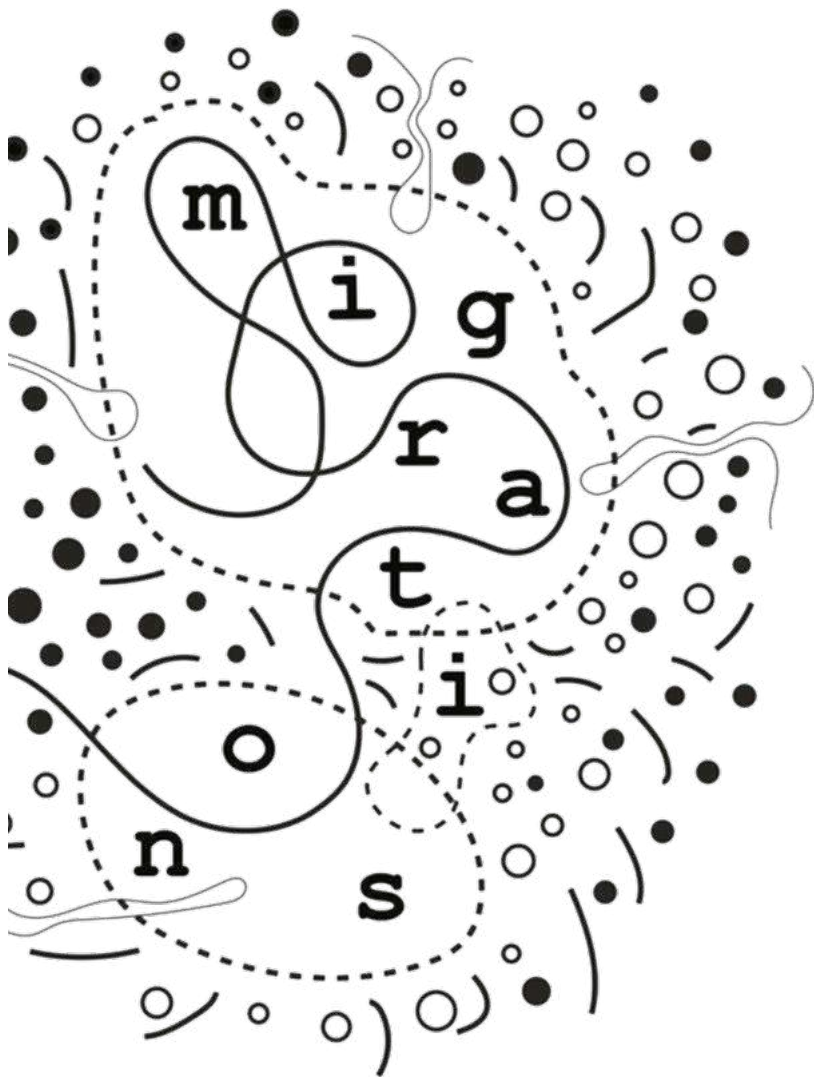


# Migration and Transculturalidad(e)

---

## Session 13



## Session 13

# Migration and Transculturalidad(e): Agents of Transcultural Art and Art History

---

**Alexandra Karentzos**

Technical University of Darmstadt

**Miriam Oesterreich**

University of the Arts Berlin



**Fig. 1.** Adriana Varejão: Proposta para uma catequese: morte e esquitejamento / Proposal for a Catechesis: Death and Dismemberment, 1993, oil on canvas, 140 x 240 cm. Ph: Eduardo Ortega. Private collection, São Paulo, Brazil. Courtesy Fortes d'Aloia & Gabriel Gallery, São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro.



**Fig. 2.** Rosana Paulino: Untitled, 2016, Print on fabric, drypoint and sewing, 58 x 89,5 cm, private collection. Courtesy of the artist.

In the context of current debates on migration and transculturation, as these pertain to colonialism and its enduring aftermath, the works of Adriana Varejão and Rosana Paulino, two Brazilian artists, open up new perspectives. Varejão's painting *Proposta para uma Catequese* from 1993 takes up Theodore de Bry's widely-known and very powerful early modern images, which were created to illustrate Hans von Staden's colonial travelogue<sup>1</sup>. They depict cannibalistic and religious rituals of so-called Indians and appear in the texts as ethnographic descriptions of the indigenes' lives. In imitation of *azulejos*, a baroque portico architecture frames the scenery. Blue and white tilework covers it, like that characterizing the cityscapes in Portugal and imported into Brazil through colonisation. The dark red colour resembles blood and marks the bodies depicted on the tiles, signifying not only the violence of anthropophagy but also that of colonial occupation.

Rosana Paulino's untitled work on fabric from 2019 also illustrates this theme: The fabric squares take up the blue and white ornamental tile motif, but they are combined with ethnographic-photography resembling imaging and x-rays, as well as with drawings of bones. The rough stitching of the squares denotes the violence and death in the colonial past and thus also functions as 'scars' still visible into the present. The large sailing ship on

one 'tile' thus becomes a symbol, not only denoting colonialist domination at sea, but also of the Black Atlantic<sup>2</sup>, in which the 'Middle Passage', the slave trade as forced migration, becomes visible.

Both artists hence address migration and transculturality on three different levels:

Firstly, the violent "migration of forms"<sup>3</sup> marks both works, where baroque forms, the colonial, missionary imagery and *azulejos* are sewn together and display breaking points: the *sutures*<sup>4</sup>.

Secondly, the forcible migration is particularly evident in Rosana Paulino's work, where she places the naked Black body of a woman next to the ship.

Thirdly, the migration of concepts is central to both artists' work, and our examples literally incorporate concepts of cultural anthropophagy. Theodor de Bry's imaginations of the cannibalistic Other in Varejão's work, or the bones, skull and heart in Paulino's work refer directly to this, as does the incorporation of objects and forms introduced with the colonizers and intended to consolidate the cultural hegemony of Europe.

Through this inversion and subversion of "the locus of observation", a deterritorialisation of occidental thought takes place.<sup>5</sup> As we show here alongside the artworks discussed, processes of transculturation and migration can be seen as deeply connected to each other.

The terms migration and transculturality both originate in national and cultural boundaries – inherently unstable as they are – being permanently transgressed, and they register phenomena resulting from cultural contact as well as cultural processes of negotiation. Migration implies the movement of people on a global scale. Along with people, images and aesthetic concepts, artifacts and everyday practices also figure in such migration processes. Accordingly, on the one hand, migration, in particular, stimulates forms of transculturation. On the other hand, establishing a transcultural methodological and theoretical perspective beyond national boundaries allows a more differentiated understanding of culture associated with migrational movements.<sup>6</sup> Phenomena of cultural as well as artistic adoption and 'blending' (mestizaje, creolisation, métissage, hybridity, migration)<sup>7</sup> are dealt with globally and form a particular research area.

As early as the 1920s, and particularly at a time of increasing nationalistic and racist discourse in Europe, which resulted in global migration streams, Latin American theoreticians like Gilberto Freyre in Brazil, José Vasconcelos in Mexico and Fernando Ortiz in Cuba debated phenomena of a connection between migration and transculturation, reflected on them and developed a very early “history of transcultural thought”<sup>8</sup>. It represents counter-positions questioning ethnic as well as cultural fantasies of purity, because its authors understood hybridization and mestizaje precisely as genuinely Latin American and modern.<sup>9</sup> The current theoretical discourse around transculturality thus already has precursors hailing from the first half of the 20th century and developed in the discursive ‘peripheries’.

The Mexican minister of education, José Vasconcelos, imagined the emergence of a utopian *raza cósmica* (*The Cosmic Race*, 1925), in effect, through the successful overcoming of all differences in Mexican history: “La civilización conquistada por los blancos [...] ha puesto las bases materiales y morales para la unión de todos los hombres en una quinta raza universal, fruto de las anteriores y superación de todo lo pasado.”<sup>10</sup> Vasconcelos thus creates a universal ‘mestizo’ ideal based on racial mixture. However, this racialist utopia takes the ‘overcoming’ of independent cultures, which Vasconcelos always thinks of as ethnically determined and self-contained, as its foundation. His concept posits indigenous people as developing into ‘mestizos’ via a process of “latinization/latinización”.<sup>11</sup> The ‘mestizo’ ideal thus excludes racial diversity but creates a mixed, though homogenous, utopia, here conceived as something already achieved. The local context of post-revolutionary Mexico also plays an important role where Vasconcelos conceived of the ‘mestizo’ as embodying nationality in his ethnicity. Yet the ‘mestizo’ in his conception was always imagined as male, a figuration meant to embody Mexican national consciousness<sup>12</sup>. It functions as a cultural-political objective, and the arts were to play a preeminent role via the visualization and interpretation of Vasconcelos’ claims in the form of state-sponsored and state-promoted muralism, together with other visualizing media, such as photography or exhibition practices.<sup>13</sup>

On the one hand, then, Vasconcelos imagined a counterpoint to the U.S. policy of ethnic segregation, as well as to European tendencies already

embodied in the 1920s through ultra-conservative and emerging national-socialist beliefs in racial hierarchies.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, he starts from the idea of 'pure' cultures of origin, the 'mixture' of which at the same time means their overcoming. So, in the ethno-cultural *raza cósmica* envisaged, he imagines a new history-less, post-*tabula rasa* 'race', with no transcultural history of origin any longer perceptible. Hence, it should not be forgotten that José Vasconcelos increasingly sympathized with National Socialism with this line of thought,<sup>15</sup> just as he also espoused the totalitarian-socialist vision of the 'New Man'.

In Brazil, it was Gilberto Freyre's *Casa Grande e Senzala* (literal translation *Manor and Slave Cabin*, published *The Masters and the Slaves* 1933), in particular, that gave international research on transculturality its decisive impetus. Freyre founded the topos of a 'racial democracy' in 1933<sup>16</sup> – the year of the German National-Socialist “Machtergreifung” (assumption of power by the National Socialists) – by contrasting the latter's idea of European-white supremacy with the one of a mixture of European, African and indigenous components which had in fact been practiced in Brazil for centuries. Freyre argued that, among other things, the close relations between slave owners and slaves, even before the official abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888, as well as their frequent 'intermingling' through interethnic children, prevented the emergence of strict racial categories. Rather, these practices of continued miscegenation have led to the emergence of a *metaraca* – a superordinate ethnic entity beyond categories of distinction.<sup>17</sup>

In the romanticizing tradition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Marc-Antoine Laugier, he refers to a de-politicized vision of harmony between slave-owners, as social elites, and slaves, as deprived and excluded from society in the concept of the Vitruvian 'Primitive Hut'. He associates an architectural discourse on the 'primitive hut' as common origin of all architecture, as discussed by Laugier in his 1755 *Essai sur l'architecture* (Essay on Architecture), and applies it to harmonize the social reality of extreme contrast of hut and palace in the image of cultural *mestiçagem*.<sup>18</sup>





**Fig. 3.** Frans Post: Brazilian Landscape with a House under Construction, 1655-1660, oil on panel, 70 x 46 cm, Mauritshuis Den Haag.



**Fig. 4.** Indian workers harvesting the crop on a coffee plantation. Coloured lithograph by Deroi, c. 1850, after J. M. Rugendas, lithograph, with watercolour; 24.5 x 30.8 cm, Wellcome Collection.

In Freyre's case, a romantic view of a peaceful coexistence does predominate, however, it is one marking the imperialist claim of the manor house. Freyre begins his book by also referring to picturesque landscape painting and mentions the importance of artists in the construction of Brazil: "As to the iconography of slavery and patriarchal life, that has been masterfully executed by artists of the order of Franz [sic!] Post, Zacharias Wagner, Debret, Rugendas, not to speak of lesser and even untutored ones – draughtsmen, lithographers, engravers, watercolorists, and painters of ex-votos – who from the sixteenth century on (many of them being illustrators of travel books) have reproduced and preserved for us, with emotional power or realistic exactness, intimate household scenes, the life on the streets, and the work of the fields, the plantations and manor houses, and ladies, slaves, and mestizos of various types."<sup>19</sup>

Freyre himself clearly attaches a high documentary value to the pictures. However, the pictures rather emphasize – as illustrated above – an imperial claim to the Brazilian landscape. As Tanja Michalsky has shown through the example of Frans Post, those images are still today widely regarded as eyewitness documents of a given reality – not as pictorial constructions of a colonial imaginary –, because they hardly exaggerate the foreign into the fantastic or exotic, but rather demonstrate the political, social and cultural appropriation of the colonial landscape in a much more subtle and almost imperceptible way using a naturalist style.<sup>20</sup> Rugendas' pictures function in a similar way. Until nowadays various scenes of his *Picturesque Journey* were also used for panoramic wallpapers, so that a European elite could take home the idealized images of distant places in the wallpaper format which apparently extended the view from the interior to the outside.<sup>21</sup> These paintings and graphic works idealize plantation life, in order to defend and promote the system of slavery. In doing so, they negotiate the economic, political, and cultural issues that converged around the slavery question in the decades following the declaration of Brazilian independence in 1822.<sup>22</sup>

It is this, in part, strongly romanticising depiction of slavery and colonialism that also stimulates the main criticism of Freyre's work. The "mixture" of the races is neither unprejudiced nor democratic. Freyre's theoretical and elitist position was never implemented socially; on the



contrary, racially-motivated acts of violence took on genocidal features.<sup>23</sup> The sexual relations between slave owners and female slaves were determined by the existing power relations and more by violence than any racial-democratic impulse in this discourse. Nevertheless, as Christian Kravagna emphasizes, Freyre's positive assessment of the creativity within processes of "racial mixing" (*mestiçagem*) and cultural hybridization, especially in the 1930s, was highly attractive, not only in Brazil but also among Black civil rights activists in the USA.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, the Cuban anthropologist and politician Fernando Ortiz introduces the concept of transculturation (*transculturación*) into the debate: in *Contrapunteo Cubano del tabaco y del azúcar* (1940; *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, 1947), he tells the history of Cuba as a story of complexly interwoven transculturations.<sup>25</sup> Like Freyre, Fernando Ortiz also emphasizes the internal diversity of African, European, Asian and American cultures, so that each group of immigrants was already exposed to what Kravagna describes as a syncretism that influenced them, whilst they also contributed their part to it.<sup>26</sup>

Ortiz constructs an allegorical parallel between 'white' skin color and sweet sugar, while 'black' pairs with "bitter and aromatic"<sup>27</sup> tobacco. He chose the stimulants grown in Cuba as metaphors: "The result has been that this urgent agricultural-chemical nature of the sugar industry has been the fundamental factor in all the demogenic and social evolution of Cuba."<sup>28</sup> Tobacco and sugar are the two Cuban crops forming the cornerstone supporting the colonization of the Caribbean and the mercantilization and capitalization of the plantation economy based on the exploitation of indigenous and Black slaves.<sup>29</sup> Ortiz personifies the plants as agents and attributes character traits and attitudes to them. In his logic, tobacco thereby embodies everything masculine, spiritual, liberal and individual, but, above all, he racializes the two stimulants, e.g.: "Thus tobacco and sugar each have racial connections. Tobacco is an inheritance received from the Indian, which was immediately used and esteemed by the Negro, but cultivated and commercialized by the white man."<sup>30</sup> By contrast, sugar stands for everything feminine, physical, conservative and abstract-formless.<sup>31</sup> Ortiz used these moralizing characterizations to advocate the ethnic 'mixtures', which had made a specifically

Caribbean-Cuban identity formation possible in the first place. In 1940, he stated that cultural mixing processes had taken place in Cuba on so many levels at the same time that a term like *acculturation* was not able to grasp the phenomenon; he thus introduced *transculturación* into the discourse for the first time, both with reference to hybridization processes of cultures and also to describe the specifically Cuban experience.<sup>32</sup>

Ortiz describes not only the forced migration of the people exploited as slaves, and in addition he considers the various migration flows from Europe and how they displaced the indigenous population. He also connects thinking about transculturation and migration: “This is one of the strange social features of Cuba, that since the sixteenth century all its classes, races, and cultures, coming in by will or by force, have all been exogenous and have all been torn from their places of origin, suffering the shock of this first uprooting and harsh transplanting. [...] There was no more important human factor in the evolution of Cuba than these continuous, radical, contrasting geographic transmigrations, economic and social, of the first settlers, this perennial transitory nature of their objectives, and their unstable life in the land where they were living, in perpetual disharmony with the society from which they drew their living.”<sup>33</sup> He continues: “They [the N...] were of different regions, races, languages, cultures, classes, ages, sexes, thrown promiscuously into the slave ships, and socially equalized by the same system of slavery. [...] No other human element has had to suffer such a profound and repeated change of surroundings, cultures, class, and conscience.”<sup>34</sup>

These early theoretical premises on transculturation in Latin America did not remain uncriticized, precisely because they often worked with essentialist attributions and advanced the utopia of a homogenizing fusion of ethnic and cultural differences, thus defusing the violence of power relations nowadays still partly visible<sup>35</sup>. Nevertheless, they underpin a differentiated debate about transculturation and migration still underway in the Latin American region today.

Especially in times of nationalization of the former colonies, the latter were – and still are – particularly exposed to neo-colonial tendencies and had to deal with the consequences of colonialism. The fact of always existing and colonially conditioned 'racial mixtures' had to be positively

valorized in order to demarcate it from European racial discourses, such as the Spanish 'pureza de sangre'<sup>36</sup> and other Eurocentric ethnic purity fantasies, culminating in their scientific legitimization by National Socialism.

Thus, from the mid-1920s until the 1940s, 'contrapuntal' theoretical discourses emerged which understood precisely hybridization and *mestizaje* as genuinely Latin American and modern. By making these early debates on transculturation visible, the paradigm of the Western invention of modernity, with its binary oppositions such as center/periphery, nature/culture, progress/historicity, or modernity/backwardness, is thus brought into question.<sup>37</sup>

These early and mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century metaphorical images of cultural hybridizations are to be understood as consequences of (mainly forced) migrations in the colonial and neo-colonial contexts of the Americas as "arrival region".<sup>38</sup> In this sense, these assumptions of a praise of racial mixture are well capable of inspiring our understanding of transculturality as a concept fundamental to art historical research. To this end, we are here drawing on these assumptions for choosing *transculturalidad(e)* as our title, in both Spanish and Portuguese, in order to highlight the mentioned theoretical, though not un-situated references.

Néstor García Canclini in his seminal monograph from 1989, *Culturas Híbridas. Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad / Hybrid Cultures. Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* then proceeds far beyond such biologicistic conceptions of *mestizaje* to posit a state of hybridity as something always marking modern post-colonial societies, such as Mexico. This is the product of a long history of migration, both of people and of cultural assumptions, so that Canclini understands hybridization as a result of "sociocultural processes in which discrete structures or practices, previously existing in separate form, are combined to generate new structures, objects, and practices. In turn, it bears noting that the so-called discrete structures were a result of prior hybridizations and therefore cannot be considered pure points of origin."<sup>39</sup> Hence, his concept of hybridization transfers human migration and ethnic 'mixture' into the cultural sphere.

In this respect, newer theoretical discourses in and on Latin America borrow from such migrational processes as fundamental to the theoretical and epistemological conception of the subcontinent: Decolonial Theory

questions the primacy of Western epistemologies and unfolds its foundation in the concept of colonialism, in this context developing 'Border Thinking' or 'pensamiento fronterizo'. This discourse theorizes coloniality as an all-encompassing dispositive as well as a paradigm intrinsically linked to conceptions of modernity as it – coloniality – represents “the darker side of modernity”<sup>40</sup>. However, it also displays re-essentializing tendencies which require critical evaluation. Following the radical, feminist writer and artist Gloria Anzaldúa, Border Thinking offers a way to change epistemological perspectives to re-think and re-combine binary contrasts, synthesizing notions of inside and outside of borderlines, and challenging the denial of ambiguity.<sup>41</sup>

Borders may be understood as sites where migration culminates with nationalisms. Borders do not necessarily have to be demarcated lines separating one territory from another; they can be contiguous regions connecting (forcefully) divided geographies, cultures and people, and they can also metaphorically denote the digital or artistic boundaries, as these are perpetually debated in the arts and via various cultural practices. Indeed, geography is intrinsically related to migration, and Latin America is historically a continent of immigration, emigration and internal or domestic migrations, the accelerated flux of people from one geography to another, crossing third and fourth geographies.

In the Latin-/American context, especially the *frontera*, the US-American-Mexican border, has become emblematic of contemporary migrant movements, and a source of both real politics and artistic positions concerning the mechanisms of inclusion or exclusion. The emblem of the *frontera* embodies differing, even antagonistic, meanings: on the one hand, the violence against migrants and the maintenance of unjust power relations as a means of social security and, on the other, internal freedom, homogeneity and liberty.

Estudio Teddy Cruz + Fonna Forman have called this borderline the “political equator”: “dividing the global South and North, the developing and developed worlds”,<sup>42</sup> a setting for the abrupt and often violent encounters of geographies, cultures, stereotypical ascriptions and wealth and poverty. The pictures conveyed by the media coverage of the migrants' and border area residents' struggles are contrasted and broadened by an increasing number

of artistic modes of expression addressing the subject both north and south of the “political equator”<sup>43</sup>. The visual arts play an important role in the construction of migration-related narratives that deviate from its conceptualization as a problem by, much rather, focussing on the diversity of the phenomenon. In this vein, migration-related art works visibilize realities and experiences often suppressed in the official and social media representations and often tend to even overlap with activist work. In this respect, artists gain special relevance in debating imageries and act as agents<sup>44</sup> in the field of transculturality and migration. They are tied to power structures, but artists can also create spaces for subversive empowerment structures: geographies, politics and aesthetics are thus intrinsically interwoven.

In this chapter, we approach the topic of migration, borders and transculturalidad(e) from an art historical point of view dealing with artistic and visual material. We reflect the CIHA panel 13 contributions and debates by asking: What do such transcultural approaches mean for art history? In effect, they concern the fundamentals of the discipline, given that the development of art per se received impulses in transcultural contexts. European art, for example, cannot be viewed in isolation from other parts of the world, but evolved in an exchange with them. The processes whereby cultures interact demonstrate how the so-called “Others” appear not only as the subject of European art, thus conforming to European perspectives, but also, in their turn, develop their own perspectives on that art, in part reflecting, yet also ironizing, European views. Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff points out that the critical approaches taken by art history do not simply aim to include individual artifacts and works not yet been taken into consideration, such as “African masks or Chinese cloth painting[,] in the canon”; rather, it is “about reflecting on the criteria of their exclusion”.<sup>45</sup> Hence, it is not only a matter of “the material expansion of the subject areas of art history”, “but also the self-reflexive expansion of the perspective in which we perceive our cut-out”.<sup>46</sup>

Monica Juneja emphasizes how “a transcultural perspective postulates that concepts – such as modernity – do not necessarily hold on to their original interpretive frameworks during their global wanderings, but rather de-provincialize, as they always experience processes of translation

and reconfiguration in new contexts.”<sup>47</sup> Transculturality is thus also significant for our critical discourse in today's art history and is closely interwoven with questions of migration.

The contributions of this session connect concepts of transculturality and migration with artistic practice from a variety of perspectives:

Mrinalini Sil explores a set of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Bengal Ganjija cards in a British art collection and the meandering paths that led them into Robert Clive's house. The contribution shows how the collector functions as an active agent of transculturation. Starting from this, Sil develops her approach of a “courtly cosmopolitanism”, she also revalidates the notion of cosmopolitanism itself, to identify it as a non-hierarchical process of cultural exchange, in which forms and practices with diverse geographic origins met and therefore must be grasped simultaneously.

Hanna Büdenbender analyzes the US-Mexico borderlands in photography, beginning with the marking of the borderline after the US-Mexican war in mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century when photography was coming of age as a scientific tool as well as an artform. She compares the historical photography with contemporary artistic photography dealing with the border today, as the latter bears the potential to de-stabilize this demarcation line.

Aneliese Tietz traces the entangled realities of geographies, politics and aesthetics by focusing on displacement and forced migration in Latin America alongside the photographs and performances of Paulo Nazareth and Libia Posada. They deal with Othering practices in visual culture by making such strategies visible in an attempt to subvert them. Tietz reads the artists' actions as small transgressions performed by marginalized people, by those who have no hegemonic power. She argues that these actions deliberately represent displacement as an artistic tactic of micro-resistance.

The artist and art scholar Brandon Sward problematizes site-specificity and the “location of culture”, that is, the situatedness of modern and contemporary ‘global’ art where he minutely analyzes performances by the Asco art collective in the United States of the 1970s.

Both Lisa Andrew and Franciska Nowel Camino deal with textile practices and their transcultural entanglements. Lisa Andrew proceeds from her artistic research to elaborate the multi-cultural historical threads nowadays coming together in works using Philippino piña cloth and displays



her way of extending these threads, whilst also disentangling them. Pre-colonial knotting practices figure in Franciska Nowel Camino's analysis of their treatment by two artists: Jorge Eduardo Eielson and Cecilia Vicuña both relate their contemporary artistic knotting to the function of the ancient Andean *quipus* as communications media. Nowel Camino examines such work to theorize on the interaction of text and textile.

Joseph Hartman offers an art historical and theoretical perspective on hurricanes as Caribbean climate phenomena powerfully bringing together previously disparate elements. He advances the term "hurricane hybridity" to describe artistic phenomena reflecting transculturation and migration in that region.

Mona Schieren's approach demonstrates how transcultural thinking and perception influence not only art but also art history. She traces the construction of Asian-influenced aesthetic regimes in the West and shows how the artworks themselves are transculturally entangled by notions of 'East' and 'West', whilst critically engaging with the theories of Ernest Fallosa and Okakura Kakuzō. Using the example of the American artist Agnes Martin, she shows how her paintings deploy the specific aesthetic and modes of an Asianistic pictorial culture.

Liisa Kaljula brings together Soviet visual culture both east and west of the so-called Iron Curtain to demonstrate overlappings in the style and techniques of Pop Art and Sots Art. She refers to the Estonian cultural semiotician Yuri Lotman, who has described border cultures as transcultural blocks able to translate ideas from one culture into the other, and she specifically investigates the role of the two artists Andres Tolts and Leonhard Lapin within such a border culture.

The contributions to the session "Migration and Transculturalidad(e): Agents of Transcultural Art and Art History", negotiate the multi-layered forms of transcultural entanglements and migratory processes, as shown above with the example of Varejão and Paulino, in different ways and with different weighting.

In the context of theorising transculturality, we have shown how closely interwoven it is with the wanderings of people, concepts, aesthetics and artworks themselves. Such concepts of transculturalidad(e), a term that is itself hybrid, accordingly assume a permanent transgression of national

and cultural borders, with their inherent instability, and focus on phenomena of cultural contact and 'mixing' as well as cultural negotiation processes. The chapter thus aspires to elaborate entangled art histories concerning historical as well as geographical aspects, and socio-political or aesthetical issues.

---

### Endnotes

1. Hans Staden [1548-1550], *Brasilien: die wahrhaftige Historie der wilden, nackten, grimmigen Menschenfresser-Leute*, ed. Gustav Faber (Stuttgart: Thienemann, 1984).
2. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic – Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993). See also Haus der Kulturen der Welt in cooperation with Tina Campt and Paul Gilroy (eds.), *Der Black Atlantic* (exh. cat. Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin, 2004).
3. Roger Buergel, "The Migration of Form," *documenta 12 Kassel*, 2007, <https://www.documentar2.de/en/aktuelles/aktuelles-inhalte/the-migration-of-form.html> (20.05.2022).
4. The term *suture* comes from psychology and was applied to film theory by Kaja Silverman (*The Subject of Semiotics*, Oxford, London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). Silvia Eiblmayr applies the term to 20th century art (Silvia Eiblmayr, *Suture – Phantasmen der Vollkommenheit*, exh. cat., Salzburg: Salzburger Kunstverein, 1994, 3–16).
5. Silviano Santiago, "A ficção contemporânea e visionária de Adriana Varejão: Para uma poética da encenação." / "The Contemporary and Visionary Fiction of Adriana Varejão: Towards a Poetics of Mise-en-Scène", in *Adriana Varejão – Entre Carnes e Mares/Between Flesh and Oceans*, bilingual edition, ed. Isabel Diegues, trans. Stephen Berg (Rio de Janeiro: Cobogó, 2009), 73-83, 85-96. See also Irina Hiebert Grun, *Strategien der Einverleibung. Die Rezeption der Antropofagia in der zeitgenössischen brasilianischen Kunst* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020), 124 (own translation).
6. See Cigdem Bözdog and Johanna Möller, "Transkulturalität, Migration und Diaspora," in *Handbuch Cultural Studies und Medienanalyse*, eds. Andreas Hepp et al. (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2015), 332-342, 336.
7. See Natascha Ueckmann, "Hybriditätskonzepte und Modernekritik in Lateinamerika," in *Dazwischen. Reisen – Metropolen – Avantgarden. Festschrift für Wolfgang Asholt*, eds. Wolfgang Klein, Walter Fähnders and Andrea Grewe (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2009), 507-529.
8. Christian Kravagna, *Transmoderne. Eine Kunstgeschichte des Kontakts* (Berlin: b\_books, 2017).
9. Cf. Ueckmann, "Hybriditätskonzepte und Modernekritik," 512ff. Cf. Mary Louise Pratt, "Modernity and Periphery. Toward a Global and Relational Analysis," in *Beyond Dichotomies. Histories, Identities, Culture, and the Challenge of Globalization*, ed. Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 21-47.
10. José Vasconcelos, *La Raza Cósmica* (Mexico-City: Espasa-Calpe Mexicana, 1948), 16, engl.: "The civilization developed and organized in our times by the whites has set the moral and material basis for the union of all men into a fifth universal race, the fruit of all the previous ones and amelioration of everything past." José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race*, bilingual edition (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, 9. See Thomas Benjamin, "Rebuilding the Nation," in *The Oxford History of Mexico*, eds. Michael C. Meyer and William

- H. Beezley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); William H. Beezley, "Creating a Revolutionary Culture: Vasconcelos, Indians, Anthropologists, and Calendar Girls", in *A Companion to Mexican History and Culture*, ed. William H. Beezley (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 420-438, 421-422.
11. Vasconcelos, *La Raza Cósmica*, 25: "Los mismos indios puros [...] están latinizados.", engl.: "Even the pure Indians are Hispanized, they are latinized." Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race*, 16.
  12. Desmond Rochfort, *Mexican Muralists. Orozco- Rivera- Siqueiros* (London: Laurence King, 1993), 83. See further Tace Hedrick, *Mestizo Modernism. Race, Nation and Identity in Latin American Culture, 1900-40* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Stacie Widdifield, *The Embodiment of the National in Late Nineteenth-Century Mexican Painting* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1996).
  13. See exemplary: Rochfort, *Mexican Muralists*; Matthew Affron, Mark A. Castro, Dafne Cruz Porchini and Renato González Mello, eds., *Paint the Revolution: Mexican Modernism, 1910-1950*, exh. cat. Philadelphia Museum of Art (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016); Mary Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture: Murals, Museums, and the Mexican State* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2012); Tatiana Flores, *Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-gardes: From Estridentismo to ¡30-30!* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013); Anna Indyk-López, *Muralism without Walls: Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in the United States, 1927-1940* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009); Stephanie Lewthwaite, *A Contested Art: Modernism and Mestizaje in New Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015); Rick A. López, *Crafting Mexico. Intellectuals, Artisans, and the State after the Revolution* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2010); Harper Montgomery, *The Mobility of Modernism. Art and Criticism in 1920s Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017); Dafne Porchini, Claudia Garay Molina and Mireida Velázquez Torres, eds., *Recuperación de la memoria histórica de exposiciones de arte mexicano (1930-1950)* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2016); Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis, eds., *The Eagle and the Virgin. Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2006).
  14. See also José-Antonio Orosco, "Jose Vasconcelos, White Supremacy and the Silence of American Pragmatism," *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (December 2011), 1-13, accessible online: [https://ijp.tamu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/v2i2-Orosco-Jose\\_Vasconcelos\\_White\\_Supremacy\\_and\\_the\\_Silence\\_of\\_American\\_Pragmatism.pdf](https://ijp.tamu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/v2i2-Orosco-Jose_Vasconcelos_White_Supremacy_and_the_Silence_of_American_Pragmatism.pdf)
  15. See I. Bar-Lewaw, "La Revista Timón y la Colaboración Nazi de José Vasconcelos," in *Actas del Cuarto Congreso Internacional de Hispanistas*, vol. 1, ed. Eugenio Bustos Tovar (Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca, 1982), 151-156; Héctor Orestes Aguilar, "Ese olvidado nazi de nombre José Vasconcelos," *Istor, Revista de Historia Internacional*, año 8, núm. 30, (2007), 148-157, accessible online: [http://www.istor.cide.edu/archivos/num\\_30/coincidencias.pdf](http://www.istor.cide.edu/archivos/num_30/coincidencias.pdf); see also William H. Beezley, "Creating a Revolutionary Culture: Vasconcelos, Indians, Anthropologists, and Calendar Girls," in Beezley, *A Companion to Mexican History and Culture*, 420-438, 421-422.
  16. Cf. María Lúcia Pallares-Burke, "Gilberto Freyre and Brazilian Self-Perception," in *Racism and Ethnic Relations in the Portuguese-speaking World*, eds. Francisco Bethencourt and Adrian Pearce (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 113-132,
  17. Though he debated these standpoints much earlier, Freyre did not introduce the term, *além-raça*, until 1976: Gilberto Freyre, "Aspectos da influência africana no Brasil," *Cultura – MEC* 6,23 (out./dez. 1976), 6-19 [re-published online: Gilberto Freyre, "Aspectos da influência africana no Brasil," *Revista del CESLA* 7 (2005), 369-384, Redalyc, <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=243320976021>. Cf. Michael Hanchard, *Orpheus and Power: The Movimento Negro of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil, 1945-1988* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 44-47.

