to the English translation. The Spanish translation indicates “the body of crime” while the English is written as “Body of delight.” In consideration of the artist’s language, Spanish, I refer here to the correct translation as this change implies a different reading of the object.

53 Jhafiz Quintero, communication with the artist via telephone, October 12, 2008.
object fulfills the most effective strategy of survival during incarceration for a particular inmate. The objects’ existence, therefore, speaks of survival not only in its resuscitation from the death of commodity but also as testament to desire, will, and creativity. Despite their objectification through the lens of consumerism, law, and science, the objects are encoded with the presence/aura of their makers. Quintero’s goal was to give the prisoners, and creators of these objects, the status of artist. As hand made works of art, each object carries imprints of the creator’s hand, survival, and thus, existence.

But one must remember that these are violent objects. The majority are weapons designed to defend, injure, and kill. They are not in their natural environment; they are violently mutated to function in the service of their creators. They are stigmatized for who made them, how they were made, and whom they victimize. They reflect the violence of prisons that, in Costa Rica as in Central America, are a space of overcrowding, corruption, human rights violations, death, and control. They are products of their environment, and thus the only manner in which they come into existence is through their resistance, that is, their aim for survival. But, to survive is to be criminal, and to live is to die. They are radical. The subject may seem ambiguous; does one refer to the objects in the catalog, the prisoners, or both? This blurred distinction is central to Quintero’s artwork.

The catalogue notes to the viewer: “If the logic of capitalism transformed subjects into objects, then the logic of the penitentiary corrupted objects into
Thus, a capitalist structure reduces marginalized peoples into producers and consumers of commodities, attributing commodity status to them. Through this death of humanity, and subsequent exploitation, the poor react violently and are thus deemed unworthy of liberty. The penitentiary, in its “rehabilitation” attempts, claims to give new life but will only do so by breaking and corrupting the subject, attributing the subject with criminal status. Thus, there must be death before there can be new life. Once marked the subject is instructed to integrate himself into society, but now as a self-regulating, self-corrupting subject. The capitalist-penitentiary system is thus designed to make, break, stigmatize, and sabotage integration. Anticipating failure, it patiently waits for the subject’s return.

With the catalogue, the artist’s intention was to reintegrate what were once commodities—now mutated and condemned—back into the market. In this reintegration through the means of exhibition, the artist sought to attribute one more identity to the objects and their makers—that of art work and artist—by highlighting their uniqueness, efficiency, and aura, so that like jewels, they are admired and desired by consumers. The artist sought acceptance for the objects. And yet, there is a consistent ambiguity of identity, objectivity, and subjectivity. What is criminal, who is mutated, and what is condemned? Who/what is the main subject: the objects on display or the prisoners in obscurity? I suggest here that while the artist may intend to consolidate the two, the real subject at hand is

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54 Quintero et al, 8.

55 Ibid.
the artist himself. Through one more lens, that of trauma theory, one can understand each object as a representation of the artist’s self in the aftermath of ten years of incarceration.

In *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, the psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman notes that the American Psychiatric Association once referred to a traumatic event as “outside the range of usual human experience.” In more recent studies, she claims, this theory was disproved as traumatic events, whether rape, domestic abuse, natural disaster, or military violence, have been understood as a “common part of human experience.” The impact of a traumatic event is measured not by its occurrence, as individual traits and circumstances may lead to trauma in some and not in others. Rather, the event becomes traumatic for an individual when it elicits feelings of “intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation.” The close encounter with violence, or the threat of physical injury or death, immediately activates a complicated system of defense in which the body and mind react to danger. At that moment, the individual experiences an adrenaline rush, goes into state of alert, focuses only on the immediate situation, undergoes altered perceptions, and may feel overwhelmed by fear and anger.

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57 Ibid, 33.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid., 34.
The event becomes traumatic when the individual feels a loss of control, that is, an impossibility of taking control over the situation, or the self, and where resistance or escape are beyond reach. Herman explains that in a traumatic reaction to such an event, the normal defense mechanism of the body and mind loses its utility and “tends to persist in an altered and exaggerated state long after the actual danger is over.” The result is a disconnection of the event from its source, a fragmentation that impedes individuals from integrating the memory of the traumatic event into their lives. This psychological trauma, known as Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD) manifests itself through various mental and somatic symptoms that fall under three categories. Herman succinctly describes each: “Hyperarousal reflects the persistent expectation of danger; intrusion reflects the indelible imprint of the traumatic moment; [and] constriction reflects the numbing respond of surrender.”

Although the penitentiary system is designed for so-called “rehabilitation” of prisoners, its function actually creates the perfect environment for repeated trauma through captivity. Unable to escape, unable able to flee, and under the control of a perpetrator, prisoners are susceptible to psychological domination. In fact, one might venture to say this is the ultimate goal. In this case, the prison guard becomes the perpetrator but also represents the judicial and social system that sentences the inmate. Herman notes that in captivity, a

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60 Herman, 34.
61 Ibid., 35.
62 Molina, 5.
63 Herman, 76.
perpetrator destroys the victim’s sense of autonomy by inducing fear, through scrutiny and a total control of the victim’s body and bodily functions, thus destroying the victim’s sense of autonomy.\textsuperscript{64} This assault on bodily autonomy occurs with the denial/command/supervision of organic functions like sleeping, releasing bodily waste, eating, and exercising and the derivation of food, sleep, physical activity, light, and human contact.\textsuperscript{65} In addition to demoralization, victims of captivity are coerced into believing, through their isolation, that no one cares for them and that even their family and allies have forgotten them. According to Herman, the ultimate goal of psychological control is achieved with the victim’s total surrender, that is, when the victim conforms to a dependency on the perpetrator and becomes a submissive and compliant prisoner.\textsuperscript{66} A prisoner is “broken” when s/he becomes a willing victim, one who surrenders for the sake of survival. Consequently, in a state known as “robotization,” victims believe they have been reduced to “a nonhuman life form.”\textsuperscript{67}

Given this theoretical backdrop, it is unsurprising that Quintero emphasizes the transformation of a human subject to non-human status, or vice versa, by bringing attention to the objectified mutated object in IN DUBIA TTEMPORA. As exhibited objects in the catalogue for the purpose of observation, they reflect the artist’s loss of bodily autonomy and privacy experienced during his captivity. The individual presentation of each object

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 77.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid, 83.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid, 84.
against the white backdrop references the isolation of captivity, like that of the prisoner. As in “robotization,” the objects displayed are not emotional organic objects—they are mechanical, functional objects, and more importantly, non-human.

According to Robert Jay Lifton, both victims and victimizers experience death immersion.68 Physically and conceptually, both are immersed in a death anxiety that is also tied to survival. In this case, the reality is that inmates must kill or be killed. The constant threat of death, and having survived that threat, constitutes what Lifton coins the “death imprint,” which he explains, “includes actual death anxiety (the fear of dying) and anxiety associated with death equivalents (especially having to do with disintegration of the self).”69 In prison, inmates are only instilled with a criminal, less-than-human identity, and they are forced to become perpetual witnesses and perpetrators of violence. Out of necessity for survival, the inmate must be on constant alert, be trustful of no one, and be willing to defend oneself by injuring or killing another inmate that poses a threat. It is out of this hypervigilant lifestyle that many of the objects were created, the majority as weapons of defense against another. Inmates thus serve the role of victim and victimizer.

For ex-prisoners like Quintero, every day in captivity was simultaneously an encounter with death and an accomplishment of survival. This overlapping

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69 Ibid., 17.
experience and double identity is also attributed to the objects, which are presented as both weapons and self-serving objects with the abilities to hurt and help the captive body. Moreover, the objects themselves metaphorically become a death imprint. The objects exist in prisons clandestinely as witnesses and as active participants to death and the threat of death. As discarded commodities, they are dead objects. Like Quintero, these objects are also survivors of captivity. That they are now “liberated,” however, can be attributed to the will of the artist, who broke into a prison office and freed the objects by removing them clandestinely. As a survivor, Quintero can do nothing for the inmates left behind who remained condemned and captive, sentenced to daily psychological or spiritual deaths, but he can free the objects who, according to the artist, are “impregnated with the inmates’ identity.”

