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Phantom League: Refusal as Conceptual Methodology

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Saúl Hernández-Vargas

Committee in charge:

Professor Ricardo Domínguez, Chair
Professor Mariana Wardwell, Co-Chair
Professor John Blanco
Professor Rubén Ortiz Torres

2017

The Thesis of Saúl Hernández-Vargas is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Co-Chair

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2017

DEDICATION

Hace ya algún tiempo escribí un párrafo de agradecimientos que sigue vivo y merece regresar al lugar en que fue generado: La Jolla, California. En *Zapatos italianos*, la novela que Henning Mankell publicó en México en el 2007, hay una escena parecida al significado de decir “gracias”: Agnes, dirigiéndose a Harriet mientras recuerda a otro personaje, dice: “Aplaudía cada vez que salía al campo y veía algo hermoso. ¿Por qué habríamos de aplaudir sólo cuando vamos a un concierto o cuando alguien pronuncia un discurso? ¿Por qué no va uno a aplaudir aquí, en medio de un acantilado?”. La conversación concluye de la mejor forma posible: Agnes conduciendo a Harriet hasta la roca más alta y saliente. Y: “Mientras ella gritaba ¡bravo!”, Harriet aplaudía.

En este texto no hay acantilados, pero sí tiempo y trabajo desde que inició el proyecto en la ciudad de Oaxaca hasta el día en que inauguré mi exposición de tesis. Cuatros años median desde entonces. Y por eso, después de tanto tiempo transcurrido y estando aquí, en “medio” de un pequeño bosque, me gustaría aplaudir y gritar bravo, y compartirlo con ustedes. Esos aplausos que, son reconocimiento y alegría compartida, sólo significan una cosa: A todos ustedes, a todas las personas que de alguna u otra forma me apoyaron en este proyecto, muchas gracias.

Si esta tesis ha sido posible se debe, en gran medida, al apoyo incondicional de mi comité: Ricardo Domínguez, Mariana Botey, Rubén Ortiz-Torres y Jody Blanco. En este proceso, los comentarios de la profesora Julie Burelle fueron fundamentales para otorgarle densidad y peso a mi trabajo. Durante este periodo, aprendí mucho de las interacciones con PhD students en historia del arte y en art practice; entre ellos se encuentran Javier Fresneda, Sascha Crasnow, Melinda Guillén, Elizabeth Miller, Paloma Checa-Gismero and Marianna Hovhannisyán. Las conversaciones con otros MFA students contribuyeron al desarrollo de este proyecto: Patricia Zambrano, Sindhu Thirumalaisamy, Andrew Sturm, Seth Ferris, Trevor Amery, Jonathon Paden y Patrick Shields. Me gustaría agradecer tanto a Sarah Carvalho como a Consuelo Soto por sus clases de inglés.

Si mis piezas audiovisuales llegaron a buen puerto se debió al trabajo del Cliffmann. “Xipe-Totex que Lloro” le debe mucho a las conversaciones con Gregory Montes. Tales **piezas**

piezas también se beneficiaron de las pláticas con Marina Azahua, Cliffman e Irmgard Emmelhainz. La traducción de los subtítulos está en deuda con Amanda Petersen y con Cristina Rivera Garza—quien también corrigió y comentó cariñosamente todos los componentes de este proyecto. El poster-publicación existe gracias a Lorena Gómez Mostajo, del Taller California. Si las esculturas fueron exhibidas en San Diego fue gracias a que Andrew Sturm y Omar Pimienta cruzaron la frontera con ellas.

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También quiero agradecer a las personas que confiaron en mí, dándome cartas de recomendación para ingresar a este programa: Magali Lara, Eugenio Tisselli y la dra. Elena Castañeda, mi asesora de licenciatura. Agradezco también a todos los amigos que me apoyaron en este proceso: Marina Azahua, Juan Pablo Anaya Arce, Guillermo Esponisa Estrada, Luna Marán, Tajëw Díaz Robles, Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil, Ingrid Solada, Juan Pablo Ruiz Núñez, Stalin Cruz y Amandine Semat.

El amor y apoyo incondicional de mis queridos padres, Laura Vargas Fagoaga y Saúl Hernández Fernández, ha sido fundamental para concluir esta etapa académica. Pocas veces la palabra incondicional tuvo tanto sentido como en el caso del apoyo de mi madre, quien me ayudó a conseguir lo que parecía, literal y burócraticamente, imposible. Esta tesis también es de ella.

También quiero darle las gracias a los doctores del Seguro Social, en Oaxaca y Puebla, que cuidaron de mi padre y permitieron que me acompañara durante este proceso. Gracias a todos ellos, y al sistema de salud pública en México, mi padre está vivo.

Nunca tuve mejor incentivo para terminar este proyecto que el cariño de mis sobrinos, Laura Trejo Hernández y Toño Goycolea Hernández. Como les dije hace tiempo, me encantará verlos en sus graduaciones.

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EPIGRAPH

Nuestros poemas
como mojoneras
deben trazar el camino.
—Nazim Hikmet

No queda nada para nosotros en la espesura
sino lo que la espesura conservó para sí misma.
—Mahmoud Darwish

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Phantom League: Refusal as Conceptual Methodology

by

Saúl Hernández-Vargas

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2017

Professor Ricardo Domínguez, Chair
Professor Mariana Wardwell, Co-Chair

In January 14th, 1931, an earthquake destroyed the city of Oaxaca. Usually seen as a natural disaster or a mere human tragedy, the earthquake became, on the contrary, a fundamental political agent in the rise and development of a new city—one completely dominated by tourism. This thesis, along The Phantom League Archive, my thesis show, is an exploration of the concept of *refusal*, developed by Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson (2014) in *Mohawk Interruptus*, as a tactic to interrupt or struggle against colonial narratives. The three clay sculptures and two videos I created for my thesis show were designed to interrupt Mexico's foundational narrative based on a common origin—linked to a pristine Indigenous past—by asking: How is

history made to be understood as a dense monolith without cracks or fissures? By problematizing ideas of commodity and rent associated to the materials I use in the making of the pieces, my sculptures arrest both time and narrative, creating a space to interrogate alternative notions of land and territory aligned with Mixe scholar Floriberto Díaz' work. Additionally, in using the concept of readymade by John Roberts, I open an aesthetic and political discussion of labor in the art work in the context of Latin American art.