18. See Kirsten Wagner, "Raumordnung und Körperordnung. Zum historischen Verhältnis von Architektur und Anthropologie," in *Architektur in transdisziplinärer Perspektive: Von Philosophie bis Tanz. Aktuelle Zugänge und Positionen*, eds. Susanne Hauser and Julia Weber (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015), 223-256.
19. Gilberto Freyre, "Preface to the Second English-Language Edition of *The Masters and the Slaves*," in Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press 1986), xviii-lxx, liii.
20. Tanja Michalsky, *Projektion und Imagination. Die niederländische Landschaft der Frühen Neuzeit im Diskurs von Geographie und Malerei* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink 2011), 318.
21. See Jean Julien Deltil, *Les Vues du Brésil* (Zuber, Rixheim/Alsace), 1829, panoramic wallpaper, printed in colours and finished by hand, the complete set of thirty panels, unstretched, each panel 400 x 53cm. Extreme width of design 1590cm, after the illustrations by Johann Moritz Rugendas, in Zuber: Collection Décors Panoramiques imprimés la planche, <https://www.zuber.fr/fr/catalogues/decors-panoramiques-1> (last accessed May 4, 2022).
22. Erika Kohlen, *A Romanticism of Slavery and the Plantation Economy. Coffee Gatherers in Rio*, by Johann Moritz Rugendas, at: <https://library.brown.edu/create/modernlatinamerica/chapters/chapter-11-brazil/moments-in-brazilian-history-2/a-romanticism-of-slavery-and-the-plantation-economy/> (last accessed May 4, 2022).
23. Stefan Rinke and Frederik Schulze, *Kleine Geschichte Brasiliens* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2013). German settlers in particular also have played an essential part in the violent history of the widespread 'extermination' of indigenous groups.
24. Christian Kravagna, "Transkulturelle Anfänge: Dekolonisation, Transkulturalismus und die Überwindung der 'Rasse,'" in *Transmoderne*, 85-100, 88. Nevertheless, Freyre was broadly criticized, see: Thomas E. Skidmore, *Black into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Michael Hanchard, *Orpheus and Power: The Movimento Negro of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil, 1945-1988* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); France Winddance Twine, *Racism in a Racial Democracy: The Maintenance of White Supremacy in Brazil* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997); John F. Collins, *Revolt of the Saints: Memory and Redemption in the Twilight of Brazilian Racial Democracy* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2015).
25. Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint. Tobacco and Sugar* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 98ff.
26. Kravagna, "Transkulturelle Anfänge," 95.
27. Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 6.
28. Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 33f.
29. See Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 56: "[T]he production of sugar was always a capitalistic venture because of its great territorial and industrial scope and the size of its long-term investments. Tobacco, child of the savage Indian and the virgin earth, is a free being, bowing its neck to no mechanical yoke, unlike sugar, which is ground to bits by the mill. This has occasioned profound economic and social consequences." Cf. Sven Beckert, "Das Barbados-Prinzip," *Die Zeit* (03/2021), 17; see further Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton. A Global History* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015); Gerald Horne, *The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism: The Roots of Slavery, White Supremacy, and Capitalism in Seventeenth-Century North America and the Caribbean* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017); Zach Sell, *Trouble of the World – Slavery and Empire in the Age of Capital* (Chapel Hill: The University of Carolina Press, 2021); Bernd Hausberger, ed., *Die Verknüpfung der Welt. Geschichte der frühen Globalisierung vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert* (Wien: Mandelbaum-Verlag, 2015). See also the older Manuel Moreno Fraginals, *The Sugarmill. The Socioeconomic Complex of Sugar in Cuba, 1760-1860* (New York et al.: Monthly Review Press, 1976).
30. Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 57. See also in Spanish: Fernando Ortiz, *Contrapunteo Cubano del Tabaco y el Azúcar. Advertencia de sus Contrastes Agrarios, Económicos, Históricos y*

- Sociales, su Etnografía y su Transculturación*, ed. Enrico Mario Santí (Madrid: Cátedra, 2002 [1964]).
31. Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 58ff.
  32. As he claims himself: "I have chosen the word transculturation to express the highly varied phenomena that have come about in Cuba as a result of the extremely complex transmutations of culture that have taken place here, and without a knowledge of which it is impossible to understand the evolution of the Cuban folk, either in the economic or in the institutional, legal, ethical, religious, artistic, linguistic, psychological, sexual, or other aspects of its life." (Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 97ff., 98).
  33. Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 100-101.
  34. Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 101-102.
  35. See Paulo César Ramos and Siri Völker, "Police Violence Against Black People Is on the Rise in Brazil," *GIGA Focus Latin America* 5 (2020), <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/police-violence-against-black-people-is-on-the-rise-in-brazil> (last accessed May 4, 2022); David Treece, "The Challenge for Anti-Racists in Bolsonaro's Brazil," *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies* 27, no. 2 (2021), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14701847.2021.1944030>; Reighan Gillam, *Visualizing Black Lives. Ownership and Control in Afro-Brazilian Media* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2022). Constance Malleret, "Outrage in Brazil as mentally ill Black man dies in police car 'gas chamber,'" *The Guardian* (May 26, 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/26/brazil-mentally-ill-black-man-dies-gas-police-car> (last accessed June 1, 2022).
  36. The concept of *limpieza de sangre* (blood purity) was a system of discrimination in early modern Spain and Portugal which was established during the Reconquista era in order to differentiate "Old Christians" from those with Jewish or Muslim ancestors: the categories of race and religion were paralleled in this conception which was also exported to the American colonies; cf. María Elena Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions. Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); Nikolaus Böttcher, Bernd Hausberger and Max S. Hering Torres, eds. *El peso de la sangre: limpios, mestizos y nobles en el mundo hispánico*. (Mexico-City: El Colegio de México, 2011).
  37. Cf. Santiago Castro-Gómez, "Teorías sin disciplina: Latinoamericanismo, modernidad, globalización. Prolegómenos a una crítica poscolonial de la razón," (1998), 1-21, <http://www.periodismo.uchile.cl/talleres/teoriacomunicacion/archivos/teoriassindisciplina.pdf> (last accessed May 4, 2022); Cornelia Sieber, *Die Gegenwart im Plural. Postmoderne/postkoloniale Strategien in neueren Lateinamerikadiskursen* (Frankfurt/M.: Vervuert, 2005), 111; Beatriz Sarlo, *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1920 y 1930* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1988).
  38. See Burcu Dogramaci et al., eds., *Arrival Cities - Migrating Artists and New Metropolitan Topographies in the 20th Century* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020).
  39. Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures. Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) [span. *Culturas Híbridas. Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad*, 1989], xxv.
  40. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2011).
  41. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/ La Frontera •® The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lut e Books, 2012 [1987].
  42. See Justin McGuirk, *Radical Cities. Across Latin America in Search of a New Architecture* (London: Verso, 2014), 434. On architect Teddy Cruz, see: <https://visarts.ucsd.edu/people/faculty/teddy-cruz.html> (last accessed May 4, 2022);
  43. See for example the many art and design proposals dealing with the *frontera* in Ronald Rael, *Borderwall as Architecture. The Divided States of North America*, in *Borderwall as Architecture. A Manifesto for the U.S.-Mexico Boundary*, ed. Ronald Rael (Berkeley, CA:

University of California Press, 2017); or Katherine G. Morrissey and John-Michael H. Warner, eds., *Borderspaces. Visualizing the U.S.-Mexico Frontera*. (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2018).

44. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Subaltern Talk. Interview with the Editors (29 OCTOBER 1993)," in *The Spivak Reader, Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, eds. Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (New York: Routledge, 1996), 287-308; and Simone Bignall, *Postcolonial Agency: Critique and Constructivism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

45. Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, "Kunst und kulturelle Differenz oder: Warum hat die kritische Kunstgeschichte in Deutschland den postcolonial turn ausgelassen?" in *Schwerpunkt: Postkolonialismus. Kunst und Politik. Jahrbuch der Guernica-Gesellschaft* 4 (2002), 7-16, 11. (own translation to English)

46. *Ibid.*

47. German original: "Eine transkulturelle Perspektive postuliert, dass Begriffe – wie etwa Moderne – auf ihrer globalen Wanderschaft nicht unbedingt an ihren ursprünglichen Deutungsrahmen fest halten, sondern sich entprovialisieren, da sie in neuen Zusammenhängen stets Prozesse der Übersetzung und Neukonfigurierung erleben." (own translation to English) Monica Juneja, "Kunstgeschichte und kulturelle Differenz: Eine Einleitung," *Kritische Berichte* 40, 2 (2012), 6-12, 9, <https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/kb/article/view/10766> (last accessed May 4, 2022).



# Transits on the Margins: Art and Migrations in Latin America

---

**Anelise Tietz**

Instituto Federal Fluminense

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper intends to discuss productions of two artists: Libia Posada and Paulo Nazareth, in artistic practices that evoke the idea of displacement and migration in Latin America. In both artists, migration is related to a process of violence. Libia Posada (Cardinal signs, 2008) talks about the forced migrations of women in Colombia and tries to remember these invisible paths. The action of recording the paths of these immigrants brings us the image of people in a situation of absolute vulnerability. Thus, the artist's action makes visible an invisible path, with a strategy of producing testimonies. In Paulo Nazareth (America News, 2011-2012), the artist proposes to travel the route between Brazil and the United States only with hikes and occasional rides, because he understands that as a Latin American subject this is the only way to access the USA. In this action, there is also a relationship with the testimony, because along the way the artist makes a long photographic record and feeds a blog with his travel notes. From these artistic experiences, we propose to discuss the migratory movement in Latin America, which, in general, is linked to traumatic moments, such as dictatorships, violence, armed conflicts, and inequalities. Thus, talking about migration is a way of approaching an erased history of marginal people. It seems that in these actions, art becomes a possible space for elaborating boundary situations that escape the official narrative of Latin America.

## **KEYWORDS**

Latin American Art; Migration; Contemporary Art; Paulo Nazareth; Libia Posada.

The history of Latin America is intrinsically related to migratory movements, both those motivated by dreams and hopes, as well as forced movements. The arrival of Europeans to the Americas, the enslaved labor force brought from the African continent, and more recently, the outflows of political exiles from the numerous armed conflicts and military dictatorships in Latin America are some examples. Even today, migration in Latin America is an urgent issue, mainly motivated by political, economic, and natural issues. And in addition, the escalation of violence against Latin Americans who enter US territory after the adoption of a zero-tolerance policy against undocumented immigrants and the proposal to build a wall on the US-Mexico border. The idea of building a physical barrier between the two countries would only serve to reinforce an anti-immigration policy that has been in effect for a long time in US territory and that has forged an entire imagination about the Latino figure, as someone who needs to flee their country and find better opportunities.

It is always valid to reiterate that the issue of migration in Latin America is imbricated in a logic of power, as it is only a certain type of immigration that is not desired. It is also valid to say that the invention of Latin America' was forged with the use of force and violence, which imposed the weight of a European tradition, erased other traditions (indigenous and African), and in order to maintain itself as a hegemonic force it had to rely on in conservatism - in stagnation<sup>2</sup>, instead of the movement, even if it was the movement that built the territory of Latin America itself. It is an absolute paradox that even today the figure of the immigrant is strongly marked by stereotypes and that they face a situation of vulnerability within a territory that was built from migratory flows.

The Colombian artist Libia Posada presents us with yet another possibility for migratory flows in Latin America, forced migration within national boundaries. The exile or one who migrates for compelling reasons cannot be compared with one who travels freely. At this point, it would be important to emphasize that if there is any romanticism associated with discussions about the figure of the immigrant, who sees in it the ideal of the individual who seeks a better life, this idealization cannot be applied to the

type of migration that Libia Posada discusses. As the artist herself explains forced migration is not traveling.

When traveling, it is usual for the traveler to determine in advance a route to follow, which is marked both at the starting point, as well as the places of passage and the point of arrival. Traveling by force implies, however, opening paths or describing urgent routes, difficult to locate, recognize, understand, and see, not only in the memory of those who flee but in that representation of the territory, called a map, which - as we know - implies a series of prejudices and exclusions from places and experiences.<sup>3</sup>

In the photographic series *Cardinal signs*, from 2008, the artist decided to talk about the history of her own country, which has a sequence of armed conflicts that resulted in large internal migratory flows. Colombia has a significant number of citizens living outside its national boundaries, but there is also a large internal flow of forced migration. According to Karo Ramírez Duque (2016), we can define forced migration as one that occurs due to the incidence of violence in areas of a given country and that is distinguished from the refugee figure precisely because they seek to improve living conditions, but remain within national borders.

The period of Colombian history known as La Violencia took place between 1948 and 1964 and involved most of the Colombian territory. The political conflict intensified with the murder of liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in Bogotá. In addition to the number of dead, what became evident were the practices of bodily mutilation used in the murders. In Colombian history, there was a pact for oblivion, which ended up repressing the memories of that time.

The print media of La Violencia's era were full of photos that are now hard to see, and so Colombia has become a heap of mutilated and dismembered bodies. The death toll was more than 200,000 people who were never considered victims, nor received any reparation or

recognition from the State. (...) This refusal by Colombians to know and digest the atrocious content of La Violencia will make it reappear years later in the practices of the paramilitaries with some innovations.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1980s, when drug trafficking emerged on the national scene, a new period of great violence was inaugurated in the country, as the same methods of combat were used, mainly with the action of paramilitary groups. A new flow of forced migration was also inaugurated. According to Duque (2016), the most recent and most numerous flow of forced migration was between 2000 and 2007, which also occurred due to the continuation of armed conflicts in the country. Also at this moment, there is a pact for oblivion, so that these events do not form part of the country's historical narrative. Migrants, although they survived, also experience a type of mourning, they lost their home, and their place of origin, and like the fatal victims, they were never identified as such. If the crimes committed were not prosecuted and were supposedly forgotten, how can the individual deal with grief?



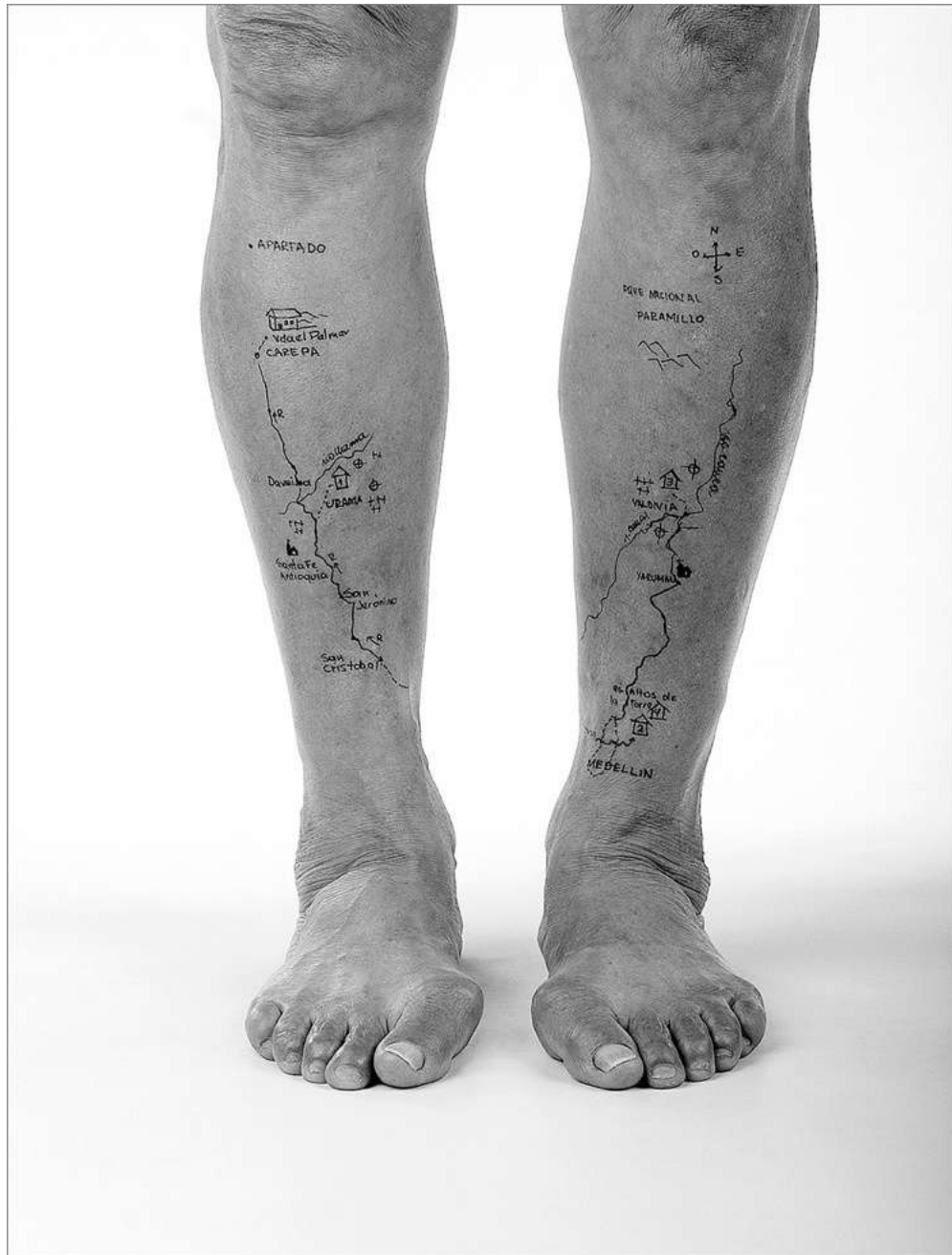
**Fig. 1.** Libia Posada, 2008, “Cardinals Signs”

Libia Posada proposed dealing with this forgetfulness through narratives of some forced displacements that took place in Colombia. The artist, upon meeting a group of people – mostly women – requested them to tell their stories. The face-to-face meetings were carried out with the help of traditional cartographies, in which the routes taken in their escapes were identified. From contact with this material, the artist built a small collection of stories and drew cartographies of the displacements narrated by the group of women. Subsequently, the cartographies were drawn directly on the skin of the ‘witness-narrators’ legs and photographed.

In the photographs, Posada used a repetitive and monotonous aesthetic: all the legs were photographed from the same angle and same position, and in black and white, approaching scientific cataloging. However, Libia Posada constructed her images by making visible what is not apparent at first. These images work as testimonies that tell a unique story, a path. The photographs seem to pay tribute to this journey, a tribute to the bodies that moved. The artist excludes the faces of these people from the photograph. The face can be considered the most knowable part of individuals. It is through face photographs that identification documents are made. However, the artist placed the legs as the central object. The choice to present only a part of the body in the photographs of *Cardinal signs* may also resemble other visual productions from Colombia. Uribe (2018) understands that this tendency to use human body parts could be understood as a kind of symptom of the years of brutal violence that involved the mutilations of the human body. In a way, Posada also performed a manipulation of the human body, first by drawing on the skin, and second, by presenting it only in fragments.

This symptom can also be elucidated in the installation *Rehabilitation Room*, exhibited at the 8th Havana Biennale, in 2003, in which Libia Posada had the participation of Cuban nurses who instructed the public to use crutches and wheelchairs. In this way, the public could experience transiting through space in a situation similar to someone who has suffered an amputation. In the series *Anatomy Lesson*, amputation is again discussed

through a puzzle with the image of two children, but without the pieces that would form the feet and legs of human figures.



**Fig. 2.** Libia Posada, 2008, “Cardinals Signs”



This kind of obsession with dealing with the image of the human body also occurred in other Latin American countries. Nelly Richard (1983) pointed out that Chilean artistic production during the Pinochet dictatorship also turned to the body, as it was exactly the body that was violated. Elías Adasme produced a series of photographs entitled *To Chile* (1979-1980), where the artist's body is placed alongside maps of Chile and in one of the images, the map is drawn on the artist's naked body.

In this specific image, there is a clear resemblance to Libia Posada who also draws on the bodies of migrant women. If Elías Adasme seems to want to appropriate the Chilean territory that was deprived of its citizens during the authoritarian regime, Posada seems to want these women to appropriate their own stories. In these two cases, drawing on the skin causes the sensation of something that makes itself emerge. The use of the body in art in periods of great violence against the human body could be understood as a symptom. There was a prohibition on reactions against those violations. There was no room for these victims to mourn - the individual could not react. The artistic production then becomes a possible space for reaction.

The Brazilian artist Paulo Nazareth uses his own body to discuss migration in Latin America. Upon being chosen to carry out the artistic residency for cultural exchange by the Residency Unlimited program at Harlem Biennale, the artist refused the proposal and chose to continue an old project. A few years before, Paulo Nazareth had the project of driving across Latin America and then crashing the car into the wall that separates Tijuana and San Diego. Years passed and the project became the walk to the United States. The artist chose to travel from Minas Gerais to New York mainly on foot. This walk took place between March and October 2011. In this journey, he developed several actions, which were grouped in the project entitled *America News* and posted on a blog, which functions as a testimony of his journey. If he accepted to participate in the international residency program, Paulo Nazareth would enter the United States recognized as an artist, possibly with easier access to the country. When making his trip on foot and occasionally taking rides, he managed to access the United States in a situation similar to undocumented immigrants who try to enter this territory.

The artist produced a series of photographs that reveal the situation of the immigrant from Latin America. On the posters that read *I take messages to the USA*, there is this tense communication between Latin Americans who managed to migrate and those who did not. On the sign that reads *I am an American also*, there is the tension of not being considered an American, or of being considered a second-class American, a Latin American. Several images show the presence of bananas, referring to a pejorative expression that indicates Latin American countries that have an underdeveloped economy. In several of these photographs, Paulo Nazareth resembles a lone protester.



**Fig. 3.** Paulo Nazareth, “America News”, 2011-2012.

In addition, Paulo Nazareth's journey had a series of determinations previously defined by the artist. The artist only wore slippers on his feet and

did not wash his feet during the entire journey, until his arrival on the Hudson River, in the state of New York, in which the artist washed his feet to take away all the dust from Latin America collected on his way. In the photographic records that make up the blog, there are several images of the artist's feet, as in the photographs where Paulo Nazareth appears lying on the ground with some element of the landscape covering his face.



**Fig. 4.** Paulo Nazareth, “America News”, 2011-2012

As in Libia Posada's photographs, his body appears fragmented, omitting the most knowable part of an individual - the face. In this series of photographs by Paulo Nazareth, the body seems to merge with the landscape. There is also a similarity to images of bodies dumped in desolate landscapes, indicating a possible situation of violence against the body. But as in Libia

Posada, the foot and legs occupy a central position. These bodily elements are capable of witnessing the path taken, as they are the ones who carry out the displacement.



**Fig. 5.** Paulo Nazareth, “America News”, 2011-2012

It is also important to point out that the artist has a heritage from the Krenak indigenous people, who also went through a process of forced migration. The krenak occupied extensive areas close to the Rio Doce, in the state of Minas Gerais, Bahia and Espírito Santo. During the colonial period, they suffered numerous attacks that resulted in the dispersion and the reduction of their territory. More recently they have suffered two large and violent forced movements. According to Brazilian researcher Daniela Araújo da Silva (2009), in the 1950s the first major relocation of this group was carried out due to territorial conflicts. After being transferred, the Krenak decided to return on foot to their territory on the banks of the Rio Doce, on a

walk that lasted three months<sup>5</sup>. In the 1970s, this action was repeated, the indigenous people were transferred, and sometime later, they decided to return on foot to their original territory. The memory of these walks is always remembered by Paulo Nazareth, who understands himself as a nomad due to his Krenak heritage<sup>6</sup>.

In his journey, Paulo Nazareth helps to build memory in dialogue with other Latin American countries, as this artist

explains its search for a memory that has been erased, and suggests the possibility of finding it in another territory, distinct but, perhaps, analogous, as it somehow shares common memories with its homeland (...) creating unsuspected ties to trying to reconstruct stories not told or deliberately erased is one of the most impressive features of his work.<sup>7</sup>

In the artistic practices that trigger discussions about immigration in Latin America, there seems to be a desire to contest the norms, a small momentary uprising against the rules that paralyze the movements. The uprising manifests itself in a small transgression, doing something that is not foreseen in the norms, in clear opposition to power. "The happiness of transgressing, therefore. The potency of transgression – a word that means the difficult passage through a closed border, the disobedience to a rule that limited our freedom of movement."<sup>8</sup>. Finally, these images are guided by a desire for "freer movements"<sup>9</sup>.

At this point, we remember two actions by Paulo Nazareth, where the artist also talks about this desire for transgression and freer movements. Upon returning to Brazil, in two different situations, he brings in his body parasites of foreign origin, African lice in his hair on a trip to Africa<sup>10</sup>, and a parasite bug in his foot acquired on hikes in Latin America<sup>11</sup>. The videos that record these actions show the artist removing these parasites after "cheating" the rules of entry into the country that specify that no animal should enter the country illegally.

These artists start from traumatic experiences - forced migration, the immigrant's situation of vulnerability. According to Freud (2016), trauma

causes such a rupture within the individual that he needs to banish certain memories to the unconscious - the individual forgets them. The forced displacements of Colombian women and indigenous people from Brasil were supposedly forgotten. But in the understanding of psychoanalysis, nothing can be forgotten, as memory remains causing symptoms in the individual. All these stories of violence happened. Frantz Fanon (1968) used the term *atmospheric violence* to refer to colonial society. Fanon also emphasizes that being in this environment of brutality would be sickening for the individual.

The solution proposed by the artists is precisely to pierce the feeling of isolation and promote meetings. Posada summoned migration narratives to be told to us. These women lived through a grieving experience and are in the process of identifying and naming the traumas experienced. Going through their movements again, identifying the places they passed, the places that welcomed them, and identifying the danger zones is a way to elaborate on these memories and interrupt the feeling of helplessness. On the other hand, Paulo Nazareth's path was a dive into submerged memories. During the months of the journey, he developed the project entitled *Indigenous's Face*, in which Paulo Nazareth photographed himself alongside people with the indigenous heritage he met on his way, with the objective of "comparing the mestizo face to the face of the other". In this project, the artist manages to question the fixed categories of identity, imposed by colonial logic. But beyond that, the artist manages to pierce the feeling of isolation that colonialism imposes. If it is the not-knowing that prevents grief, Paulo Nazareth seems to give himself over to an experience to recover, at least in part, what was forgotten. In these cases, and many others, the helplessness did not produce a melancholy state, but, as Didi-Huberman (2017) would say, it did generate an uprising. For this author, the possibility of an uprising originates through loss, through grief. A loss that, instead of immobilizing us in a melancholy state that never ceases, would generate an inner movement.

Subverting norms for entry and exit from the country, recalling invisible migrations, talking about those who face a situation of absolute vulnerability when crossing borders, wouldn't these actions be small transgressions carried out by those who have no power at all? The migrant

and the exile seem to be condemned to belong to nowhere, to occupy an in-between place. These figures also walked around the *Tree of Oblivion*<sup>12</sup> from the moment they left their place of origin. It seems to us that art becomes a possible space to elaborate limit situations that immigrants and exiles often experience, but that escape the official narrative.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bonfim, Manoel de. "Latin America—Evils of Origin (Summary)". In *Resting Categories: Latin American and/or Latino?*, organized by Héctor Olea, Mari Carmen Ramírez and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, 215-222. Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 2012.
- Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Levantes*. São Paulo: Edições Sesc, 2017.
- Duque, Karo Ramírez. "Uma análise aos fluxos migratórios e dinâmicas do deslocamento forçado na Colômbia para o período 2000-2007". *Confins. Revue franco-brésilienne de géographie*, 29 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.4000/confins.11466>.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Os condenados da terra*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Civilização Brasileira, 1968.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Estudos sobre a histeria (1893-1895)*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2016.
- Mazzucchelli, Kiki. "Sobre marfins, dentes e ossos: uma breve introdução ao trabalho de Paulo Nazareth". In *Arte contemporânea/LTDA*, edited by Isabel Diegues and Ricardo Sardenberg. Rio de Janeiro: Cobogó, 2012.
- Nazareth, Paulo. "Direito ao Funeral". In *Jornal dos 100 dias. Catálogo 3ª Bienal da Bahia*, 2014. [https://issuu.com/bienaldabahia/docs/jornal\\_100\\_dias\\_small](https://issuu.com/bienaldabahia/docs/jornal_100_dias_small).
- O'Gorman, Edmund. *A Invenção da América: reflexão a respeito da estrutura histórica do no mundo e do sentido do seu devir*. São Paulo: Editora da Universidade Estadual Paulista, 2012.
- Posada, Libia. Signos Cardinales. *Cuadernos de música, artes visuales y artes escénicas*, 9, n° 2, (2014): 217-222. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/73a453c7566188d600bf1fa6772bofaa/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=1216356>.
- Reis, Rogério Costa Reis Costa and Genovez, Patrícia Falco. "Território sagrado exílio, diáspora e reconquista Krenak no Vale do Rio Doce, Resplendor, MG". *Boletim Goiano de Geografia*, 3, n° 1 (January - April 2013). <https://doi.org/10.5216/bgg.v33i1.23628>.
- Richard, Nelly. "Márgenes e Institución: Arte en Chile desde 1973". In *Arte en Chile desde 1973: escena de avanzada y sociedad*, 1-13. Santiago: FLACSO, 1983.
- Silva, Daniela Araújo da. "*Diáspora Borum: índios Krenak no Estado de São Paulo (1937 - 2008)*". Masters diss., Faculdade de História, Universidade Estadual Paulista, 2009. <http://hdl.handle.net/11449/93399>.

Uribe, María Victoria. "Los fantasmas no inquietan nunca a las cosas muertas: entre el Terror y el desaliento en Colombia". *Revista M. Estudos sobre a morte, os mortos e o morrer*, 3, n° 5 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.9789/2525-3050.2018.v3i5.92-102>.

---

### Endnotes

1. O'Gorman, *A Invenção da América*, 1992.
2. Bonfim, "Latin America—Evils of Origin (Summary)", 215-222.
3. Posada, "Signos Cardinales", 218; author's translation.
4. Uribe, "Los fantasmas no inquietan", 95-96; author's translation.
5. Reis, "Território sagrado exílio", 9.
6. Nazareth, "Direito ao Funeral".
7. Mazzucchelli, "Sobre marfins, dentes e ossos"; author's translation.
8. Didi-Huberman, *Levantes*, 322; author's translation.
9. Didi-Huberman, *Levantes*.
10. Paulo Nazareth, "African lice", 2013, <https://vimeo.com/106514870>.
11. Paulo Nazareth, "Footverm", 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbKgKgGoECo>.
12. Paulo Nazareth, "Tree of Oblivion", 2013, <https://vimeo.com/199736235>.



# Towards a Queer Catholicism: Religious Imagery in Asco's Whittier Boulevard Performances

---

**Brandon Sward**  
University of Chicago

## **ABSTRACT**

Asco present us with the paradox of why a queer Chicano art collective would choose to make extensive use of Roman Catholic imagery, when the Catholic Church was generally associated with sexual and political conservatism. By situating four of Asco's performances along Whittier Boulevard within the geography of colonial California, I argue this choice wasn't despite, but rather because of the politics of these images. More specifically, I consider how Whittier Boulevard was laid over parts of el Camino Real, which linked the 21 Franciscan missions of New Spain. Through these references, Asco draws a parallel between the colonization of the Americas and the internal colonialism they experienced as marginalized racial minorities in East L.A. By drawing the queerness out of Catholicism, Asco emphasized the intersection of their views with Catholic social teachings while simultaneously calling out the hypocrisy of Catholic sexual teachings. While I begin with more overtly religious performances like Stations of the Cross and First Supper, I find similar tactics in more distantly related pieces like Walking Mural and Instant Mural. I conclude by calling for a reconsideration of the complex inheritance of Catholicism among queer Chicanos and the literature on Asco, which hasn't fully attended to this facet of their work.

## **KEYWORDS**

Performance; Art; Identity; Geography; Colonialism.