During captivity, the structures of the self are broken and thus altered. As Herman explains, “the image of the body, the internalized image of the others, and the values and ideals that lend a person a sense of coherence and purpose—have been invaded and systematically broken down.” In the penitentiary the attack on the prisoner’s bodily autonomy, the body’s dehumanization, the distrustful and threatening relations and perception of other inmates, the placement of the prisoner in a secluded space from society with no indicators of his past free life, and the forced and ongoing shifts between the role of victim and perpetrator, all contribute to the breaking of the prisoner. It is only by

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70 Jhafiz Quintero in a telephone conversation with the author, October 12, 2008.

71 Herman, 93.
breaking the prisoner, and his identity, that he can be mended back into an ideal member of society. This psychological alteration affects the inmate’s perception of the self and others.

In trauma, even after a victim of captivity regains freedom, the altered self will persist and assuming a former identity will not be possible. Only a new identity can be developed once free from captivity, but it must include the “the memory of the enslaved self.” For the captive, after freedom, the image of his/her body must be a “controlled and violated” body. The body’s relation to others must be one that is “lost to others” and that can coexist with the idea of humanity’s capacity for evil, including one’s own. Herman notes that in the most severe cases, after release “the victim retains the dehumanized identity of a captive who has been reduced to the level of elemental survival: the robot, animal, or vegetable.”

For Quintero, his old identity was broken long ago. It is not the same one of nineteen years of age before a decade of incarceration. The old identity is lost and cannot be found or regained, but the altered self continues to exist and becomes materialized through the objects, attributing a tangible meaning to the loss. One has to ask why the objects? Why would the artist risk his freedom for imprisoned objects? I suggest that the objects in the catalogue reflect the prisoner’s altered identity. As noted earlier, Quintero emphasizes that in merely

72 Ibid, 93.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., 94.
looking at the objects one can identify its creator. He lends the object for viewing so that in being looked at by the viewer, the object regains identity. The viewer becomes a witness to the altered body, altered identity, and the altered self. And yet, in his classification of the object, Quintero attributes identity to the objects only in relation to their elemental function. They are not emotional, irrational objects; they are mechanical with a fundamental purpose, for a fundamental need, and created out of fundamental materials. In this sense, they are fragments barely held together to function as an object, or subject: and they are crafted with cold logic and precision.

Quintero did not create the objects on display but he created many while incarcerated. The objects are evidence of fragmentation and disintegration of the self, but they remain above all, dehumanized objects. As much as the artist intends to humanize the objects, to give them status of art, to make them as “desired as jewels,” he nonetheless emphasizes their dehumanization through his presentation. They are classified, objectified, and reduced to function. As objects of gaze in the catalogue, they belong not to the artist but to the viewer. The setting remains controlled, and the body of the object remains violated, even after Quintero freed it from captivity.

The penitentiary system seeks to reintegrate newly “rehabilitated” prisoners into society. However, broken, transformed, and stigmatized, ex-prisoners are faced with a situation that impedes their integration into society, or

76 Jhafiz Quintero in a telephone conversation with the author, October 12, 2008.

77 Ibid.
for that matter, any sense of safety, trust, or sense of worthiness. Quintero rescued the objects from captivity with the desire to reintegrate them into society. He sought to reverse the stigma by presenting the objects as artworks, unique, beautiful, and worthy. But this is only done in respect to a social integration not a personal psychological one. Quintero contradicts his aim by objectifying and reducing them to functional criminal objects. The objects are integrated into the world, in this case the art world, by their mere presence, and on a superficial level. But the artist does not allow the objects to foster a relationship or be linked with the greater society. As objects on display, they are subjected to distance from their viewer, reinforcing the power relations of captivity. Although the objects are appreciated for their function and creativity, they are trusted or deemed safe. At the end of the day, they remain in a state of perpetual captivity, their freedom only an illusion. They remain prisoners of body and conscious.

Quintero’s work questions the western system of “justice,” the penitentiary, and its claim to “rehabilitation.” Trauma from captivity is unique not only in that it consists of a prolonged traumatic event—in Quintero’s case ten years of incarceration—but also as it pertains to Central America where issues of human rights violations, corruption, and indifference in prisons are relegated as third world concerns. The penitentiary system in the US does not differ much from that of Central America in its claim to rehabilitate and in its act of inflicting bodily and psychic mutation. Globalization continues to pull bodies from the

South to the North, only to punish and criminalize those who surrender to its call. Bodies move and they are already convicted. Quintero’s work not only testifies to his personal traumatic transformation in captivity. It also testifies to the very kind of traumatic life that prisons forcefully impose. In the coloniality of power, as it exists in postwar Central America, bodies are racialized and gendered in order to criminalize them, which allows their placement in prison captivity. Once in captivity, the bodies are disposed of through a range of human rights violations and destructive fires that burn them alive. Artists throughout Central America reveal a new manifestation of social cleansing in the region through criminalization and captivity.

V. Making the Non-human

In what has becomes a very controversial artwork worldwide, the Costa Rican artist Guillermo Vargas, better known as Habacuc, shows how the issues I have discussed so far—criminalization, creation of fear, punishment, indifference, among others, function not only with the stereotyped image of the gang member, or criminal, but seeps into the everyday life of society in the making of “the internal enemy.” So deep has the fear of the criminal extended, so embedded in racist discourse, and so fed by media spectacles that create fear and turn humans against humans, that this criminalization as a function of coloniality can be seen in multiple spaces, which Habacuc shows us with his controversial conceptual installation, Exposición #1 (2007).

Habacuc’s installation Exposición #1, exhibited in Nicaragua at the Gallery Codice of Managua, is often referred to as “eres lo que lees,” which translates to

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“you are what you read,” but it is popularly identified by a general public with the vulgar phrase “starving dog art.” Habacuc’s careful construction of his installation consisted of the following symbolic elements: 1) the sound of a Sandinista hymn played in reverse (Figure 67); 2) an incense burner, burning 175 rocks of crack cocaine and an ounce of marijuana (Figure 68); 3) a sick dog from the streets, tied to a short leash inside the gallery (Figure 69); 4) instructions not to feed or free the dog that the artist named “Natividad”; 5) a text reading “eres lo que lees” written on the gallery wall in dry dog food (Figure 70); 6) and responses to the installation, which accumulated during the three days of the exhibition from mass media communications systems, including television, newspapers, Internet blogs, cell phones, texting, YouTube, etc. (Figure 71).

Following the three days of the installation, reports of the dog’s death circulated internationally and global outrage was palpable. Animal right activists and others denounced the artist for cruelty to a defenseless dog, for exploiting the animal’s deteriorating state, for inflicting torture on Natividad by holding him captive and forbidding the public to intervene, for using the animal’s misery for shock value under the guise of art, and for creating a spectacle with the aim of furthering his artistic career. For half a decade, a global public has condemned and questioned his authenticity as an artist and denounced his moral and ethical stance as a human being. He has received countless death threats by the public both in and outside international art communities. Worldwide blogs dedicated to his defamation exist in English, Spanish, Turkish, German, French, Italian, Russian, Portuguese, Greek, Bulgarian, Danish, Romanian, and many other
In addition to the written word, vitriolic manifestations toward the artist appeared in various visual forms and performances. Together with an online petition composed of four million signatures, protestors demanded the artist’s removal as a participant in the 2008 Central American Biennial held in Honduras. Similarly, any local art professionals who spoke in defense of the artist—or any foreign institutions that economically supported art spaces exhibiting Habacuc’s art—were not spared scrutiny or threats. Such international outcry, beyond criticism, sought complete expulsion of a Central American artist from his own artistic context.