PHANTOM LEAGUE: REFUSAL AS CONCEPTUAL METHODOLOGY

1. Plates: Specters of January 14th, 1931

During the winter 2016, I traveled to the city of Oaxaca, in southern Mexico. There, I asked two artisans, Omar Fabián, from San Bartolo Coyotepec, and Jose Manuel Valdés, from Santa María Atzompa, to make three pieces of clay. The procedure I proposed to them was similar to what they commonly use; or perhaps not, and this was radically different. I asked each one to make a square plate measuring 150cm on each side, and then let it dry on its own until it broke by itself. I asked them to subvert, or refuse, the methods with which they produce their handicrafts.

San Bartolo Coyotepec is a well known village for its production of pitchers and decorative vases, made of barro negro (black clay). Unlike Santa María Atzompa, its artisan production is iconic. Omar Fabián belongs to a family of artisans who, recently, perhaps for his academics studies in design, has been characterized by its formal experimentation and its accomplishment of orders for collectors or local and foreign businessmen. Santa Maria Atzompa, on the other hand, is well known for its production of pots and saucepans, made of “glazed” clay. However, José Manuel belongs to a family that, in its attempt to expand its market, began to produce a very fine decorative type of crafts, known as filigree. It is no coincidence that these craftsmen, the two recently dedicated to experimenting with the material, would accept my proposal. They were the only ones doing the kind of work necessary to do it.

When I visited them in their workshops, I asked them to let the material “create” the piece and, in that sense, I asked them to work using error or the unexpected as departing point. I literally asked them to make a clay plate and let it dry on its own until it brokes. They said yes, but not before hesitating and rebutting a little. We negotiated the size. In the first lines of “Theorizing Refusal: An Introduction,” Carole McGranahan asserts that refusal means “to say no,” but “not just that”. (McGranahan, 2016: 319). Refusal is a strategy that both interrogates and illuminates. (McGranahan, 2016) At the end, when the pieces were dry, the craftsmen’s work consisted of burnishing these fragments—to make them bright—and then burn them as they regularly do. Later, I would assemble the plates and intervene on them with small objects made

by my grandfather Alfonso Vargas Sánchez in the sixties.

One of the risks of this procedure was that the pieces could change in size and some fragments could be arched. If Omar and José Manuel's warnings were true, the piece would never draw a perfect square plate measuring 150cm on each side.

And if it did, they could do nothing with the procedure I suggested; they could solve or even control nothing. Somehow, they had to give up "total" control to the clay itself. Since the artisans started with the work, I have come to understand the clay, those types of clay, as a metaphor, or as a representation, of the Oaxacan territory, a concrete, determined, contested territory, "rich" in cultural and natural "resources". With these pieces, I tried to illuminate the radical opposition of the clay, and with it of the Indigenous territory, against the pure, present and living, geometry of the colonial power. (Mbembe, 2014)

This thesis is an exploration of the concept of *refusal*, developed by Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson (2014) in *Mohawk Interruptus*. Simpson defines refusal as a tactic to interrupt or struggle colonial narratives. Drawing from Simpson, I am interested in refusal as a conceptual methodology central to my work. Taking Simpson's articulation of refusal as a starting point, I approach some pieces that inform my "production" as a visual artist—such as *The Atlas Group* (1989-2004) by Walid Raad and *El enigma de Ichcateopan: Archivo mesiánico de la nación* (2010) by Mariana Botey, among others—which simultaneously interrogate the engine of this project: how is history constructed and established, made to be understood as a dense monolith, without cracks or fissures?

So, what is that which I call refusal? The answer could be brief and, above all, simple: Refusal is saying no. However, this could be further elaborated from the work of Audra Simpson and her *Mohawk Interruptus* (2014). In this book, which could be understood as "a cartography of refusal" (Simpson, 2014: 33), the author problematizes the role of anthropology as a science that "has imagined itself to be a voice, and in some disciplinary iterations, the voice of the colonized." In this sense, the author claims that this science has developed a series of "techniques of knowing" (Simpson, 2014), with the aim of registering and, above all, "verifying," the communities under study. (Simpson, 2014) Not without some irony, Andrea Giunta asserts that Christopher Columbus, for example, "did not discover, he verified and identified, mutilated and reduced." (Giunta, 1996: 54) Thus, from its beginnings, the colonial project established a process of reduction of scale that, as Bruno Latour said, allows to generate the scientific

distance necessary to act on determined events or communities (Latour, cited by Rozenhal, 2008). Among its consequences, this process has allowed the acquisition of “space”, that is, territory and natural resources (Simpson, 2014), and also the imposition of meaning or, in other words, the narrativization of the world from the colony’s governance needs (Simpson, 2014; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010).

This is a form of politics that is more than representational, as this was a governmental and disciplinary possession of bodies and territories, and included existent forms of philosophy, history, and social life that Empire sought to speak of and for. (Simpson, 2014: 96).

In this way, stories like the “empty continent” (Subirats) or like the one of common, Indian, mythical and grandiose origins (Machuca, 2005), were useful for the establishment and legitimation of the States (Lombardo de Ruiz, 2004) vis á vis the indigenous majorities that, from that moment on, were “minorized and dwarfed” (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2008). Therefore, Audra Simpson suggests another form of ethnography that cuts or interrupts or rejects its own colonial barriers:

I am interested in the way that cultural analysis may look when difference is not the unit of analysis; when culture is disaggregated into a variety of narratives rather than one comprehensive, official story; When proximity to the territory that one engages in is as immediate as the self. What, then, does this of ethnographic [or artistic] form? I will argue that when we do this type of anthropological accounting, “voice” goes hand in hand with sovereignty at the level of enunciation, at the level of method, and the level of textualization. Within Indigenous contexts, when the people we speak of speak for themselves, their sovereignty interrupts anthropological portraits of timelessness, procedure, and function that dominate representations of their past and, sometimes, their present. (Simpson, 2014: 97).

Thus, the people interviewed by Simpson reject the words that, from the social sciences, try to provide an explanation of them themselves (Simpson, 2014: 99). In this sense, one of the most relevant questions in the book is about sovereignty. This matters, as a methodological issue in an of itself, because it speaks from jurisdictional authority: the right to speak and, in this case, to not speak”. In the ethnography of refusal there is always a calculation between what people need to know and what the ethnographer decides not to tell (Simpson, 2014); not in order to protect any kind of magical or esoteric knowledge, as the anthropologist explains, but to prevent the telling from activating or exacerbating forms of dispossession and subjection

established by the colony.