On August 26, Carmelites around the world celebrate the Feast of the Transverberation, which commemorates the “piercing” of St. Teresa of Ávila’s heart by an angel. In her autobiography, she writes how she “saw in his hand a long spear of gold,” which he thrust “at times into my heart and to pierce my very entrails” (Lewis 1916, 266). “The pain was so great,” she continues, “that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it” (Lewis 1916, 266–7). It is difficult to ignore the sexual undertones of St. Teresa’s description of this experience, famously immortalized in Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647–52). From its obsession with the Virgin Mary to its longstanding requirement for a celibate clergy, the Catholic Church has something of a fixation on sex, prompting Pope Francis to lament in 2013 that the Church had become obsessed with abortion, contraception, and same-sex marriage, to say nothing of the sex abuse scandal that rocked the Holy See for decades and involved approximately 3,000 priests. But throughout its history, the Catholicism has been associated with a sexual morality that elevates the “charmed circle” married heterosexual couples over all other forms of human intimacy (Rubin 2011, 152). Although its positions on sexuality may be the most visible manifestation of the Church’s politics, it is far from the only one.<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, Catholics have been a powerful conservative force across much of the globe, from opposition to the French Revolution to support of the Francoist dictatorship in Spain (Payne 2009; Shusterman 2013). Alongside this history, however, runs the countercurrent of Catholic social teaching, such as within the Catholic Worker Movement founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in 1933 at the nadir of the Great Depression. These developments were especially pronounced in Latin America in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962–5), when theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, Juan Segundo, and Jon Sobrino drew inspiration from the Sermon on the Mount to defend a “preferential option for the poor.” Liberation theology, as it came to be called, emphasized “integral mission,” stressing both evangelism and social responsibility (Gutiérrez 1973).<sup>2</sup>

These ambivalent political legacies of Catholicism help us to make sense of the use of religious imagery within Chicano art. In this article, I focus on Asco, a Chicano collective active in East Los Angeles from 1972 to '87.<sup>3</sup> Working primarily within performance, the members of Asco (Harry Gamboa, Jr., Glugio “Gronk” Nicandro, Willie F. Herrón III, and Patssi Valdez), grew up during the Vietnam War spanning from 1955 to 1975, which many Chicanos in the Los Angeles area believed was killing them at a disproportionate rate. Indeed, Gronk cites the Vietnam War as inspiring Asco’s name. In his words, “a lot of our friends were coming back in body bags and were dying, and we were seeing a whole generation come back that weren’t alive anymore. And in a sense that gave us nausea—or ‘nauseous.’ And that is Asco, in a way” (Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art 1997). To protest Vietnam, Chicano activists banded together to form the Chicano Moratorium, which existed from 1969 to 1971. This group organized the National Chicano Moratorium March along Whittier Boulevard in 1970 to voice their disapproval of the Vietnam War and its effects on their community.<sup>4</sup>

A major commercial corridor in East Los Angeles, Whittier Boulevard runs about twenty miles from the Los Angeles River at its eastern end to Brea at its western end. Not only was Whittier Boulevard the location of much community activity but it also connected East Los Angeles to the heart of the Los Angeles metropolitan area (after the Los Angeles River, Whittier Boulevard becomes Sixth Avenue and continues downtown). Several of Asco’s performances over the years would occur on Whittier Boulevard. Regarding the street’s importance to Asco, Herrón reminisces,

At the time of the Moratorium, I was in high school. I remember the procession originating at Belvedere Park, protesting the Vietnam War and all the Chicanos that [*sic*] lost their lives. The police brutality was incredible. It affected me quite a bit and I think it affected all of us. So that’s why Whittier Boulevard became such an important street, and a place for us to conduct our performances and connect them to our community and

the way society viewed us at the time (Los Angeles County Museum of Art 2011).

We can see in this quote the double role Whittier Boulevard plays as simultaneously symbolizing the reality and reputation of East Los Angeles, as well bridging the *barrio* and the art world, between which Asco would continually navigate.<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 1. Asco, *Stations of the Cross*, 1971

But if we take a longer view of the history of this area of what is now the Southwestern US, we can see yet another dual role for Whittier Boulevard. The thoroughfare also carries a portion of *el Camino Real* (“Royal Road,” “King’s Highway”), which once connected twenty-one religious outposts in what was then *Alta California*, a province of New Spain.<sup>6</sup> We know Asco was aware of this fact because Gamboa once “used the phrase ‘el camino surreal’ (the surreal road/path), a play on El Camino Real, the historic highway of colonial California, to describe Whittier Boulevard as the setting where everyday reality could quickly devolve into absurdist, excessive action” (Chavoya and González 2011, 55). Hence, “el camino surreal” is both a pun on

*El Camino Real* and a gesture towards the surreality of Asco's performances. Indeed, the coloniality of the *Camino Real* is crucial to the success of these pieces, insofar as the tension between imposition and conversion is key to the acceptance and reproduction of national values (i.e., the whole apparatus of the state is ready to spring upon those who resist it, even as it's clear that strictly speaking belief cannot be forced).<sup>2</sup>



**Fig. 2.** Asco, *First Supper (After a Major Riot)*, 1974

By foregrounding Whittier Boulevard as the site for several Asco performances, we can see that rather than making simple “protest art,” Asco’s performance demonstrate a profound awareness of the historical forces excluding them from both the Latino communities of East L.A. and the Anglo art world downtown and on the Westside. In two performances, *Stations of the Cross* (1971) and *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* (1974), Asco used mimicry of Roman Catholic liturgical rites to compare their experiences as racial minorities with the history of Latin American colonialism, thus politicizing a religion that has, justifiably or unjustifiably, been blamed for the supposed

traditionalism of Mexican Americans; cf., “internal colonialism” (Blauner 1987). Two other performances, *Walking Mural* (1972) and *Instant Mural* (1974), poked fun at muralism, thus calling attention to the cultural expectations that ghettoize Chicano art as “folk art.” Indeed, Asco’s first piece, *Spray Paint LACMA/Project Pie in De/Face* (1972), involved tagging the entrance of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in protest against a curator who explained the museum didn’t acquire Chicano art because Chicanos were only capable of “making folk art and joining gangs.” Although ostensibly unrelated to Catholicism, I intend to show how indebted muralism is to Catholic iconography, and how we might thus read *Walking Mural* and *Instant Mural* as continuing this same interest.

Despite their differences, these performances all share similar strategies; namely, a process of defamiliarization the Situationist International famously dubbed *détournement*, which they define as follows:

The integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu. In this sense there can be no situationist painting or music, but only a situationist use of those means. In a more elementary sense, *détournement* within the old cultural spheres is a method of propaganda, a method which reveals the wearing out and loss of importance of those spheres (Situationist International 1958).

By resignifying culturally loaded religious and muralist imagery, through performance Asco loosens up the meanings associated with such imagery so these meanings can be redeployed in more politically progressive ways. Although all art is strictly speaking unable to produce new meanings *ex nihilo*, by presenting the history of a people in a novel way Asco makes room for the potentially discordant multivocality of site.<sup>8</sup> Like all places, there is a historical residue here available for reactivation.<sup>9</sup> Through performances that bring the past into the present, Asco in other words provides us with a way of thinking about how to make site-specific art when sites themselves have histories.





Fig. 3. Asco, *Walking Mural*, 1972

More directly, it may be that performance as an artistic medium is uniquely equipped to support the play of multiple meanings of a site in a way that the more traditionally sculptural practices of artists like Richard Serra or Robert Smithson cannot.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps there's something about performance that allows it to preserve the multivocality of site. There is a way in which a performance can at once adopt and reject, affirm and deny, as is the case with regard to many of the artists we've come to associate with the work of José Muñoz (Muñoz 1999). Although disidentification is essentially the failure of the subject to fully inhabit hegemonic culture, within this failure lies a radical possibility. To disidentify is essentially to refuse to accept the world as it is, to imagine other possible worlds we might collectively bring into existence.<sup>11</sup> Failure, then, only becomes failure within the context of a world that cannot at the moment supply the conditions under which this failure wouldn't count as failure. In her reading of Asco in *Abject Performances*, Leticia Alvarado concludes, "we are invited, by dwelling on loss, absence, and failure, to imagine a form of collectivity that does not require consensus or

singularity, which was often achieved at the exclusion of some of its members” (Alvarado 2018, 87). In this way, we can connect Asco’s performances to a politically progressive agenda. Perhaps by drawing out the multivocality of site through their performances, Asco allows us to map possible paths forward from our pasts to our potential futures that might result in a more egalitarian world than the one we have today.



**Fig. 4.** Asco, *Instant Mural*, 1972

If you look up it up in the dictionary, you will find both lower- and upper-case definitions for the adjective “Catholic,” denoting the Roman Catholic Church in particular, and “catholic” meaning all-embracing. The reason for this discrepancy is that for the first several centuries of its existence, there was only one Christian church. It wasn’t until the Protestant Reformation that it became necessary to differentiate between different *kinds* of Christians, with Catholics being but one among them. Much of the history of this period involved various debates over “pagan” elements like bells, dancing, and animal sacrifice (MacMullen 1999). And even after the changes instituted during the Counter-Reformation, many of these practices persist to the current day (e.g., incense, candles, even the timing of the liturgical calendar itself). In short, Catholicism has long been a syncretic religion, one containing that which is outside of itself.



These clashing inheritances allow us to better make sense of the sexual politics of Catholicism, which valorizes chastity even as its exploration of the nude male form borders on prurience (Steinberg 1996). And far from being mere topics of antiquarian interest, these taken-for-granted assumptions about gender and sexuality seem to be very much still with us, especially in cultures whose histories are deeply entangled with those of the Roman Catholic Church. Consider, for example, how the virgin-whore dichotomy between Mary and Mary Magdalene resurfaces in the conflicted history of Doña Marina Malintzin, or *La Malinche*, a Nahuatl interpreter for Hernán Cortés who is alternately seen as a foundational figure of the Mexican nation or as a traitor, depending on sociopolitical climate (Cypess 1991). To this day, to call a Mexican a *malinchista* is to accuse them of denying their own culture in favor of foreign imports (Fortes De Leff 2002).

It is precisely these sorts of disconnects which are ripe for queer intervention. Indeed, Annamarie Jagose writes in her introduction to queer theory that queerness “focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire” (Jagose 1996, 3). By drawing out the performative—even campy—aspects of Roman Catholicism, Asco engages in a type of political resistance that doesn’t at all dwell outside of what it criticizes, but is deeply embedded within it, much like the mode of working with and against hegemonic forms we might associate with artists like Vaginal Davis (Muñoz 1999). Rather than evidencing a shying away from politics, this strategy seems one of the few avenues available to those who believe power has no constitutive “outside” (Foucault 1995). Part of what makes power so totalizing a force is how fields of knowledge are caught up with one another, congealed into the frames through which we make sense of our surroundings (Foucault 1994). Power branches out into the fabric of institutions, physical space, and even our own selves and identities. And in Asco we witness an artistic practice able to make such moves visible, the necessary first step in the process of remaking the world around us differently, and perhaps even better.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alvarado, Leticia. 2018. *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Blauner, Robert. 1987. "Colonized and immigrant minorities." In *From Different Shores: Perspectives on Race and Ethnicity in America*. Edited by Ronald Takaki. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 149–60.
- Burnham, Linda Frye. 1987. "Asco: Camus, Daffy Duck, and Devil Girls from East L.A." *L.A. Style* February.
- Chavoya, C. Ondine and Rita Gonzalez. 2011. "Asco and the Politics of Revulsion." In *Asco: Elite of the Obscure*, edited by C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez, 37–85. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag.
- Corboz, André. 1983. "The Land as Palimpsest." Translated by R. Scott Walker. *Diogenes* 121: 12–34.
- Cypess, Sandra Messinger. 1991. *La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Fortes De Leff, Jacqueline. 2002. "Racism in Mexico: Cultural roots and clinical interventions." *Family Process* 41 (4), 619–23.
- Foucault, Michel. 1994. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books.
- Gutiérrez, Gustavo. 1973. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Translated by Caridad Inda and John Eagleson. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Jagose, Annamarie. 1996. *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York: New York University Press.
- Krauss, Rosalind. 1979. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." *October* 8: 30–44.
- Lewis, David, trans. 1916. *The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus of the Order of Our Lady of Carmel, Written by Herself*. Edited by Benedict Zimmerman. New York: Benziger Brothers.
- Los Angeles County Museum of Art. 2011. "Asco, Firsthand." <http://unframed.lacma.org/2011/08/29/asco-firsthand>.
- MacMullen, Ramsay. 1999. *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Moyn, Samuel. 2015. *Christian Human Rights*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. 1999. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press.

- Payne, Stanley. 2009. *Franco and Hitler: Spain, Germany, and World War II*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ratzinger, Joseph, with Vittorio Messori. 1985. *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*. Translated by Salvator Attanasio and Graham Harrison. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.
- Rodman, Margaret C. 1992. "Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality." *American Anthropologist* 94: 640–56.
- Rubin, Gayle. 2011. "Thinking Sex." In *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press, 137–81.
- Shusterman, Noah. 2013. *The French Revolution: Faith, Desire and Politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Situationist International. 1958. "Definitions." Translated by Ken Knabb. *Internationale Situationniste* 1. <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/definitions.html>.
- Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art. 1997. "Oral history interview with Gronk." <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-gronk-13586>.
- Steinberg, Leo. 1996. *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

---

## Endnotes

1. Indeed, some intellectual historians have attributed the rise of human rights discourse in the postwar period to Christian political discourse (Moyn 2015).
2. The movement did not, however, receive a warm reception in Rome, with Joseph Ratzinger calling it "a fundamental threat to the faith of the Church" (Ratzinger 1985, 175).
3. There are several manifestations of Asco, but I concentrate here in its first iteration.
4. In a turning point of the Chicano anti-war movement, a stray tear gas projectile killed *Los Angeles Times* reporter and columnist Ruben Salazar during the Moratorium March. Salazar was the first Chicano journalist to cover the ethnic group for a large general circulation publication.
5. This feeling of being caught between two worlds is expressed at multiple points in the journalistic accounts of and interview with members of Asco. Los Angeles art critic Linda Frye Burnham explains that Asco's name "was chosen because, as artists, the group got no respect, either in the conservative Latino environment of their home turf or in the Anglo art world" (Burnham 1987). In an interview with Burnham, Patssi Valdez laments, "We weren't Chicano enough for someone, too Mexican for others" (Burnham 1987).
6. *Real* can also mean "real" in the sense of "true."
7. Although scholars of Asco like art historian C. Ondine Chavoya are aware Asco knew portions of Whittier Boulevard were constructed over what was once *el Camino Real*, it doesn't play a significant interpretive role for them.
8. Multivocality is a crucial way that anthropologists, at least, have reconceptualized place as "a politicized social and cultural construct" (Rodman 1992, 640).
9. "The land as palimpsest" in the words of André Corboz (Corboz 1983).

10. It may be that Rosalind Krauss's "expanded field" of sculpture can now accommodate performance as well (e.g., "A performance is a sculpture made with the body"), but for present purposes I will use "performance" and "sculpture" with their conventional meanings (i.e., performances use the body, sculpture materials) (Krauss 1979).
11. In this we can make sense of Muñoz's ostensibly puzzling turn to futurity in his next major work: *Cruising Utopia*; our queer dissatisfaction with this world necessarily implies the possibility of a better future (Muñoz 2009).

# Disrupting Colonial Chronology. Quipus in the Artistic Practice of Jorge Eduardo Eielson and Cecilia Vicuña

---

**Franciska Nowel Camino**

Dresden University of Fine Arts

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper is based on my talk *Transcultural Text(ile)-Knots. Quipus in the artistic practice of Jorge Eduardo Eielson and Cecilia Vicuña* at the 35th CIHA Conference. There, I demonstrated the intermedial adaption of quipus as an artistic strategy within postcolonial discourses and transcultural processes. In my paper, I shed new light on Jorge Eduardo Eielson's *Tornillo para Rafael* (1972) and Cecilia Vicuña's *Quipu desaparecido* (2018) and discuss their inherent temporalities. In their engagement with quipus, the artists not only succeed in adding a new tangible dimension to the textile medium; both also refer to the contemporary tendencies and cultural traditions of quipus. In comparison of both artists, the art historical development of artistic quipus as well as their diversity becomes clear. They combine the textile material as well as the knotting techniques with social, political and historical connotations, and process them affirmatively in their contemporary reception. Rather than simply emphasizing the cultural weight of their artistic quipus, my intent is to demonstrate the expressive potential of these textiles and their concepts regarding contemporaneity and transcultural processes.

## **KEYWORDS**

Quipu; Textile; Contemporaneity; Transculturality; Temporalities.

### **Living Quipus**

In April 2022, the Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña received the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement of the 59th Biennale di Venezia.<sup>1</sup> In the curators' statement, Cecilia Alemani particularly appreciated the transdisciplinarity of the artist, which would form a "fragile equilibrium" between "a precarious art that is both intimate and powerful". Also mentioned in the statement are Vicuña's fascination and preoccupation with indigenous traditions and epistemologies of the South.<sup>2</sup> These include Vicuña's artistic engagement with the Américan<sup>3</sup> cultural tradition of the quipus<sup>4</sup>, which can be traced back to the 1960s.

Three-dimensional, textile quipus are based on a knotting system that is more than 5000 years old, used by various population groups in the coastal and Andean region of the Américas as a communication medium and to record information. The term 'quipu' comes from the Américan indigenous language Quechua and translates as 'knot' – both in its verb and noun form – and is both description and function (Urton 2003, 1). Consequently, quipus in their function as knots transmit, attach, secure and connect in different contexts, fulfilling this purpose simultaneously with the metaphorical transmission of memories, signs, symbols and knowledge.

Cecilia Vicuña's artistic approach to languages, word images and characters, as well as their visualization using natural materials such as wood, stone or (unspun) animal hair wool, runs through her oeuvre and is always linked to contemporary social issues. Already as a young woman in the early 1960s she began to deal with the concept of quipus and their contemporary meaning. At that time, it was unusual in Chile to take an interest in indigenous cultures and precolonial history, especially since there was no school subject that neutrally addressed precolonial national history. Textbooks of the time also discussed indigenous cultures merely sporadically and a lot of them were only published in English. In addition, indigenous textiles or means of communication were not on public display in the Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino until 1981 (Bryan-Wilson 2017, 111), which is why Vicuña's involvement with archaeological objects was initially motivated by her own private interests.<sup>5</sup> The artistic starting point of her work group of

quipus, which continues until today, can be traced back to *El Quipu que no recuerda nada* from 1966, which, as she states, only existed virtually in her mind until its two-dimensional realization four years later.<sup>6</sup> Art-historically, this quipu can be linked to concept art, which was emerging at that time. It stands exemplary for the idea, which itself becomes the material of art (Hoormann 1992, 591, 602). The inherent ambivalence and the already mentioned "fragile equilibrium" can thus be seen in the immateriality of the *Quipu que no recuerda nada*, which requires the thought of a thread – i. e. of material – in order to become visible (Bryan-Wilson 2017, 110). And even if reading about a virtual, materially inexistent artwork might seem random, it is especially the trust in the artists description, that makes the *Quipu que no recuerda nada*, as her first quipu, so significant in Vicuña's oeuvre. Therefore, as part of the unlearning process (cf. Spivak 2010; Azoulay 2019) of Western epistemologies Vicuña's first quipu is to be considered real and factual.

Similar to her current works, an emotional approach to historical quipus is as important as her studying the current research on this topic. In the art historical analysis of this history of rewriting, it is therefore necessary to take into account the artist's knowledge of the historical means of calculation and communication. Merely starting from the current state of research of archaeological finds and ethnological objects would not be sufficient, because some inherent information within the artworks would get lost. For example, some older sources referred to quipus as an administrative object or bureaucratic tool (Ascher [1981] 1997); other 18th century sources described the quipu somewhat more mystically as a magical object, subjective as a diary, or attested its literary components (Graffigny [1748] 2009). In addition, some sources from the 1960s and 1970s compared quipus to a code system as a protocompiler (Ascher [1981] 1997).

Furthermore, Vicuña has been familiar with the research of anthropologist Gery Urton (Vicuña/Urton, in Brooklyn Museum 2018, Min. 6:57-10:00), for example, since the 1980s, which also marks her commitment to the scientific decipherment of the historical quipus.<sup>7</sup> But, knowing his research, she contradicts him in his assumption that quipus are a closed communication system that is no longer used today. Vicuña states that

quipus still exist, not only as archaeological objects in museums, but everywhere where information is spun as virtual threads between people and their thoughts (Vicuña 2005, 11:20-12 min.). This concept is also incorporated in many of Vicuña's performances.<sup>8</sup> (cf. Nowel Camino 2022, 188 ff.) Vicuña formulates a further contradiction to the predominantly Western research situation in a conversation with Camila Marambio, in which she described the characteristics of the quipu systems as follows: "The information encoded in the quipu can be historical, mythical, poetical, musical, and the one that the Europeans understood was the statistical ones referring to tax accounting." (Vicuña, in: Hughes 2019, 63-64) In her statement, she, on the one hand, romanticizes and mystifies the quipus. On the other hand, she criticizes the Western standards and makes the importance and contemporaneity of epistemologies of the South very clear.

The literature often describes the knots of quipus as "mnemonic codes" (Boone/Mignolo 1994, 284; Bryan-Wilson 2017, 110; Urton 2003, 3 a. 10 ff; Alcalá 2018, 24; Leone 2004, 88), which illustrates the multiple functions as well as the possibility of knotting cultural semantics (Gardner Clark 2012, 24). Vicuña, in contrast, argues that calling quipus a "mnemonic device" is only one aspect of the concept. According to her, in addition to the tactile physical quipu system, there is a virtual one (Vicuña, in: Hughes 2019, 64.). Thus, in her approach to the knots, she always includes epistemologies of the South and criticizes the Western ones, based only on academic written structures and on forms of knowledge imposed during colonization. For the implementation of the Latin alphabet in the Américas corresponded not only with a representation of power but also to an adaption of non-alphabetic signs and technologies for their own use (Rama 1998, 23-27). Subsequent measures of the conquest were the forcible christianization and forced introduction of the Spanish language and Latin alphabet (Rinke 2010, 32). On the one hand the colonizers tried to bann all other communication systems, so the quipus were systematically burned and their production forbidden under the Third Council of Lima in 1583 (Urton 2003, 22). Untying the knots and burning the textiles therefore supposedly solved the ownerships and laws that were stored in the quipus. On the other hand, the quipus offered the colonizers



important information concerning the political and social systems of the Incas. As a result, the cultural tradition of the quipus and other pre-colonial textile techniques are documented only in a few colonial sources; they were passed down mostly orally within indigenous populations, were increasingly forgotten, and their functions were replaced by European writing (cf. Salomon 2004; Urton 2017, 217). Here, however, it is quite important to note that the tradition of the quipus continued to be practiced in several regions, despite being banned by colonizers in the 16th century; rarely as a medium of communication, but nevertheless for administrative or private purposes (cf. Salomon 2004). Here I would like to refer especially to the exhibition shown from November 2020 to August 2021 at the MALI Museum in Lima, where a chronological overview and development to the present day was shown. The exhibition *Khipus. Nuestra historia en nudos* combined archaeological discoveries and the latest research results on historical quipus with contemporary artistic positions. Here, however, the exhibition took historical quipus as its main point of departure and led them through the colonial period to the present day, where the artists Jorge Eduardo Eielson and Alejandra Ortiz de Zevallos represented the contemporary component of the textile tradition.

It is therefore important to emphasize that quipus are not a purely pre-colonial concept, but that there were also colonial as well as post-colonial knot systems. Exact contents and statements of the historical quipus are not fully deciphered yet, but there are definitely some recent discoveries grounded in a statistical procedure that study the quipus from an “comparative, systematic, and typological” (Boone 2011, 386) approach, which helps to categorize the knotted information’s into buzzwords and into pre-versus post conquest content (cf. Medrano 2021).<sup>9</sup>

As in her physically inexistent *El Quipu que no recuerda nada*, Vicuña also takes up forgotten topics and virtual realities in her space-filling quipu installations. There she plays with the paradox “de recordar lo olvidado y preservar lo efímero” (Gardner Clark 2015, 213). Her *Quipu desaparecido*, installed from May to November in 2018 in New York at the Brooklyn Museum, provides a respective example.

### **Transtemporal Characteristic**

*Quipu desaparecido* is a site-specific installation for the Brooklyn Museum. It consisted of a multitude of strands of unspun sheep's wool in off-white tones that were hung down from the ceiling at regular intervals, framed by the columns of the museum architecture. Vicuña's handling of the material and her deliberate exploitation of its possibilities is revealed in the respective woolen strands, their structure, and their grade of opacity.

The ends of the woolen strands, draped on the floor, gave the installation a moment of grounding, which was condensed in these arranged and folded structures. The strands are provided by different knots twisted in Z or S direction and of different sizes. Between the quipu as a historical medium of communication and its materiality interstices open up. The properties of the textile, such as its texture or warming function as well as its fragility and transcendence are other important aspects to understand the social and contemporary significance of the artwork (cf. Nowel Camino 2022).

It can be concluded that the physical and also conceptual components as a result of the processed raw materials fulfill certain signs in the sense of a coded system and can thus be read, similar to a historical quipu. Nevertheless, a quipu is not a writing system with alphabetical and grammatical prerequisites or foundations, rather it is a three-dimensional aesthetic sign system that is "read" tactilely and visually, embodying knowledge and making it comprehensible, as we can also observe in Vicuña's performances and some installations. Vicuña's work with quipus can be described "as a form of embodied [and materialized] language that takes shape like chords of music or visual poetry, with every colored string [and] knot [...] a semantic unit [can] be read, heard, [felt], and interpreted in dialogue with the other knotted strings." (Bryan-Wilson 2017, 111) Thus, her quipus fulfill a visual manifestation of the way textile objects can store and render information and are an integral part of epistemologies of the South.

The hanging woolen webs create a richness of association that refers to the many disappeared people and lost lives during twentieth century American dictatorships, already referred to in the title. The representation of

the non-visible ultimately amounts to the evocation of a sphere in which it is not the recall of a reality that is decisive, but the thinking of perceptions. The hanging woolen strands assign a concrete place to the absent – the disappeared bodies occupy a place. Furthermore, their visualization through the medium of the quipu, as the official means of communication of the Incas, mediates an official and political claim.

The presence of the disappeared is complemented by the historical context of archaeological objects in small glass cases that were placed next to the meter-high spatial installation. Furthermore, the entire installation is spotlighted with projections of images of historical textiles. The depicted textiles are from the ancient Andean collections of the Brooklyn Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts, New York. Curatorially, this implies references to the past, or exhibits them as part of contemporary quipus. Furthermore, a recording plays chants by the artist, culminating in elements of spoken word and melody. The light and sound installation plays on all the textiles located in the space and is thus also conceptually connecting them.

The exhibition concept took *Quipu desaparecido* as its main point of departure and led it back to pre-colonial times by means of historical quipus and textiles. In curatorial terms, Vicuña's artwork can be seen as a representative continuation of this cultural tradition, demonstrating its persistent existence beyond colonization and into the present. According to my argument, Vicuña's engagement with and taking up of American textile traditions is an evaluation of temporalities and their consequences and effects on concepts of the past, memories, and loss. With her work, she moves toward a setting that recognizes and analyzes multiple understandings of time and forms of knowledge. This process involves the unlearning of the standardization of time emanating from Europe and its conceptualization as neutral, constant and measurable. Therefore, time must be understood as a historically justified social and colonial construction (cf. Nanni 2012; Philips 2021), whose unlearning can mean a form of decolonization. According to this understanding of temporalities, the concepts of past, future, and present coexist in Vicuña's quipu. This phenomenon is also reflected in Vicuña's other quipus, in which she refers to the present by globally addressing means of

communication that have been relegated to the past in order to create awareness of the future. Vicuña takes up decolonizing understandings of time, as a concept to be revised.

Even if the exhibition form in New York makes visible the transtemporal quality of the quipus and thus also of the Américan textile tradition, the exhibition also points to the common curatorial practice of showing contemporary textile art – especially Américan – not autonomously, but together with its (supposed) historical context; the narrative of rediscovered and reanimated cultural traditions and of a cultural tradition that is always linked to the past is thus cultivated. Art historiography, however, is able to challenge this premise that Américan art must be historically contextualized in order to understand it. Historical contextualization of contemporary art is often exoticizing and mystifying and serves the eurocentric narrative of Américan (textile) art as component of a past. Dealing with it therefore inevitably calls for an investigation of the “fractures and ruptures in arthistorical timelines” (Kernbauer 2017, 4) as well as their continuities of history and temporalities. Plenty of works of Américan artists are certainly embedded in discourses of contemporary history with a relationship of historicity and consciousness of the past (cf. Rith-Magni 1994). However, recollection does not equal regression, and tradition does not equal the past.

Nevertheless, in the context of *Quipu desaparecido* it is difficult to let the textile installation speak for itself, to understand it only as present and the historical references as a mediating aspect of the quipu’s explanation as a millennia-old concept. The historical quipus in their showcases are part of the present. In this case, the temporalities are inseparable; at some point they even overlap through the light and sound installation, disrupting the colonial chronology.

With her installation, Vicuña thus reached back to an ancestral form of communication whose cultural significance stretches from the pre-colonial past to the present – and this at a time when technological developments are influencing contemporary understandings of knowledge, history, language, reality, and community (Lee 2019).

Vicuña and, as will be explained in the following, also Eielson, argue with the contemporaneity of the supposedly past through the presence of physical materials. They thus don't tell a story about Américas's past, but they tell a story about Américas's present.

### **Performative Knots**

Jorge Eduardo Eielson is one of the first artists to artistically deal with the design feature of the knot, titling his works "quipu" in an affirmative way as reference to the pre-colonial accounting and communication system. He grew up in Peru in the 1930s and 40s. During this time, archaeological excavations and finds, as well as scientific research on pre-colonial artifacts, increased and became a central interest for Peruvians, as well as early forms of tourism (Castro Sajami 2016, 31).

Eielson, who in this field was well educated and collected pre-colonial ceramics and textiles, began to journalistically deal with the relevant content at a young age and published several texts on the subject during his life. His articles not only reflect his literary and philosophical views, but also testify to his interest in Peru's cultural history as well as in current art debates (Castro Sajami 2016, 31). In this context, it is necessary to consider the artist's contemporary knowledge of the quipus. Similar to Vicuña, Eielson had a much more spiritual understanding of the quipus than the current state of research. That Eielson researched the historical quipus and other pre-colonial textile works in depth is evidenced, among other things, by his many visits to the Amano Museum in Lima.<sup>10</sup>

Eielson's quipus run intermedially through his oeuvre from the 1960s onwards, progressively taking on the form of autonomous sculpture, being placed in spatial installations, or wrapping the body of a female model during a performance. All of Jorge Eielson's quipus were created according to a similar basic principle, whose defining formative features are knots.

Eielson's first textile knot(s) from 1964, titled after the traditional knotting system is called *White Quipus*. It consists of four different colored cotton strings, knotted together in front of a white canvas. In contrast to the historical examples there is no clear main cord visible in Eielson's artistic

quipus, from which the reading direction emerges, which in turn would allow a stored information to be successively decoded; in Eielson's work however, the canvas assumes the cohesive function of the main cord. It is the connecting element to which the knots created through different techniques are attached.

Eielson transfers the various knotting and twisting techniques of the historical models and combines the colors and shapes according to his subjective perception. Accordingly, these twists and knots are not based on any predefined coding, but have emerged from his aesthetic sentiment (cf. Rith-Magni 1994). He plays with the possibilities offered by the textile material, with its colorfulness, its flexibility as well as different manifestations. Particularly through the procedure of stretching the textiles over the canvas in different ways, a dialogue between the materials occurs and a focus on textiles as an independent artistic material is made.<sup>4</sup>

Eielson already combined the influences he absorbed from contemporary European art movements with pre-colonial knotting techniques in his first quipus. As a logical consequence of the stylistic developments, Eielson's visual language became more concentrated over the years: the knots per work were reduced, and, in later works, monochrome followed polychrome textiles stretched over a single- or two-color surface. Good examples for this phenomenon are *Progresión gris (1966)* and *Quipu 29 A-I (1966-1971)*. The entire fabric is under tension: because, in addition to the twisting and knotting, the cotton fabric was soaked in paint and glue, so that when it dried it lost its flexibility and softness – characteristics of textiles. Here, the textile undergoes a change in its natural appearance. The wrinkling here makes the tension visible and is not a reaction to an underlying body. This, too, makes the textile an independent actor in Eielson's artworks, especially since he mainly used the specific properties of textiles, knotting, felting, and twisting them on the picture surface, forming fabric folds and unfolding them, and then manipulating and preserving them through the additional use of glue (Rith-Magni 1994, 220), cement, plastic or paint. Eielson's procedure of hardening the textiles, so that there is a detachment from the conventional 'soft' perception is an example of the necessity of a

material aesthetic method: it is precisely this separation and the simultaneous difference to the original flexibility that brings the significance of the work, or rather its meaning, to surface.

Another example for this proceeding is his quipu *Tornillo para Rafael*<sup>12</sup>, which Eielson made in December 1972 for his close friend, the artist Rafael Hastings. Here, the white fabric, hardened with glue, runs diagonally from top right to bottom left over a wooden, natural surface. The small format is unique among Eielson's quipus, which gives the quipu a personal character. This is further stressed by the format that is similar to a framed memory photo, which can be taken anywhere due to its convenient size. The wooden surface, which has remained almost untreated, also differs from Eielson's backgrounds that are usually painted with bold and eye-catching colors. *Tornillo para Rafael* is a work that is restrained in its effect and metaphorically stands for the friendship between Eielson and Hastings.<sup>13</sup> Eielson's work, like a photograph, can be understood as an attempt to capture and record time, in which again a reference to the information- and memory-storing quipus can be seen. This impression is particularly supported by the artificial hardening of the textiles, which also preserves the object.

Similarly, the work *Nudo* from 1973, by its weight, holds the gesture of knotting forever. The knot, weighing two kilograms, is relatively heavy and immobile. It can only be assumed that Eielson probably filled a tube with liquid cement and knotted it while it was still flexible and, after it had hardened, covered it with a fabric, which was then dipped in glue to harden the folds. The *Nudo* is solidified not only in its nature and technique, but also in its materiality, which combines softness and hardness also on a metaphorical scale.