The Nicaraguan Gallery Codice was also attacked for supporting “animal abuse” in the name of art, even though the gallery owner Juanita Bermudez explained that Natividad was cared for and fed by the artist, and the dog had only been restrained during the hours of the exhibition, then set free in the gallery yard until it escaped. Habacuc, however, refused to confirm Bermudez’s defense and would only state that Natividad “died.” Using this oblique statement, he fueled uncertainty and speculation about the dog’s death. Meanwhile, the reception of the artwork in the international art community divided: some supporters defended the art’s autonomy, and others questioned Habacuc’s artistic credibility, his ethics, and the morality of contemporary art. This debate raises the question of why a conceptual art work, produced in a

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81 Ibid., 120-121.
region historically marginalized by the international art world, ignited absolute condemnation without critical investigation and analysis.  

International bloggers suggested that Habacuc used Natividad as a vehicle to create public controversy in order to comment on the social neglect of homeless and starving animals. Despite apparently clear understanding of one aspect of Habacuc’s intentions, to this day the public continues to denounce him for putatively permitting the dog to die. The primary argument is that a “real” artist should be creative enough to communicate his position without perpetuating the suffering of an animal. However, by returning to the original source of the work, the installation’s social critique shifts from animal to human suffering and how media spectacle clouds reasoned discussion of the artist’s critical analysis of an unjust human and political condition. *Exposition #1* is simultaneously all of the following: a commentary on cruelty to animals; an astute observation of the simplicity and hypocrisy of viewer response; a critique of the international art world, its institutions, and hunger for and promotion of sensation; an analysis of media manipulation and its ability to bury socio-political issues in spectacle on both a local and global scale; and a visualization of the operations of the spectacle itself. At the same time, the meaning and  

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82 Even as recent as the 2011 College Art Association conference in a panel on “Art and Ethics,” Habacuc’s *Exposition #1* was included along other controversial works but presented without any deeper analysis beyond the information and critiques circulated by anti-Habacuc protestors online.

83 The well-known Argentinean artist Marta Minujín was quoted in the *La Nacional*, the Argentinean newspaper, as stating: “Art is life and energy. I am not in agreement with anything dying in an artwork. If the dog died, then it is horrific.” (My translation) Habacuc, “Habacuc GuillermoVargas,” [http://www.blogger.com/profile/17960886994184148250](http://www.blogger.com/profile/17960886994184148250) (9 February 2009) under “interviews.”
implications of *Exposition* #1 extend beyond even these dense and interlocking observations to a veritable study of the historical racism existing between Costa Rica, where Habacuc was born, and Nicaragua, where he exhibited this work. Habacuc intentionally targeted the racism existing of these two Central American countries, which I argue is rooted in the traumatic colonial wound and preserved through the colonially of power that suppresses the real issues underlining injustice, suffering, and human inequality.

Habacuc intentionally named the dog Natividad to refer to the notorious case of Natividad Leopoldo Canda Mairena, who was born in Nicaragua were he lived with his parents and six siblings in humble surroundings (Figure 72). At the age of thirteen, following his father’s death, Natividad abandoned school and immigrated to Costa Rica in pursuit of work to provide his family with better living conditions. However, once in Costa Rica, only further poverty and discrimination confronted him, and his attempts to secure a job and transcend Costa Rica’s hostile anti-immigrant environment failed. Without a job and money, he began living under a bridge, became addicted to crack cocaine, stole for survival, and accrued a criminal record for petty theft. Then, around midnight, on the night of November 10, 2005, Natividad jumped over a wall and entered the Taller Romero (warehouse) with the supposed intentions of stealing. According to reports, the security guard, Luis Hernandez Quezado, who knew Natividad, released two Rottweilers that immediately began to attack the young

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man. As Natividad’s screams echoed in the night, a growing crowd of neighbors quickly arrived at the scene, followed by the police and the media. Rather than intervening, and following the owner’s orders not to shoot the dogs, the police and all the spectators simply watched as the two Rottweilers devoured Natividad Canda for an entire hour. The attack finally ceased when the fire department used a water pressure hose to distance the dogs long enough to remove Natividad, who was then limp, semi-conscious, and immobile.

Natividad was taken to a hospital, where the doctors diagnosed him as suffering from multiple loss of skin, muscle, tendons, arteries, veins, and nerves. His testicles were ripped off, and he had severe blood loss due to the over 200 bite wounds covering his body. Natividad Canda, twenty-five years of age, died shortly after his arrival in the hospital.

Natividad Canda’s death was met with a media storm. Allegations emerging from Nicaragua—against the owner of the warehouse, the guard who released the dogs, and the police who did not intervene—claimed that Natividad Canda was permitted to die a slow torturous death despite the multiple instances when intervention by the police and witnesses could have prevented it. The video documenting the attack became the basis of the claim, promoted by Natividad’s mother, who argued that Costa Rican discrimination against Nicaraguans caused her son’s death. Natividad’s case brought to light the history

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85 The factual events as they occurred, as well as the public reaction was all documented by mass media and was compiled by the artist in his blog, available for viewing. See Habacuc, “Habacuc GuillermoVargas,” http://www.blogger.com/profile/17960886994184148250> under “Caso Natividad Canda” (9 February 2009).

86 Ibid.
of racial and class tension between Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans, which had begun with the influx of undocumented Nicaraguan immigrants into the country since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The historical roots of the tension, however, date back to colonization, post independence, and border disputes over the San Juan River.  

In his blog, Habacuc documented the subsequent reactions in the Costa Rican media to Natividad’s death in order to convey the xenophobia of Costa Ricans and how they used the tragedy as an excuse to perpetuate already existing historical tensions. Moreover, the Costa Rican media presented the Rottweilers as heroes, applauding the dogs for “effectively” eliminating the “Nicaraguan problem.” Commercials advertised Rottweilers for half price, offering to throw in a free Nica (the appellative given to Nicaraguans) in order to test the dog’s efficiency. Some even proposed replacing the Costa Rican border patrols with Rottweilers, as they proved more capable of eliminating immigrants than the border guards. Others proposed that the Rottweiler be celebrated as the new national hero and that historical monuments of Juan Santamaria (the

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country’s official national hero) be replaced with statues of Rottweilers. Dog food was advertised as “Nica food.”

Placing this highly conceptual installation within the context of the Natividad case highlights Habacuc’s many references and intellectual and moral concerns, and offers a reading that extends from animal negligence and cruelty to racism and xenophobia, or coloniality, amplified through technological means. The parallels Habacuc drew between Exposición #1 and the Natividad case were intentional and preconceived in planning his exhibition, as Natividad (the name he gave the dog) is a metonymy for Natividad, the man who lived a “vida de perro” (a dog’s life) and died, killed by dogs. As a social outcast forced to endure a dog’s life, Natividad, the man, like Natividad the dog in Habacuc’s installation, belonged nowhere, had no roots in Costa Rica, the foreign land he came to in order to work and send money home to his family in Nicaragua. The man, like the dog, was an invisible nomad subsisting by scavenging, stealing, and living hungry and homeless on the street, a way of surviving visible to all, accepted by all, but purged from social consciousness so as to suppress the need to respond to him, provide him a living, or make social change.