My notion of refusal articulates to mode of sovereign authority over the presentation of ethnographic data, and so does not present “everything”. This is for the express purpose of protecting the concerns of the community. It acknowledges the asymmetrical power relations that inform the research and writing about native lives and politics, and it does not presume that they are on equal footing with anyone. This presumption of equal footing is false. (Simpson, 2014: 105)

Thus, if traditional ethnography attempts to make the communities it studies transparent and to impose “scale reduction” (Latour, cited by Rozenhal, 2008) on them, the ethnography of refusal attempts to make them translucent and, in some way, unavailable to the colony’s knowledge technologies. The artist Ricardo Domínguez (2015), closely following the Caribbean Édouard Glissant, uses these concepts to describe the three functions that borders deploy: to make those who cross it either translucent, opaque, or transparent. If the transparent and the opaque could be understood as opposites, the translucent operates in both territories: partially exposes them, limiting the perception of contours and details. We could turn to the post-exoticism of French writer Antoine Volodine to clarify this idea: according to one principle of this paradigm: “a portion of shadow always endures in explanations, or in confessions, modifying them, to the point of making them useless for the enemy.” (Volodine, 2014:9)

Audra Simpson’s ethnography of refusal seems to be advocating transparency, for this is an ethnography that, in its attempt to analyze particular communities, refuses the tools of the discipline. However, if we return to her elaboration of sovereignty, such ethnography becomes translucent. Let us consider the following questions: if the ethnographer of refusal claims to study and analyze certain communities, why not keep silent or write everything the informants tell you? Why establish ethical and political limits in the ethnographic work? Who or to whom does that benefit? Could (traditional) ethnography then be considered as a border control post? And, in this particular case, in the case of my thesis project, in the context of a thesis in visual arts, what do I mean by refusal? What kind of things are refused by the pieces here exhibited? The three pieces, or rather sculptures—this is how I shall hereafter refer to the pieces of clay made by Omar Fabián and Jose Manuel Valdéz in Oaxaca, later assembled by and intervened on by me in San Diego—seem to be broken squares of approximately 150 centimeters for each of its sides. In short, they give the appearance to be pieces resulting from error or neglect. In “The Power and the Illusion”, Gustavo Buntix recalls that the crack and fracture reject “any

illusion of wholeness” (Buntix, 2010: 316). In that sense, these pieces refuse the straight lines that rationalize the territory according to the demands of global capital. They refuse the idea of mestizaje and our supposed and glorified common origin, indigenous, mythical and grandiose (Machuca, 2005; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010). And these sculptures refuse the Nation-State as an endogenous and homogeneous totality (Machuca, 2005; Simpson, 2014).

1.1. Where I sit and stand: Another way of understanding the territory

The three sculptures of clay, made by Omar Fabián and José Manuel Valdés, could be read as literal representations of the earthquake, which destroyed the city of Oaxaca (Mexico) in 1931. I will tell the “anecdote” in length below.

On the night of January 14th, 1931, hundreds of people were literally, and metaphorically, in the open, exposed to disease and hunger. Countless architectural structures collapsed in a blink, especially those located in the so-called lower part of the city; (Álvarez, 2008: 228). In the upper side of the city, as Luis Rodrigo Álvarez explains, the damage was atrocious, but some large constructions, such as the church of Carmen Alto or the former convent of Santo Domingo de Guzman, were left standing as though they had been saved thanks to some kind of miracle (Álvarez, 2008). However, their miraculous integrity is not due to some divine intervention but rather to the geological quality of the terrain on which these structures stood. This area of town was simply more stable.

Different chronicles of the period described the noise of the structures “collapsing” as unbearable, only comparable to the cries of the people who congregated on the streets. Some of them, kneeling or with their arms spread out in the shape of a cross, asked forgiveness for their sins (Sánchez Hernández, 2014). Oaxaca had been the theatre of such tragedy before. Indeed, Fray Francisco de Burgoa witnessed a similar scene in the sixteenth century, when an earthquake caused the collapse of the former convent of Santo Domingo de Soriano, raising dust clouds that managed to confuse the earth with the sky afterwards (Van Doesburg, 2007). Three centuries later, the sensation was similar. Again: the shaking of the mountains, the tremor of the bodies, the fear.

At the end of the earthquake, the rumors spread rapidly. In their low voices, they noticed the collapsed buildings and did not miss the possible robberies in the evicted houses. These rumors turned out to be a tragic and discreet version of the night watchmen of former

times. Among the affected churches were: San Juan de Dios, whose bell tower came down. But that list also included the Compañía church, the main Cathedral, the Merced church and the Iglesia de las Nieves. Many of them lost their towers. Therefore, in the days that followed, Néstor Sánchez tells us in his chronicles, “improvised huts were created to carry out... religious acts” (Sánchez Hernández, 2014: 36). Fear and guilt soon became precious objects of exchange. The Church began to deal with the disaster; the sky, then, became a comfortable shelter for victims (Álvarez, 2008).

That same night, an electric storm illuminated the beautiful hill of San Felipe del Agua. It was at that moment that Francisco López Cortés, governor of the state, wrote to Pascual Ortiz Rubio, then the president of Mexico. The telegram—which had a small red stamp and said, on the margin, that “(our) state is poor because of ignorance and lack of communications”—included López Cortés’ report of the brutal event. “Great material losses” and “numerous deaths” were two of the expressions used by the young and “intense” governor who, according to Margarita Dalton, “wanted to be involved in everything”: in “consolidating agrarian reform” but also and, of course, in the “construction” of roads and highways (Dalton, 2004). Indeed, this was a tragedy: 114 people died that night, and many others lost everything. Family dinners and birthday parties were buried and reduced, in seconds, into rubble and rubbish. The situation in Oaxaca was desperate. Spread of hunger, cholera, and other diseases, only worsened the situation in the following days.

In the first paragraphs of “Nonorganic Life,” Mexican philosopher Manuel DeLanda (1992) recounts the incompetence of Western astronomers of the fifteenth century to contemplate the cosmos. Their belief system did not allow them to notice any change because, for them, the cosmos was restricted. Thanks to similar systems, other observers have been unable to understand anomalies and accidents as a norm. That is what Manuel DeLanda refers to when he speaks of a soliton: a solitary wave, apparently peculiar and never before seen that, after its interaction with other waves, is able to remain apparently intact and then retract to become a tsunami and then collide and modify the known landscape. (DeLanda, 1992) Somehow, one of the objectives of this project is to operate from another belief system; in that sense, this project explores the agency of the earthquake of 1931 that, on one hand, destroyed a city and, on the other, founded another one, completely oriented to tourism. My goal is to place the earthquake at the center of the historical narrative of modern Oaxaca as a foundational event,

both at political and aesthetical levels, rather than as an isolated incident. The earthquake created a stage to display the original condition of Indigenous peoples (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010) and thus, in some way, turn them into exotic providers of touristic services. Tourism become an extension, or tool, of the settler colonial project. Paraphrasing Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, tourism has reproduced colonial modes of domination, granted by the center of the power which is, in this case, the global capital.