Against this background, Eielson's artistic quipus can also be understood as a way to capture, make aware of, visualize, as well as metaphorically and actually conserve and value the cultural textile tradition and communication medium. The gesture of knotting can be understood as a "citational act" according to Butler that traverses the realm of language and performance (Butler 2019, 39). Gesture as quotation (historical quipus and

languages) and as event (act of knotting) is used by Eielson as a critical practice towards forms of expression. Thus, it should be noted that Eielson's quipus are an examination and questioning of painting, and the knot becomes a performative act with which the artist succeeds in expanding his contemporary understanding of art. Fittingly, he refers to his quipus as "fragments of language and archaeological remains." (Eielson, in: Rabaza Soruluz 2010, 111-112)<sup>14</sup> If his quipus were excavated after centuries, they would provide information about the anthropocene, not only because of their material durability, and bear witness to their producer.

It is clear that the materiality of the knots not only makes technical statements about the artistic quipu, but also statements about their content. The knot is thus no longer just an object, it is a kind of gesture or movement as well as the result of force and centered energy. The effort and strength required to create the tensions of Eielson's quipus is stored in the stiffness. Unlike historical quipus, whose knots do not require muscular strength, Eielson's quipus seem to be the result of shared forces (cf. Lerner 2018, 43-44).<sup>15</sup>

### **New 'vocabularies'**

Eielson and Vicuña create transcultural means of communication that mediate between them and the recipients. They take up the concept of the historical quipu system, make the signs their own, and invent new 'vocabularies' for their own nodal language. Both combine different quipu systems – the tactile and the virtual – as well as their inherent temporalities to make different statements. Thus, a new aspect is added to the quipu as a phenomenon of contemporary art: it is no longer just an object or an action, but also a virtual and material concept that comes with plural temporalities like deceleration and simultaneity. Furthermore, it is the deceleration that is often associated with the textile material, which is also one aspect of the growing discourse on traditional textile techniques in contemporary art. That deceleration goes beyond the production process; it also influences the reception and the viewer's behavior.



Vicuña and Eielson studied and interpreted the knot system and its materiality as well as techniques and transferred as well as translated them in their artistic practice into a transtemporal form of communication. On the one side this approach can be described as a form of postcolonial retransfer of quipus into their textile material, from which some were extracted during the colonization. There the quipucamayocs, the cord keepers “offered oral renderings of their khipus, which were subsequently translated into Spanish and transcribed in the written proceedings as paper khipus” (Medrano 2021, 2 after Brokaw 2003, 113). By hardening, preserving the material and enlarging the strands and knots into meter-high dimensions, Eielson and Vicuña make the quipus an unmissable part of transcultural art history. On the other side both artists not only adapted the textile medium into a new tangible understanding, they also referred to the omnipresent cultural history in their countries of origin and contemporary trends, such as the increasing scientific research on these artifacts.

According to my estimation, Eielson and Vicuña are the first artists to artistically deal with the concept of the quipus. Here I am particularly referring to the explicit titling of artworks as “quipus,” which was not done, for example, by Anni Albers and Sheila Hicks. Both of these female artists had been working with the knotting technique of the quipus from the 1950s onward. It is remarkable that Anni Albers's book *On Weaving*, a survey work published in 1965, was published only shortly after Eielson's and Vicuña's first textile works. Even though neither artist adapted Albers's work, the simultaneity of American textile traditions gaining global importance is made clear.

In addition, Eielson's and Vicuña's works had an exemplary character: many artists of mostly American origin deal with the concept of quipus. One example is the Mexican artist Tanya Aguiñiga with her multimedia quipu project, in which she invited people waiting at the border between Mexico and the United States to tie strings to the wall. These knotted strings can also be classified as a form of transnational communication as well as a storage for memories.

In conclusion, the artistic quipus can be said to correspond to an object of discourse since the early 1960s and, beyond the function of the respective knots, to be recognizable as an independent formative element in contemporary art.<sup>16</sup> The process of transformation and inscription carried out by Eielson and Vicuña in different ways and independent from each other can be described as a complex cluster of transnational influences. In this context, the interrelationships and also the symbiosis of visual art, poetic and (written) signs resemble a consequent crossing of borders. Eielson and Vicuña act as transcultural agents, whose biographies and artistic practices are determined by exile and migration (Eielson to Italy and Vicuña to England and the USA).

With that in mind, I understand the artistic quipus as a form of textile technology that can be described, following Elvira Espejo Ayca and Denise Arnold, in a general sense “as a set of knowledge and practices constructed historically within a region. They can be understood at an intellectual and corporeal level, while at the same time being practiced in material contexts and also in the sphere of artefacts.” (2015, 29) This technological entanglement between “the corporeal and the material aspects” (2015, 29) supplies to the inclusion of the epistemologies of the South in artistic practice as well as academic writing and thinking.

The manifold forms of reception that can be identified from this can be described, for example, as the interpretation and continuation of textile techniques, but also motifs and traditions. In the quipus by Eielson and Vicuña discussed here, there were no dichotomies between the sense of sight and touch, writing and visual art, or tactile and visual perception. Their interactions were effectively used to achieve an activation of the senses through the experience of art, starting from the interrogation of textiles, and thus transcending the boundaries of art – as well as geographical ones.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Alcalá, Rosa (ed.). *Spit Temple. The Selected Performances Of Cecilia Vicuña*, New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018.

Arnold, Denise Y., and Espejo-Ayca, Elvira. *The Andean Science of Weaving: Structures and Techniques of Warp-faced Weaves*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015.

Azoulay, Ariella Aisha. *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. London: Verso Books, 2019

Ascher, Marcia, and Robert Ascher. *Code of the Quipu: A Study in Media, Mathematics, and Culture*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, [1981] 1997.

Boone, Elizabeth Hill, and Walter D. Mignolo (ed.). *Writing without Words. Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes*, London: Duke Univ. Press 1994.

Boone, Elizabeth Hill. "The Cultural Category of Scripts, Signs, and Pictographies." In *Their Way of Writing: Scripts, Signs, and Pictographies in Pre-Columbian America*, ed. Boone Elizabeth Hill, and Gary Urton, 379–90. Washington (DC): Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2011.

Brooklyn Museum. *Conversation: Cecilia Vicuña and Gary Urton*. 2018, Video, 59:51. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2\\_YLzO-XFcg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_YLzO-XFcg)

Bryan-Wilson, Julia. *Fray. art and textile politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Butler, Judith. *Wenn die Geste zum Ereignis wird*. Wien: Turia + Kant, 2019.

Gardener Clark, Meredith. "Warping the Word and Weaving the Visual: Textile Aesthetics in the Poetry and the Artwork of Jorge Eduardo Eielson and Cecilia Vicuña" PhD diss., Austin (Texas): The Uni. of Texas at Austin, 2012.

Gardener Clark, Meredith. *Vicuñiana. El arte y la poesía de Cecilia Vicuña, un diálogo Sur/Norte*. Santiago de Chile: Editorial Cuartopropio, 2015.

Castro Sajami, Carlos. *Concepción de un arte peruano en la obra plástica de Eielson*, ed. Chiri Jaime, Sandro, and Javier de Taboada, 29-36. Lima: Casa de la literatura peruana, 2016.

Gschwandtner, Sabrina. „kNOT a QUIPU – An Interview with Cecilia Vicuña Cecilia Vicuña“, 2005, Video. <https://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/articles/1470/knot-a-quipu>

Hoormann, Anne. „Außerhalb des Ateliers: Land Art und Concept Art“. ed. Monika Wagner, 591-610. Hamburg: Rowohlts Enzyklopädie, 1991.

Hughes, Helen. *Slow Down Fast. A Toda Raja / Camila Marambio and Cecilia Vicuña*, Berlin: Errant Bodies Press, 2019.

Kernbauer, Eva. "Anachronic concepts, art historical containers and historiographical practices in contemporary art". *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 16 (June 2017): 16 – EK1.

Lee, Pamela M. *The Glen Park Library. A Fairy Tale of Disruption*. London: MIT press 2019.

Lerner, Sharon (ed.). *Eielson: exposición, Museo de Arte de Lima - MALI, del 16 de noviembre de 2017 al 4 de marzo de 2018*. Lima: Asociación Museo de Arte de Lima – MALI, 2017.

Medrano, Manuel. "Khipu Transcription Typologies: A Corpus-Based Study of the Textos Andinos", *Ethnohistory*, 68 (2) (April 2021): 311–341. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-8801912>

Nanni, Giordano. *The Colonisation of Time*. Manchester, UK: Manchester Univ. Press 2017.

Neff, Franziska, and Miriam Österreich (ed.). "Editorial", *Miradas*, Bd. 4: 2018 (2020): 2–7. doi: <https://doi.org/10.11588/mira.2018.0>

Nowel Camino, Franciska. „Taktile und intertextile Erfahrungen. Cecilia Vicuña's Performance Living Quipu (2018)". ed. Carolin Meister and Kristin Marek, 181–197. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2022.

Padilla, José Ignacio (ed). *nu/do. Homenaje a J. E. Eielson*, Pontificia universidad católica del Perú, fondo editorial: Lima 2002.

Phillips, Rasheedah. "Counter Clockwise: Unmapping Black Temporalities from Greenwich mean Timelines". ed. Léopold Lambert, *The Funambulist*. Politics of Space and Bodies, no. 36, July–August 2021, 20–25.

Rabaza Soraluz, Luis. Jorge Eduardo Eielson. *Ceremonia comentada (1946-2005): Textos sobre arte, estética y cultura*. Fondo Editorial del Congreso del Perú: Lima, 2010.

Richmond, Susan. Lynda Benglis. *Beyond Process*, New York: I. B. Tauris 2013.

Rinke, Stefan. *Geschichte Lateinamerikas. Von den frühesten Kulturen bis zur Gegenwart*. München: C.H. Beck 2010.

Rith-Magni, Isabel. *Ancestralismo: kulturelle Identitätssuche in der lateinamerikanischen Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*. München: Eberhart, 1994.

Salomon, Frank. *The Cord Keepers. Khipus and Cultural Life in a Peruvian Village*, London: Duke Univ. Press, 2004.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?": Revised Edition, from the 'History' Chapter of *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*." In *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris, 21–78. Columbia University Press: New York, 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/morra14384.5>.

Urton, Gary. *Signs of the Inka Khipu. Binary Coding in the Andean Knotted-String Records*. Austin (Texas): Univ. of Texas Press, 2003.

Urton, Gary. *Inka History in Knots. Reading Khipus as Primary Sources*, Austin (Texas): Univ. of Texas Press, 2017.

---

## Endnotes

1. In addition to Vicuña, the German artist Katharina Fritsch has also received the Golden Lions for Lifetime Achievement of the 59th Biennale di Venezia. The decision was approved by La Biennale's Board of Directors, chaired by Roberto Cicutto, upon recommendation of the Curator of the 59th International Art Exhibition, Cecilia Alemani.

2. Hereby I refer especially to: Sousa Santos, Boaventura de: *Epistemologien des Südens. Gegen die Hegemonie des Westlichen Denkens*. Münster: Unrast Verlag 2018.
3. With the designation of „the Américas“ I follow Miriam Österreich and Franziska Neff (Neff/Österreich 2018 (2020), 6).
4. Following Eielson and Vicuña, I use the Spanish spelling "quipu" instead of the English "khipu".
5. The first quipu Vicuña saw was in a book belonging to her aunt, which dealt with the history and function of cords and knotting techniques. Vicuña / Gschwandtner 2005, Minute 00:00-03:00; Also see Bryan-Wilson 2017, III.
6. The book *The Precarious (The Art and Poetry of Cecilia Vicuña) / Quipoem*, published by Vicuña and M. Catherine de Zegher in 1997, contains the written thought of the *Quipu que no recuerda nada*, in English: "The Quipu that remembers nothing, an empty cord - the heart of memory." Vicuña 1997, 8-10.
7. Likewise, in the conversation cited above, Urton confirms following Vicuña's artistic practice since the 1990s and approving of her approach, Min. 9:00-10:00.
8. The first performance of this kind took place in 1966 and is titled *Guante*. Others are: *Amor. Weaving in All the Wrong Places*, 1981; *Amarrando Bogotá*, 1981; *Allqa*, 1997; *Cloud-Net*, 1999; *Quipu menstrual*, 2006; *Quipu vivo*, 2006; *Beach Ritual (near Athens)*, 2017; *Living Quipu*, Brooklyn Museum, New York, 23.9.2018; *Living Quipu* Fine Art Museum Boston, 19.10.2018; *Living Quipu*, Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, April 2019.
9. However, since these research results were published after Vicuña's performances, I will not draw references between them. What is particularly important here is the still ongoing and evolving process of decoding on the part of the researchers and also the artist.
10. The Amano Museum was opened in Lima in 1964 and is still one of the world's most important museums for Peruvian textiles. According to the museum, Eielson often booked private tours there, during which not only the textiles in the permanent exhibition are explained by restorers or curators, but also drawers and cabinets are opened, in which further textiles are located. Carlos Runcie Tanaka, Rafael Hastings and Manongo Mujika also confirmed Eielson's regular visits to the Amano Museum.
11. With this decision to make the cotton textiles into essential subjects themselves, Eielson certainly followed models such as Lucio Fontana (1899-1968). The knot as an archetype of an act of strength seems here like a counterpart to Fontana's cuts, as the art historian José Ignacio Padilla (2002, 240) described it. Especially in Eielson's and Fontana's repetitive procedure and gestural approach, a connection to contemporary artistic movements in Italy, Germany, and France, where both artists resided at some time, can be detected.
12. Jorge Eduardo Eielson: *Tornillo para Rafael*, 1972, cotton fabric soaked in white paint and glue over wood, 28,3 x 21,5 cm, private collection Rafael Hastings & Yvonne von Möllendorff.
13. Already in 1970 Eielson had made one of his textile pyramids from Hastings paintin grags, for which Eielson also specially built a wooden display case. Hastings had this in his living room, which illustrates the importance that the work had for him.
14. Eielson chose this description for the exhibition text of his first exhibition in Lima after his departure to Europe in 1967. Moreover, it was the first exhibition of his quipus in América which he had already shown a year earlier in Venice at the Biennale.
15. The fact that Eielson's quipus always had to be twisted and tied by two people is also confirmed by the artist's later assistant in Patricia Pereyras Film *Eielson Des-nudo*, Lima 2014, Min. 4:00-4:25.
16. In this context, it is also interesting to highlight that in 1973, at the same time as Eielson's *Alfabeto*, the American artist Lynda Benglis began tying various materials such as zinc and metal into meter-sized knots. In these knots, the tension between surface and form becomes a provocative metaphor for mediated embodiment and the interplay between the physical and social body. But the titles of her knots as well as their typeface are also significant: for example, she used the phonetic alphabet of the American military for the metallic knots and Greek

letters for her later glittering knots (Richmond 2013, 101); At the beginning of this series of works, Benglis formed some of the knots according to certain Latin letters. Ultimately, Benglis' knots cannot be read and deciphered literally any more than Eielson's, and yet the titles and forms provide information about their meaning (Richmond 2013, 101-104).

# Representing and Negotiating the US-Mexico Borderlands: Photography, Migration, and Transculturality

---

**Hanna Büdenbender**

Universität des Saarlandes

## **ABSTRACT**

The U.S.-Mexico border is both a geopolitical boundary and a social construction. As a space of national fortification and a porous zone of migration, mobility and movement of people, objects and practices, the borderlands can be defined as a hybrid in-between space and a transcultural contact zone. Since the installation of the border following the Mexican-American War, the medium of photography has been closely linked to the making of the border. This paper examines the role of photography in making the border and works of contemporary photography, presenting the borderlands as a transcultural space in a constant state of movement.

## **KEYWORDS**

US.-Mexico Borderlands; Photography; Transculturality; Migration, Postcolonial Theory.

The history of the U.S.-Mexico border runs parallel with the history of photography<sup>1</sup> In the first half of the nineteenth century, photography emerged together with the events that led to the definition of the U.S-Mexico border and the world's first photographs of war are those of General John E. Wool's troops, taken by an unknown daguerreotypist during the American occupation of Saltillo, Mexico in the Mexican-American war in 1847 or early 1848.<sup>2</sup> This paper examines the photographic constructions and representations of the Western U.S.-Mexican border, focusing on migration and transcultural processes of exchange from early views of the boundary line in the mid-nineteenth century to today's works of contemporary artists. Crucial for the analysis is the relationship between seeing, representing, and the question of how the border as a cultural construction came into being through the use of the photographic medium. From whose point of view were photographs of the border taken, to what purpose and what do they convey?

As geopolitical boundaries, borders are commonly defined as international boundaries between nation states.<sup>3</sup> However, rather than being a rigid, pre-given and fixed line separating two nation states, the US-Mexican border is both, a physical construction on the actual ground and a social construction that does not have a single, static, and unchanging meaning. It acts as both, a space of national fortification and a porous zone of migration, mobility and movement of people, objects and practices.<sup>4</sup> From a postcolonial approach, the U.S.-Mexican borderlands can be defined as a hybrid "in-between" space following the definition by Homi Bhabha.<sup>5</sup> Using the term by Mary Louise Pratt, they can also be described as a transcultural, liminal "contact zone" of encounter and powerful negotiation including conditions of coercion, inequality and conflict in which different cultures in the Americas meet and clash.<sup>6</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa has called the U.S.-Mexico border "*una herida abierta*"<sup>7</sup>, an open wound, "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds".<sup>8</sup>

In this respect, the focus is on the landscape of the borderlands: How is it represented? Which images and imaginations of the landscape are transported? Which role do plants and stones and rocks play? How do landscape and migration come together? Which signs of migration can be



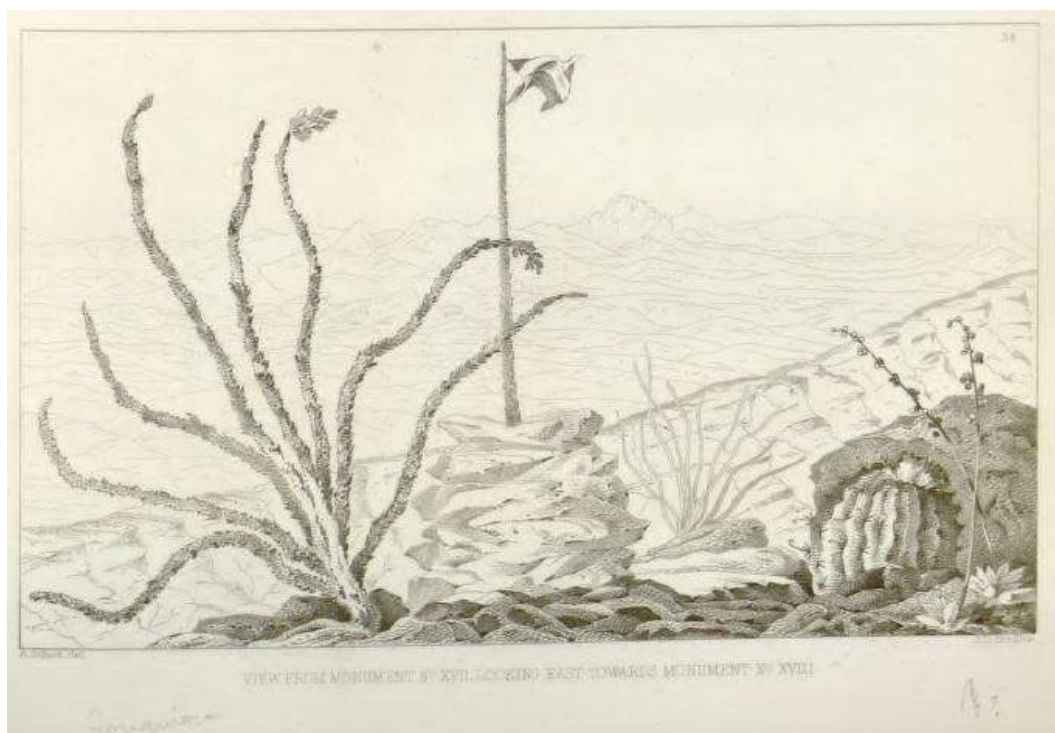
found in the images of contemporary photographers who show the Sonora region as a landscape of migration? Closely connected to the borderlands as a landscape of migration is the aspect of transculturality: How does contemporary photography show the everyday life of people living on both sides of the border, making it a transcultural zone of contact and exchange?

The history of the U.S.-Mexico border began in the early nineteenth century. After Mexico had declared its independence from Spanish colonial power in 1821, the competing territorial visions of both states brought them to war in 1846.<sup>9</sup> In September 1847 American troops invaded Mexico. After the occupation of the Mexican capital by U.S. soldiers, in 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo brought an end to the Mexican-American War. With the Gadsden Purchase in 1853, a new international boundary was set, extending nearly two thousand miles from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Coast. By agreeing to this, Mexico was forced to give up more than half of its territory to the United States who in turn acquired what is now the American Southwest.<sup>10</sup>

Long, straight international boundaries were not common in the mid-nineteenth century, the more usual approach to establishing borders was to use the contours of nature.<sup>11</sup> But whereas for the eastern part of the border, from the Gulf of Mexico to El Paso, the center of the Rio Grande was defined as the boundary, U.S. and Mexican officials determined the location of its western part by simply drawing straight lines between a few geographically important points on a map – El Paso, the junction of the Colorado and Gila rivers, and San Diego Bay. The analysis focuses on this Western part – the desert border running from west of El Paso to the Pacific Ocean as an entirely new space created by the U.S. and Mexican nation-states.<sup>12</sup>

For the demarcation of the new boundary, a joint Boundary Commission, headed by William Hemsley Emory of the United States and José Salazar y Larregui of Mexico,<sup>13</sup> employed survey parties along the boundary to fix the new line by producing fifty-four sectional maps.<sup>14</sup> Transferring the maps to the ground, fifty-two boundary markers were erected along the border to mark the line on the ground.<sup>15</sup> As the markers were vulnerable however, subject to people moving or destroying them, or to landslides and other

dangers,<sup>16</sup> images were needed to “perpetuate the evidences of the location of the boundary, in the event of the Indians removing the monuments erected on the ground”<sup>17</sup> as the 1857 Report of the Boundary Commission states. Indeed, the new boundary line, imposed by colonial powers that claimed indigenous territories as their own, cut the lands of the Tohona O’odham people in two, leaving half on the U.S. side and half on the Mexican side.<sup>18</sup> Their dispossession from their lands is today mirrored by immigrant rights groups’ counter-discourse, stating, “We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us”, thereby referring to land that was once Mexico, but which has been indigenous land long before that.<sup>19</sup>



**Fig. 1.** Arthur Schott, *View from Monument No. XVII, Looking East towards Monument No. XVIII*, engr. J.D. Smillie, c. 1856, William Emory, *Report on the United States and Mexican Boundary Survey*, 1857, vol. 1, pl. 38, <https://archive.org/details/mobot31753002023569/page/n1/mode/2up>

There is a set of thirty-two steel engravings in the first volume of the Report of the Boundary Commission whose purpose was to record the

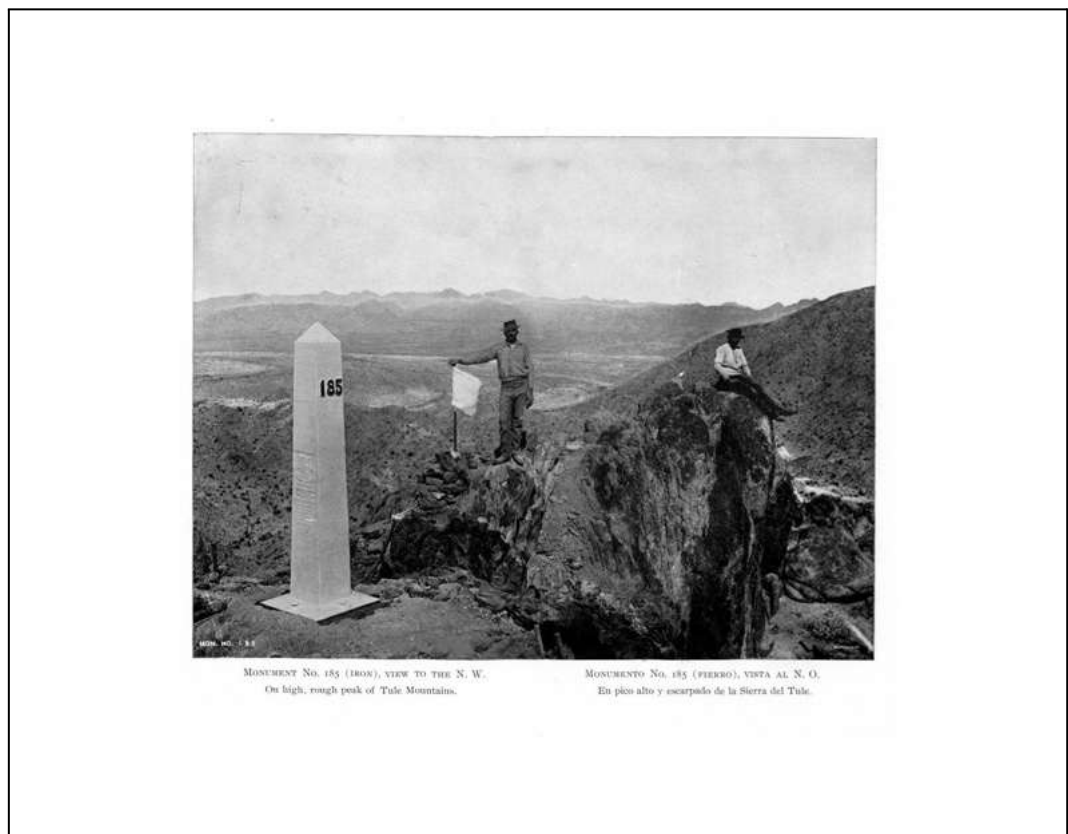
location of the markers erected along the border.<sup>20</sup> These boundary views thus helped establish the imagination of a continuous, coherent boundary line. The pictorial inaccessibility caused by the bare rocks and sharp needles of the cacti and other peculiar plants in the foreground<sup>21</sup> (fig. 1) is an expression of the struggle to come to terms with the unwelcoming strangeness of the unfamiliar landscape<sup>22</sup> and the strains and hardships that had to be overcome by its survey. The views put the emphasis on the line and the discipline required to keep it true<sup>23</sup> and legitimated both the boundary and the survey that defined its official course.<sup>24</sup>

By the 1880s, a new International Boundary Commission with engineers from Mexico and the United States was organized to resurvey the boundary line. New, obelisk-shaped monuments were erected, increasing the number of markers to 258 along the U.S.-Mexico land border from El Paso to the Pacific Ocean. They were never footed more than five miles apart and were placed on high ground wherever possible. The aim was to provide the line with greater visibility and they were positioned so that any one of them could be seen from the one adjacent to it.<sup>25</sup> Prefabricated from cast iron, serialized, and standardized, the border monuments were meant to embody the regularity, uniformity, and industrial precision of the boundary commission's task.<sup>26</sup> Together with the increasingly marked and enforced boundary came a new and similarly efficient medium that could be easily reproduced: photography.

In the 1890s, individual photographs of the monuments were taken with the aim of creating a continuous visual record of the border. The focus remains the same throughout the Boundary Commission's album, with the monument in the center of the image while the surroundings change. Whilst these photographs take their visual language from the earlier sketches of the border monuments, it was however the characteristics of photography with its supposedly truthful rendering of reality and its wide distribution as an early mass medium that made it ideal for the task. Understood as faithful documents, the photographs show the violent act of taking possession of the land, disguised in seemingly objective landscape pictures. The images helped with the construction of a U.S.-American national identity by establishing the

border line, based on difference from ‘the others’ that were meant to be kept out of the new nation’s land.

In this respect, the often elevated vantage point is important: expansive, vast and ‘empty’ mountainous landscapes void of human presence, seemingly waiting for their exploitation and development (fig. 2).<sup>27</sup>



**Fig. 2.** *Mon. No. 185, (Iron), View to the N.W. On high, rough peak of Tule Mountains, Report of the Boundary Commission Upon the Survey and Re-Marking of the Boundary Between the United States and Mexico West of the Rio Grande, 1891-1896, University of North Texas Digital Library, <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1030/>*

Although the aerial photograph taken from an airplane was not yet available to the early surveyors, an aerial sensibility, expressed in bird’s-eye drawings, maps, and plans, nonetheless pervaded the constructing, surveying, and colonizing of the lands in the American West. The power of the aerial image

reflects *and* constructs the world.<sup>28</sup> Like map-making, air photography and obtaining accurate photographic and remote sensed images of the earth from above has, from its earliest days to the present, been of state and military interest.<sup>29</sup> The concept of the border takes on a bird's-eye view, from which the object and its dividing lines are seen from a distance above. In this sense, borders are understood as a more or less clear demarcation line.<sup>30</sup> According to the ideal of mechanical objectivity, photographs – technically produced images that could seemingly be made without human intervention – were considered particularly desirable. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison consider the multiple applications of the new medium of photography and the new ideal of objectivity<sup>31</sup> and Thomas Nagel has called the effort to achieve a rational and distanced gaze, which became stronger in the course of the 19th century, the “view from nowhere”.<sup>32</sup> This ‘objective’ view from above is at the same time a cartographic view. The map materialises the boundaries of a territory. Maps also serve to monitor and control the world, up to the planning of strategic bombardments or for the division of a territory according to ‘ethnic’ groups.<sup>33</sup> Christine Buci-Glucksmann writes that the cartographic gaze oscillates between aesthetic observation and political intervention, which can also be called a panoptic gaze as an expression of knowledge and power, i.e. of surveillance, discipline and control with reference to Michel Foucault.<sup>34</sup>

Today, this controlling gaze from above can be found in the media framing of so called “migrant caravans” as in the photograph of a group of mostly Honduran migrants heading to the United States, on the Southern border of Mexico with Guatemala in October 2018.<sup>35</sup> In recent years, groups with thousands of people fleeing violence and insecurity in Central America have made their way northwards, from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador in hopes of finding asylum in Mexico or the United States. Such images were used by the U.S. administration for their cause, with then President Trump calling the migrants “an invasion”.<sup>36</sup> The media, which described migrants as “marching”, picked up a tone that treats migration in terms of nationalism and a threat to the nation. In September 2021, a drone operated by Fox News was banned from flying over the International Bridge between Del Rio in

Texas and Ciudad Acuña, Mexico after thousands of migrants, mostly Haitian, had assembled underneath the bridge.<sup>37</sup>

Whereas at the end of the nineteenth century, photography served the national, colonial project of demarcation in the U.S.-American nation-building, and recent news coverage often constructs and reinforces national imaginations, fostering binary oppositions of “us and them”, artists and writers have traveled along the line with different goals and works of contemporary photography draw attention to the complexities of migration from a wider perspective. In the following analysis, the borderlands are looked at from both sides of the line to explore how both national states have used them to foster transnational communities as well as to divide them.



**Fig. 3.** Jay Dusard, *Mercado Cuauthémoc, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua*, in: Alan Weisman and Jay Dusard: *La Frontera: The United States Border with Mexico* (San Diego et al.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1986), pl. 25

In the early 1980s, author Alan Weisman and photographer Jay Dusard were the first to travel the complete borderline from the Gulf of Mexico to

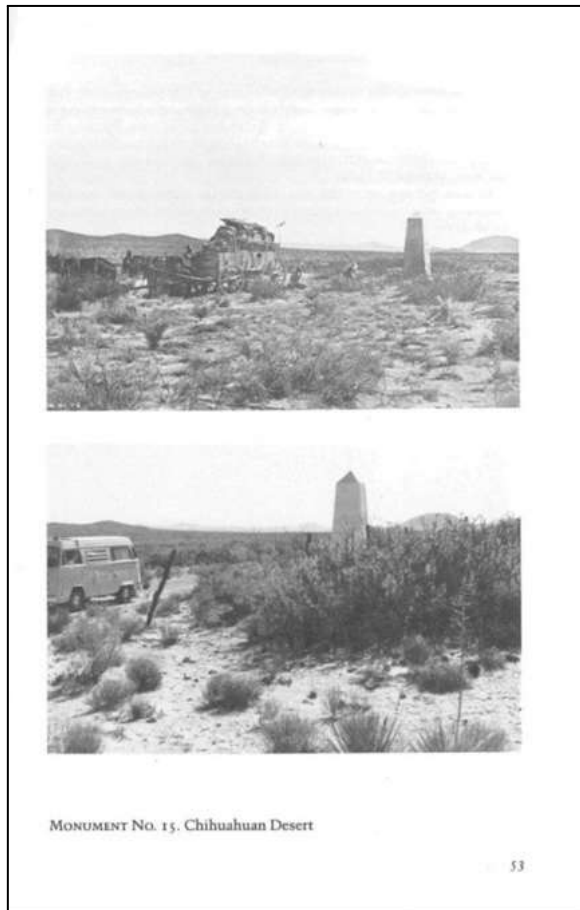


the Pacific Ocean. Their resulting book, *La Frontera: The United States Border with Mexico*, captured a region that was largely unknown to both, the U.S.-American and Mexican publics. Divided into nine chapters, each representing a geographic area and accompanied by Dusard's black and white photographs, their publication is less interested in the demarcation of the line by the boundary monuments as it is in presenting the region from the point of view of the people who live and work along the varied and increasingly complex border (fig. 3).