In both cases, the media provided a variety of technological witnesses to the slow deaths of the man and the dog, proving that both deaths were preventable with intervention. Everyone’s failure to intervene transformed the public and the media from witnesses into participants and perpetrators. Through his installation and the meticulous and thorough record he kept of its reception

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89 Ibid.
on his website, Habacuc proves how the media images illustrate its own and the public’s complicity through inaction. Moreover not only the media but also social and legal conventions were responsible for the death of both the man and dog. For example, the police were instructed not to shoot the Rottweilers, and they followed penal code protocol prohibiting firing a weapon without direct threat to the policemen. Similarly, gallery viewers were compliant with orders not to assist, feed, or free the starving dog. Despite whatever discomfort or feelings the public experienced or expressed to each other in the gallery and in the presence of the dying dog not one person disobeyed the artist’s order to not save the animal. Rather, they stood around drinking wine and chatting. The public’s failure to act is another instance of culturally sanctioned behavior that Habacuc sought to illuminate in this conceptual piece: when faced with a work of art and an artist’s instruction—“do not feed or release the dog”—the public responds with institutionalized conformity and nonintervention. Conceptual art raised related issues in the 1960s, and since its development in installation and performance art these conventions have rarely been questioned. Habacuc, fully cognizant of such predictable behavior, took great advantage of it in constructing his piece.

Habacuc’s underlying evaluation of social hypocrisy exposed the culprits for their lack of responsibility, which resulted in the perpetration of the animal’s suffering. Habacuc’s installation also visualized the institutionalized domination that cultivates and maintains submissive viewers. In both cases, rather than act to change a situation, fear of breaching gallery conventions, passivity, apathy, and a callous lack of concern enabled inaction and delayed reaction. So-called protest
and activism on behalf of the two Natividad’s only materialized at the safe
distance of virtual space: in the media where protest immediately transmogrified
into a spectacle of self-righteous blame and accusation against the artist, all of
which detracted from individual culpability. Moreover, and more importantly
for the context of art, Habacuc’s powerful concepts and cultural criticism was
entirely ignored; his exposure of antiquated aesthetic conventions regarding the
autonomy of art, at the expense of the life of a dog, were overlooked; his
condemnation of the public and the police for not intervening in the death of a
man were disregarded; and his analysis of how the public and Internet users
uniformly respond with unthinking hysteria to media reports were unnoticed.
Indeed, the public performed exactly as Habacuc predicted in his incisive wall
text: “eres lo que lees” / “you are what you read.” This phrase captured how
credulous acceptance and consumption of what one reads reduces the individual
to thinking with the crowd and failing to exercise critical judgment. The textual
record that Habacuc kept of all these events underscored how spectators
themselves became the diversion, distracting attention from moral and ethical
social issues to justify their own inaction. Rage against the artist, who exposed
the public’s culpability, protected the international mob from themselves and the
recognition of their own guilt. Few even bothered to consider the enormity and
significance of the issues Habacuc’s art raised and no one responded
appropriately by saving the dog or the man.

Finally, the public both failed to read or think about the meaning of the
wall text or have the courage to release the dog, but viewers also ignored and
failed to come to terms with the incense burner smoldering crack cocaine. Who
considered its allusion to Natividad’s drug addiction? No one seems to have pondered the meaning of the Sandinista hymn playing in reverse and that reference to the failure of the revolutionary Nicaraguan government to provide enough economic resources for its people to survive, a failure that led to people like Natividad migrating to foreign countries for work. Furthermore, mass media systems failed to communicate any of the substance of the situation, airing only the most shallow and sensational “information” on a global scale. Only a handful of intellectuals around the world attended to the meaning of Habacuc’s blogs, which display the conceptual formation and foundation of his work along with the hyperbole and frenzy of the public. Habacuc drew out, even played on, the public's automatic response to inflammatory incidents, knowing that rather than investigate the content of the event(s) and their circumstance(s), it would erupt in thoughtless and meaningless excitement. As such, Habacuc exhibited not “starving dog art,” but “starving spectacle art,” namely a public hungering for constant sensation and thrill. As such, the artist stood virtually alone in his meditation on Exposición # 1.

In Exposición #1, Habacuc transformed the gallery space through the arrangement of objects suggesting specific references that together evoke the social context of Natividad Canda’s death. However, as I have argued, the premise of the work both includes and extends beyond the specific Natividad case and into the idea of spectacle and viewer complicity to colonialist structures and institutions. The text “eres lo que lees” underlines the main concept of the

\[90\] Ibid.
work, which Habacuc communicated through the stories of the two Natividades. In this way, while categorized as an “installation,” Habacuc’s profound critique of society and the media is better understood in the context of conceptual art (in which the idea takes precedence over the aesthetic materiality of the work), and it makes an important contribution to and enriches the scholarly dialogue developing about conceptualism in Latin America that has only recently begun to include Central American artists.

More recently, Habacuc has created two additional installations—Dos Nombres (Two Names) (2010) and camisETA (T-shirt) (2010)—that further exhibit his strategic conceptualism. Exhibited during the 2010 Central American Biennial held in Managua, Dos Nombres consisted of two iconic names written on the wall in contrasting scales and color. The larger name measured ten meters in length and in black letters read “Augusto Nicolás Calderon Sandino,” the full name of the national hero who led the Nicaraguan resistance against US military occupation from 1927 to 1933 (Figure 73). Adjacent, in white letters measuring ten centimeters, was the name “José Daniel Ortega Saavedra,” the man who has held presidential office in Nicaragua since 2007 and who stirred controversy for his attempts to change the constitution in order to facilitate his reelection (Figure 74). Both names are easily recognized by any Nicaraguan, and most Central Americans in general, the former as a national revolutionary hero and martyr after whom the party was named and the latter as the party’s prominent leader during the revolution over three decades ago. The artist’s stylistic choice of presenting the two in hierarchical scale, however, denotes a clear distinction in importance between the two names: José Daniel Ortega Saavedra’s name is
considerably smaller in comparison, and the lack of color in the name makes it nearly invisible. Only through close observation can a viewer actually make out the latter’s name as part of the work. Once again Habacuc uses text to incorporate the historical context of Nicaraguan political history to convey meaning and a specific idea. In this case, he provokes viewers to reconsider the notion of national hero, differentiating between actual revolutionaries and self-interested politicians, and the contradictions in one who was killed for the revolutionary cause and one who lives for the presidential life.

That same year, 2010, Habacuc was invited to participate in the XXXI Biennial of Pontevedra, in Spain, with two video installations: *Johnny Leyendo y Explicando un Texto* (2008) and *Persona sin Educación Formal Caminando en Zancos Hechos con Libros Apilados* (2010). Both video installations address the theme of reading and interpreting a text, specifically as a critique of the educational system in Costa Rica. However, *camisETA* was the conceptual work that completed and united the two videos (Figure 75). During the public ceremony for the inauguration, the artist wore a black t-shirt with the word “camisETA” on the front in white capital letters. The Spanish word for t-shirt is *camiseta*, however, the last three letters were drastically larger in size and “ETA” became the only visible letters from a distance. ETA is easily identified in Spain as the acronym for the group “Euskadi a askatasuna,” meaning “Basque Homeland and Freedom,” which originated in the late 1950s as a radical student group opposing General Franco’s repression of Basque language, culture, and intellectuals. Since then, ETA has been labeled an armed terrorist group in Spain and accused of major killings, kidnappings, extortions, and attacks on citizens to promote its
cause. During the official inauguration ceremony, security warned Habacuc to move out of sight of officials, but instead the artist positioned himself closer to them and the guest speakers, making himself visible to both other attendants and media reporters. As a result, he was photographed next to prominent figures with ETA on his shirt provocatively causing discomfort for viewers, security, and biennial staff. As a result, Habacuc’s two videos were removed from the biennial under the premise of last minute adjustments, and payment for his hotel room was cancelled as well. According to Habacuc, for whom there is no “text without context,” he aimed to challenge textual reception and interpretation of texts, and his camisETA t-shirt was aimed to complement the two videos selected for the biennial. Ultimately, Habacuc provoked his censorship by self-consciously bringing attention to a longstanding political and social concern in Spain, and he knowingly posed as if a security risk.