Using the gentrification framework, tourism implies a radical reconfiguration of the users (the Indigenous people) and the uses of the space (the Indigenous land). In that sense, the process of becoming a touristic attraction, paraphrasing Lucía Durán, “is inscribed in an spectacular and civilizatory project where the interventions [to the space] acquire the appearance of the restitution of rights”. That is, they appear now as rights to use and occupy the space with different types of bodies. In other words, the deserving space is to be used and inhabited only by deserving (tourist-oriented) bodies. (Durán) Through an opaque discourse, tourism has created or established clear roles for both the tourist and, paraphrasing Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, the Indigenous or, to be more precise, the “original” people. When tourism speaks of “people located in the origin”, it speaks of “people excluded from the laws of modernity”. “They are given a residual status, and in fact, they become minorities, encapsulated in indigenist stereotypes of the good savage guardian of nature.” (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010:59) This means that they become guardians managing and taking care of the space they occupy, dispossessed of any kind of rights over the territory. We should remember that “[W]hen we speak of dispossession we are speaking of the materiality of land”, as Simpson (2014: 18) argues. This form of dispossession, which is always a racialized and gendered process (Simpson, 2014), could be described along the logic of elimination by Patrick Wolfe (2006): a logic which utilizes a wide variety of tools to eliminate the Indigenous people and, in that sense, to deprive them of their ownership of the land. In the Mexican case, those tools range from the public education through the discourse of modernity of development deployed by the State and the touristic industry.

Coming back to my clay pieces, in the foreground, these could “represent” a set of tectonic plates that, in their interactions, are able to reconfigure the landscape as it was known. However, among the three pieces are obvious material differences. San Bartolo Coyotepec, unlike Santa María Atzompa, is a town famous for its artisan production of black clay (*barro negro*). Their pitchers and vases are iconic and well known not only in the town, but in the state at

large. San Bartolo, or San Bartolo Coyotepec, is, in fact, a brand , which protects and certifies the quality of the pieces. Therefore, we could examine the materiality of these sculptures, first, using the concept of rent monopoly from political economy. “Rent monopoly,” David Harvey explains (2001: 30), “arises because social actors can obtain a higher income stream over a prolonged period of time by virtue of their exclusive control over a particular article.” The crafts of San Bartolo Coyotepec are reproducible, but not the material with which they are made. The terrain and the Indigenous tradition guarantee the exceptionality of the pieces and, in this sense, the monopolist price (Harvey, 2001). This explains why the price of the piece made out of black clay by Omar Fabian from San Bartolo was four times more expensive than the pieces made out of red clay by Jose Manuel Valdez from Santa María Atzompa. It seems important to point out that my relationship with these two artisans was strictly a labor relationship that, of course, rejects the colonial logic of “collaboration” and “socially responsible enterprises.”

This logic, the capitalist logic, was established since colonial times in the sixteenth century, and in the twentieth century, with the earthquake, was strengthened and took the shape of or became embodied in “Oaxacan products and souvenirs,” and, in the 21st century, has acquired the form of “ethical” and “responsible” products (Zizek, 2011). And this is the current logic of the neocolonial ongoing project. However, my project attempts to refuse, or interrupt, or crack such logic. Or, as Cusicanqui would say, to stain it (Cusicanqui, 2010). I do not understand these sculptures as mere commodities, but as magical artifacts or as objects organically related to a given territory. To paraphrase Marcel Mauss (1967), these sculptures, made with two different types of clay, one red and the other black, are similar to a talisman or taonga, as long as they contain the vitality of the rivers and mountains from which they originate (Mauss, 1967).

To refuse, interrupt or crack the neoliberal project implies a radically different way of understanding what a territory means and is. The anthropologist and comunero mixe Floriberto Diaz (2007) assured that the territory is an entity that operates in two axes, one horizontal, which somehow speaks of the material reproduction of the daily life; and another vertical, which connects the earth with the cosmos and with the realm of the sacred. Specifically, in the horizontal sense, says Floriberto (2007), is:

1.”Where I sit and stand.” 2. “The portion of land that occupies the community to which I belong so that I can be myself.” (Y) 3. “The Earth, as of all living beings.” (Diaz, 2007: 41)

Vertically, there is a relationship between the “height” of the people and the “hierophanic (or sacred) mountain”. This is:

3. “The universe”.
2. “The mountain”.
1. “Where I sit and stand.” (Díaz, 2007: 42)

This way of thinking the territory is shared by other Indigenous epistemologies. Therefore, some of them reject both the vision of the “right” that understands the territory as a vast and inexhaustible set of natural resources and, at the same time, the point of view of the “left” that only understands it from the concept of peasants (Díaz, 2007, Lauer, 1996). That is why Floriberto Díaz (2007) asserted that neither the left nor the right understands that the relation of Indigenous peoples to the territory goes beyond the material reproduction of daily life. In that sense, in the Quiché Popol Vuh and in the oral tradition Mixe, there is a close relationship between the territory and, therefore, the earth, and the mud itself, with the creation of the human being.

The clay is the easiest element to manage to form the figure of the human being, who is pulled out from the innards of the earth. Corn is the most precious fruit of the relationship established between people and nature, through collective work (...) (Díaz, 2007: 51)

Thus, for Mixe people, earth is both starting and arrival point: (Díaz, 2007: 52)

That is why she became the mother of all living beings: we are of her, we feed from her and we return, accepting in her innards. She is sacred and we, her children, are also sacred. (Díaz, 2007: 52)

Thus, it is not difficult to imagine that between the earth and the mixes, in this case, there is a “maternal-filial” relationship, which goes beyond the spirituality of “something imaginary.” (Díaz, 2007)

That is why among the natives we cannot conceive an abstract religiosity, but concrete and symbolic, but without remaining solely in the mere matter but transcending into the depth of it. (Díaz, 2007: 52)

From their point of view, the land is alive and, therefore, the relationship that must be

established with it is a relationship of respect and reciprocity as the basis of exchange. (Díaz, 2007; Martínez; 2013; Mauss, 1967) The land gives them corn, and they give her parties and rituals. They also give her the fatigue of the body that works and celebrates, in some cases (Rivera Garza, 2016).

Understanding these sculptures as magical artifacts allows me, on the one hand, to refuse the neoliberal logic that only conceives the territory horizontally, that is, as a set of natural resources, available and for sale. And, in that sense, this allows me to struggle against the ongoing neocolonial project in what we call Mesoamerica. But as Marcel Mauss suggests, cited by Carole McGranahan (2016), refusal disrupts, but also generates. In this sense, understanding these sculptures as magical artifacts also allows me to claim another way of understanding the territory and life itself from the axes proposed by Floriberto Díaz (2007), the Mixe intellectual from Santa María Tlahuitoltepec (Oaxaca, Mexico), which has little or nothing to do with the narrative of colonial powers. Against western “horizontalism”, the Indigenous complexity. Indeed: geological, cosmic and epidermic complexity.