Through their narratives, readers are introduced to the landscape, the economy, local and international politics, and the constant struggle for survival of border cities and industries. In the book's preface, Weisman declared that their "intention was to learn what this region meant to the two worlds that held it like a vise and whether it had metamorphosed under this pressure into a new, separate entity", i.e. a transcultural, hybrid in-between space, concluding that "most of it is a stunningly beautiful international treasure. To some, it divides two countries, to others, it unites them. We discovered the truth to be a bit of both, but it is still the former more than the latter."<sup>38</sup>

In 1983, Robert Humphrey, professor of ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of Arizona, used the 1890s Boundary Commission Album for a rephotography project. Interested in the study of vegetation and landform change, he traveled along the New Mexico and Arizona sections of the border, retaking photographs of the same places as earlier nineteenth-century photographers had done, and used the images to compare changes in vegetation over time. In his book *90 Years and 535 Miles: Vegetation Changes Along the Mexican Border* he juxtaposes each of the 1890s album's images with one of his own photographs, taken from the same direction.<sup>39</sup> While the album's photographs focused on the monuments, Humphrey drew the viewers' attention to their surroundings – the vegetation depicted in his images compared with their counterparts from the 1890s. Using the photographs as scientific evidence made it possible to show ecological changes taking place. However, Humphrey also gives a personal comment

when his carefully positioned Volkswagen bus replaces the horse-drawn wagon shown in the 1890s counterpart (fig. 4).<sup>40</sup>



**Fig. 4.** Robert R. Humphrey, *90 Years and 535 Miles: Vegetation Changes Along the Mexican Border* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 53.

After the Boundary Commission Album of the 1890s, there had been no complete documentation of all the boundary monuments in more than a hundred years. David Taylor traveled the borderline, often in the company of border agents, to locate and photograph all of the 276 monuments. His series *Monuments: 276 Views of the United States - Mexico Border* was published in 2015.<sup>41</sup> As a documentary catalogue, his photographs echo those taken by the International Boundary Commission. However, instead of merely re-taking them from the same point of view as the album's photographers, he also focuses on the surroundings and the impacts on the landscape, as well as the lives of the people in the borderlands. Thus, Taylor's images are at the same



time an artistic and a critical comment. With social and political discourse surrounding the border as a symbol for the enforcement of immigration policies driven by a concern for national security, the images show “a highly complex physical, social and political topography during a period of dramatic change”.<sup>42</sup>

A symbol of the constant surveillance is a camera tower in the border town of Nogales, Arizona, from the series *Working the Line*. (fig. 5). From a hilltop perspective, Taylor here inverts the surveilling gaze from the United States onto Mexico by casting a downward gaze from Sonora onto the militarized border zone on the U.S.-American side of the border fence.<sup>43</sup>



**Fig. 5.** David Taylor, *View into Nogales from the Border Fence (with camera tower)*, 2009, from the series *Working the Line*. Courtesy of the artist

In his photographic project *El Camino del Diablo*, Mark Klett also takes an approach of revisiting the border region, following an earlier, literary source. The “Road of the Devil”, a trail running parallel to part of the Arizona-Mexico border across the Sonoran Desert and terminating at the Colorado River is known for its remoteness, extreme heat, and lack of water. One of the earliest accounts was written in 1861 by Raphael Pumpelly, a geologist, explorer, and

mining engineer on his westward journey to take charge of the Santa Rita silver mines, south of Tucson. Klett took the same route, but unable to trace Pumpelly's exact steps, he created images that are not literal references as he focused instead on the landscape and the people taking the route today.<sup>44</sup> The Camino del Diablo is a part of the desert which has been traveled by the O'odham people to-and-fro between what is modern-day Mexico and the United States. Today migrants also cross here. Klett shows vast, empty landscapes, seemingly without any human presence. But he includes traces of human evidence: the remnants of struggle and suffering: migrant trails, clothing left behind by migrants or empty water bottles.<sup>45</sup> By focusing on the beauties of the Sonoran Desert while at the same time including traces and objects left by migrants, Klett represents it as a landscape of migration. His portraits of giant saguaro cacti, taken in the deserts of central and southern Arizona between 1987 and 2006, are straightforward and frontal, with each cactus in the center of the photograph, in black and white and thus reminiscent of the seemingly objective presentation of the border monuments in the album of the boundary commission, but making the plants the objects of interest and symbols of the desert.<sup>46</sup>

In his *Frontera* project, Mexican artist Pablo López Luz traces the boundary line from above, examining it in aerial photographs taken from both sides of the line. Over four helicopter rides in 2014/2015, he captured 2,000 km of land between San Diego/Tijuana and El Paso/Ciudad Juarez in large-format landscape photography. *San Diego – Tijuana XI, Frontera USA-Mexico*, 2015, taken from the U.S. side, shows the border between Tijuana and San Diego.<sup>47</sup> Whereas almost 50 million people cross it each year, making it the busiest land-border crossing in the world, López Luz shows it void of human presence. The photographs offer no indication of who 'belongs' on either side of the border. Instead, he concentrates on the green and brown, sublime mountain landscape which is divided by a thin line.<sup>48</sup> From the air a seemingly uniform landscape can be seen whose nature is emphasized as common ground.

Through a combination of black-and-white landscape and portrait photographs, illustrations, maps, instructions and personal narratives, Paul

Touronet's photo book *Estamos Buscando A*, meaning "We are looking for", gives insight into the experience of migrants along the U.S.–Mexico border region. It features portraits of migrants or those who have plans to migrate in the Sonora-Arizona region and written accounts of what Touronet himself saw over many years of studying their crossings.<sup>49</sup> The little booklet, with text in Spanish and English, has been designed to reference the migrant safety guides that are given to migrants by the Instituto Nacional de Migración of the Mexican government which works for the protection and defense of human rights of migrants on Mexico's northern and southern borders. The text warns people thinking of walking across the border not to do it, counseling them, instead, to seek legal means of entry. But it also offers them advice on how to proceed if they must. Sections include "Be Careful of Smugglers", "If You Are Detained", or advice on how to cross the desert or a river.<sup>50</sup> The photographs are marked with a number that corresponds to a location along the U.S. – Mexico border that can be found on the foldout map provided.

Between 2005 and 2007, the organizers of the Border Film Project distributed disposable cameras in northern Mexico among Mexican and Central American migrants as well as among Minutemen who worked together with the Border Patrol, surveilling undocumented migrants at "observation sites" along the U.S. side of the border. Each of the two groups was asked to take photographs that would later be assembled into a traveling exhibition, a website and the book *Border Film Project: Photos by Migrants & Minutemen on the U.S.-Mexico Border*. The intention of the project was to enable each group to self-represent their views. In the accompanying interviews, the Minutemen described their tasks of surveillance, of spotting and reporting migrants to the Border Patrol, using photography not only as a form of surveillance, but also to document "caught" and detained people.<sup>51</sup> The migrants used photography as a means to make visible their political and material circumstances as well as the structural violence produced as a result of U.S. border policy. Their photographs have the power to challenge nationalist discourses by presenting the border as a porous, transcultural space in a constant state of movement.<sup>52</sup>

All the artists presented here use the medium of photography, but they do so in different ways, with different intentions, goals and results. They all focus on the impacts that the border has on the lives of people living in these borderlands, on the landscape or on ecological changes, on migration and social space. The examples examined here show that photography can be used to build national identities, to foster nationalist discourses, and, as in the cases of the Boundary Commission Album, the Border Patrol or the Minutemen, as a means of surveillance. But photography can also be used for counter-discourses as in the case of migrants' self-representation in the Border Film Project. Like the Boundary survey album, the artists' photographs have also been published in photo books. Photography is thus used as a mobile, transportable medium in order to draw attention to the issues concerning the border and to reach a wider audience. As Burcu Dogramaci and Helene Roth have shown, photography is the diasporic medium par excellence. By transgressing national and global boundaries on the move and being used as a means of memory and communication, it becomes a transcultural medium in itself.<sup>53</sup>

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adler, Rudy, Victoria Criado, and Brett Huneycutt. *Border Film Project: Photos by Migrants & Minutemen on the U.S.-Mexico Border*. New York: Abrams, 2007.
- Alvarez, C.J. *Border Land, Border Water: A History of Construction on the U.S.-Mexico Divide*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019.
- Alvarez, Robert R. "The Mexican-US Border: The Making of an Anthropology of Borderlands." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 447–470.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London, New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Boime, Albert. *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting, c. 1830–1865*. Washington, London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991.
- Buci-Glucksmann, Christine. *Der kartographische Blick der Kunst*. Berlin: Merve Verlag, 1997.
- Corner, James, and Alex S. MacLean. *Taking Measures Across the American Landscape*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996.

- Cosgrove, Denis, and William L. Fox, *Photography and Flight*. London: Reaktion Books, 2010.
- Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992.
- Daston, Lorraine, and Peter Galison. "The Image of Objectivity." *Representations*, no. 40 (Autumn 1992): 81–128.
- Dear, Michael. "Monuments, Manifest Destiny, and Mexico." *Prologue Magazine* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2005), <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2005/summer/mexico-1.html>.
- Dogramaci, Burcu, and Helene Roth, eds. *Nomadic Camera. Fotografie, Exil, Migration. Fotogeschichte. Beiträge zur Geschichte und Ästhetik der Fotografie* 39, no. 151 (Spring 2019).
- Fellner, Astrid. "Grenze und Ästhetik: Repräsentationen von Grenzen in den kulturwissenschaftlichen *Border Studies*." In *Grenzforschung: Handbuch für Wissenschaft und Studium*, edited by Dominik Gerst, Maria Klessmann, and Hannes Krämer, series *Border Studies. Cultures, Spaces, Orders*, vol. 3, edited by Astrid Fellner, Konstanze Jungbluth, Hannes Krämer, and Christian Wille, 436–456. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2021.
- Friedman, Nathan C. *Hypothetical Geography: Constituting Limits on a New American Frontier*. Master of Science in Architecture Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, June 2015.
- Garcia, Nichole Margarita. "‘We Didn’t Cross The Border, The Border Crossed Us:’ The Importance Of Ethnic Studies." *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*, July 16, 2019, <https://www.diverseeducation.com/opinion/article/15104989/we-didnt-cross-the-border-the-border-crossed-us-the-importance-of-ethnic-studies>.
- Gerst, Dominik, and Hannes Krämer. "Methodologie der Grenzforschung." In *Grenzforschung: Handbuch für Wissenschaft und Studium*, edited by Dominik Gerst, Maria Klessmann, and Hannes Krämer, series *Border Studies. Cultures, Spaces, Orders*, vol. 3, edited by Astrid Fellner, Konstanze Jungbluth, Hannes Krämer, and Christian Wille, 121–140. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2021.
- Harding, Wendy. *The Myth of Emptiness and the New American Literature of Place*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014.
- Houtryve, Tomas van. "When Borders Crossed/Cuando las Fronteras se Cruzaron." In Tomas van Houtryve. *Lines + Lineage*, 115–127. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Radius Books, 2019.
- Humphrey, Robert H. *90 Years and 535 Miles: Vegetation Changes Along the Mexican Border*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987.
- Kelsey, Robin. *Archive Style: Photographs & Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850–1890*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007.
- Klett, Mark. *El Camino del Diablo*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Radius Books, 2016.

- Klett, Mark. "El Camino del Diablo."  
<http://www.markklettphotography.com/camino-del-diablo/k8sz9i9kn3orgcf3f2r5q8p5a2cb7u>.
- Klett, Mark. *Saguaros*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Radius Books, 2007.
- Lind, Dara. "The migrant caravan, explained." October 25, 2018,  
<https://www.vox.com/2018/10/24/18010340/caravan-trump-border-honduras-mexico>.
- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather. Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. London, New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Morrissey, Katherine G. "Traces and Representations of the U.S.-Mexico *Frontera*." *Pacific Historical Review* 87, no. 1 (2018): 150–172.
- Nagel, Thomas. *The View from Nowhere*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Ortiz, Fernando. *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947.
- Phillips. *UK Guide for Prospective Buyers, Photographs*. London, 1 November 2018, no. 35, [https://issuu.com/phillipsauction/docs/uko40218\\_catalog/90](https://issuu.com/phillipsauction/docs/uko40218_catalog/90).
- Pratt, Mary Louise *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London, New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Report on the United States and Mexican Boundary Survey, made under the direction of the secretary of the interior, by William H. Emory. Major First Cavalry and United States Commissioner*. Washington: A.O.P. Nicholson, printer, 1857, vol. 1, <https://archive.org/details/mobot31753002023569/page/n1/mode/2up>
- Sandweiss, Martha A. *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West*. New Haven Conn., London: Yale University Press, 2002.
- Sandweiss, Martha A., Rick Steward, and Ben W. Huseman, eds. *Eyewitness to War: Prints and Daguerreotypes of the Mexican War, 1846–1848*. Fort Worth, Texas: Amon Carter Museum, 1989.
- Shaw, Michael. "The Visual Representation of the US/Mexico Border Wall in the Media – The Reading the Pictures Salon." November 5, 2018,  
<https://www.readingthepictures.org/2018/11/visual-representation-of-the-border-wall/>
- Schulze, Jeffrey M. *Are we not Foreigners Here?: Indigenous Nationalism in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018.
- Spocchia, Gino. "Fox News drone banned from filming immigrants under Texas bridge after mass border crossing by thousands of Haitians." *Independent*, September 17, 2021,  
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/fox-news-ban-migrants-texas-bridge-b1922105.html>.
- St. John, Rachel. *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border*. Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Taylor, David. *Monuments: 276 Views of the United States-Mexico Border*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Radius Books, 2015.

- Taylor, David. *Working the Line*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Radius Books, 2010.
- Taylor, David. "Working the Line."  
<http://www.dtaylorphoto.com/portfolio.cfm?nK=4418#0>.
- "The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo."  
<https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/guadalupe-hidalgo>.
- Touronet, Paul. *Estamos Buscando A*. Self-published, 2016.
- Touronet, Paul. "Estamos Buscando A, 2016."  
<https://paulturonet.com/estamos-buscando-a-migrant-guide>.
- Ulibarri, Kristy L. "Documenting the US-Mexico Border: Photography, Movement, and Paradox." *Art Journal* (Summer 2019): 48–67.
- Washington, John. "The Borderlands' Human Stain". *The Nation*, July 27, 2017,  
<https://www.thenation.com/article/society/the-borderlands-human-stain/>.
- Warner, John-Michael H. "A Border Art History of the Vanishing Present: Land Use and Representation." In *Border Spaces: Visualizing the U.S.-Mexico Frontera*, edited by John-Michael H. Warner and Katherine G. Morrissey, 195–217. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2018.
- Weisman, Alan, and Jay Dusard. *La Frontera: The United States Border with Mexico*. San Diego et al.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1986.
- 

## Endnotes

1. Tomas van Houtryve, "When Borders Crossed/Cuando las Fronteras se Cruzaron," in Tomas van Houtryve, *Lines + Lineage* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Radius Books, 2019), 115.
  2. Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven Conn., London: Yale University Press, 2002), 21–22; Martha A. Sandweiss, Rick Steward, and Ben W. Huseman, eds., *Eyewitness to War: Prints and Daguerreotypes of the Mexican War, 1846–1848* (Fort Worth, Texas: Amon Carter Museum, 1989), 44.
  3. Robert R. Alvarez, "The Mexican-US Border: The Making of an Anthropology of Borderlands," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 449.
  4. Kristy L. Ulibarri, "Documenting the US-Mexico Border: Photography, Movement, and Paradox," *Art Journal* (Summer 2019): 51.
  5. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 2007), 2.
  6. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London, New York: Routledge, 1992), 6–7. For the concept of transculturality, see Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947).
  7. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 3.
  8. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 3. See also Astrid Fellner, "Grenze und Ästhetik: Repräsentationen von Grenzen in den kulturwissenschaftlichen *Border Studies*," in *Grenzforschung: Handbuch für Wissenschaft und Studium*, ed. Dominik Gerst, Maria Klessmann, and Hannes Krämer, series *Border Studies. Cultures, Spaces, Orders*, vol. 3, ed. Astrid Fellner, Konstanze Jungbluth, Hannes Krämer, and Christian Wille. (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2021), 439.
-

9. Rachel St. John, *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 10.
10. "The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo", <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/guadalupe-hidalgo>.
11. C.J. Alvarez, *Border Land, Border Water: A History of Construction on the U.S.-Mexico Divide* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019), 42.
12. St. John, *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border*, 10.
13. Michael Dear, "Monuments, Manifest Destiny, and Mexico," *Prologue Magazine* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2005), <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2005/summer/mexico-1.html>.
14. Robin Kelsey, *Archive Style: Photographs & Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850–1890* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 25; Michael Dear, "Monuments, Manifest Destiny, and Mexico".
15. Kelsey, *Archive Style*, 25.
16. Kelsey, *Archive Style*, 26.
17. *Report on the United States and Mexican Boundary Survey, made under the direction of the secretary of the interior, by William H. Emory. Major First Cavalry and United States Commissioner* (Washington: A.O.P. Nicholson, printer, 1857), vol. 1, 96.
18. Jeffrey M. Schulze, *Are we not Foreigners Here?: Indigenous Nationalism in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 47.
19. Nichole Margarita Garcia, "'We Didn't Cross The Border, The Border Crossed Us: The Importance Of Ethnic Studies,'" *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*, July 16, 2019 <https://www.diverseeducation.com/opinion/article/15104989/we-didnt-cross-the-border-the-border-crossed-us-the-importance-of-ethnic-studies>.
20. Kelsey, *Archive Style*, 21.
21. Kelsey, *Archive Style*, 47.
22. Wendy Harding, *The Myth of Emptiness and the New American Literature of Place* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 27.
23. Kelsey, *Archive Style*, 54.
24. Kelsey, *Archive Style*, 71.
25. Alvarez, *Border Land, Border Water*, 36. See also Nathan C. Friedman, *Hypothetical Geography: Constituting Limits on a New American Frontier*, Master of Science in Architecture Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, June 2015, 81.
26. Alvarez, *Border Land, Border Water*, 36.
27. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather. Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995), 30; Harding, *The Myth of Emptiness*, 27 and Albert Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting, c. 1830–1865* (Washington, London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).
28. James Corner and Alex S. MacLean, *Taking Measures Across the American Landscape* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), 16.
29. Denis Cosgrove and William L. Fox, *Photography and Flight* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 26.
30. Dominik Gerst and Hannes Krämer, "Methodologie der Grenzforschung," in *Grenzforschung: Handbuch für Wissenschaft und Studium*, ed. Dominik Gerst, Maria Klessmann, and Hannes Krämer, series *Border Studies. Cultures, Spaces, Orders*, vol. 3, ed. Astrid Fellner, Konstanze Jungbluth, Hannes Krämer, and Christian Wille. (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2021), 123.
31. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, "The Image of Objectivity," *Representations*, no. 40 (Autumn 1992): 81–128.
32. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). For technologies of image production and „practices in which visual images no longer have any reference to the position of an observer in a 'real,' optically perceived world“ see Jonathan



- Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 2.
33. Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Der kartographische Blick der Kunst* (Berlin: Merve Verlag, 1997), 28.
34. Buci-Glucksmann, *Der kartographische Blick der Kunst*, 28.
35. For the photograph by Guillermo Arias, see Michael Shaw, "The Visual Representation of the US/Mexico Border Wall in the Media – The Reading the Pictures Salon," November 5, 2018, <https://www.readingthepictures.org/2018/11/visual-representation-of-the-border-wall/>
36. Dara Lind, "The migrant caravan, explained," October 25, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/10/24/18010340/caravan-trump-border-honduras-mexico>.
37. Gino Spocchia, "Fox News drone banned from filming immigrants under Texas bridge after mass border crossing by thousands of Haitians," *Independent*, September 17, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/fox-news-ban-migrants-texas-bridge-b1922105.html>.
38. Alan Weisman and Jay Dusard, *La Frontera: The United States Border with Mexico* (San Diego et al.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1986), XIII–XIV.
39. Katherine G. Morrissey, "Traces and Representations of the U.S.-Mexico *Frontera*", *Pacific Historical Review* 87, no. 1 (2018): 168.
40. Morrissey, "Traces and Representations," 168.
41. David Taylor, *Monuments: 276 Views of the United States-Mexico Border* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Radius Books, 2015).
42. David Taylor, "Working the Line," <http://www.dtaylorphoto.com/portfolio.cfm?nK=4418#0>. For the book, see David Taylor, *Working the Line* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Radius Books, 2010).
43. John-Michael H. Warner, "A Border Art History of the Vanishing Present: Land Use and Representation," in *Border Spaces: Visualizing the U.S.-Mexico Frontera*, ed. John-Michael H. Warner and Katherine G. Morrissey (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2018), 202.
44. Mark Klett, "El Camino del Diablo," <http://www.markklettphotography.com/camino-del-diablo/k8sz919kn3orgcf3f2r5q8p5a2cb7u>. For the book, see Mark Klett, *El Camino del Diablo* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Radius Books, 2016).
45. John Washington, "The Borderlands' Human Stain," *The Nation*, July 27, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/the-borderlands-human-stain/>; Mark Klett, *Faint trail, granitic mountains near Raven Butte*, 2013: <http://www.markklettphotography.com/camino-del-diablo> and Mark Klett, *Empty water bottles caught in dried brush*, 2013: <http://www.markklettphotography.com/camino-del-diablo>.
46. For the photographs, see Mark Klett, *Saguaros*, <http://www.markklettphotography.com/saguaros> and Mark Klett, *Saguaros* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Radius Books, 2007).
47. For the image *San Diego – Tijuana XI, Frontera USA-Mexico*, 2015, Chromogenic print, flush-mounted, see [https://issuu.com/phillipsauction/docs/uko40218\\_catalog/90](https://issuu.com/phillipsauction/docs/uko40218_catalog/90).
48. Phillips, *UK Guide for Prospective Buyers, Photographs*, London, 1 November 2018, no. 35, [https://issuu.com/phillipsauction/docs/uko40218\\_catalog/90](https://issuu.com/phillipsauction/docs/uko40218_catalog/90).
49. Paul Touronet, "Estamos Buscando A, 2016," <https://paultouronet.com/estamos-buscando-a-migrant-guide>. For the book, see Paul Touronet, *Estamos Buscando A* (self-published, 2016).
50. For the photographs, see Paul Touronet, "Estamos Buscando A, 2016".
51. For the photographs taken by minutemen, see <https://www.borderfilmproject.com/minutemen.html>. For the book, see Rudy Adler, Victoria Criado, and Brett Huneycutt, *Border Film Project: Photos by Migrants & Minutemen on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (New York: Abrams, 2007).
52. For the photographs taken by migrants, see <https://www.borderfilmproject.com/migrants.html>.

53. Burcu Dogramaci and Helene Roth, eds., *Nomadic Camera. Fotografie, Exil, Migration, Fotogeschichte. Beiträge zur Geschichte und Ästhetik der Fotografie*, 39, no. 151 (Spring 2019), see <https://www.fotogeschichte.info/en/back-issues/issues-from-150/151/nomadic-camera-editorial-fotogeschichte-151-2019>.

# Hurricane Hybridty: Migration, Transculturation, and the Art History of Hurricanes

---

**Joseph R. Hartman**

University of Missouri-Kansas City

## **ABSTRACT**

This essay examines the cultural politics, art, and architecture of catastrophe, which uniquely transformed the urban and visual landscapes of the Caribbean across generations. Natural disasters are cultural artifacts, I argue, which participate in interrelated histories of migration, transculturality, hybridity<sup>1</sup>, and decoloniality in the Caribbean context throughout time and space (as outlined by writers like Antonio Benítez-Rojo, Édouard Glissant, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and others). Drawing from the writings of Fernando Ortiz on the visual anthropology of hurricanes, this discussion begins with the visual works and buildings of the Carib and Taíno peoples, and later depictions, expressions, and built environments related to hurricanes by European colonizers and descendants of enslaved Africans during the colonial period. It then projects forward to the interweaving histories of revolution, emergent democracies, imperialism, modern art, and hurricanes that defined the greater Caribbean during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. This *longue durée* look at hurricanes in visual and material culture ultimately aims to demonstrate the productive possibilities of visual and material culture in our current geologic era, the Anthropocene, an age marked by human-made climate ruin.

## **KEYWORDS**

Cultural Politics; Climate Change; Hurricanes; Longue Durée; Poetics Of Catastrophe.

Antillean writers (Édouard Glissant, Edwidge Danticat, Antonio Benítez-Rojo, and many others) have observed how the history of the Caribbean traces a poetics of catastrophe: from slavery and colonialism to economic exploitation and deadly calamities. This paper examines the interrelated *cultural politics, art, and architecture* of catastrophe, particularly that of hurricanes and their aftermath, which uniquely transformed Caribbean cultures across multiple historic periods. Hurricanes and other natural disasters represent more than poetic metaphors of tropical entropy. Natural disasters are also cultural artifacts, I argue, which participate in interrelated histories of migration, transculturality, hybridity, and decoloniality in the visual and material context of the Caribbean.

Hurricanes are, by nature, transregional super-forces, no less so in art and architectural histories than global climate change. Hurricanes exceed and redefine the visual, material, and cultural landscapes of the Caribbean, as well as the globalized world, across time and space. Hurricanes are without boundaries (hyper, multi, super, and trans). They affect the development of cities like Fort-de-France, Houston, Nassau, New Orleans, San Juan, Santo Domingo, and Havana just as they once inspired the British bard William Shakespeare and his archetypal play *The Tempest*; iconic American artist Winslow Homer and his racial justice-themed paintings *The Gulf Stream* and *After the Hurricane, Bahamas*; Puerto Rican modernist, printmaker, and muralist Rafael Tufiño's masterwork of popular culture *La Plena*; and contemporary Caribbean artists, like Poli Marichal and her haunting linocut series *Hurricane Redux* that followed Hurricane María in Puerto Rico in 2017; or Angelika Wallace-Whitfield and her graffiti-tagging charitable project *Hope is a Weapon* that responded to the pain caused by hurricane Dorian in the Bahamas, 2019.

The Atlantic hurricane is a chronotopic force that produces historic moments of crisis in human society.<sup>2</sup> Natural disasters, like the hurricane, become cultural disasters based on human responses before and after the crisis event, evidenced in art, architecture, and urbanism as much as writing, poetry, and law. Writers like Homi K. Bhabha, following Frantz Fanon and others, might remind us that it is precisely from crises (wars, colonialism,

imperialism) that new cultures are negotiated and translated.<sup>3</sup> Hurricanes destroy cultural boundaries, identitarian politics, and physical space, but those storms also produce a need to create, reconstruct, and remake. Hurricanes are not solely catastrophic meteorological events. They also effectively *made* and continue to redefine the migratory and transcultural environments of the greater Caribbean and by extension the global community. Contemporary philosopher Timothy Morton has designated the hurricane as a “hyperobject” in the era of global climate change – an event beyond human comprehension that yet unites us all.<sup>4</sup> Anthropologist Jorge Duany and many others have argued recently that migrants from Puerto Rico and other parts of the Caribbean are, in fact, refugees of climate ruin - displaced by super storms and other natural disasters ultimately caused by industrial societies around the world.<sup>5</sup> In our present Anthropocene, as we humans create new and unforeseen dramatic changes to the natural environment, the humanistic study of hurricanes in the *longue durée* becomes ever more important. To understand the threat of human-made climate ruin (as well as wide-ranging and related histories of racism, immigration, technology, and so forth), we must also consider the cultural life of natural disasters. Of these, none is more iconic or defining of the Caribbean cosmos (to borrow from artist Teresita Fernández) than that of the hurricane.<sup>6</sup>

Art historical writings have logically privileged the role of human actors in retelling those palimpsestic moments of destruction and reconstruction that would come to define the complex cultural currents of Caribbean material and visual cultures, whether early modern conquest, colonialism, and revolutions or Cold War imperialism and contemporary neoliberalism. Culture-altering disasters, however, are not always human products. Change may also come through the indifference of nature. The Atlantic hurricane was a particularly profound source of change in the Caribbean, from ancient times into the present. The swirling rain bands of the Atlantic hurricane reach back to the ancient cultures of the Caribbean and Gulf Coast as they project forward through colonialism, plantation slavery, and modernism into the Anthropocene. By Anthropocene I mean to

say our current era since the 1950s, which has been defined by humanity's effect on earth's geology. Human visual culture and the earth's climate, however, have a much longer and storied history. "Huracán," from whence came the word hurricane, was the name of a deity of destruction and creation across multiple Indigenous cultures, including the Taíno and Carib of the Antilles and the Maya of Yucatan and Mesoamerica. Ancient Indigenous art likely representing the same god included counterclockwise spirals around an ambiguously gendered head, sometimes depicted inside the body of a woman (possibly the nature goddess Guabancex and her child Huracán) (Figure 1).

Indigenous artworks of stone and clay demonstrated a remarkable visual knowledge of the cyclonic nature of Caribbean storms, many hundreds of years before the development of meteorology in Europe. These ancient artworks (with only one known exception) suggest an astute visual understanding of the rotation of winds and water according to the magnetic poles and earth's rotation, better known today as the Coriolis effect (storms swirl counterclockwise in the northern hemisphere and clockwise in the southern).<sup>2</sup> Famed Cuban ethnographer Fernando Ortiz, inventor of the term transculturation – an influential if not controversial concept of cultural intermingling that would come to encompass the African, European, Asian, and Indigenous origins of Cuban culture — was among the first to discuss these enigmatic figures. Ortiz suggested various interpretations. Perhaps they were symbols of a swirling dance; of fertility; of birth. Or they encompassed all these ideas: birth, life, death, and rebirth. For Ortiz, these figures were likely a representation of that unrepresentable and sublime force we call the Atlantic hurricane.



**Fig. 1.** *Indigenous Idol (“Guabancex and Huracán”), diorite, 7.5” x 3.3” x 2.18”, date unknown, reproduction from Ortiz, *El Huracán: Su Mitología y sus Símbolos*, 22.*

Hurricanes could not be seen (as we do now with airplanes and later satellites), yet Indigenous peoples understood their visual form well through lived experience. That understanding affected their aesthetic, social, and religious world. The winds that spiral counterclockwise, and the calm eye that defines the center of the hurricane also represented a configuration of Indigenous understandings of space and time. For the Taíno and other Indigenous groups in the greater Caribbean, the hurricane was not only a destructive force. It was also a creative energy. They observed how the hurricane affected crops and new growth, as an integral part of a larger ecosystem. Those storms would thus dictate Antillean cuisine, particularly the reliance on ground crops and tubers like Yucca and Casaba. Just as they also came to define Indigenous architecture and urban space. A prime example can be seen in the use of natural materials like the strong bejuco

climber vine. Spanish chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés noted how Arawacks used the bejuco for tying down the deep-driven columns of their homes, known as bohíos.<sup>8</sup> The columns themselves were made of ausubo wood: a native Caribbean tree that the British later called ironwood (in their observations of the tree's strength).<sup>9</sup> Like their homes, Taíno and pre-Taíno urban spaces were often oriented in a circular form. The Indigenous Antillean village was a ritual space, often set around a large ceiba tree or ancestral burial ground. In addition to spiritual traditions, the circular form of their architecture and urbanism reflected a profound understanding of physical geometry in the face of natural hazards. Round or multi-sided homes are more resistant to hurricane-force winds, a fact of aerodynamics deployed by many architectural firms working in the Caribbean today.<sup>10</sup>

The Spanish quickly usurped, burned, and destroyed the architectural innovations of Indigenous Caribbean peoples after 1492, along with cacique leaders like Anacaona – the Flowery Queen of Haiti, as they strove to introduce their own materialist order in the so-called new world. Spanish colonists appropriated materials and techniques in the process, which resulted in new Ibero-American expressions. The Spanish made sure to clear cut forests of powerful ausubo trees for use in their own fortifications, including the fortified cities of Havana and Porto Rico (now known as San Juan) and the strong roofs of nearby sugar, coffee, and tobacco plantations – principal elements in the economic engine that was the Spanish kingdom.