Just as in Dos Nombres and camisETA, the text in Exposición # 1 (eres lo que lees) encompasses the artist’s main concern and the central idea behind his work. In each case, he addressed a socio-political context and incorporated an ideological and political concept for debate. Yet while Habacuc’s work follows some of the major distinctions Latin American scholars have made for a conceptualism in Latin America, he simultaneously challenges those assertions. For instance, one of the dividing factors, noted by curator Mari Carmen Ramirez, has been related to Lucy Lippard and John Chandler’s 1968 theory of the dematerialization of the object in conceptual art, a notion that was hotly debated in 1969 by many artists practicing conceptual art. In Latin America, where the materiality of the object has always been an important factor in the emergence of
conceptualism, artists rejected the notion of dematerialization.⁹¹ “Eres lo que lees,” written in dog food, conveys this importance of materiality and further ascribes the political meaning to the work. Moreover, Habacuc’s emphasis on “no text without context” reinforces the importance of “context” in Latin American conceptualism as argued by Luis Camnitzer who has even suggested the term “contextual art” as a better fit to understand its function in Latin America.⁹²

Yet even from the debates around conceptualism in Latin America, which originated response to political repression in the Southern Cone, particularly in the context of Brazil, Argentina, and Chile, conceptualism in Central America differed. Conceptualism in Central America became prominent after the war and revolutionary period of the 1970 and into the 1990s, which were not the same military regimes as in the 1960s in South America, but rather products of US imperialist interventions shaped by cold war rhetoric leading into neoliberal policies such as CAFTA.⁹³ Its geopolitical position and politics provide a different context that, while sharing similarities with a general Latin America context, are also unique on its own terms. As I argue, the primary concept in Exposición #1 extends beyond state politics to coloniality as a unifying context in both Habacuc’s

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criticism of art institutions and their viewers, along with the racist logic of the anti-immigrant sentiment in Costa Rica, itself a manifestation of coloniality.

The lack of inquiry into the social condition of anti-immigrant injustice, the decontextualized moral judgment used to condemn the artist, and the demand of his complete expulsion even from his own local artistic context all convey a pious intervention that resonates with the history of imperial intervention in Central America. Clearly the global outcry was more like a mob than a constructive debate. The dog Natividad was instantaneously defended as the universal “man’s best friend.” But never did Natividad the man become the universal “economic refugee.” Inquiry into either death simply did not receive a considered analysis.

The unanswered question at the foundation of the emotional response to Exposition #1 is: Did the dog die or not? Habacuc could have confirmed that the dog’s death was a media myth; and some locals criticized him for not doing so and bringing the attacks on him to an end. One must question what truly angered the protestors? Was it the use of the dog in an artwork that possibly caused its death or that the artist declined to explain the work upon demand? Such lack of explanation is celebrated in European avant-garde theories. In Theory of the Avant-garde, Peter Bürger explained that:

Refusal to provide meaning is experienced as shock by the recipient. And this is the intention of the avant-gardist artist, who hopes that such a withdrawal of meaning will direct the reader’s attention to the fact that the conduct of one’s life is questionable and that it is necessary to change it. Shock is aimed for as a stimulus to change one’s conduct of life; it is the
means to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in (initiate) a change in the recipient’s life praxis.94

Yet Habacuc was condemned for his lack of explanation and accused of merely seeking shock-value in his work. One can see how his withdrawal of explanation ignites this discomfort for viewers that leads to distress even though the artist provides the tools with which viewers can create meaning—text and context. Similarly, Stiles has noted, “Habacuc’s silence is the cultural, social, and political substance of this conceptual work.”95 And has claimed that “no artist has the responsibility to ‘clarify’ his or her work, but in refusing to do so must equally take responsibility for the public response: Habacuc did so in his refusal to demythologize the public’s mystification of Exposición #1, perplexity that thereafter made the myth part of the substance of the work, which Habacuc rightly refused to change, responded to in silence, and continued to document.”96

Closer reading of the work reveals the artist’s extensive critical sensibility and his astute socio-political assessment of the underlying racism and colonial trauma in its narrative. The “colonial wound” that is the consequence of internal racial and class prejudice perpetrated in modernist colonial nation-state building in Latin America (and throughout the world) is evident in the xenophobic tension between Nicaragua and Costa Rica, which dates to the colonial


95 Kristine Stiles in conversation with the author in 2008. Stiles compared the reception of Habacuc’s Exposition #1 to both that of Yves Klein’s faked montage Leap Into the Void (1961) and to the willingness of the public to believe in the erroneous story that Rudolf Schwarzkogler died in a performance by severing his penis.

imposition of borders between the two countries.\textsuperscript{97} Gloria Anzaldúa has theorized such borders as an “open wound,” a metaphoric and geographic space “where the third world grates against the first and bleeds.”\textsuperscript{98} I would argue that Habacuc could be said to have extended this reference from a first/third world anti-immigrant context, to convey how the logic of coloniality has infiltrated and divided two countries equally categorized by imperial nations as “third world” or “underdeveloped.” Habacuc’s reference in Exposition #1 to Natividad Canda as the “other” in Costa Rica points directly to how Costa Rica is figured as the “Switzerland of Central America” while Nicaragua remains the “third world,” even and especially to Costa Ricans. This is not only a symptom but also an example of the colonial wound inflicted by geo-racial classifications from centuries ago.

Exposición # 1 denounces injustices regarding art and social practices and the formalist concept of the autonomy of art, as well as the hypocritical politics between animal rights and human rights, while exposing the works of coloniality. Sergio Villena Fiengo, Costa Rican scholar and expert on Habacuc’s work, has rightfully argued that Habacuc’s work was an “epistemic catalyzer” in Central America with regard to socio-political issues.\textsuperscript{99} It was a catalyst that


\textsuperscript{98} Gloria Anzaldúa. \textit{Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza}, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Book, 1999), 3.

\textsuperscript{99} Villena has written a comprehensive account of the varied positions and debates swirling around Exposition #1 in Central America in his book, see Sergio Villena Fiengo, \textit{El Perro Está Más Vivio Que Nunca: Arte, Infamia Y Contracultura En La Aldea Global} (San Jose, Costa Rica: Editorial Arlekin, 2011), 161.\textsuperscript{99}
provoked and forced a critical debate in the region among artists, curators, and scholars—those who defended and those who opposed the work, as well as those in between. Unfortunately, Villena’s detailed investigation was rarely encountered anywhere else except in Central America, either in scholarly or artistic discussions. Neither did anyone protest or organize an investigation into the Natividad Canda case to insure justice and compensation for his family. Instead, the uncertain death of a dog proved of more emotional consequence than the death of a man, or, summoning Franz Fanon, one of the “wretched of the earth.”

VI. Considerations

The artists discussed in this chapter are only a few of the many who are aware, who are critical, and who expose the current concerns of a postwar Central America. While countries in the region continue to push forward, using a modern logic of historical progression to argue that the war years are in the “past,” these artists reveal that the violence during the conflict has not ceased but rather increased through different methods. More women are tortured and killed based on mere gender than during the armed conflict years. Women live in fear of the possibility that once they step out the door, they too will fall victim, and worst, that nobody will care. They fear that, like the cadavers often seen on the streets, their bodies too will be one that people trample on the street. But artists like Regina José Galindo and the Projecto Artería Collective, among many others,

100 Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, translated from the French by Richard Philcox; introductions by Jean Paul Sartre and Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Grove Press, 2004).
do not just fear this reality; they root it in a continuation of colonial violence, where patriarchy and racism continue to manifest in contemporary neoliberalism. Through their visual disobedience they expose the intersectionality of race and gender in the region. Their works also make visible the other side of the victimization, which is criminalization.