1.2. Readymades ch'ixi: brief political history of debris and rubble

I make a brief recount of the work process: 1. Two artisans, Omar Fabián and José Manuel Valdés, of San Bartolo Coyotepec and Santa María Atzompa, make three clay plates. 2. Each of these plates dries alone until broken. 3. Later, Omar Fabian and Jose Manuel bur-nish or illuminate the resulting fragments. 4. Then, those fragments are burned in the oven. 5. Completed, the pieces travel from the city of Oaxaca (Mexico) to Tijuana (Mexico), first, and two days later, crossing controls and border posts, to San Diego (USA). 6. When the pieces are re-assembled, or reconstituted again, they become “frames” for waxwork from the workshop of my maternal grandfather. 7. In the exhibition space, the pieces are transformed into a ready-made ch'ixi.

Thus, these pieces, that I call readymades ch'ixi, are the product of the juxtaposition of two different languages: the sculpture (clay plate) and the proper readymade (waxwork).

According to Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2010), “the word ch'ixi has several connotations: it is a color product of the juxtaposition, in small spots or spots of two opposing colors” (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010: 69) Thus, the ch'ixi, or variegated, “obeys the Aymara idea of something that is and is not” simultaneously. (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010: 69). Faced with the opacity of the

hybrid, the transparency of the staining.

The notion of “hybridity” proposed by [Néstor] García Canclini is a genetic metaphor, connoting sterility. The mule is a hybrid species and can not be reproduced. Hybridization assumes the possibility that the mixture of two different, can leave a completely new third, a third race or social group capable of fusing the traits of their ancestors in a harmonious mix and above all unprecedented. (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010: 70)

However, the ch’ixi notion is completely opposite: there is no fusion. Well does Rivera Cusicanqui in remembering that Indigenous modernity is a project that is inclined by the variegation or by the stain (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010). In that sense, Indigenous modernity has struggled against “any illusion of wholeness” (Buntix, 2010: 316), or homogeneity, imposed by the Nation-States and the colonial powers. Thus, Indigenous movements have underlined the plurinational features of “their” countries, keeping in mind that diversity is related to political rights which could be summarized, briefly and arbitrarily, as rights over the territory and respect for their autonomy.

The ch’ixi metaphor assumes a double and contentious ancestor, denied by processes of acculturation and “colonization of the imaginary,” but also potentially harmonious and free, through the liberation of our ancestral Indian half and the development of diagonal forms of construction of knowledge. (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010: 71)

Thus, for Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, “bilingualism” is a chix’i gesture and, of course, a “decolonizing practice” that allows “to create a ‘we’ of interlocutors and producers of knowledge. (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010: 71) Such bilingualism could probably translate into the ability to navigate between completely different theoretical systems. The Argentine philosopher Leon Rozitchner (2015) uses the category of bricoleur to describe something similar. Speaking of himself, Rozitchner (2015) says that the bricoleur does not opt for “machines (of perfectly thought) organized”, understood and in relation to other machines, but opts to work with what the bricoleur has at hand. (Rozitchner, 2015) Anything, even the scrapping and the rubble. An intellectual or artist bricoleur is an intellectual or ch’ixi artist. The epistemologies of the south, Cusicanqui asserts, opt for theoretical architectures that could be described as precarious self-constructions, made of sheets, metal, wooden sticks, tarpaulins and linings. Anything: probably, then, what characterizes these ch’ixi epistemologies is a sense of emergency or, much more clearly, a quick response to a given reality.

From my point of view, this has also characterized the artistic production of Latin American modernity. Andrea Giunta does not hesitate to define it as “a misappropriated and modified project” (Giunta, 1996: 55), constituted by a vast series of “tactics” that denoted diversity and opposition. (Giunta, 1996) If we think of “Upside-down map” of Joaquín Torres-García, we could agree that inversion and appropriation were at the center of the tactical repertoire of Latin American artists; And together with these: the blends, the cut-out, the radical decontextualization and another series of clandestine practices (Giunta, 1996; Buntix, 1996) and revolutionary that put, and put, in crisis the modernity of the West. In front of the store of balances invoked by the art critics (Bourriaud, 2009), the market of chacharas and fayuca; the place of the exchange par excellence, the site of the escamoteo, of the permanent traffic and circulation of clandestine goods: Tepito. Faced with the metaphor of the DJ (Bourriaud, 2009), the sonidero of Mexico City, cumbia, and the “Pachuco Boogie” by Don Tosti.

But these tactics have much deeper roots, and should be emphasized quickly. It is important to remember that thanks to this tactical sense, the Mesoamerican peoples were able to oppose and refuse the “practices or representations imposed on them by force or by seduction for purposes other than those sought by the conquerors.” (De Certeau, 2007: 38) That is to say: those towns “did something different with them; (De Certeau, 2007: 38) thanks to the use and a series of translucent customs for the European colonizer.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau asserts that uses and tactics are the tools of the weak. (De Certeau, 2007). Strategies are something else:

As in the general administration, every “strategic” rationalization is first concerned with distinguishing in an “environment” what is “proper”, that is, the place of one’s own power and will. Cartesian action, if you will: circumscribe your own in a world bewitched by the invisible powers of the Other. Scientific, political or military action of modernity. (De Certeau, 2007: 42)

In this sense, paraphrasing the historian, “‘own’ is a victory of the place over time.” (De Certeau, 2007: 42) Thus, those who use tactics operate in a territory organized and monitored by the enemy. For the latter, which enjoys technologies and border posts, the weak is transparent. Therefore, it has to “take advantage” of the occasions, the errors and conjunctures to intervene and to enter in scene. (De Certeau, 2007) Breaking without warning. Hitting first. Hit harder.