And so, the cyclonic arms of the hurricane accompanied the catastrophes of the colonial period, a moment marked by European conquest, Indigenous genocide, and the enslavement of African peoples. It is then, too, that we see the beginning of an unprecedented exploitation of the natural world on a global scale, alongside tremendous cultural intermingling, migrations, and evolution. The hurricane is central to that history. It was providential that Christopher Columbus managed to avoid the annual storms of the region when he landed in Guanahani (later San Salvador) of the Bahamas at the height of hurricane season, October 12, 1492.<sup>11</sup> The hurricanes that Columbus narrowly avoided would soon define the schedule of the Spanish silver fleet. Laden with riches from New Spain, Peru, and Manilla via



Acapulco, galleons had to leave the Bay of Havana for Seville in June or July before the hurricane season began in earnest. The steady schedule of storms made the fleet an easier target for pirates. But for the Spanish crown, the Atlantic hurricane was a far greater danger than any corsair's blade. You could lose a whole fleet to a storm. This was the case throughout the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. A hurricane July 31, 1715, for example, claimed 11 of 12 ships and over a thousand Spanish sailors' lives. Gold escudos and silver cobs from the drowned fleet still sometimes wash along the shores of Florida. Faded towers and lions on shipwrecked coins offer reminders of the hurricane's economic toll for the rulers of Castille and Leon.<sup>12</sup>

Not just fleets, but entire cities were lost to storms. European settlers, unaware of the science of hurricanes, often built their first settlements in the Caribbean along those coastal regions most susceptible to storms. Veracruz set along the Gulf of Mexico was nearly undone in the hurricane of 1552, just 30 some years after Hernán Cortés precipitated the conquest of the Mexica after burning his own fleet in the port of the new settlement in 1519.<sup>13</sup> As storm after storm battered prized colonial port cities and plantations (we see one such storm in Havana in 1846, as illustrated by the French lithographer Frédéric Mialhe, for example), European parvenus came to join Indigenous peoples in their belief that hurricanes represented a divine (or diabolic) force (Figure 2). The hurricane was, for many, a punishment for sins. A sixteenth-century depiction of one such storm by Flemish-born German engraver Theodor de Bry shows us Spanish colonists gazing skyward in a penitent gesture. They flee along a rocky shoreline, strewn with discarded arquebuses. Half-nude Indigenous figures seek shelter under large stones, matching (ethically dubious) descriptions of "Indians" hiding "in holes in order to escape such disasters (Figure 2)."<sup>14</sup>



**Fig 2.** Theodor de Bry, *Ein schrecklich und unerhörtes Ungewitter*, engraving, circa 1594, from Benzoni and De Bry, *America (Band 4)*. Image courtesy of the University of Heidelberg Digital Library. Available at <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.8296>

After the introduction of the slave trade in the colonial period, African descendants in the Caribbean likewise came to view the annual hurricane as both a natural and spiritual force. Religious affiliates of African-derived belief systems would represent the swirling winds of the hurricane in their whirling performances, as in those of Oya – the orisha of wind – and Changó – the deity of lightning. Hurricanes were a powerful embodiment of *aché* – a spiritual energy to make things happen.<sup>45</sup> Beyond potent destructive force, the storm also represented a divine possibility for enslaved peoples and colonial subjects alike. British, Spanish, Dutch, and French colonial powers feared the fallout of annual hurricanes. The storm weakened the plantation economy and presented opportunities for revolts and revolutions like those

of the United States and Haiti. The deadly hurricane of 1780, for example, considered the most fatal in human history with a toll of 22,000 souls, sunk whole fleets of French and British ships deployed to either aid or thwart the American Revolution.<sup>16</sup> The British had to cede Yorktown to revolutionaries after losing 24 warships to the storm of 1780. Those devastating scenes of ships lost to Atlantic storms were a common theme of British art, from the early prints of Valentine Green after William Elliot to the infamous *Slave Ship* of James Mallord William Turner (Originally Titled: *Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhon coming on*) (Figures 3). Turner's iconic painting shows us brilliant crimson and yellow cirrus clouds juxtaposed with the prostheses of enslaved African peoples drowning in ochre waves.<sup>17</sup> The storm here would seem to consume the sinful products and real human costs of colonialism and capitalism at once. Those same sins and storms would undergird the Haitian Revolution, too. Early French and Haitian chroniclers symbolically suggested that the only successful slave revolt in world history started with a vodou ceremony at the rise of a tropical storm in August of 1791.<sup>18</sup> That fabled storm would follow a series of truly deadly hurricanes throughout the 1780s, alongside the American and French Revolutions, which fundamentally disrupted the plantation state and eventually resulted in the establishment of the first Black Republic in 1804.

Major hurricanes had the potential to help overturn the world order. Yet, they could also present opportunities for those with power to maintain their hold. Such was the case in the major storms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, beginning with San Ciriaco in Puerto Rico in 1899.<sup>19</sup> Coming less than a year after the United States took possession of Puerto Rico from Spain, the storm of San Ciriaco presented US officials with an opportunity to cement the empire's power, quite literally, through the reconstruction of roads, homes, and public buildings. San Ciriaco preceded the deadly storm of Galveston, Texas in 1900.<sup>20</sup> That storm, too, opened opportunities for the assertion of so-called white power in the Southern United States after the Civil War, haunted by the same socio-racial hierarchies of most of the ex-colonial world. After the storm, white vigilantes executed dozens of African Americans, whom they accused of looting. With



this and later storms, we see how hurricanes disproportionately affected Black communities and communities of color in the greater Caribbean, whether in acts of outright violence or in state negligence. Here we witness the non-ethics of disaster response (to borrow from Puerto Rican philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres) which would reveal the coloniality of modernity.<sup>21</sup> These historic inequities and storms inform the anti-racist themes of Winslow Homer's 1899 paintings, too, like *The Gulf Stream* and *After the Hurricane, Bahamas* – hinting at the natural and cultural disasters that would continue place the Black body in crisis.<sup>22</sup>

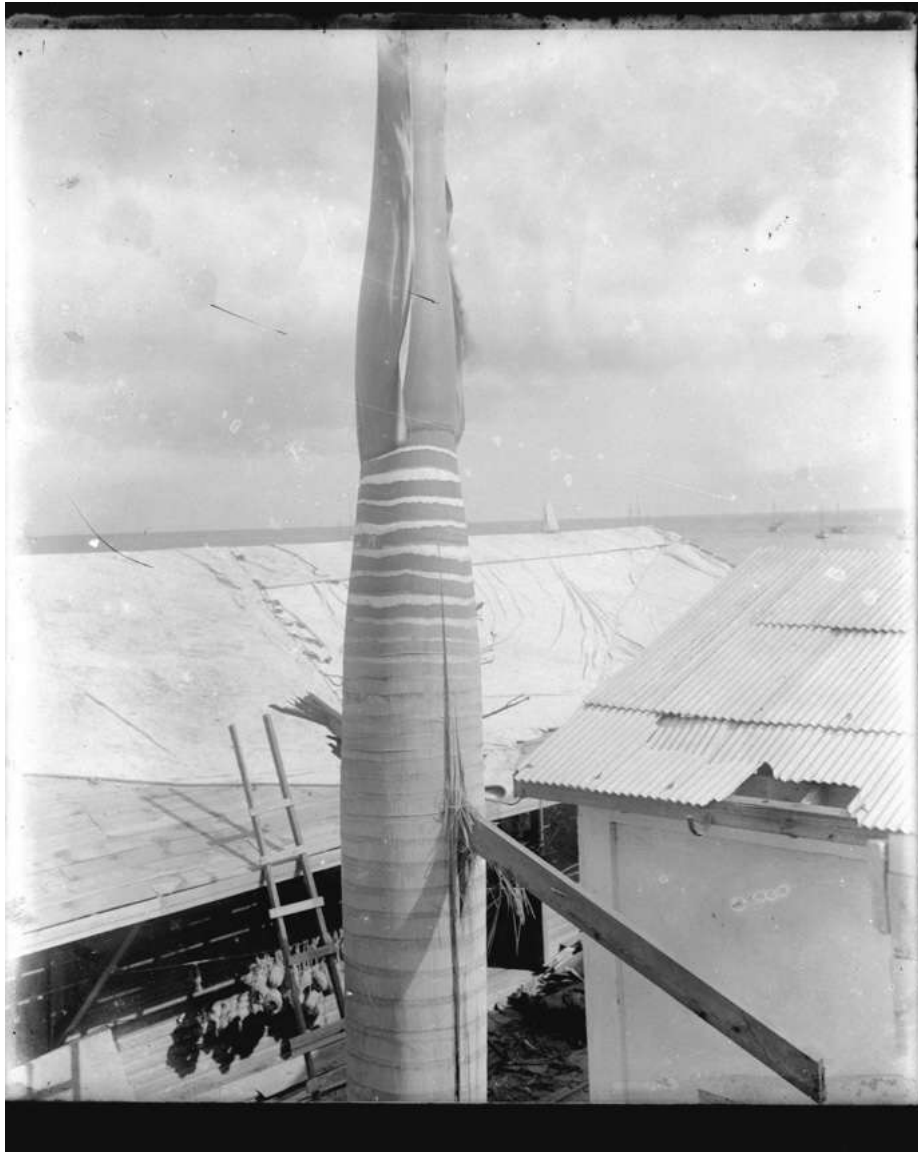


**Fig. 3.** J.M.W. Turner, *Slave Ship (Slaver's Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying Typhoon Coming On)*, oil on canvas, 1840. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Decades later, the entire world was in crisis with the advent of World War I, the Great Depression, and eventually the rise of Nazism and the start of World War II. This period between the 1920s and 1940s also witnessed the

worst storms in Caribbean history, due to major shifts in climate caused by El Niño-Southern Oscillation weather effects. The most devastating storms of the twentieth century presented unique political opportunities across multiple cultural sectors. US imperial officials, Caribbean despots, and local reformers alike used architecture and visual propaganda to restore, reshape, and control cities affected by the worst hurricanes of the period. This included the ornate buildings, highways, and parks of the US-funded public works program of Cuban dictator Gerardo Machado in Havana that followed the hurricane season of 1926; the cementing of US imperial power in concrete and neoclassical monuments in San Juan and Puerto Rico after hurricane San Felipe II in 1928; and the modern architecture and urbanism that refashioned Santo Domingo as Ciudad Trujillo under the infamous despot Rafael Leónidas Trujillo after San Zenon struck the Dominican Republic in 1930.<sup>23</sup> In each case, the hurricane acted as a cultural catalyst, which operated alongside political and social structures. An apt metaphor of those storms and their unsettling cultural echoes can be found in the commonly circulated photograph of a palm tree stabbed by a beam of wood (thrust so by hurricane force winds after each storm). Created during the rise of surrealism in Europe, these storm photos offer us a glimpse of the uncanny – a crisis of natural and cultural orders across multiple insular contexts – *el huracan que se repite*, the repeating hurricane (to riff on Cuban postmodernist Antonio Benítez-Rojo) that produces and reproduces Caribbean visual cultures (Figure 4).<sup>24</sup>

Those historic storms destroyed and then, through public art and architecture, recast the modern cities of the Caribbean. Yet, the political forces (US capitalists and local caudillos) that drove those post-disaster building projects would no less threaten the region's most vulnerable populations for generations to come. Puerto Rican printmaker Carlos Raquel Rivera thus justly represented one such storm in his mid-century linocuts as a visible metaphor for the ruinous effects of US-style capitalism (and its support of local despots and exploitative businesses).



**Fig. 4.** Manuel Martínez Illa, *Palm Tree Stabbed by Beam of Wood*, 1926. Courtesy of the photo archives of the Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad de la Habana.

Annual storms and major hurricanes would continue to redefine the art, architecture, and cultural politics of the Caribbean throughout the late-twentieth century into the twenty first. Acknowledging perhaps the humanistic effects of those storms after 1953, the US weather service began naming them. We can all recall the names of the most devastating storms in our recent history: Katrina, Harvey, María, Dorian. In the era of climate ruin,

those storms that were once viewed by Indigenous and African diasporic peoples as spiritual energies and by European colonists as punishment for human sins, have again taken the form of arbitrator in human affairs. In the age of human-made climate change, super storms loom on the horizon, foretelling of a new decade of storms, empires, and despots like that of the 1920s and 30s; or a new powerful force that could upend colonialism and the world order like the storms of the 1780s. Today's storms leave new yet strangely familiar images and constructs in their wake: flooded streets and felled trees, boats on highways, the bureaucratic temporary housings of government agencies like FEMA. Contemporary art in the age of climate ruin no less reflects an aesthetics of catastrophe over the *longue durée*. As it also gestures at the radical decolonial solutions that our present climate crisis will require. The art produced in protest of the United States failures after Hurricane María in 2017 is a case in point. As of 2021, Puerto Rico had only received 1/5 of the 90 some billion dollars needed for full reconstruction – turning a natural disaster into an utterly cultural one. Decoloniality becomes a form of critical thinking made tangible in the “ugly” rusted sinks of Rafael Vargas Bernard's *Tenemos sed – We are thirsty* and the felled powerlines of Gabriella Torres-Ferrer's *Valora tu mentira americana (Value your American Lie)* (Figure 5).<sup>25</sup>



**Fig. 5.** Gabriela Torres-Ferrer, *Untitled (Valora tu mentira Americana)*, 2018. Hurricane ravaged wooden electric post with statehood propaganda. 116” x 118” x 122”. Collection of César & Mima Reyes. Courtesy of the artist and Embajada, San Juan, Photo: Raquel Perez-Puig.

Tracing the art, architecture, and cultural politics of hurricanes throughout history, I hope to reiterate in closing, is a critical step toward confronting the social, economic, and emotional entanglements of migration and transculturation in the contemporary Anthropocene. We continue to grapple with debates over climate change, immigration, international policies, and the haunting legacies of European colonialism, the Monroe Doctrine, and US ambitions to empire in the Western hemisphere. The artistic and architectural legacy of hurricanes is not epiphenomenal to those larger debates, but rather central to confronting our shared crises. Nor are visual and material cultures epiphenomena of other prime movers (be they war, disease, or natural disasters). On the contrary, the history of art and architecture allows us to ontologize hurricanes and their complex effects on theories of migration, transculturality, hybridity, and decoloniality in the Caribbean context. The hurricane is a traumatic but creative element in the non-art history of the Caribbean's chaos-monde (to borrow the parlance of Martinican poet Édouard Glissant).<sup>26</sup> Art and architecture provide the conditions of possibility for the hurricane in the Caribbean and worldwide, whose ultimate effects, history tells us, depends on humanity's (yours, mine, and the world's) material response.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Anderson, Mark. *Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America*. Charlottesville, Va: University of Virginia Press, 2011.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1981.

Benítez Rojo, Antonio and James Elliott Maraniss, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*. Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1996.

Benzoni, Girolamo and Theodor de Bry, *America (Band 4): Neuwe Und Gründtliche Historien Von Dem Nidergängischen Indien, so Von Christophoro Columbo Im Jar 1492 Erstlich Erfunden*. Franckfurt am Mayn: De Bry, 1597.

Boime, Albert. "Turner's Slave Ship: The Victims of Empire." *Turner Studies* 10, no. 1 (1990): 34-43

Bonilla, Yarimar, Marisol LeBrón, and Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, eds. *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019.

Bry, John de. "The Order of the Holy Spirit: An Important Decoration from a 1715 Plate Fleet Wreck." *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (1995): 50-63.



Cartwright, Keith. "'To Walk with the Storm': Oya as the Transformative 'I' of Zora Neale Hurston's Afro-Atlantic Callings." *American Literature* 78, no. 4 (2006): 741-767

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change." *New Literary History* 43, no. 1 (2012): 1-18.

Clark, J.M.H. "Climate and the Politics of Relocation in the Caribbean Port of Veracruz, 1519-1599," in *The Spanish Caribbean and the Atlantic World in the Long Sixteenth Century*, eds. Ida Altman and David Wheat (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2019), 189-210.

Cuomo, Rebecca Rose. "Teresita Fernández Investigates the Caribbean's Colonial Past and Natural Forces." *Frieze* (January 21, 2021). Available at <https://www.frieze.com/article/teresita-fernandez-maelstrom-2021-review>

de la Fuente, Alejandro, César García del Pino, and Bernardo Iglesias Delgado. "Havana and the Fleet System: Trade and Growth in the Periphery of the Spanish Empire, 1550-1610." *Colonial Latin American Review* 5, no. 1 (1996): 95-115.

Derby, Lauren. *The Dictator's Seduction: Politics and the Popular Imagination in the Era of Trujillo*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

Duany, Jorge "Rethinking Puerto Rican Migrants as Climate Refugees," Paper presented at *Bregando with Disaster: Post Hurricane Maria Realities and Resiliencies*. University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, Miami, FL, October 2, 2021. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23GSHdhmoYw>

Dubois, Laurent. *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004.

Emanuel, Kerry. *Divine Wind: The History and Science of Hurricanes*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 2004.

Geggus, David Patrick. *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002.

Glissant, Édouard. *Traité du Tout-monde*. Paris: Gallimard, 1997.

Hartman, Joseph R. "The Ceiba Tree as a Multivocal Signifier: Afro-Cuban Symbolism, Political Performance, and Urban Space in the Cuban Republic." *Hemisphere: Visual Cultures of the Americas* 4, no. 1 (2011): 16-41.

Hartman, Joseph R., *Dictator's Dreamscape: How Architecture and Vision Built Machado's Cuba and Invented Modern Havana*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019.

Horowitz, Andy. "The Complete Story of the Galveston Horror: Trauma, History, and the Great Storm of 1900." *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 41, no. 3 (2015): 95-108.

Johnson, Sherry. *Climate and Catastrophe in Cuba and the Atlantic World in the Age of Revolution*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2011.

Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. "On the Coloniality of Being." *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007): 247-260.

- McCoubrey, John. "Turner's Slave Ship: Abolition, Ruskin, and Reception", *Word and Image*, no. 14 (1998): 323-324.
- Monteagudo, Antonio M. and Antonio Escamez, *Albúm de oro de la República dominicana*. La Habana, Cuba: Sindicato de artes gráficas de la Habana, s. a., 1936.
- Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- Mulcahy, Matthew. *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624-1783*. Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.
- Ortiz, Fernando. *El Huracán: Su Mitología y Sus Símbolos*. Fondo de Cultura Economica: Mexico – Buenos Aires, 1947.
- Oviedo y Valdés, Gonzalo Fernández de. *Historia General y Natural de las Indias*, 1535. Electronic text from "Research at King's College London: Early Modern Spain" website. Available at <http://www.ems.kcl.ac.uk/content/etext/eo26.html#doi1805>
- Prieto, Eric. "Edouard Glissant, littérature-monde, and Tout-monde." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 3 (2010): 111-120.
- Rivera, Raquel Rosario. *La Llegada del Cíclope: percepciones de San Ciriaco a cien años de su visita*. San Juan, P.R.: Fundación Puertorriqueña de las Humanidades, 2000.
- Rivera-Santana, Carlos. "Aesthetics of Disaster as Decolonial Aesthetics: Making Sense of the Effects of Hurricane María through Puerto Rican Contemporary Art." *Cultural Studies* 34, no. 3 (2020): 341-362.
- Schwartz, Stuart B. "The Hurricane of San Ciriaco: Disaster, Politics, and Society in Puerto Rico, 1899-1901." *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 72, no. 3 (1992): 303-34.
- Schwartz, Stuart B. *Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina*. Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2015.
- South, Andrew and Chris Zweifel, "Disaster survivability of thin-shell concrete dome structures: experience and practice." In *Proceedings of IASS Annual Symposia* no. 21 (2014): 1-13.
- Tannehill, Ivan Ray. *Hurricanes, Their Nature and History, Particularly Those of the West Indies and Southern Coasts of the United States*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1938.
- Tate, Shirley Anne. *Black Skins, Black Masks: Hybridity, Dialogism, Performativity*. London: Routledge, 2017.
- Tedeschi, Martha. "Memoranda of Travel: The Tropics," in *Watercolors by Winslow Homer: The Color of Light*, eds. Martha Tedeschi and Kristi Dahm. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2007.
- Tezanos Toral, Lorena. "The Cuban Bohío: History, Appropriation, and Transformation," in *Visual Culture and Indigenous Agency in the Early Americas*, ed. Alessia Frassani (London: Brill, 2021), 102-123.
- Young, Robert J.C. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London: Routledge, 2005.

---

## Endnotes

1. Recognizing the complexity of this widely used and debated term, I hope to employ “hybridity” here in the spirit of scholars like Shirley Anne Tate, Robert Young, Homi K. Bhabha, and Mikhail Bakhtin. That is as a conscious or intentional form of hybridity, embodying a political effort to disrupt homogenization and ultimately reverse colonial structures of domination. Caribbean art made in response to hurricanes, especially recent works aimed at critiquing the colonial status quo, possess that very potential. This contrasts with an unconscious deployment of hybridity. Resting on racist assumptions and colonial discourse, unconscious hybridity assumes a passive mixture of cultures, which at best erases oppositional histories and at worst implies lesser value. See Shirley Anne Tate, *Black Skins, Black Masks: Hybridity, Dialogism, Performativity* (London: Routledge, 2017); and Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 2005).
  2. Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel.” In *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1981), 84-258.
  3. Homi K. Bhabha, “Forward: Framing Fanon,” In *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), vii-xlii; see also Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change.” *New Literary History* 43, no. 1 (2012): 1-18.
  4. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
  5. Jorge Duany, “Rethinking Puerto Rican Migrants as Climate Refugees,” Paper presented at *Bregando with Disaster: Post Hurricane Maria Realities and Resiliencies*. University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, Miami, FL, October 2, 2021. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23GSHdhmoYw>; See also Yarimar Bonilla, Marisol LeBrón, and Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, eds. *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019).
  6. Rebecca Rose Cuomo, “Teresita Fernández Investigates the Caribbean’s Colonial Past and Natural Forces.” *Frieze* (January 21, 2021). Available at <https://www.frieze.com/article/teresita-fernandez-maelstrom-2021-review>
  7. Fernando Ortiz, *El Huracán: Su Mitología y Sus Símbolos* (Fondo de Cultura Económica: Mexico – Buenos Aires, 1947), 15-65. See also Kerry Emanuel, *Divine Wind: The History and Science of Hurricanes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 18-23.
  8. Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, *Historia General y Natural de las Indias*, Part 1 (1535), Libro III, Capitulo V. Electronic text from “Research at King’s College London: Early Modern Spain” website. Available at <http://www.ems.kcl.ac.uk/content/etext/eo26.html#doer1805>
  9. Many thanks to Dr. Paul Niell for sharing his current research on this and other elements of the *bohío*.
  10. For the *bohío* and its cultural uses across time, see Lorena Tezanos Toral, “The Cuban Bohío: History, Appropriation, and Transformation,” in *Visual Culture and Indigenous Agency in the Early Americas*, ed. Alessia Frassani (London: Brill, 2021), 102-123. Several studies on the durability of geodesic and monolithic domes exist, see for example, Andrew South and Chris Zweifel, “Disaster survivability of thin-shell concrete dome structures: experience and practice.” In *Proceedings of IASS Annual Symposia* no. 21 (2014): 1-13.
  11. Stuart Schwartz, *Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2015), 10.
  12. For further discussion on storms and the Spanish fleet during the colonial period, see Schwartz, *Sea of Storms*, 38-39. For a study on the treasures of the 1715 fleet, see John de Bry, “The Order of the Holy Spirit: An Important Decoration from a 1715 Plate Fleet Wreck.” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (1995): 50-63. For the fleet generally, see Alejandro de la
-

- Fuente, César García del Pino, and Bernardo Iglesias Delgado. "Havana and the Fleet System: Trade and Growth in the Periphery of the Spanish Empire, 1550–1610." *Colonial Latin American Review* 5, no. 1 (1996): 95–115.
13. See J.M.H Clark, "Climate and the Politics of Relocation in the Caribbean Port of Veracruz, 1519–1599," in *The Spanish Caribbean and the Atlantic World in the Long Sixteenth Century*, eds. Ida Altman and David Wheat (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2019), 189–210; and Schwartz, *Sea of Storms*, 1–5.
14. Girolamo Benzoni and Theodor de Bry, *America (Band 4): Neuwe Und Gründtliche Historien Von Dem Nidergängischen Indien, so Von Christophoro Columbo Im Jar 1492 Erstlich Erfunden* (Franckfurt am Mayn: De Bry, 1597), 145.
15. Keith Cartwright, "'To Walk with the Storm': Oya as the Transformative 'I' of Zora Neale Hurston's Afro-Atlantic Callings." *American Literature* 78, no. 4 (2006): 741–767; and Joseph R. Hartman, "The Ceiba Tree as a Multivocal Signifier: Afro-Cuban Symbolism, Political Performance, and Urban Space in the Cuban Republic." *Hemisphere: Visual Cultures of the Americas* 4, no. 1 (2011): 24.
16. For more on the storm of 1780 and the period generally, see Matthew Mulcahy, *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624–1783* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 55–58, 103–110; and Sherry Johnson, *Climate and Catastrophe in Cuba and the Atlantic World in the Age of Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 139–150.
17. Albert Boime, "Turner's Slave Ship: The Victims of Empire." *Turner Studies* 10, no. 1 (1990): 34–43; and John McCoubrey, "Turner's Slave Ship: Abolition, Ruskin, and Reception", *Word and Image*, no. 14 (1998): 323–324.
18. Bois Caïman was believed to be the first major meeting of enslaved Africans that precipitated the Haitian Revolution. It likely coincided with a vodou ritual, August 14, 1791. Scholars debate when, where, and whether the event occurred, including early accounts of a coinciding storm in the writings of French abolitionist Civiqve de Gaston in 1819 and Haitian poet and politician Herard Dumesle in 1824. For more, see Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*, (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 100–101; David Patrick Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 88–89.
19. Raquel Rosario Rivera, *La Llegada del Cíclope: percepciones de San Ciriáco a cien años de su visita* (San Juan, P.R.: Fundación Puertorriqueña de las Humanidades, 2000); and Stuart B. Schwartz, "The Hurricane of San Ciriaco: Disaster, Politics, and Society in Puerto Rico, 1899–1901." *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 72, no. 3 (1992): 303–34.
20. Andy Horowitz, "The complete Story of the Galveston Horror: Trauma, History, and the Great Storm of 1900." *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 41, no. 3 (2015): 95–108.
21. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being." *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007): 247–260.
22. No small thing that the latter painting was originally entitled *After the Tornado, Galveston*, see Martha Tedeschi, "Memoranda of Travel: The Tropics," in *Watercolors by Winslow Homer: The Color of Light*, eds. Martha Tedeschi and Kristi Dahm. (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2007), fn. 21.
23. For Machado and the storm of 1926, see Joseph R. Hartman, *Dictator's Dreamscape: How Architecture and Vision Built Machado's Cuba and Invented Modern Havana* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), 95–132; for San Felipe II, see Schwartz, *Sea of Storms*, 226–234; for Trujillo and San Zenón, see Lauren Derby, *The Dictator's Seduction: Politics and the Popular Imagination in the Era of Trujillo* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 66–108; and Mark Anderson, *Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America* (Charlottesville, Va: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 1–55.
24. Antonio Benítez Rojo and James Elliott Maraniss, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Pr, 1996). For further description of the

- photograph in Cuba, see Hartman, *Dictator's Dreamscape*, 98-100. For a nearly identical image after the hurricane of San Felipe II in Puerto Rico see Ivan Ray Tannehill, *Hurricanes, Their Nature and History, Particularly Those of the West Indies and Southern Coasts of the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1938), figure 66. For similar images after the San Zenón hurricane of 1930 in the Dominican Republic, consult the Luis Mañón photographic collections of the Archivo General de la Nación de la Republica Dominicana; and see the photographs related to "El Ciclón de 1930" in Antonio M. Monteagudo and Antonio Escamez, *Albúm de oro de la República dominicana*. (La Habana, Cuba: Sindicato de artes gráficas de la Habana, s. a., 1936), no pagination. The author is currently developing a manuscript related to those storms. For more see, Joseph R. Hartman, "Eye of the Hurricane: Politics of Art, Architecture, and Climate in the Modern Caribbean." Available at <http://www.grahamfoundation.org/grantees/6360-eye-of-the-hurricane-politics-of-art-architecture-and-climate-in-the-modern-caribbean>
25. Carlos Rivera-Santana, "Aesthetics of Disaster as Decolonial Aesthetics: Making Sense of the Effects of Hurricane María through Puerto Rican Contemporary Art." *Cultural Studies* 34, no. 3 (2020): 341-362.
  26. Édouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997); and, Eric Prieto, "Edouard Glissant, littérature-monde, and Tout-monde." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 3 (2010): III-120.

# Modified Fruit: Weaving Transcultural Threads Between Santa Cruz and Santa Cruz

---

**Lisa Andrew**

Independent Scholar

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper addresses the politics of authenticity through a strategy of transcultural appropriation. I draw on the history of *piña* (pineapple cloth from the Philippines) as a metaphor for a transcultural ‘traveler.’ The pineapple, indigenous to Brazil was thought to have been accidentally brought to the Philippines during Magellan’s circumnavigation of the globe. The fruit’s consequent production into *piña* cloth and eventually into a national symbol may be attributed to the actions associated with European colonization and indigenous weaving practices, which, in the age of nineteenth-century nationalism, converged with print technology. Ecclesiastically Baroque embroidered *piña* cloth was gifted to European courts as lace; Indigenous animism was conflated with Christian vestiaries and embroidery illustrating the power of cloth as a colonizing tool. *Piña* cloth, unmoored from artworld preconceptions and as a cultural material formed by an intermeshing of cultures, operates in its own space; the syncretic mode by which this material was formed has made possible its hybrid contemporary forms; a transcultural material which resists homogenization addresses and challenges essentialist ideas of culture as static and pure.

## **KEYWORDS**

Transculture; Appropriation; Textile; Syncretism; Decolonization.

**Modified Fruit: weaving transcultural threads between Santa Cruz and Santa Cruz**



**Fig. 1.** *Santo Niño and pineapple* (no date), Manuel Baldemor, 70 cm x 100 cm, oil on wood, photograph taken by the author courtesy of India Legaspi 2017, Kalibo, Aklan, Panay, the Philippines.

This paper traces the trajectory of the pineapple from Brazil to the Philippines as an analogy of the transcultural agency of subjects in motion. Transcultural agency lies within ideas which surround acts of appropriation and mis/translation which produce confluences that can demonstrate that ‘the transcultural dynamic is directly proportional to the limits and opacity of its translation’ (1). An example is the syncretic conflation of indigenous Animism with Christianity (2) is in the collapsing of the image of the pineapple into the figure of the Christ Child, in figure 1, the *Santo Niño*. Pineapple cloth is woven from the leaves of the pineapple plant in the Philippines, and this cloth,

unbound from any original tradition and the syncretic mode by which this material came to be, has made possible its hybrid contemporary forms.



**Fig. 2.** Extracting *liniwan* 2014, the innermost fiber of the leaf of the pineapple plant, Barangay Fulgenzio del Norte, Aklan, Panay, the Philippines



To travel the route of the biography of things (3) is to trace how ‘subjects get constituted in and by their relations to each other’ (4). Syncretic forms are the result of transcultural processes in which appropriation occurs through any contact; a displacement which makes visible a ‘diasporic sensibility in which agency is found in the very fragmentation, translations and crossings of dispersal’ (5).

The pineapple is indigenous to Brazil where for 4,000 years it was cultivated by the Tupinamba (6). In 1400, varieties of the plant were carried by Tupi descendants, the Kalinago, from the interior of Brazil along the Orinoco River to the Caribbean where on November 4, 1493, Columbus was presented with one during his second voyage to the West Indian Island of Santa Maria de Guadeloupe (7). Within 200 years after this contact, the pineapple was transported from Santa Cruz, in the first colonized part of Brazil, all around the globe; the pineapple is thought to have landed on the island of Samar in the Visayan archipelago via Magellan’s circumnavigation in 1521 (8). The research for this paper began in the province of Santa Cruz in the Philippines, a center for embroidering the *Barong Tagalog*, the National dress.

The name *piña* is a conflation of the Tupi name for pineapple—Nana, ‘excellent fruit’ and the Spanish word, *piña* (9), because of its resemblance to a pinecone. It is thought that the Tupi cultivated the pineapple to make rope and wine (10) and that pineapples first left the shores of the Americas as a cure for scurvy on long voyages (11). According to Montinola (12) the accidental discarding of the pineapple suckers, rather than its deliberate introduction, is credited with its introduction into the Philippines. However it arrived, the climate was right for the discarded suckers to grow, and this, converging with indigenous weaving practices (13) and at the time, colonialism and print technology, led to the production of pineapple cloth, *piña*, in the Philippines.



**Fig. 3.** Knotting *piña* fiber 2014, Barangay Fulgenzio del Norte, Aklan, Panay, the Philippines

The power invested in objects on the periphery is that constraining structures are absent and within, objects and images unmoored from preconceptions and as cultural material formed by an intermeshing of cultures, operate largely in their own space. Similarly, Oswaldo Andrade's Anthropophagic metaphor of transcultural appropriation in Brazil points to a 'procedure that is characteristic of post-colonial art and implies the perception of anthropophagy as a metaphorical definition of the appropriation of otherness for one's own liberation' (14).

*Piña* cloth's significance shifted through oscillating between ideas of power, identity, tradition, and nationalism (15). The rapid Christian conversion in the Philippines is evidenced in its visual representation through catholic vestuary; it then became a marker for denoting race and class imposed by the Spanish in 1741 to the early 19th century. In paintings and travelers' accounts,

*mestizos* wore *piña*. The weaving, embroidering, and wearing of *piña* cloth came to be associated with the Spanish Chinese *mestizos* who were the administrative class below the *peninsulares* and the *insulares* (Spanish born in Spain and Spanish born in the Philippines). The *mestizos* became the new wealthy elite after the demise of the Galleon trade in 1815. This new blend of Spanish and Chinese *mestizos* and *criollos* travelled to Europe and returned home as the, the *ilustrados*, the creolized elites who adapted European ideologies in an active strategy of decolonization. This class wore *piña*, which came to be identified as national dress (16) and to identify as the Spanish ‘other’ at the onset of American colonization.



**Fig. 4.** Working with old *piña* 2014, (courtesy Patis Tesoro) Barangay Concepción, Lumbang, Laguna, the Philippines

*Piña's* history can be read through its shifting role and appropriative hybrid forms. Woven into *piña's* performative social life and surface is a combination of appropriative imagery and ritual. While the European baroque language of ornamentation marginalized the pre-colonial voices of Indigenous culture; since the revival of *piña* cloth in the eighties, designers have crafted their practice by contextualizing it within indigenous textiles.

The research of *piña* cloth as an analogy of a transcultural traveler and tracing its thread was undertaken to understand a way with working with a significant cultural material from a practitioner's point of view, which is, from elsewhere.