Ironically, as governments allow femicide to exist and persist, they simultaneously induce fear through the creation of new internal enemies. No longer the leftist guerillas, now the urban youth, and more specifically the new “deported class,” pose a threat. Artists like Zavaleta expose the manipulation of governments, media, and US imperialism in both producing the violence for forced migration, the racist structures that produce social inequalities for immigrant youth, the anti-immigrant policies that produce a double-displacement through deportation, and then the strategy attack of this new “deported class” to create a new enemy. Only with a common enemy, can a government convince citizens they need protection, and only through fear will a society give up their rights for “security,” whether through fear of the criminal or the terrorist. Zavaleta, however, also disobeys that logic by emphasizing the human aspect of the most feared people in Central America and what has become known internationally as the most dangerous gang in the world. His works offer a counter narrative to the media stories as an act of visual disobedience by showing how such gang life has been created, and how members, who are often the most poor, have had to survive.

When citizens, however, succumb to the colonialist logic that some bodies are dirty, and rapable, or criminal, and disposable, it comes as no surprise that
the inhuman prison conditions go unprotested. As humans are being caged like animals, with no food, no space, and no fair trial, they are merely collected until the next prison fire eliminates many. Artist Quintero, who like other Central American artists has experienced incarceration, uses installation and performance to expose how captivity in prisons is designed to break down a human being, to fragment, to surrender, and to dehumanize. His work often offers survival strategies for those deprived of liberty as an act of visual disobedience. Exposing the racist and classist structures behind the penitentiary system, he recalls nineteenth-century practices of scientific racism in the categorization and objectification of humans. Yet, Habacuc, who has perhaps received the most repercussion from his visual disobedience than any other global artist, has shown how the world will first protest the putative death of dog before that of a human being. Through his work, Habacuc exposes the logic of coloniality that criminalizes a young Nicaraguan immigrant and applauds a supposed just punishment of being devoured by dogs for the crime of enduring a life of poverty.

Through their visual disobedience these artists are the most outspoken, taking to both public spaces and art spaces to expose and condemn the violence in Central America that has surpassed deaths and victims during the actual years of conflict. Their choice of medium fits within any contemporary art space and discussion, yet their subject matter, their call to action and reflection, are actual matters of life and death. Understanding the circumstances that the region faces,

and their personal experiences, emotions, and positions, show that beyond experimental art, these artists are taking risks for the sake of humanity and the logic that aims to eliminate it. Through this visual disobedience they locate the root of violence allowing for more effective ways to combat aggression towards the most marginalized. Their visual disobedience, beyond exposing and condemning postwar injustices, offers opportunities for healing colonial wounds.
Conclusion

I have set out in this dissertation to explore Central American experimental art practices in a postwar period that challenge the idea of a state beyond war and aggression. This art exposes the normalization of violence, specifically one rooted in coloniality, or the system of domination in which the European/Western colonization of political and economic spheres continue to be intricately linked to the colonization of knowledge systems at the world scale.¹ I have argued that the contemporary art scene, beginning in the 1990s, can be understood as a time in which artists have found new methods to denounce the militarization, war, and dictatorship from the previous decades while confronting the violence of displacement, poverty, and trauma that remain its consequence. They use aesthetic means to counter the current oppressive mechanisms of fear and control in order to expose the fictitious creation of a new enemy face. That is, the government and media now promote a new national enemy, no longer the communist rebel of the 1970s and 1980s, but the marero/a, the gangster and the captive criminal. The notion of the subhuman, which has been used since colonization to argue people are not equals and undeserving of basic human rights, was seen during the conflict period toward indigenous peoples and continues today. In other words, through experimental art practices, artists are exposing the continuity of a historical racial and gendered violence that, despite the current postwar period, stems from the same legacy of violence.

through coloniality. With their works, these artists reveal a colonial wound and offer a decolonial gesture (not only visual, and epistemic, but corporal) toward healing.

Through what I have theorized as visual disobedience, it is evident that art and visual culture in Central America today extends beyond the depiction and (re)presentation of the geo-body-politics of space from which the artist creates. Rather, I proposed that, through their work, Central American artists enunciate or visualize back from a specific geopolitical location, that of a colonial difference. These artists engage in decolonial healing by asserting humanity. That is, through visual disobedience the artists discussed in this dissertation create decolonial gestures that not only expose the coloniality of power but stem from a personal and collective experience, an alternative perspective and intellectual criticism on society and humanity. As I suggested earlier, this method of activism and knowledge production is aligned with ancient Mayan values and understandings of the visual and the corporal as modes of knowledge and transmission. Despite their political nature, it is evident these perspectives are not rooted in political rhetoric from either the left or the right. In actuality, they are enunciations from below. Thus, through visual disobedience these artists undermine the logic of coloniality, including the coloniality of seeing; they re-affirm political and epistemic aspects of the visual and other senses; they connect the current political struggles with historical conquest; and they defy colonialist notions of the non-human by asserting humanity. By using their bodies, objects, and media technologies and by intervening in space, each artist
enacted a sensorial and theorization of time and space that reflects, reclaims, and reasserts humanity though transfers of knowledge.

The artists make their visual disobedience apparent through performance, installation, and conceptual art and also through the creation of spaces, dialogues, and pedagogical initiatives as described in the first chapter. That is, the first chapter aimed to show that Central America has undergone a dialogue of personal and critical self-investigation to define itself. This has been an effort from within, and it has been in process since before the international art scene decided to pay attention to artists from the Isthmus. In fact, these initiatives—the creation of museums and galleries, the organization of symposium, the creation of new pedagogical sites for younger artists, the creation of magazines and critical texts, exhibitions, collaboration through collectives, and alternative art and cultural spaces—have placed Central America on the artistic radar. These initiatives are not the artists’ only contribution. The “fuzzy logic” under which Central American artists and curators operated in the transformation of artist structures in the Isthmus and the “voluntad” from the people that has made it possible are equally important. These were acts of visual disobedience in that they all occurred despite the challenges posed by increased violence, impunity for human right violations, and the lack of interest from the national governments and international art world. They were also initiatives that centered on and spoke from a geographical and political space, embodiment, and experience. As Pérez-Ratton noted, “our time and space is different, it is one among many others, and artists are trying to define it.” With this statement, she indicates a clear understanding that what was needed in Central America could
be in contrast to what was needed in Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, or South America in general. Pérez-Ratton also acknowledged that as one region among many, the Central American art scene could evolve at its own pace. Thus, the discussion and projects catered specifically to the Central American context conscious of its history, its necessities, and its desires. There were no imported formulas, but rather, the formation of networks and solidarity with individuals who supported the Central American artistic scene as allies. Amid this stage of conversations and dialogues, Central American artists, curators, and cultural promoters began to engage in acts of visual disobedience through experimental art. The following two chapters then presented a selection of artists and artworks that engage issues concerning the most marginalized embodiments in postwar Central America—indigenous people, women, and the criminalized.

The second chapter showed how indigenous artists confront the romanticized depiction of indigenous peoples, as was seen in Latin American modernism, by challenging that figurative representation of bodies as merely “to be seen” and instead inserting their own bodies in public spaces to condemn impunity in Guatemala. Through visual disobedience Monterroso, Chavajay, the Poyón brothers, and Pichillá draw from their own ways of seeing and dispute the logic of modernity and its underside coloniality by creating performances, installations, objects, and videos that incorporate a Mayan episteme. This Mayan episteme is one rooted in the stones of Lake Atitlan, just as it is in practices of protection and preservation through practice of braids and knots, and highlights concerns of memory, migration, spirituality, and identity. Moreover I showed how their mere being as Mayans already consists of a disobedience against the
state considering the military’s blatant attempt to eliminate the “internal enemies” or “bad seeds,” that according to military during the conflict, would one day grow up and seek revenge. While artists in chapter two show a critical understanding of the disappearance of and military orders to exterminate the Mayan Guatemalans, their visual disobedience proves they do not seek revenge with violence. Instead, they fight back with a perhaps more dangerous strategy—asserting a Mayan episteme—by re-reclaiming their history, their ways of seeing and visualizing, and their own modes of thinking.