In the field of art, the examples are numerous and eloquent. Many artists have privi-

leged the use of tactics. Trained abroad, cubist painter Wilfredo Lam employed the languages of the European avant-garde to imbue them with a “combative energy,” which amplified the voice and protest of his ancestors. (Giunta, 1996: 61)

A knowledge of the decontextualizing operations of the European avant-gardes allowed him in turn to decontextualize the forms of the avant-garde to charge them with revolutionary and prophetic contents. And not only with the forms, but also with the utopian telos of modernity, allowing him to conceive his program as the start of a different time. Lam repeated the pillaging gesture he had learned, using whatever served his purpose of giving to a different culture for which he had, through his journeys, developed a new vision that he now proposed as a recontextualizing program. (Giunta, 1996: 62)

In “The Jungle,” Lam used “scissors” as an instrument or “necessary symbol” to literally and ritually cut off the “foreign impositions” in his native Cuba. (Giunta, 1996: 62) Unlike the European avant-gardes, Lam did not appropriate the texts and experiences of the colonized, but the strategies of the settlers. The use of these strategies allowed him to subvert them from within, (De Certeau, 2007) staining or mottling them, in order to place them at the center an aesthetic and political discussion. It was obvious that Lam required the same syntax and grammar of Western modernity (De Certeau, 2007) in order to interrupt it or, better yet, to refuse it. Gustavo Buntix (1996) uses the adjective “popular” in order to describe Latin American modernity. From his point of view, modernity was constructed or reconstituted from seemingly dispersed and disjointed “fragments:” a bricolage process whose tactical repertoire also included the communalization of artistic practices. (Buntix, 1996) That is, appropriating the strategies of the metropolis of art, but using communal frameworks and scenarios to think about the critical and political potential of aesthetics. (Roberts, 2007) For example, while it is true that achorado pop—a Peruvian pop from the 80s—appropriated the Roy Lichtenstein’s visual language, it is also true that it too appropriated Mexican muralist strategies in order to engage in active conversation with audiences roaming the streets. This engagement stretched the meaning of the word “popular” used by Gustavo Buntix to mean subversion. Indeed, Latin American modernity was popular because Latin American people attempted to subvert the political order. They were using a pretty complex set of political tactics not just to resist in everyday life, but to overtake power.

In this sense, it seems to me that using the term ready made (ch’ixi) to describe my sculptures—made by Omar Fabián and Jose Manuel Valdés, and then reconstituted and

intervened upon by me in San Diego—could be inaccurate or problematic. The clay pieces themselves are not ready made but sculptures: a metonymic representation of the Indigenous territory (Oaxaca) occupied by the global capital and the Mexican State. In a different order of ideas, I am interested in appropriating the conceptual strategy and framework of the ready made but tilting it a little. I not only want to talk about labor, but also want to interrupt and interrogate a certain historical narrative supporting progress and national foundation narratives. In his analysis, John Roberts points out and emphasizes that many of the objects that Duchamp used in his readymades were objects with extended utility. This idea problematizes the theoretical formulations that understand the readymades as products of the consumption. (Roberts, 2007) There is no consumer desire for a urinal, neither for debris of waxwork, but there is for a piece made of a material (clay) endowed, as it's the case with fetishes, with unique characteristics and, therefore, destined to the shopwindows and the logic of Oaxacan souvenirs. In this sense, these pieces interest me as spaces for delay and utopia, which appeal to the critical and revolutionary “transformative options” of aesthetics (Roberts, 2007: 41)

When I finished assembling the sculptures, I intervened upon them by placing small pieces of wax made by my grandfather Alfonso back in the sixties. A beekeeper and a goldsmith, my grandfather made various replicas of the jewels apparently “found” by Alfonso Caso in 1932 in the legendary Tomb 7 (Monte Albán)—one of the most important burial sites in the history of Mexico because both the quantity and quality of the sacred objects it contained. In order to do so, my grandfather modified the scale and the graphic vocabulary of the originals. For example, the Juego de pelota was reduced in size and converted in earrings. Similarly, carved bones became bracelets. Paraphrasing Bruno Latour (cited by Rozenhal, 2008), the jeweler’s task was to reduce the scale of the original pieces in order to better comprehend them and, thus, make them circulate in a range of market circuits. The success was such that Tomb 7 became a wide range of products destined to different types of consumers: primarily tourists, on the one hand, and politicians. Gorgeous gifts for powerful and famous beneficiaries¹.

Alfonso Vargas, a Zapoteco worker and a converted mestizo, devoted his life to investi-

1 President Adolfo Lopez Mateos and the despicable Gustavo Diaz Ordaz—the president responsible for the student massacre in Tlatelolco 1968—strolled through my grandfather’s jewelry often enough. And so did Charlton Heston, Argentinian singer Palito Ortega, the world known Jackie Kennedy Onassis and Isabel II (1975). In addition, some of his replicas were exhibited in local museums or, as it happened in 1967, at the museum of the ex-convent of Santo Domingo Guzmán, in downtown Oaxaca City. Unfortunately, the authorship of these pieces remained hidden behind the prestige of the branding and the assumed neutrality of history.

gate, both intellectually and materially, the becoming of objects that brought with them a version of the past. They were large-scale objects, magical in many ways, and powerful too. People like my grandfather, the goldsmith, turned those objects that touched the inert body of the Mixtec elites into delicate pieces especially designed for the bodies and tastes of white tourism roaming Oaxaca city and countryside.

In that sense, the little pieces I used to intervene the sculptures were tiny “prehispanic” images, broken, ghostly appearances, placed right on the clay. Known as lost wax, these pieces were what was left after the manufacture of jewelry with rubber molds was completed. And, as Shuddhabrata Sengupta argues, they constituted the residue that embodies the accumulation or synthesis of what was “left behind when value was extracted.” (Sengupta, 2014: 24, These left over pieces were rightful witnesses of the trauma provoked by the foundation of a city completely oriented to the tourism. However, these leftovers are precious pieces, completely related to the “prehispanic” ones. In that sense, reusing them is a strategy to “replicate” or “steal” their “aura”. (Roberts, 2007: 16) We should remember, paraphrasing Roberts, that this use of the waxwork could be a way to “reanimate” them or, even better, to reactivate them as powerful objects which contain the vitality of the pieces, times, peoples, from which they originate. This is, of course, a process of auratic speculation through the ready made form. And this is, of course, a process of chamanic intervention which, in a similar fashion of Mariana Botey, call for an “insurrection of subjugated knowledges against the powerful centralizing effects of an official history, subordinating the Indians (the others) to bourgeois liberal Nation-state”. (Botey, 2014:15) That kind of insurrection aims to question the despotic way in which those from above have tried, so many times successfully, to explain and, thus, to snatch our own past, and our present and our future as available time. It is thus my intent to recover the past as available or accessible time.

1.3. Waste as readymades: Readymades as a tactic and a technical category

Skeptical about my proposed plate, both Omar and Jose Manuel hesitated a little. Each one wrote a list of errors. The two warned me that it would be impossible to control the fragmentation of the plaque. But they also warned me that, when it dried, some fragments would slightly blow and their tones, or halftones, would be different. The result would neither be uniform nor controllable as in his artisan pieces. Although one element (waxwork) of these pieces could be

considered as readymade, I use it as a framework to talk about labor. I understand readymade as John Roberts (2007: 22) does: as a demand and as a technical category.