**Fig. 5.** OO (YES) 2017, (detail, author's work in progress) 50 cm x 200 cm, *piña*, silk, polyester, Barangay Fulgenzio del Norte, Aklan, Panay, the Philippines

---

## Endnotes

1. Ian McLean, *Double Desire: Transculturation and Indigenous Contemporary Art*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, 2014, p. 41
2. Bautista, J. J., 2005. An Archipelago Twice "Discovered": The Santo Niño in the Discourse of Discovery. *Asian Studies Review*, 29(2), pp. 187-206.
3. Igor Kopytoff, The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process. In: Arjun Appadurai, ed. *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 64-91.
4. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and transculturation*, Routledge, London, 2008, p. 230.
5. Papastergiadis cited in McLean 2014, p. 38
6. Gary Okihiro, Of space/time and the pineapple, *Atlantic Studies*, 11(1), 2014, p. 92
7. Okihiro, p.94
8. Benitez, C. & Craig, A., *Philippine Progress Prior to 1898*, Manila: University of the Philippines, 1916
9. Levitt, R., 'A Noble Present of Fruit': A Transatlantic History of Pineapple Cultivation. *Garden History*, 42(1), 2014, p.107
10. Lourdes R. Montinola, *Piña*, Amon foundation, Metro Manila, 1991, p.26
11. Montinola, p.32
12. Montinola during a meeting in 2014
13. Montinola, p.8
14. Joao Cezar de Castro Rocha, Anthropophagy as a world view: Camus meets Oswaldo de Andrade, *Arcade*, blog, 2013, <https://arcade.stanford.edu/blogs/anthropophagy-worldview-camus-meets-oswald-de-andrade>
15. Lynne B. Milgram, Piña cloth, Identity and the Project of Philippine Nationalism, *Asian Studies Review*, 2005, vol. 29, no.3, pp. 237
16. Mina Roces, Dress, Status and Identity in the Philippines; Pineapple Fibre Cloth and Ilustrado Fashion. *Fashion & Theory*, 17(3), 2013, pp. 341-372

# Pop Art or Sots Art? Appropriation of Soviet Visual Culture in Estonian Art under Late Socialism

---

**Lisa Kaljula**

Tallinn University

## **ABSTRACT**

The location of Estonia as the Westernmost Soviet republic during late socialism (1956-1985) made it a transcultural areas par excellence. Artistic ideas from the socialist East as well as the capitalist West met here to merge into complicated hybrid forms, challenging the existing art historical narratives. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, several Estonian artists also turned their attention to the surrounding Soviet reality, creating unique examples of what have thus far been tackled as Pop Art in Estonian art histories. However – should today's scholars, equipped with mighty tools from postcolonial and decolonial theories, global and horizontal art histories, describe these local phenomena in the framework of global Pop Art or regional Sots Art? The group SOUP`69 in Tallinn, just like Sots Art artists in Moscow, were unsatisfied with the socially unengaged practices of their predecessors and started to accommodate principles of American Pop Art to the Soviet reality surrounding them. For the leading members of the group Andres Tolts (1949-2014) and Leonhard Lapin (1947) this meant widening their interest to the Soviet aesthetico-political legacy, appropriating and investigating Soviet visual culture in their early collages, assemblages and paintings.

## **KEYWORDS**

Sots Art; Pop Art; Appropriation; Soviet Union; Unofficial Art.



Fernando Ortiz has described transculturality as something that is shaped as a result of the extremely complex transmutations of culture at the crossroads of various civilizations and colonial cultures.<sup>1</sup> The location of the Baltic countries had historically been at such crossroads, but becoming the Westernmost Soviet republics after 1945 - known as the Soviet West in the rest of the Soviet Union - made them transcultural areas par excellence. Among the three Baltic countries, the Iron Curtain in the Northernmost Estonia became especially porous during late Socialism: in the 1950s radio programme American Voice began broadcasting in Estonian, in the 1960s Finnish television channels could be easily received in the Northern part of country and in 1965 the first ferry line after World War 2 started to operate between Tallinn, the capital of Soviet Estonia and Helsinki, the capital of Finland. Whereas the institutional life in Soviet Estonia was still shaped by the Soviet regime and in fine arts, Soviet infrastructure created in the 1940s and 1950s persisted until the very fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> It was then inevitable that artistic ideas from the socialist East as well as the capitalist West met here to merge into complicated hybrid forms, challenging the often binary Cold War art historical narratives.

Within the Soviet Union, the Baltics also gained image as the Soviet West because of its more liberal cultural life in the 1970s, and its capitals would become important art centres where official exhibitions had long abandoned Socialist Realism. Moscow and Tallinn had therefore become palpably different art cities by the 1970s: when Moscow was strictly divided between official and unofficial art scenes, then Tallinn, because of its peripheral location and locally appointed officials on the one side, but easy access to Western media on the other side, could maintain a more liberal official exhibition scene. By the second half of 1960s, abstractionism and surrealism were common phenomena at the official exhibitions in Tallinn, and by the early 1970s the most avant-garde art of that time — such as conceptual art and appropriation art — could be exhibited in semi-opened cafe and research institute exhibitions. As a result of these differences, the unofficial art circles of Moscow visited Tallinn regularly in the 1970s, whereas in Moscow, the Bulldozer Exhibition of 1974 showed clearly that there was no

place for the more liberal art life even in the outskirts of Moscow. Keen friendship between the key figures of Moscow and Tallinn art scenes, Ilya Kabakov and Leonhard Lapin, proved that tight connections between the two cities were also interpersonal.

Leonhard Lapin, one of the defining artists of the conceptual turn that took place in Estonian art during the 1970s, is best known in Estonian art history as the founder of the group SOUP'69. The group SOUP '69, which brought together design and architecture students at the Estonian art institute, got its name from the exhibition that took place at Pegasus Café in Tallinn in 1969. Although the name and the poster of the exhibition clearly referred to American Pop Art, the main ideologist of the group Leonhard Lapin stressed that: "Although United States pop art was the model for SOUP'69, its system of images was not adopted mechanically. As intellectuals, we examined the ideological and aesthetic background of pop art, and understood that at home we must turn our attention to our own symbols and Soviet mass culture, which for us was Communist political propaganda."<sup>3</sup> For the leading members of the group Leonhard Lapin and Andres Tolts this meant turning boldly to Soviet visual culture, appropriating reproductions of Socialist Realist paintings and investigating Soviet symbols in their early collages and paintings. However, in the small and unified Estonian art world, this was a rebellious act by the young artists as the 1960s had been a decade prevailed by the aesthetic doctrine of Tõnis Vint and the group ANK'64. For Tõnis Vint, the spiritual and intellectual leader of the 1960s Estonian art scene, the socially escapist aesthetic doctrine was not only a question of aesthetics, but also of ethics in the Soviet context.<sup>4</sup> And for ANK'64, the imported aesthetics of Pop Art – lent from an opposingly different, capitalist society - offered a way for realizing the socially escapist beauty doctrine that Vint had envisioned. According to Elnara Taidre, Pop Art attained an entirely different meaning for Vint, where the critique of the Western consumer society via parodying its attributes, was replaced by the means of making the Soviet everyday environment more pleasant, humane and consistent.<sup>5</sup> However, as Sirje Helme has pointed out, the escapist part of Estonian pop art



remained a pop dream as imagination of how the Soviet environment could look like prevailed over what the environment really looked like.<sup>6</sup>

Catherine Dossin in her recent book „The Rise and Fall of American Art“ has claimed that the triumph of American art in Europe was not the triumph of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s, but the triumph of Pop Art in the 1960s, as the latter’s arrival was timely to resonate Europeans’ desire for something new as well as meet their growing attraction for the country of John F. Kennedy.<sup>7</sup> Recent large museum shows dedicated to the globalization of Pop Art, such as *The World Goes Pop* (2016) at Tate Modern and *International Pop* at Walker Art Center (2016) have confirmed the movement’s history as that of the invincible Anglo-American style taking over the world. Socialist Eastern Europe, being cut off from the rest of the world after World War II, became especially receptive to the fragmentary artistic ideas coming from the West. However, the uncritical acceptance of Pop Art in the unofficial art circles of the Soviet Union deserves a second look, as the socialist one-party state had its own all prevailing mass culture to turn to, not to mention that there was no abundant consumer society to criticize in the Soviet Union. Dávid Fehér has therefore used the phrase pop beyond pop while describing the pop art influenced art in Hungary on the 1960s and 1970s and the Hungarians’ peculiar understanding of pop art that was shaped by the local discourses of realism.<sup>8</sup> However, artists working in the Soviet Union in the 1907s had invented their own term for the hybrid pop art influenced art that instead of imagining a different environment, turned its attention boldly to the surrounding Soviet reality.

In 1972 the Moscow duo Komar and Melamid founded Sots Art that started to systematically appropriate Soviet visual culture to analyze the aesthetico-political nature of the Soviet project. Mixing together the terms of Socialist Realism and Pop Art, Sots Art in itself was a chimera, a transcultural term, revealing and accepting the hybrid nature of the unofficial art created inside the Soviet Union as well as the impossibility to create pure-bred pop art in the context of planned economy and its systematic deficit. Even more, according to Boris Groys, the main goal of Sots Art was specifically bound to Soviet society: it was to analyze the aesthetico-political will to power that the

artists acknowledged was present in all artistic projects, including the Soviet and their own.<sup>9</sup> Looking at the movement's legacy today, we see that Sots Art appropriated tropes not only from Socialist Realism, but from Soviet visual culture in its wider meaning, including the Soviet printed matter, official symbols and ordens, street banners and railroad signs, and also the early Russian avant-garde. Hence, equipped with timely distance and moving away from the deconstructive approaches of the late 80s and early 90s, we can look at Sots Art today as a reflection of Soviet modernity, specific Eastern European modernity where visibility played an important role. Martin Jay has described modernity as a scopic regime that is ruled by the omnipresent seeing as the master of the senses of the modern era.<sup>10</sup> According to Leah Dickerman, the Soviet Union was the first to realise that the world was standing on the threshold of a new media age: that mass politics needed mass communication. Dickerman also finds that the production of state-controlled images on such a scale, and the accompanying system of regulation could not be found in any of the Western European media cultures at the time.<sup>11</sup> But looking at Soviet modernity this way also allows us to review the ways in which Soviet empire sought to establish itself in its vast territories, using a wide variety of and often mass produced visual culture to colonize its peripheric areas. Bringing the Soviet rule to Estonia in 1940 with a special train, the front of which carried a reproduction of Stalin's portrait, is a telling example of this visual cultural colonization.

Sots art is in fact an interdisciplinary term applied to fine art, as well as literary works, that used the ideological clichés of Soviet mass culture as its subject matter and stemmed from the Moscow unofficial art of the early 1970s.<sup>12</sup> Although it is more common to start the history of the Soviet unofficial art with the Khrushchev Thaw and to consider the artists of the 1970s as the second generation of unofficial art, Joseph Bakshtein has called them the third, 'Soviet generation' of unofficial art, thus distinguishing them from the first generation of the Stalinist era and the second, 'modernist' generation, which was forced underground after the scandal in the Moscow Manege exhibition.<sup>13</sup> Looking at Sots Art as a generational phenomenon allows us also to see it through changed mentality compared to the previous

generations: when for the modernists of the 1950s and 1960s it was essential to denounce any kind of Soviet discourses, then the Soviet generation focused precisely on the most outstanding declarations of the Soviet visual culture, quoting, modifying and hyperbolizing its motives and symbols. The latter was also the reason why in Moscow, the two generations ended up in unresolvable conflict of virtues that became one of the reasons for the Sots Art generation to emigrate and relocate to New York in the 1970s. However, in Estonia, with its more liberal art life among other reasons, the Pop Art and Sots Art generations could not afford a similar open conflict, so no comparable emigration wave took place.



**Fig. 1.** A train carrying the reproduction of Stalin's portrait, which returned the delegation of the Estonian National Council from Moscow in August 1940. Estonian National Archives

Appropriating reproductions of Socialist Realist paintings and kitschy postcards, as well as Soviet mass production in their collages and assemblages, Andres Tolts and Leonhard Lapin did manifest discontent with the unsocial practices of Estonian art at the time. Admiring the sociality of

American Pop Art, the artists nevertheless understood that at home, they must turn to their own environment, saturated with Soviet mass culture at the time. Andres Tolts completed around sixteen collages based on Soviet magazine pictures in the period of 1967-1968, when he was still a high school student. The source material for Tolts's early collages mainly came from the weekly illustrated Soviet magazine *Ogoniok*, although a closer look at his work reveals more varied source material, including the Estonian and German language magazines, but also the Soviet study books that Tolts had used as a schoolboy. However, it is inevitable that *Ogoniok* with its large scale colour pictures would become a favourite of the Soviet-era collage artists. In the Perestroika era, *Ogoniok* became one of the most-read magazines in the Soviet Union, although in the 1960s, it did not yet stand out for its liberal content, but rather for large-format retouched colour photos and reproductions of Socialist Realist classics. The latter was also the reason why Russian artist Gennady Goushchin completed a magnificent multi-part collage series *Alternative Museum* (1970–1990) on the basis of *Ogoniok*'s reproductions. A common thread in the series is the unexpected intervention into the most popular reproductions of the Soviet and Russian art classics, such as Ivan Shishkin's *Morning in a Pine Forest* (1889) or Isaak Brodsky's *Lenin in Smolny* (1930), although these were definitely not meant just as harmless jokes directed at the Soviet art classics.

Since the Soviet art system was built on the circulation of a limited number of approved visual tropes, which were meant to keep the system monolithic and safeguard it against dangerous influences, the mass reproduction of art classics was a symbol of the Soviet art system. Ekaterina Dyogot has even claimed that in compliance with the Socialist Realist art canon established in the 1930s, which directed completed artworks directly to mass circulation via magazines and postcards, the works of Socialist Realist art were meant to exist rather as reproductions than original pieces of work.<sup>14</sup> Similarly to Goushchin's *Alternative Museum*, Tolts's collage *School* (1967) is an intervention into the reproduction of the Soviet artist Vladimir Rutstein's work *Back at the Local School* (1950s). This reproduction was commonly used in Soviet Estonian school books as a didactic illustration to teach children to

respect the older people and accept them as their teachers. However, Tolts decisively ruins the reunion between an old grey-haired teacher and her former student by gluing a figure of a soldier cut out from another reproduction over the teacher and scattering heads and butterflies from another context all over the image. The floating butterflies that can also be found from his other collages from that period, can be interpreted as a link between Soviet visual culture and kitsch because kitsch was a phenomenon that interested Tolts at the time, he even wrote a newspaper article about the links between kitsch and Soviet Estonian souvenir production.<sup>15</sup>



**Fig. 2.** Andres Tolts. School. 1967. Collage. Art Museum of Estonia

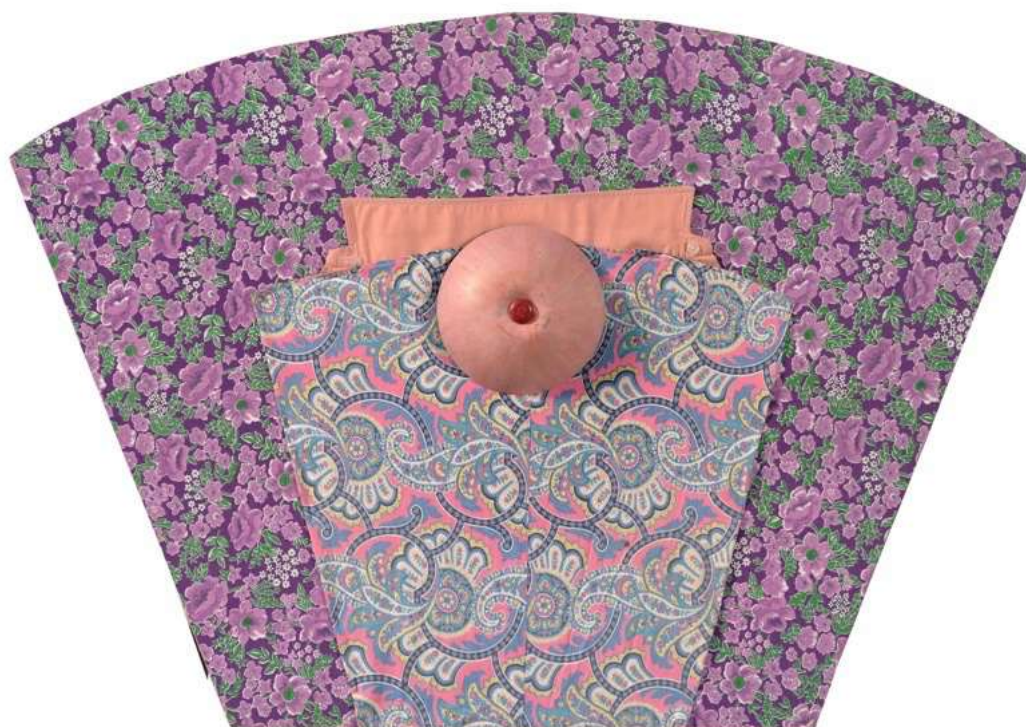
In the following two years, Tolts moved from collages to assemblages, and started to appropriate Soviet industrial output – such as floral chintz,



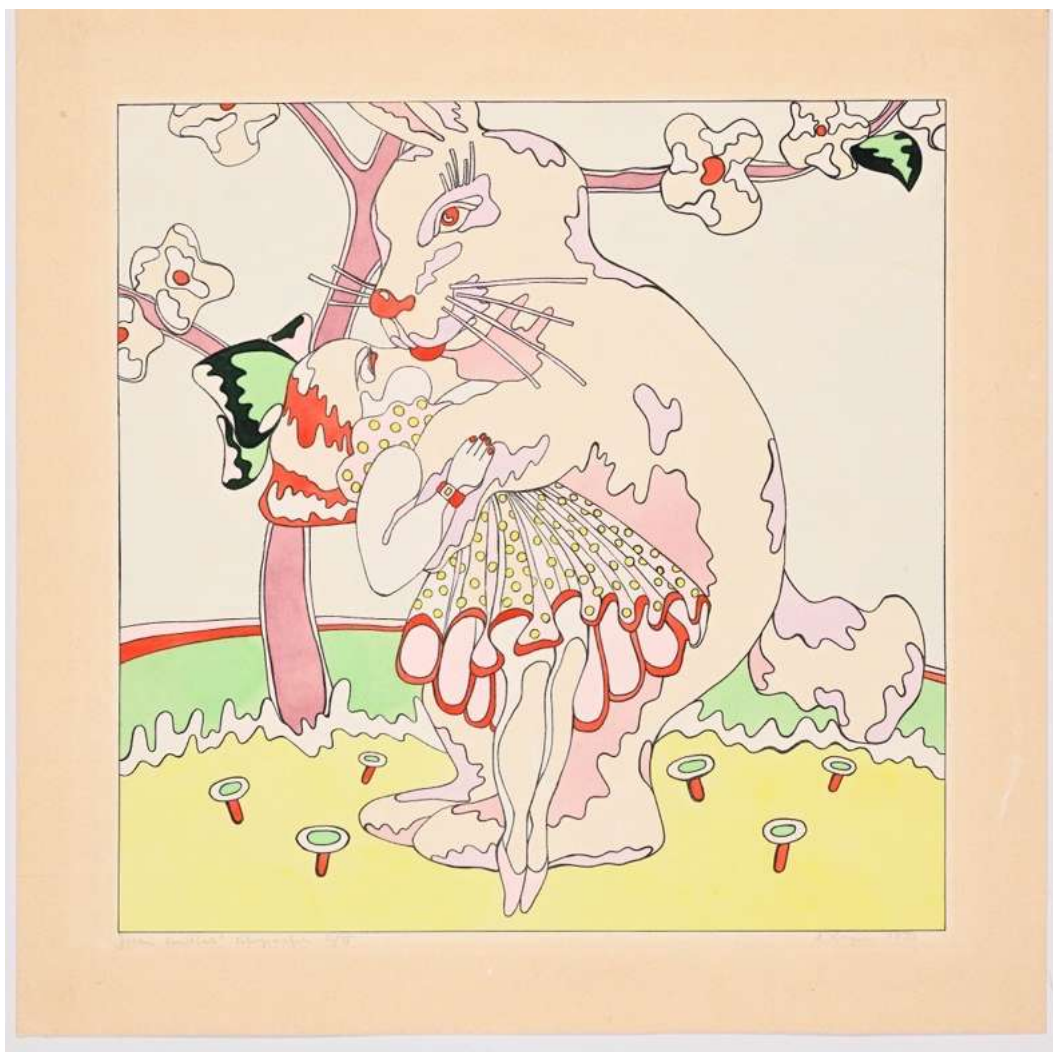
patterned wallpapers, mass produced toys - instead of images from magazines, replacing the two-dimensional depiction with the three-dimensional world. The textile assemblage *Resting Place* can be seen as a summary of Tolts's early Sots Art period, because the artist here combined two floral-print cotton fabrics, a pink blouse collar and a pink object resembling a breast. Since the semi-circular form of the work was derived from the Soviet Komsomol badge, the breast-shaped form in the middle of the work can only be seen as a humorous-blasphemous reference to Lenin's bald head. The floral chintz which was also mass produced in Kreenholm factory in Estonia and which for Tolts symbolized the working woman's gown that was the most common clothing item in the deficit Soviet society, became one of the most important leitmotifs of Tolts throughout his entire career. Being trained as a designer at one of the most progressive departments at the time of the Estonian Art Institute, Tolts's gaze on the Soviet floral chintz was playfully ironic and creative, close to the Camp sensitivity described by Susan Sontag.<sup>16</sup> The extensive use of textile by a male artist also referred to the queering or emasculating of the brutally perceived Soviet environment that had invertedly inspired Tolts. But Tolts's gaze was also orientalizing, placing Estonian culture above the occupying Soviet culture and therefore turning the traditional relationship between the colonizer and the colonized upside down.

Whereas Leonhard Lapin, the main ideologist of the group SOUP'69, but also one of the most important links between Estonian and Russian artists in the 1970s, was greatly inspired by Russian avantgarde. Architect by education, Lapin began to take interest in fine arts already during his study years at the art institute. In his early work *Bunny's Kiss* (1970) we can see similar interest in the notion of kitsch that Tolts had around the same time. Although here, Lapin has appropriated an Easter greeting card from the interwar period, it is still clear that what is tackled here is the Soviet Union as an empire of kitsch and the artists's role in maintaining this. Immediately after returning from the Soviet Army, Lapin completed several works with revanchist subtext, which he was later forced to destroy in fear of searches related to the *Harku 75* exhibition. Among them are the first works in a series

of gouache drawings called *Red Porn* (1972), in which the socialist symbols of the hammer and sickle are combined with female nudes in pornographic poses. Thus, in Lapin's case, the misuse of the Soviet discourse paradoxically began while he was still in the Soviet Army, where he, along with the representatives of many other small nations occupied by the Soviets, had learned to speak Russian properly as well as with an exaggerated foreign accent. Here we can see parallels with postcolonial appropriation, in which the language of colonisers is acquired so successfully in the colonial situation that the colonial subjects can use it to position themselves as the antithesis to the cultural meta-narrative of the imperial centre. Although Lapin destroyed all the early work of *Red Porn*, they should be seen as the artist's first Sots Art series, and as the starting point for the postcolonial appropriation art that was developed further in his subsequent works.



**Fig. 3.** Andres Tolts. Resting Place. 1970. Assemblage. Tartu Art Museum



**Fig. 4.** Leonhard Lapin. Bunny's Kiss. 1970. Lithography. Art Museum of Estonia

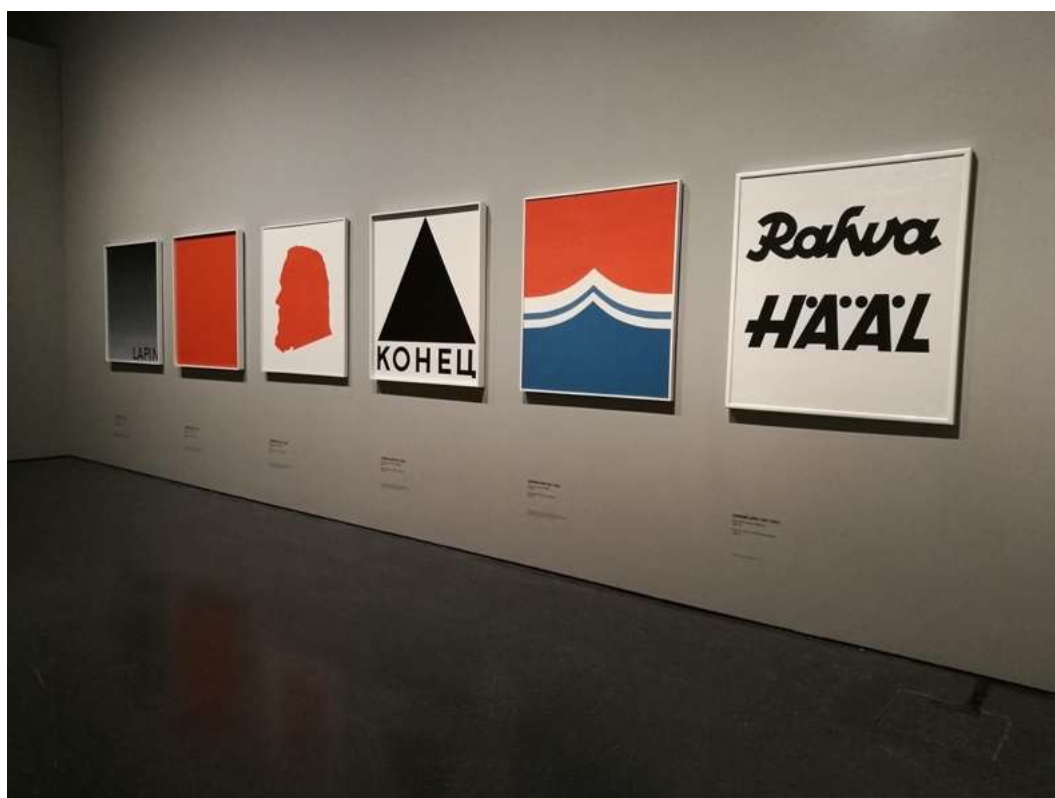
Lapin was also in the middle of a creative period at the time characterised by the appropriation of material from Soviet visual culture and a move to the favourite medium of conceptual art: the multi-part series. During the next two years, Lapin's body of work included several series which appropriated various aspects of institutional Soviet visual culture, from medical and technical drawings to the human-shaped targets used in military shooting ranges. As a conceptual gesture, in the *Saku '73* exhibition Lapin combined a smaller sub-series into a larger "bleeding" series, which could be read as a critique of violent Soviet modernity and the series later indeed



became known as *The Bleeding Systems* (1971–1973). In the series of paintings called *Signs*, which were created between 1978 and 1980, Lapin assimilated Soviet visual culture already in a postcolonial way, and the consolidation of Soviet avant-garde and Soviet institutional signs into a single visual cultural alphabet can be seen as a classic take of Sots Art. Thus, upon closer inspection, Marx's profile silhouette turns out to be the artist's own profile, the masthead of the Soviet Estonian newspaper *Rahva Häääl* is painted in a barely perceptible colour combination of blue, black and white, which are the colours of Estonian flag. Such multi-layered interpretive potential would have been immediately labelled as having an “uncontrolled subtext” and banned by the Soviet censors. The painting series *Signs* was never exhibited in its entirety in Soviet Estonia, and Lapin soon sold almost the entire series to the American art collector Norton Dodge, which is why this vast conceptual series has been somewhat overlooked in Estonian art history. However, based on the works now in the Dodge collection, the Polish-American art historian Marek Bartelik has treated Lapin as an outstanding example of Soviet conceptualist who also proves that the term of Moscow Conceptualism might be slightly misleading.<sup>17</sup>

As already mentioned above, in Estonian art history the early work of Andres Tolts and Leonhard Lapin has generally been tackled as Pop Art. It is perhaps best epitomized by the 2009 great hall exhibition at Kumu Art Museum that was curated by Sirje Helme and carried a manifestative title *Popkunst Forever! Estonian Pop Art at the Turn of the 1960s and 1970s*. Anu Liivak, who was the director of Kumu Art Museum at the time, explained the manifestative title in the main Estonian art magazine *Kunst.ee* with a historical excursion to the times when Pop art was still very much under attack in Soviet Estonia. But she stated also that “the distance between Estonian art and the ideas that were internationally actual and going through their highpoints was smallest at the second half of 1960s and in the beginning of 1970s. In terms of art movements, it was mainly connected with Pop Art, Conceptualism and Hyperrealism.<sup>18</sup> So clearly, Estonian art history that was written after the fall of the Iron Curtain, was concerned with the questions of temporality and contemporaneity, the way they were dictated by the Western

art centres. The exhibition *Popkunst Forever!* was looking at Pop Art in Estonian art as a wider phenomenon that crossed different art groups and artist generations, as well as extended its influence into the fields of animation and graphic design. Whereas the title clearly manifested that Estonian art has always been and will always be part of the Western art world, it is important to understand the psychological reasons behind this manifestative stance. And these psychological reasons are far from being characteristic only to postsoviet Estonia.



**Fig. 5.** Leonhard Lapin. From the series Signs. 1978-1980. Zimmerli Art Museum; Art Museum of Estonia

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, East European art histories have often embraced Western methodology and terminology, being motivated by the wish to fill in empty brackets and reverse the Soviet era antipropaganda for everything Western. Andrey Shental has recently analysed the activity of the Russian art museums through the notion of self-colonization and claimed

that the recent activity of the most prominent Moscow art museums has not helped Russian art museums to overcome the complex of provincialism.<sup>19</sup> And one of the most eloquent examples of such self-colonization according to Shental is the large-scale exhibition “Pop Art in Russia”, curated by Andrey Erofeyev at Tretyakov Gallery in 2005. Shental states: “Oriented towards the exhibition experience of other countries, they automatically sign the teleology, linearity and homogeneity of international (read Western) art history. And because Russian art and art history have been left out of major historical narratives, such exhibitions seek to conceptually resonate local art practices with global ones or elevate them to Western levels, as does Andrei Yerofeyev's Tretyakov Gallery exhibition "Pop Art in Russia."<sup>20</sup> The latter is well illustrated by the use of the terms 'Pop Art' and 'Sots Art' in the Russian text corpus of Google Books: the red line of "соц-арт'и" stays below the blue line of "поп-арт'и" in all decades, starting from 1960s and finishing in the 2000s.<sup>21</sup> These graphics about the incomparable use of Western and Eastern European art terms not only in the English text corpus, but also in the Russian, are signs of the challenges that postsoviet Europe is facing in writing transcultural art history. Estonian artist and decolonial thinker Tanel Rander has summed these challenges up with the harsh metaphor of a guillotine, saying that the Eastern Europeans' heads are not where their bodies are.<sup>22</sup>

In postcolonial studies, appropriation is most often used as “a term to describe the ways in which postcolonial societies adopt these aspects of imperial culture — language, forms of writing, film, theater, even ways of thinking and arguing such as rationalism, logic, and analysis that may be useful to the articulation of their own social and cultural identities.”<sup>23</sup> In the context of Western contemporary art, however, appropriation refers to the use of existing objects or images through minor alteration, and such practices are associated with critiques of central concepts of originality and authenticity in certain artistic definitions.<sup>24</sup> In Estonia, these last definitions of appropriation were especially important, as appropriating Soviet visual culture was a contemporary art practice - concurrently influenced by American Pop Art and shaped by the surrounding Soviet visual culture - as well as postcolonial gesture in the Soviet Western periphery. The world has

changed after Russian invasion to Ukraine, which from one side, has brought along a wave of solidarity among the postsoviet nations of Europe, but on the other hand, activated all the Cold War fears and oppositions, as well as revitalized desires of belonging ever more firmly to the Western cultural hemisphere. Geopolitically seismic border cultures such as Estonia - or postsoviet Eastern Europe in a more general meaning - will highly probably keep experiencing challenges in describing themselves as transcultural, even if their cultural texts may clearly indicate that transculturality is at play in their cultures. However, going back to the highly politicized art histories written in the 1990s takes Eastern European scholarly community back in decades and away from the ideals of horizontal art history, described by the Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski as “polyphonic, multidimensional and free of geographical hierarchies”.<sup>25</sup>

---

### Endnotes

1. Ortiz, Fernando 1995. *Cuban Counterpoint. Tobacco and Sugar*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, p 98.
2. Kangilaski, Jaak 2011. Lisandusi postkolonialismi diskussioonile. – *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi*
3. Lapin, Leonhard 2003. *Avangard*. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, p 182.
4. Bernstein, Boris 1995. ANK kui eetilise fenomen. – ANK'64. Tallinn: Tallinna Kunstihoone, unpaginated.
5. Taidre, Elnara 2016. Mudel, metafoor, mäng. *Omamütoloogiline tervikkunstiteos visuaalkunstis*
6. Helme, Sirje 2010. *Popkunst Forever. Eesti popkunst 1960. ja 1970. aastate vahetusel*. Tallinn:
7. Dossin, Catherine 2015. *The Rise and Fall of American Art, 1940s–1980s: A Geopolitics of*
8. Fehér, Dávid 2015. *Pop Beyond Pop: Some Exhibitions of the Hungarian “Iparterv-Circle”*. –
9. Groys, Boris 1992. *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p 81.
10. Jay, Martin 1988. *The Scopic Regimes of Modernity*. – *Vision and Visuality*. Ed. H. Foster. Dia
11. Dickerman, Leah 2000. *Camera Obscura: Socialist Realism in the Shadow of Photography*. –
12. Condee, Nancy 2000. *Sots-Art, Conceptualism, and Russian Postmodernism: An Introduction*.
13. Bakshtein, Joseph 1995. *Nonconformist Traditions and Contemporary Russian Art*. – *From*
14. Degot, Ekaterina 2003. *Unfinished Dissertation: Phenomenology of Socialism*. – Boris
15. Tolts, Andres 1972. *Kitšist, suveniiridest ja muust*. – *Sirp ja Vasar*, 21. juuli.
16. Kaljula, Liisa 2018. *Andres Tolts – Dandy at the Age of Mass Culture*. – Andres Tolts. *Landscape with Still Life*. Ed. A. Allas. Tallinn: Eesti Kunstimuuseum, p 43.
17. Bartelik, Marek 2001. *The Banner without a Slogan: Definitions and Sources of Moscow*

18. Liivak, Anu 2010. Miks "POPkunst Forever!?" – Kunst.ee, 1–2, p 29.
19. Шенталь, Андрей. Импорт/экспорт: тезисы о культурном самообеспечении. - Colta.ru 29 March 2016 (25.05.2022 <https://www.colta.ru/authors/546>)
20. Шенталь, Андрей. Импорт/экспорт: тезисы о культурном самообеспечении. - Colta.ru 29 March 2016 (<https://www.colta.ru/authors/546>, viewed 25.05.2022)
21. Ngram Viewer (<https://books.google.com/ngrams>, viewed 18.02.2021)
22. Rander, Tanel 2016. Nostalgia võim. – Brochure of the exhibition "Kolmas tee" at Tallinna Linnagalerii (12.08–11.09.2016), unpaginated.
23. Ashcroft, Bill; Griffiths, Gareth; Tiffin, Helen 2000. Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts.
24. Chilvers, Ian; Graves-Smith, John 2009. A Dictionary of Modern and Contemporary Art.
25. Piotrowski, Piotr 2012. Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe. London: Reaktion

# Agents of the Construction of Asianistic Aesthetics in the West: Ernest Fenollosa, Okakura Kakuzō and the Paintings of Agnes Martin in Post-War American Art

---

**Mona Schieren**

University of the Arts, Bremen

## **ABSTRACT**

Through analyzing the writings of Ernest Fenollosa and Okakura Kakuzō, this paper traces the *transmission culturelle* of their ideas from approximately 1880 to 1960, examining how their concepts formed categories of an Asianist pictorial aesthetic. Both authors discuss categories such as emptiness/fullness, variation/repetition, and imperfection or simplicity, thereby anchoring themselves in categories of an Asian visual aesthetic. As mediators and translators of these categories, Fenollosa and Okakura had a partly US-American, partly Japanese background and pursued their interests in the critique of modernity or in the struggle for a "better modernity." Under their influence, a convoluted concept emerged that the West regarded as Eastern philosophy, but in which a Western desire for non-rational ideologies was also inscribed. While these historical contexts are interwoven and filled with desires or projections in the US-American avant-garde reception, they led to remarkable visual practices. The example of Agnes Martin's paintings demonstrates translations into the pictorial that should not be treated as a history of form or motif, but rather make the specific aesthetics and modes of an Asian pictorial culture tangible.