Just as Mayan Guatemalans were defined as “internal enemies” by the state, in the third chapter I discussed the art of Galindo, Zavaleta, Galeano, Quintero, and Habacuc, who expressed a concern with how the logic of punishment and captivity is leading toward a new social cleansing in postwar Central America. Their works show that at the root of this logic of punishment is the idea that certain people are inherently criminal and/or undeserving of human rights—the same logic found at the root of coloniality. They debunk the idea of a postwar Central America by addressing how violence has increased, especially toward women, as the work of Regina José Galindo shows. As her performances convey, the lack of investigations into the torture and raping of women, as well as impunity when the perpetrator is known, results in the normalization of gendered violence. Galindo subjects her body to show the intersectionality of race, class, and gender, while others provide another side and perspective to the so-called new “deported class” of transnational migrants, gang members, and prisoners. These artists do not condone perpetrators of violence. Instead they expose the geopolitical conditions and coloniality that create the
circumstances of necessity and poverty for transnational gangs (Galindo and Zavaleta) and those people deprived of liberty (Galeano and Quintero). Moreover, they show how creating spectacle and fear in society has become the popular strategy with which to control a population and to gather support for the captivity of humans as well as apathy for their abuse and elimination.

The dissertation has viewed the art practices of Central American artists with the same gravity and validity given to written texts, manifestos, and declarations. Literary writing and theory is the most acknowledged venue in which colonized peoples can enter the discursive plane—because of the validity attributed to text and language in the Western tradition—at an otherwise forbidden entry into the battlefield with colonial systems. I have shown that Central American artists are entering the battle through a visual and aesthetic venue, beyond the text, theorizing and fighting a legacy of colonialism on their own terms. Thus decolonizing art and visualities cannot be accomplished only through the written word, just as activism cannot be limited to organizational protests and manifestations as is common in Latin America and increasing all over the world. Visual disobedience—even where individuals say not a word—is a shout against injustice and for humanity, as Galindo explained of her performances and as Chavajay expressed in his urban intervention. When there is no written or verbal explanation, visual disobedience unravels systems of oppression and complacency, as Habacuc has shown.

Therefore the notion of visual disobedience as a gesture of decolonization fully engages the complexities of contemporary art in Central America in a more direct way than the now ambivalent notion of “political art.” That is, a decolonial
approach acknowledges that the current struggle for social justice is not limited to fighting current political parties, the state, or its institutions, but rather, battles in full force the historical legacy of racism that, since European conquest, continues to affect every aspect of contemporary life in the region through colonial apparatuses. As these artists have shown, colonial apparatuses include the judicial system, the military, the prison system, and the media, among others. Therefore, the notion of visual disobedience both accounts for the ways in which artists expose and critique coloniality in subject matter and the ways they engage in decolonial methodologies as visual thinkers. What is at stake with their visual disobedience is not limited to bodies and public spaces or the risk of government retaliation; it also extends to a historical stake and a preservation of love for humanity and justice.

The dissertation claims visual disobedience is a conscious step toward a decolonial healing that will only occur over time and with much effort. The process will be an ongoing one of undoing and rebuilding. The first step has been in finding and exposing how coloniality functions in these contemporary times to understanding that the problem is not a new one of migration or gangs but rather one that is over 500 years old, and thus it requires a more radical approach beyond guerillas as the failures of the civil wars have shown. Even when revolution seemed like the possibility of success, artists like Habacuc and Salmeron require viewers to question who truly benefits and what social changes was really accomplished after so many sacrificed lives. These are reflections from specific geographical spaces and geopolitical embodiments. The project emphasizes that artists' work “sees” and “communicates” from a colonized geo-
historical and biographical embodiment, that is, from a colonized, racialized, and
gendered location.

As a scholar, and as part of this Central American diaspora and history, my visual disobedience has been to investigate and write this history from my own geopolitical space and embodiment—a history that is continuously excluded. This dissertation is a result of travels, conversations, and collaborations with Central American artists where collectively we discussed a shared historical legacy rather than an objective study of an outside subject matter. Yet, this has been only an attempt to address some of the contemporary artists in the region who are currently receiving worldwide attention and to place their art, achievements, and concerns in a historical context. I addressed only a few selected artists, who share common themes in their subject matter. However, throughout my research I have encountered and studied many other artists, and even artworks by the artists included, that further exemplify critical analysis and knowledge production through creative decolonial gestures.²

A broader historical context and analysis is needed for future work such as the historical African presence in the Isthmus, which dates from the sixteenth century. Enslaved peoples were brought to the Americas for labor, or were forced to participate in the ‘discovery’ and conquest of the Americas. Since then, African descendants have remained in the region, played key roles in its independence movements and, in the last century, constituted a large portion of

the labor force for banana plantations and the building of the Panama Canal.³ Afro-Central Americans remain one of the most marginalized groups in the region despite rich contributions from the Garifuna and Creole populations along the Atlantic coast (Belize, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica and Panama). Additionally requires is an analysis of Central American-Americans in US art including artworks that represent the experiences of Central American artists based in the US, who either as immigrants or as the children of immigrants, critically reflect on the politics of what Arturo Arias has coined, a “Central American-American” identity.⁴ This analysis will take into account migration and art within a Latino at context in the US that currently gives little to no visibility to artists of the Central American diaspora, instead focusing mainly on artists of Mexican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican descent. Finally, this project centers only on the most contemporary developments, yet investigations into various historical periods (from the colonial period through the twentieth century) are still urgently needed, as they still void in the art historical narratives.


The dissertation thus contributes to the scholarship in art history by presenting one of the first academic studies to consider contemporary art and visual culture in Central America. Moreover, it introduces various emerging artists from the region, who have exhibited in the US, Europe, and throughout Latin America but whose work has yet to be critically examined. The dissertation additionally maps art spaces, alternative publications and exhibition spaces, and community workshops that serve as sites of research for other scholars. Therefore, the dissertation expands the limited discourse on contemporary art in Central America to include an interrogation of the geopolitical concerns that affect Central American artists while also incorporating the epistemic values of visual culture maintained in the region since pre-conquest times.

To surpass the stereotypes attributed to Central America, and resist the violence of historical voids, the dissertation offers a visual history as a collective visual disobedience. Beyond exposing current injustices, it shows that despite the enslavement, exploitation, rape, and torture inscribed over the Central American body from conquest to the present, it is a body that also carries a history of resistance and strength that has allowed it to become indestructible and permanent, like a rock. This concept can be visually exemplified in Galindo’s performance Soy una piedra (2013) where she lays immobile on the ground covered in charcoal. She becomes a rock (Figure 76). As a rock she is hard, solid, long lasting, and, like a pillar of the earth, her body is engraved and marked with the history of the world. A poem written by the artist accompanies the performance: “I am a rock / I don’t feel the blows/ the humiliation/ the looks/ the bodies over mine/ the hate. I am a rock/ in me/ the history of the world.”
Despite the long presence of a colonial wound, Central American artists like Galindo contribute to decolonial healing by challenging the dehumanization of bodies and offering three primary mechanisms for allaying the pains of the colonial past. The healing they provide re-affirms political and epistemic aspects of the visual and other senses, connects the current political struggles with historical conquest, and defies the colonialist notions of non-human by asserting humanity. This is done through that which is rejected in coloniality—that very intellect, history making, and expressive creation evinced in art that has existed in Central America for over 500 years despite a history of oppression.
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235


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Biography

Kency Cornejo was born in 1979 to Salvadoran immigrant parents in Los Angeles and then raised in Compton, California. She transferred from El Camino Community College to the University of California, Los Angeles to major in Art History, from which she graduated with a B.A. in 2005 with a specialization in Latin American art. In 2007, she received her M.A. in art history from the University of Texas, Austin where she wrote a thesis on Liberation Theology and Art in El Salvador. During her first year at Duke she was involved in reviving the Latin@ Graduate Student Association.