In his *The Intangibilities of Form*, Roberts gives density and weight to the concept of ready made originally outlined by Marcel Duchamp in 1913 and commonly understood as an “option” or “a reflection” of almost supernatural power of the artist (Roberts, 2007: 22). Roberts, however, understands readymade as a concept or, better yet, as a practice linked “to technical transformations in production relations” (Roberts, 2007: 22). In other words, Roberts (2007) understands the readymade as a theory and as a practice of, or about, labour.

Thus, the abandonment of, or refusal against, painting, established a new relationship between the hand and the eye of the artist in the early years of the twentieth century. Roberts asserts that it was an “affirmative” action, which designated new roles for them. From that moment on, artists had to respond to a series of intellectual and technical challenges, which were often based on instructions or drawings similar to those used by engineers. From this point of view, the readymade, far from “de-professionalizing” the field, the readymade created new “skills” for the work of art. The readymade allowed the disavowal or the disarticulation of the old, but still strong, notion of the artist as a genius producing “transcendental handicrafts.” In addition, this opened up an aesthetic discussion about labor since in the readymade, the artist’s non-alienated work as the alienated work of the others were exposed simultaneously. When Marcel Duchamp exhibited his fountain, he proposed an aesthetic and political discussion based on these activities: to refuse, to render transparent, and to reveal. That’s what his gesture was all about. (Roberts, 2007)

Perhaps, my gesture, I contend, echoes Duchamp’s intentions. My pieces began with a sketch and a series of instructions. Unlike what artisans usually do, I did not ask them to make an object included in their catalogue of products and techniques. Their job was to create clay plates, and let them dry and break by themselves. The material itself would create the piece, but their work would be included in the burnishing and firing of the resulting fragments so that I could, after all, rearrange them as “square” and intervene upon them with a series of objects made in the sixties, by Alfonso Vargas Sánchez, my maternal grandfather.

One of the most interesting or useful ideas to speak of these pieces is the idea that the readymade entails a tripartite transformation: “1) alienated commodity; 2) alienated commodity in non-alienated form, and 3) alienated commodity in alienated form.” (Roberts, 2007: 25)

Point number one refers to the raw material, manufactured thanks to the alienated labor of the worker. The second point related to the conversion of that matter into a work of art, thanks to the non-alienated² work of the artist. And, finally, point number three alludes to the incorporation of that work of art in the market. Following this formula, I crafted a number of questions, along with my instructions: what would happen if the black clay, for example, is intervened upon or transformed, first, by a series of non-reproducible or common procedures which, in any case, refused the artisanal logic, as well as the rhythms and volumes of production established by the tourist industry? Would such procedures be capable of interrupting the alienation of artisanal work, subject to a certain historical narrative? Could the readymade revive or “clean” (limpiar), in its magical and shamanic sense, a material which is in itself alive and powerful? (Roberts, 2007: 25).

1.4. Brief latento³ on the slowness of barro negro

Time is one of the elements that escapes, or melts away, in my description of the pieces. All three pieces required a certain amount of time to dry completely. In the case of black clay, that was the only factor that Omar tried to control. He carried out a range of tests. The first piece he made, dried and broke quickly. The resulting fragments were so small that it was impossible, or almost impossible, to reconstitute them again as a square. Then, we decided to try something different. He proposed to work in a much wetter room, so that the piece dried out and broke much more slowly. This gesture was radically opposed to the notions of continuity, uniformity, regularity, order and intensity which, according to Marx, cited by Roberts, constitute the norm of the factory and, perhaps, of the craftsman’s workshop (Roberts, 2007).

If one of my questions was related to the emancipation of the material and, in that sense, the emancipation of the categories of “speed” and “efficiency” imposed on labor, one of the possible solutions was to extend the time and to diminish the volume of production (Roberts, 2007). Nothing more literal than that: in both cases, these pieces were problematic

2 Of course, this consideration has multiple edges because, through the 20th Century, artwork was forced to respond to the needs and desires of the market. However, I am interested in a specific type of artwork which uses, among other strategies, delay as a way to “regain control over socialized labour”. (Roberts, 2007: 35) I tried to do that because, as Robert explains, “to be emancipatory”, “the abstract socialization of labour must be dissolved”. (Roberts, 2007: 37) Delay, in this context, is a way to “refuse” the value-form.

3 Sengupta defines a latent as “an elaboration of the latent or the hidden, the antonym of a manifest”. (Sengupta, 2014:22)

because, given their dimensions, they managed to interrupt literally, and metaphorically, the production and the workflow in the workshops. José Manuel, for example, asked my mother to take the pieces as soon as they were finished, “because it took up a lot of space”. It did not matter that I had not paid him in full; what mattered was having much more space and time to do other things.

Slowing down the pace of work is a critical gesture. When Paul Lafargue (1842-1911) insisted on the universal right to laziness he meant to refuse the limits and conditions of the machines of Capitalism. His call to laziness was rebellious and fueled by solidarity but, when read it literally and without context, it could evoke his&her evil twin: a beautiful, fine and delicate product made by hand, very slowly. Let us remember, after all, that slow food movements have become trademarks of late capitalism. Time itself is a privilege.

In this sense, Roberts argues that art has some liberating potential. From his point of view, art maintains an anomalous or unconventional relationship with the “reproducibility” of objects. This feature allows art, as an “autonomous” and not “reproducible” object, to escape from the laws governing the use value, yet it cannot escape, as he clarifies it later, its character as commodity, and much less that of a fetish. (Roberts, 2007) Therefore, the “delay”, which has a universal aesthetic significance “(Roberts, 2007: 36), becomes a tool or strategy to claim control over time and then work and productive intellect. This brings to mind both the playful, and especially critical, gesture of a Bartleby who, rejecting all productive activity, utters the words: I’d rather not. As if, with that gesture, Bartleby would agree with Georg Simmel, quoted by Shuddhabrata Sengupta (2014) of the Raqs Media Collective:

The flow of time can only be established in something that, in itself, does not flow. On the contrary, a time that merely flows like water, that is to say, that has no memory, for everything that is already memory means, no doubt, a completed element but does not constitute time (Zeit), only a one-dimensional now (Jetzt). (Simmel, quoted by Sengupta, 2014: 19)

Therefore, Sengupta (2014) suggests that we escape from that “now one-dimensional”, governed by the clocks. Escape, from this point of view, is a vital and necessary activity, similar to the activity performed by the heart valves that regulate our bloodstream: “The escape of a clock regulates our sense of the flow of time.” (Sengupta, 2014) : 21) Of course, Sengupta refers to how the hands of the clock, with their transit, let escape seconds that soon will become minutes and then hours. But there is something interesting in its analogy with the metabolic energy

of the human body; that it could somehow extend to speak of the metabolic energy of the clay itself. In this context, I understand these clay plates, which dried out very slowly, like wedges that allow me to problematize the perception of time and space imposed by the machines (Illich, 2013: 40) of the colonial powers. Specifically, I mean the perception of time and space founded by tourism—an industry that expanded in Mexico from the 1930's onwards. If I insist on talking about time and, in some way, on speed, it is because it should be remembered that, historically, tourism has mobilized both the idea of modernity and of progress to establish itself, and to assert itself, on common sense (Antonio Gramsci, 1967; Harvey, 2011).