From her research, Kency has designed and taught a course at Duke titled Art, Visual Culture & Politics in Central America, which was the first class taught on the subject at Duke. She most recently published in FUSE Magazine with forthcoming publications in Art and Documentation/Sztuka i Dokumentacja and Collective Situations: Readings in Contemporary Latin American Art 1995-2010. Her most recent curatorial experience includes participation as co-curator for the exhibition and international workshop “De(coloniality)/ Indigeniety” at Duke, and was invited curator for Arte Nuevo Interactiva 2013 Biennial: ‘Estrategias Creativas Decoloniales Mayas, Afro Latina/os y US Latina/o Transnacionales’ in Mérida, Mexico. Her work has received support from the Fulbright-Hays DDRA, the Ford Foundation, the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Fellowship for Undergraduate Instruction. She has presented her work throughout the U.S., Central America, Mexico and Brazil. In the of Fall 2014, she will begin her
position as Assistant Professor of modern and contemporary Latin American art in the department of art history at The University of New Mexico.
Figures

Figure 1. Carlos Cañas. *Testimonios del 72 series*, 1972
Figure 2. Esperanza Guevara. *The Betrayal*, 1975
Figure 3. Boanerges Cerrato Collective. *The Birth of The New Man*, 1980
Figure 4. Juan Fuentes, *Romero Presente!,* 1991
Figure 5. Regina José Galindo. *Quien Puede Borrar la Huellas*, 2003
Figure 6. Danny Zavaleta. Lección “M,” 2008
Figure 7. Habacuc Guillermo Vargas. *Exposition #1 (detail dog)*, 2007
Figure 8. Priscilla Monge. The Series The Lessons: Lesson No. 1 How To Put Make-Up, 1998
Figure 9. Jonathan Harker. *Postales de Panamá*, 2001
Figure 10. Patricia Belli. *Pelo*, 2001
Figure 12. Jonathan Harker. *Mas que un canal*, 2001
Figure 13. Simon Vega. *Cuidades Perdidas*, 2006
Figure 14. Ronald Moran. *Brevedad Inmaterial*, 2009
Figure 15. Walterio Iraheta. Migration is always a matter of space, 2006
Figure 16. Patricia Belli. Vuelo Difícil, 1999
Figure 17. Wilbert Carmona. *Peluchitoul*, 2002
Estimado amigo:

Ayúdame con lo que pueda para poder comer, comprar ropa y continuar mis estudios, a sí poder servirle a la sociedad, ya que mis derechos así los dicen, y mi gobierno no a podido hacer nada. Prefiero pedir ante que robar.

No lo bote.

Figure 18. Rodrigo Pacheles. for Los niños de mi ciudad, 2002
Figure 19. Regina José Galindo. *Himenoplastia*, 2004
Figure 20. Ernesto Salmero. *Auras de Guerra* (on original wall), 2006
Figure 21. Ernesto Salmeron. *Auras de Guerra*, 2006
Figure 22. Abigail Reyes. *Radio Mujer*, 2011
Figure 23. El Nuevo Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (NuMu), Guatemala City, 2014
Figure 24. Federico Herrero Retrospective at Numu, 2012
Figure 25. Regina José Galindo Restrospective at NuMu, 2013
Figure 27. Kimbell Panel, Classic Maya Period, 300-800 AD
Figure 29. Jorge de Leon. *El Circulo*, 2000
Figure 30. Alejandro Paz. *El Genocidio*, 2000
Figure 32. Sandra Monterroso. Rakoc Atin, 2008.
Figure 33. Sandra Monterroso. *Rakoc Atin*, 2008.
Figure 34. Ángel Poyón. Letanía, 2008.
Figure 35. Ángel Poyón. Letanía, 2008.
Figure 36. Benvenuto Chavajay. *La Suave Chapina* series, 2007-08.
Figure 37. Benvenuto Chavajay. *La Suave Chapina*, series, 2007-08.
Figure 38. Benvenuto Chavajay. Untitled, 2013
Figure 39. Andres Curruchiche. *Untitled*, date unknown
Figure 40. Angel Poyón. In Estudios del Fracaso Medidos en Tiempo y Espacio, 2008.
Figure 41. Fernando Poyón. *Contra la Pared*, 2005.
Figure 42. Antonio Pichillá. *Ku’kul’kan*, 2011.
Figure 43. Antonio Pichillá. *Lo Oculto*, 2005.
Figure 44. Sandra Monterroso. *Lix Cua Rahro/Tus Tortillas Mi Amor*, 2002-2004.
Figure 45. Sandra Monterroso. *Meditando El Error*, 2008.
Figure 46. Sandra Monterroso. El *Matador*, 2011.
Figure 47. Regina José Galindo, *Perra*, 2005
Figure 48. Regina José Galindo. *Mientras ellos siguen Libre*, 2004
Figure 49. Artería Collective. ZIP 504, 2001-2005
Figure 50. Artería Collective. ZIP 504 (detail), 2001-2005
Figure 51. Regina José Galindo. *Ablución*, 2007
Figure 52. Danny Zavaleta. Retrato Hablado, 2009
Figure 53. Danny Zavaleta. *Retrato Hablado*, 2009
Figure 54. Danny Zavaleta. *Retrato Hablado*, 2009
Figure 55. Danny Zavaleta. *El Tur*, 2006
Figure 56. Simon Vega. *Ciudad Encajada*, 2001
Figure 57. Simon Vega. *Ciudad Encajada*, 2001
Figure 58. Danny Zavaleta. *Made in*, 2008
Figure 59. Danny Zavaleta. Lección M, from alphabetization series, 2008
Figure 60. Robert Yager. *Mad-dog challenging stare*, 1992
Figure 61. Isabel Muñoz. Untitled from “Maras” series, 2007
Figure 62. Gabriel Galeano. *100% Catracho*, 2004
Figure 63. Giles Clark, *Untitled* (72 hour holding cell in El Salvador), 2013
**Verba Volant, Scripta Manent** (Las palabras vuelan, los escritos perduran)
Nombre vulgar: Máquina de tatu.
Materiales: Carrito de juguete, hilo de lana, aguja y alambre eléctrico.
Uso: Ornamental y decorativo. Estampar la piel de forma permanente, mediante procedimientos cuasi infantiles.

Figure 64. Jhafis Quintero. Words disappear, writing remains from INDUBIA

**TEMPORA series, 2004**
Figure 65. Jhafis Quintero, *Beast of Pray* from *INDUBIA TEMPORA* series, 2004
Figure 66. Jhafis Quintero *the body of crime* from *INDUBIA TEMPORA* series, 2004
Figure 67. Habacuc Guillermo Vargas. *Exposition #1, (detail Sandinista Hymn)*

2007
Figure 68. Habacuc Guillermo Vargas. *Exposition #1* (detail, incense burner), 2007
Figure 69. Habacuc Guillermo Vargas. *Exposition #1 (detail dog)*, 2007
Figure 70. Habacuc Guillermo Vargas. *Exposition #1* (detail, dog food, view from entryway), 2007
Figure 71. Habacuc Guillermo Vargas. *Exposition #1* (detail, blog), 2007
Figure 72. Natividad Canda, from blog *Exposition #1, 2007*
Figure 73. Habacuc Guillermo Vargas. *Dos Nombres*, 2010
Figure 74. Habacuc Guillermo Vargas. Dos Nombres, 2010
Figure 75. Habacuc Guillermo Vargas. *camisETA*, 2010
Figure 76. Regina José Galindo. *Soy una piedra*, 2013