When Omar Fabián suggested that I should let the piece dry in a more humid room, I thought of an image composed of a series of melting snowballs. My image did not relate to the snowballs “made” and hyper-aestheticized by the liberal Andy Goldsworthy (1956) in the 1970s, but to the ones “made” or “exchanged” by David Hammons (1943), in 1983, in a small and dirty, grimy, corner in Harlem. I conceive this water evaporating, or becoming something else, as an *infra-thin*⁴ gesture, something much harder to be caught by the clumsy, but savage, invisible hand of the market.

1.4. Clay archs: complicating uncertainty

The first piece, the one made by Omar Fabián, arrived three days later than expected. Omar Pimienta—visual artist and poet, originally from Tijuana—crossed the border with it and left it in my studio. The piece that traveled in two boxes made with *mdf*⁵ was broken. I am not referring to the fractures “made” in the workshop of the craftsmen, but to new and “true” fractures caused by the trip. The next day, a small team from the Museum of Contemporary Art of San Diego went to my study to pick it up, because, in those days, it would be exhibited in their space.

First Tom and then Hannah helped me mount the sculpture: a plate 150 centimeters on each side, built of many fragments, out of black clay. Although it seemed “simple”, the assembly of the piece generated new questions and discomforts. Tom looked overwhelmed. The map to

4 According to Marcel Duchamp, art is an evanescent and material act, constituted by a sum of small and delicate events of our daily life: The heat of a seat that has just been left, the aftertaste after smoking a cigar, the breath Vital on polished surfaces, glass, mirror, piano ...

5 A wood conglomerate. We used that material because it was cheaper and it does not require to go through second inspection on the border, as wood does.

rearrange the square was blurry. And the numbers of each of the fragments did not match with the numbers in the image. Once we solved it and thought we were almost done, we came up with two new “issues”. On the one hand, the piece was much larger than planned. It was not 150 centimeters on each side but 157. The piece had stretched somewhere in the process. On the other hand, some fragments matched up “preciously”, as Tom said, but not others. We tried to assemble it, and failed to do so, for three or four hours.

The next day, standing in front of the piece, I realized that the arched fragments, the same that artisans warned me about if the pieces were left to dry on their own, were the cause of the problem. In Norman Bryson’s introduction to *Zones of Disturbance*, the book by Mariana Botey, the historian pauses before the “organizing motif” of the book, which is composed by “concepts that do nothing to hide their aporetic nature.” (Bryson, 2014:11)

Greek, *aporia*⁶ indicates a dead end, a way of understanding that is prevented from moving toward a conclusion, or proposition that can not be said without projecting into doubt (as the liar paradox: “A man says That he is lying, what he says is true or false “?) (Bryson, 2014:11)

Of difficult etymological character, an *aporia* refers to contradictions or irresolvable paradoxes. In this sense, an *aporia* presents logical difficulties almost always of a speculative nature. Is there anything much more aporetic than a work of art that, even in its error, attempts to approach history and then to dwell on the role of anthropology and archeology as privileged sciences by the narrative of the state?

“Tracing an arc” is the aporetic way of “drawing a line”, since a line drawn is something present and complete—but the line drawn at a distance from what is drawn, is secondary as an echo is secondary, incapable of supplying more than a glimpse of what is in front of her. (Bryson, 2014: 11)

In its impossibility to draw a square, “present and complete,” the sculpture drew two arches. They did not allow some fragments to fit with one another and, therefore, to settle thanks to their density and weight, on the floor of the room. Norman Bryson says it well:

Draw an arc complicates the uncertainty of the “line” because instead of forming a straight line from A to B, the line follows a tortuous path around an absent center, a center that can be derived from it, but the arc it can not affirm in itself. (Bryson, 2014: 11)

6 In the original, the word is found in Greek: ἀπορία.

Thus, in this case, “to draw an arc” complicated the uncertainty of a piece built precisely on error, the unexpected, or rather, to say it much more clearly, built according to denial and refusal. On the one hand, the rejection of the pure geometry (Mbembe, 2014) of the colonial powers, dedicated from the outset to drawing “relatively rigid lines of separation that impregnated the daily life of the social or racial segments” (Mbembe, 2014 : 39). These lines—which according to Mbembe’s categorization could be “broken lines, abstract lines, shapeless lines, death lines, cracks drawn in flesh and bone” (Mbembe, 2014: 39)—extended until cutting and marking the body and the subjectivity of the colonized, until reaching and reconfiguring the colonial institutions. One of these institutions was cartography (Mbembe, 2014). It set about drawing perfect squares in cities like Oaxaca, and then developing maps. From that moment on, everybody would be oriented themselves using the same colonial system of references.

The fact that the piece of black clay arched itself, instead of drawing a square of 150 centimeters on each side, might open up space to interrogate the role of the museum and its exhibition model and, of course, the role of the map, the colonial grid and organization. Should we read the arch as a response to the exhibition format and its exoticizing look? Should we read this arch as a response of the material to the terms and conditions of inclusion of one visual artist, as a cultural and political other, in the museum rooms? And should we, in that case, read the bow as a form of agency, magical or sacred, of the material itself? Indeed, after the 2016 presidential elections, the American museum imposed certain conditions on my body and my work as a Mexican, *ch’ixi*, visual artist. Probably, one of those conditions was to respond aloud, louder, about the American agenda.

In “Theorizing Refusal: An Introduction,” Carole McGranham (2016) argues that although refusal and resistance share links, they are not the same. While resistance “overestimates” the role of the state and its institutions, as Audra Simpson quoted by McGranham (2016: 322) says, refusal complicates this narrative and generates others. Faced with the probable, refusal weighs the possible. Utopia as a necessary space to interrupt the narrative of colonial powers. This text, and this expository project, is an attempt to think on refusal, more or less as Audra Simpson does in her work (McGranham, 2016: 321; Simpson, 2014), as subject and method. Since my first days in this MFA, I tried to develop a conceptual methodology, a technical and conceptual catalogue of strategies, rather than merely producing certain amount of objects.

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