## **KEYWORDS**

American Abstract Expressionism; Migration of Aesthetic Concepts; Asianisms; Japonisme

When one considers the construction of an East Asian aesthetic in postwar US-American Art, particularly in Abstract Expressionism, one sees that this is not a Postwar phenomenon, but rather that the reception has been fed by contact zones and appropriation processes since the 19th century. A central agent who decisively influenced the process of this construction was Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908). The US-American philosopher and art historian of Asian Art graduated from Harvard University in 1874 and was invited by the Japanese government to teach as a professor of philosophy and political economy at the Tokyo Imperial University during the Meiji Restoration from 1878 onwards. He went on to fundamentally shape the formation of Asianist aesthetic categories in his function as a curator of the Boston Museum of Fine Art together with his students Okakura Kakuzō (1862–1913) and Arthur W. Dow (1857–1922).

My paper will trace this *transmission culturelle* by analyzing the writings of Fenollosa and Okakaru, examining how their concepts formed categories of an Asianist pictorial aesthetic. Today, Asian art and its related concepts are frequently still construed as “foreign” and “other” in contrast to Western art, a rhetoric that Edward W. Said formulaically described as “us and them.”<sup>1</sup> As a result, different currents and trends are combined in a universalizing manner as being ‘Asian’ and linked to one another in a stereotypical Western perception. I believe these references cannot be understood one-sidedly as “resemblances to Oriental modes”<sup>2</sup> as art critic Clement Greenberg did; instead they should be considered processes of exchange in which the reception of concepts helps to construct them in a decisive way. This paper will therefore use the conceptual term “Asianism” to describe the mediated and stereotypical reception of what is purported to be genuinely ‘Asian.’ Nicola Spakowski and Marc Frey adapt this term both for discursive constructions of Asia as a region and for the political, economic, social, and cultural practices these are associated with:

The origin of these multiple discourses and practices need not necessarily lie in Asia itself. They can also be imported from Europe or North America or can emerge

in the interaction and collaboration of Asian and non-Asian actors.<sup>3</sup>

I use the term “Asianism” to emphasize that the concept is a construct and to describe the cultural phenomenon in the art historical discourse. Strictly speaking, every attempt to come to terms with Asian philosophy is necessarily Asianist, that is, a construct. It should be said however, with regard to the nature of Asianisms as constructs, that although they are projections, they nevertheless actually exist within the cultural field of the United States because they do exert influence. As dynamic and mutable as they are, and also (re)produced and revised in this study, they continue to have an impact on the cultural milieu because every representation of reality is simultaneously a production thereof, as Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson emphasize: “[S]emiotics reinforces tendencies within the social history of art that view representations not as the reflection of a reality found elsewhere but rather as an active and shaping force in society.”<sup>4</sup>

Hegemonic interests are involved in naming the categories of an Asianist pictorial aesthetic, which rhetorically evoke a different modernism that must overcome the alienation effects of Western industrial culture and sets the stereotypical notion of a rational materialistic West (Occidentalism) against a spiritual East (Orientalism). While these historical contexts and interests in “Asia” are even more entangled and filled with desires and projections amongst the Postwar avant-garde in North America, they nonetheless led to remarkable pictorial practices. I will illustrate this in the second part of my paper, which analyzes works by the Canadian American artist Agnes Martin from around 1960.

### **Construction and Function of Asianisms**

After helping found the Tokyo School of Fine Arts with Okakura Kakuzō in 1887 and converting to Tendai Buddhism, Ernest Fenollosa returned to the United States in 1890 to become a curator of Japanese art at the Boston Museum of Fine Art.





**Fig. 1.** Unknown: Photo of Edward S. Morse, Okakura Kakuzō, Ernest Fenollosa, William Sturgis Bigelow (from left to right), 1882, Photograph: © 2022 Lowell Observatory Archives, Flagstaff.

Donors like Edward S. Morse and William Sturgis Bigelow provided the foundational support for the development of the Asian Collection at the museum, which is marked by distinction, economic and traditionalist puritanical objectives, and US-American Exceptionalism. The puritanical objectives in particular were also a form of exoticism, and formed the other side of the exoticized reception of Japan in French impressionism, which constructed Japan as a pleasure garden for the senses. In the following, I aim to illustrate that it is not an aesthetic per se that is received, but rather that this aesthetic is shaped through desires, interests, and political instrumentalization.

With his book *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art: An Outline History of East Asiatic Design*,<sup>5</sup> published in 1912, the US-American curator, professor,

and East Asia connoisseur Ernest Fenollosa crucially shaped the Western canon of East Asian art history. His formation of categories was marked by his concerns, shared with his Japanese student, the art historian and cultural functionary Okakura Kakuzō. On one hand, they argued that Japan had fine art that could stand up to that of the West and, on the other hand, they sought to curb the influence of Western art practices in Japan, which was expressed, among other ways, through an uncritical adoption of Western oil painting. Both scholars were commissioned by the Japanese government to support Japan, which was under pressure to modernize during the period from 1868 to 1912, in its conscious effort to acquire Western knowledge in the areas of economics and engineering as well as academic art training. The Meiji strategy was not a confrontation against the West, but instead embraced Western concepts. Fenollosa and Okakura were, following the Meiji doctrine, keen to use these policies concerning the acquisition of Western art and industrial methods to demonstrate in parallel Japan's superiority insofar as the country was integrating craft technique, an aesthetic understood as traditionally Japanese, into its version of "another" modernity, as well as the linking of tradition and nature. That Fenollosa argued in the idealistic tradition of Friedrich Hegel within a Japanese context was all the more suited to the connectivity of Zen painting in the Western context, since East Asian painting had previously tended to be dismissed in Europe and the United States.<sup>6</sup> Fenollosa's two richly illustrated volumes disseminated illustrations of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean works of art and contributed to the formulation of a visual canon. He divided his text chronologically and laid out in the chapter titles of the first volume a history of the development from "Primitive Chinese Art" by way of diverse Chinese and Korean periods to "Mystical Buddhist Art" in China and Japan.<sup>7</sup> This genealogy supported the imperial argumentative models of the Meiji government, which claimed that all Asian cultures could be assimilated and refined in Japanese art and culture. This was an attempt to culturally legitimize the hegemonic position that Japan was striving for in the pan-Asian realm.<sup>8</sup>

In other contexts, Fenollosa emphasized abstraction in Japanese art and design. Art Historian David Clarke has argued that Fenollosa's *abstract*

reading was one reason why the artistic avant-garde was interested in Japanese art.<sup>9</sup> The topos of abstraction that emerged in Japonisme is expressed in a lecture given by Fenollosa in Boston in 1892: “The Japanese [...] would just as lief at first see a picture upside down; that is, they admire beauty of line and color in art, rather than [...] merely depicting nature.”<sup>10</sup> Fenollosa preferred to explain the specifics of ink painting using examples from the works of the painter Sesshū Tōyō—a preference that his pupil Arthur Wesley Dow, who was a painter and later teacher at Teachers College at Columbia University New York would later adopt.<sup>11</sup>

Fenollosa’s approach and his argumentative models were also adopted by his student and translator Okakura Kakuzō on their travels in Asia together, and he continued to develop both in his own English-language publications. Okakura published his books *The Ideals of the East with Special Reference to the Art of Japan* in 1903 and *The Awakening of Japan* the following year for a Western readership. In 1906, his popular short publication *The Book of Tea*, which was intended to convey the “essence of the genuinely Japanese,”<sup>12</sup> explains the historical background of tea ceremony culture. In this book, Okakura presented Chinese Taoism as the precursor to Japanese Zen Buddhism, to which he closely tied the tea ceremony. In doing so, he followed nationalist Meiji identity politics, which positioned Zen Buddhism and the tea ceremony as the specifically Japanese opposite pole to Japan’s Westernization. Like Fenollosa, Okakura was writing the genealogy of Chinese Taoism, which, he said, was refined in Japanese Zen Buddhism in order to provide a foundation for Japan’s privileged rank in Asia itself and, beyond that, its relation to the West.<sup>13</sup> Okakura mentioned the scholar Lao Tzu and Zhuang Zhou as protagonists of Taoism.<sup>14</sup> He emphasized the notion “Its Absolute is the Relative” as characteristic of Taoism.<sup>15</sup> According to Okakura, Taoist doctrines offer a major contribution to the field of aesthetics, particularly its doctrine of “the ‘art of being in the world.’”<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, he introduced the concept of the “void,”<sup>17</sup> which would later become important in the formation of aesthetic categories. Relativism (of perception) and individualism;<sup>18</sup> a penchant for “the Abstract,”<sup>19</sup> revealed in the preference of black-and-white drawings over the polychrome painting of

classical Buddhism; and the equal recognition of the “mundane” and the “spiritual”<sup>20</sup> were all seen by Okakura as important aspects that Zen Buddhism had adopted from Taoism. This refinement of perception is the central theme *The Book of Tea*. In the spirit of distinction, Okakura declared all votaries of this philosophy of tea to be “aristocrats in taste.”<sup>21</sup> However, he also called attention to how perception is conditioned by culture,<sup>22</sup> how it differs in the East and the West, and how stereotypes form: he called it the “glamour of the perspective.”<sup>23</sup>

Yet Okakura, as a member of the Japanese nationalist Dragon Society (Ryūchi-kai), was himself operating with the logic of stereotyping as well as of (self-)Orientalizing and Occidentalism. His achievement as a translator lay in the “selective choice and appropriation of certain models of thought developed in the West [...], which, however, he crucially modified in translation” as art historian Vera Wolf has pointed out.<sup>24</sup> The method he employs to that end is inversion, a figure that, as the scholar of Asian religions Bernard Faure has shown, was characteristic of several major players in this mediating process.<sup>25</sup> Okakura advanced Japanese self-Orientalizing by turning qualities that the West described as defects into positive, worthwhile attributes. This becomes particularly clear in the topos of the perfection of the imperfect. In Okakura’s argumentative model for the aestheticizing of the imperfect, the lack of perfection that constitutes the imperfect leaves perfection to the aesthetic imagination. In this idealized process of perfection by the imagination, moreover, the artist and the viewer become one.<sup>26</sup> Okakura saw this kind of perception as the essential aesthetic conveyed by the tea ceremony: “It is essentially a worship of the Imperfect, as it is a tender attempt to accomplish something possible in this impossible thing we know as life.”<sup>27</sup> At the same time, – as Vera Wolff has argued – Okakura linked this aesthetic of the imperfect in the process of modifying perception to an ethical dimension, arguing that because an aesthetic that aims at material perfection is always deficient, the aestheticizing of the imperfect is:

the truly idealistic approach to the spirit, because it remains in the spiritual and does not aim to depict the ideal

materially. And whereas the Latin and Germanic people sought to achieve the ideal objectively and materialistically, [...] according to Okakura, the Japanese had been striving for fulfillment of the ideal along this subjective-idealistic path.<sup>28</sup>

This was intended to be yet another demonstration of the superiority of the Japanese aesthetic over the Western one. This ennobling of the imperfect around the turn of the century happened at a time in which the category of the perfect lost value in the wake of perfecting industrial production. Okakura, by contrast, emphasized the ideal beauty of imperfection as an aesthetic category for the industrial age.<sup>29</sup> The perfect imperfection of Japanese Raku pottery prominently illustrated this idea and exquisite examples of this pottery were collected by Edward Morse to later be shown in the collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.



**Fig. 2.** Raku Chōnyu: Tea bowl, 18th century, Raku ware, earthenware, 4 1/16 x 2 1/4 in., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Morse Collection. Museum purchase with funds donated by contribution. Photograph: © 2022 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

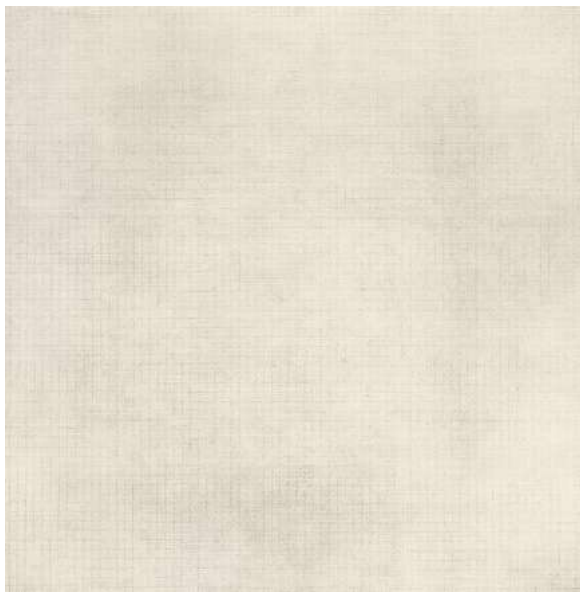
The agents imparting and translating these categories had a background that was partly American and partly Japanese and pursued their interests in critiquing modernity or struggling for a “better modernity.”<sup>30</sup> Under their influence a hybrid concept took shape that the West viewed as Eastern philosophy into which, however, was also inscribed a Western desire for non-rational ideologies and distinction. If one analyzes the writings of Ernest Fenolosa, Okakura Kakuzō, and Arthur Wesley Dow in terms of the aesthetic categories they developed, it becomes clear that elements such as abundance and emptiness, variation and repetition, simplicity and refinement, the correspondence of antithetical qualities (yin and yang), the foregoing of the depiction of depth, primacy of line, and a concept of abstraction were cited in many publications. Even into the postwar period, these elements became firmly established as categories of an Asianist pictorial aesthetic.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Bernard Faure describes the promise of the Western Orientalists within the context of postwar US-America as propagating Asian spirituality as a cure for the difficulties of a society marked by Western materialism as a form of “secondary orientalism.”<sup>32</sup>

### **Agnes Martin and the Asianism of Imperfection**

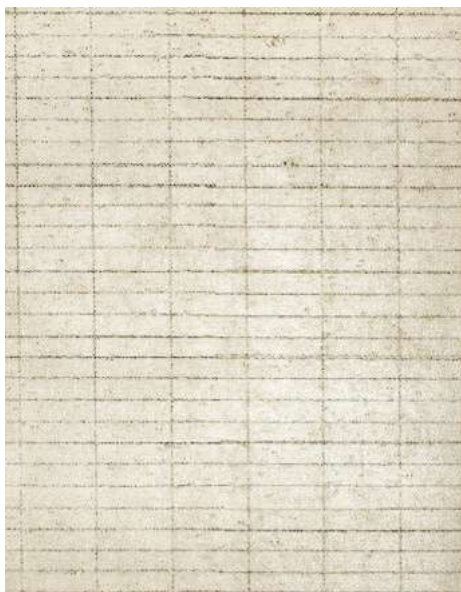
From these categories, I would like to focus on the idea of imperfection and discuss it using the example of paintings and drawings by the artist Agnes Martin as variations of strays and slips.<sup>33</sup> To judge from the sources (writings, letters, interviews, contemporaries), Martin studied Buddhist and Taoist writings. In her published texts—*Writings* (1992)—and in interviews, she mentions works such as the Taoist philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi as well as Buddhist sources by Dàjiàn Huinéng, the Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism, which she consulted and whose theories circulated in artistic and intellectual elites in the United States.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the artist studied the writings of the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu as translated by the American writer Witter Bynner.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Martin was a frequent visitor of Asian Art collections for example those of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, which Fenolosa had established, and which Arthur Wesley Dow later also curated.



Furthermore, Martin studied art at Teachers College, Columbia University New York, where the textbook *Composition: A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students and Teachers* by Fenollosa's student Arthur Wesley Dow was one of the central foundations of the curriculum. In this book, compositional aspects are described and explained with/alongside examples of Chinese and Japanese art.<sup>36</sup>

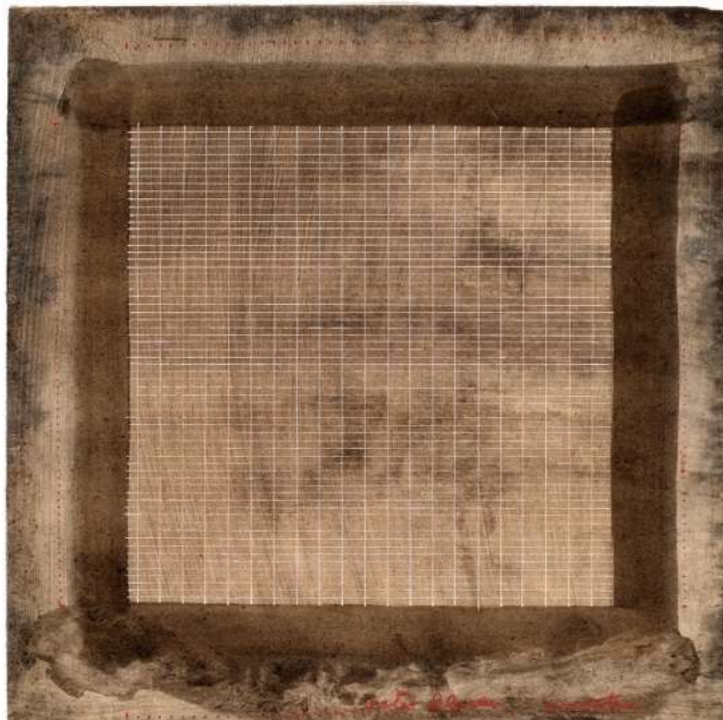


**Fig. 3.** Agnes Martin: Leaf, 1965, acrylic, graphite and plaster on canvas, 72 x 72 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Bequest of Daniel W. Dietrich II. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2022, Estate of Agnes Martin.



**Fig. 4.** Detail of: Agnes Martin: Leaf, 1965, acrylic, graphite and plaster on canvas, 72 x 72 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Bequest of Daniel W. Dietrich II. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2022, Estate of Agnes Martin.

Agnes Martin produced many of her grid paintings and drawings beginning in 1960 by running a graphite pencil along a straightedge on the primed canvas to produce a grid. In the specifics of her artistic work (square format, glazing of the ground, and graphic fields of lines and grids drawn with a ruler and by hand), she developed an “abstract” pictorial world that resulted both from processes of exchange between contemporaneous American discursive practices and the associated engagement with Asian models of thought and an appropriation of them. Concerning Martin’s paintings, the art critic Janet Hobhouse remarks: “any irregularity is greeted with joy. Miss Martin has anticipated this excitement, and her works are occasionally generously irregular.”<sup>37</sup> Martin’s floating between the regularity of the grid structure and the irregularity of the line does indeed represent a very striking aspect of her work. The reason lies in the fragility of the line. Its irregularity is only reinforced by its repetition, as a detail of Martin’s painting *Leaf* from 1965 illustrates.



**Fig. 5.** Agnes Martin: *Waterflower*, 1964, watercolour on paper, 11 7/8 x 11 15/16 in., National Gallery of Art Washington, D.C., © Photograph: National Gallery of Art Washington, D.C., VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2022, Estate of Agnes Martin.



Many of her paintings point to imperfection in that they contain obvious errors, for example, the line that strays from the guided structure of the straightedge. In the painting, Martin's brittle cracks, omissions, and deviations from the orthogonal grid can be compared structurally to the irregularities and cracks in Raku ceramics (see image 2). The watercolor *Water Flower* from 1964 features different line thicknesses, distance markings, and overlapping grid lines.

They testify to the moment and the gesture of the process in which they originated. By repeating the lines of the grid by hand, the mistakes and strays stand out in the grid or line system. The unrepeatability and individualization, yet de-subjectification, of the line points to the trace of the process of the physical act of drawing. Here, her use of the straightedge does not give the drawing an unambiguous quality.

The aesthetic of the fragment as a quasi “unfinished” and hence imperfect artifact is certainly a theme in Western art. According to the classic European concept of the sculpture, it is about imagining the continuation of the unfinished and about the topos of the “sculpture being peeled out of the stone.”<sup>28</sup> This notion of the imagination also plays a central role in the work of Okakura; the idea of imperfection, however, has an even more fundamental tradition in Japanese aesthetics, which was disseminated in Europe and the United States by means of the tea ceremony and its artifacts and was considered a sign of connoisseurship: in the process, imperfection is ennobled by regarding the perfection of the work of art as a mental process of perfecting in the imagination, and that in turn as the artist and viewer becoming one.<sup>29</sup> In the Asianist context, the intended gesture should be understood as one in which imperfection is inherent in the process. Accepted imperfection is aestheticized as such. This Asianist aesthetic of the imperfect can be seen as inspiration for Martin’s drawing practices of imperfection.

In that sense, the example of Agnes Martin’s paintings shows that her appropriation goes beyond borrowing Japoniste elements like similar motifs or colors as seen, for example, in the work of the painters James Whistler and John La Farge. The influences are noticeable not (merely) on the level of “oriental modes” as in the form of a line in imitation of calligraphy like Franz

Kline. Martin's work demonstrates translations into the pictorial that are not to be treated as formal or motivic history, but rather enable one to *experience* the specific aesthetic and modes of an Asianist pictorial culture. By doing so, Martin does not simply appropriate a style or motif, but rather creates a hybrid pictorial aesthetic.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bal, Mieke and Norman Bryson. "Semiotics in Art History," *Art Bulletin* 72, no. 2, 1991.
- Bynner, Witter. *The Way of Life According to Laotzu: An American Version*. New York: Berkley Pub. Group, 1986.
- Chamberlain, Basil Hall. *Things Japanese: Being Notes on Various Subjects Connected with Japan*. London/Kobe: J.L. Thompson & Co, 1927 [1890].
- Chamberlain, Basil Hall. *Allerlei Japanisches: Notizen über verschiedene japanische Gegenstände für Reisende und andere*. Translated by Bernhard Kellermann. Berlin: Hans Bondy, 1912.
- Chisolm, Lawrence W. *Fenollosa. The Far East and American Culture*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963.
- Clarke, David J. *The Influence of Oriental Thought on Postwar American Painting and Sculpture*. New York, London: Garland, 1988.
- Dow, Arthur Wesley. *Composition: A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students and Teachers*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1913 [1899].
- Faure, Bernard. *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Fenollosa, Ernest. *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art: An Outline History of East Asiatic Design* (2 vols.). New York, Tokyo: Frederick A. Stokes company, 1912.
- Frey, Marc and Nicola Spakowski. "Einleitung: Asianismen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert; 'Asien' als Gegenstand nationaler und transnationaler Diskurse und Praktiken," in idem, eds., *Asianismen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert*. Leipzig: Leipziger Universitäts-Verlag, 2009.
- Greenberg, Clement. "American-Type" Painting (1958, reworked version of 1955), in Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1973.
- Hijiya-Kirschner, Irmela. "Okzidentalismus: Eine Problemskizze." In: *Was heißt hier "fremd"? Studien zu Sprache und Fremdheit*, edited by Dirk Naguschewski and Jürgen Trabant, 248. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997, 243–251.
- Hobhouse, Janet K. "In the Galleries. Agnes Martin at Robert Elkon." *Arts Magazine* 44, no. 7 (May 1970).
- Kikuchi, Yuko and Toshio Watanabe *Ruskin in Japan, 1890 – 1940. Nature for Art, Art for Life*. Tokyo: Cogito inc., 1997.

Kris, Ernst. "Der Stil 'rustique.'" In *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen*, Wien, no. 1 (1926), 137-208.

Kris, Ernst and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*. Translated by Alastair Laing and Lottie M. Newman. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979.

Martin, Agnes, *Writings/Schriften*. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005.

Munroe, Alexandra. "The Third Mind: An Introduction." In *The Third Mind. American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860 – 1989*, edited by Alexandra Munroe, New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009.

Okakura, Kakuzō. *Das Buch vom Tee*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 2002 [1906].

Okakura, Kakuzō. *The Book of Tea*. London, New York: Fox, Duffield & Company, 1906.

Okakura, Kakuzō. *The Ideals of the East. With Special Reference to the Art of Japan*. London: J. Murray, 1903.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 2003.

Schieren, Mona. *Agnes Martin: Transkulturelle Übersetzung. Zur Konstruktion asianistischer Ästhetiken in der amerikanischen Kunst nach 1945*. München: Verlag Silke Schreiber, 2016.

Wagner, Wieland. *Japans Außenpolitik in der frühen Meiji-Zeit (1868 – 1894). Die ideologische und politische Grundlegung des japanischen Führungsanspruchs in Ostasien*. Stuttgart: Steiner, 1990.

Wolff, Vera. *Die Rache des Materials: Eine andere Geschichte des Japonismus*. Zürich: Diaphanes, 2015.

Wolff, Vera. "Not a real thing at all: Zur Kulturellen Übersetzung künstlerischer Techniken am Beispiel der japanischen Ölmalerei." In *Kulturelle Übersetzungen*, edited by Anika Keinz, Klaus Schönberger and Vera Wolff, 73. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2012.

## Endnotes

1. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 334.
2. Clement Greenberg, "American-Type" Painting (1958, reworked version of 1955).
3. Marc Frey and Nicola Spakowski, "Einleitung: Asianismen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert; 'Asien' als Gegenstand nationaler und transnationaler Diskurse und Praktiken," in idem, eds., *Asianismen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitäts-Verlag, 2009), 7–15, esp. 8. The term 'Asianism' is thus not used in the present study in the sense of a pan-Asian discourse.
4. Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics in Art History," *Art Bulletin* 72, no. 2 (1991): 174–208, esp. 195.
5. Ernest Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art: An Outline History of East Asiatic Design* (2 vols.), (New York, Tokio: Frederick A. Stokes company, 1912).
6. Cf. Vera Wolff, "Not a real thing at all: Zur Kulturellen Übersetzung künstlerischer Techniken am Beispiel der japanischen Ölmalerei." In: *Kulturelle Übersetzungen*, ed. Anika Keinz, Klaus

Schönberger and Vera Wolff (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag GmbH, 2012), 73. One of the first Japanologists, Basil H. Chamberlain, for example, criticized Japanese painting in his popular compendium of Japanese art, *Things Japanese*, published in 1890, for not being able to convincingly imitate nature (cf. Basil Hall Chamberlain, *Things Japanese. Being Notes on Various Subjects Connected with Japan* (London/Kobe: J.L. Thompson & Co, 1927 [1890]). The German translation bears the derogatory title: *Allerlei Japanisches: Notizen über verschiedene japanische Gegenstände für Reisende und andere*, trans. Bernhard Kellermann (Berlin: Hans Bondy, 1912).

7. Cf. Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art: An Outline History of East Asiatic Design*.

8. On hegemonic foreign policy aspirations in the Meiji period and their narratives, see in detail: Wieland Wagner: *Japans Außenpolitik in der frühen Meiji-Zeit (1868 – 1894). Die ideologische und politische Grundlegung des japanischen Führungsanspruchs in Ostasien* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1990).

9. David J. Clarke, *The Influence of Oriental Thought on Postwar American Painting and Sculpture* (New York, London: Garland Pub, 1988), 27.

10. Lecture by Ernest Fenollosa, quoted in Lawrence W. Chisolm, *Fenollosa: The Far East and American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 94.

11. Alexandra Munroe. "The Third Mind: An Introduction." In *The Third Mind. American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860 – 1989*, edited by Alexandra Munroe, New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2009, 29.

12. Afterword by the German translator Horst Hammitzsch: Kakuzo Okakura, *Das Buch vom Tee* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 2002 [1906]), 110.

13. On Okakura's adaptation of Hegelian idealism, which he received through Fenollosa's seminars at the University of Tokyo, and his indirect overruling of its dialectical structure, see Vera Wolff, *Die Rache des Materials: Eine andere Geschichte des Japonismus* (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2015), 70–71.

14. Kakuzo Okakura, *The Book of Tea* (London, New York: Fox, Duffield & Company, 1906), 63.

15. Okakura, *The Book of Tea*, 50.

16. Okakura, *The Book of Tea*, 58.

17. Okakura, *The Book of Tea*, 60. Here Okakura uses the term 'vacuum' instead of 'void'; incorrectly.

18. Okakura, *Das Buch vom Tee*, 49.

19. Okakura, *The Book of Tea*, 67: "the Abstract."

20. Okakura, *The Book of Tea*, 68: "the mundane," "the spiritual."

21. Okakura, *The Book of Tea*, 4: "making all its votaries aristocrats in taste."

22. Cf. Okakura, *Das Buch vom Tee*, 79, 12.

23. Okakura, *The Book of Tea*, 9. Cf. on this the remarks with regard to Edward Said in Wolff, *Die Rache des Materials: Eine andere Geschichte des Japonismus*, 76–78.

24. Wolff, *Die Rache des Materials: Eine andere Geschichte des Japonismus*, 72.

25. Cf. Bernard Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 53. He also mentions Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki in addition to Okakura. See also Irmela Hijiya-Kirschnereit, "Okzidentalismus: Eine Problemskizze" in *Was heißt hier "fremd"? Studien zu Sprache und Fremdheit* ed. Dirk Naguschewski and Jürgen Trabant (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997), 248.

26. Wolff, *Die Rache des Materials: Eine andere Geschichte des Japonismus*, 81; and see Kakuzo Okakura, *The Ideals of the East: With Special Reference to the Art of Japan* (London: J. Murray, 1903), 159. [Die Ideale des Ostens. Leipzig 1922.]

27. Okakura, *The Book of Tea*, 3–4.

28. Wolff, *Die Rache des Materials: Eine andere Geschichte des Japonismus*, 148–65.

29. Wolff points out that John Ruskin had already done this fifty years earlier: Wolff, *Die Rache des Materials: Eine andere Geschichte des Japonismus*, 83. Cf. Yuko Kikuchi and Toshio Watanabe *Ruskin in Japan, 1890 – 1940. Nature for Art, Art for Life*. (Tokyo: Cogito inc., 1997).
30. Cf. Mona Schieren, *Agnes Martin: Transkulturelle Übersetzung. Zur Konstruktion asianistischer Ästhetiken in der amerikanischen Kunst nach 1945* (München: Verlag Silke Schreiber, 2016), 377.
31. Schieren, *Agnes Martin: Transkulturelle Übersetzung. Zur Konstruktion asianistischer Ästhetiken in der amerikanischen Kunst nach 1945*, 32–79.
32. Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition*, 5–9.
33. For other categories see my study Schieren, *Agnes Martin: Transkulturelle Übersetzung. Zur Konstruktion asianistischer Ästhetiken in der amerikanischen Kunst nach 1945*.
34. Agnes Martin, *Writings/Schriften (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005)*, 16.
35. Witter Bynner, *The Way of Life According to Laotzu: An American Version* (New York: Berkley Pub. Group, 1986).
36. Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition. A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students and Teachers*. Garden City (N.Y.: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1913 [1899]).
37. Janet K. Hobhouse, “In the Galleries: Agnes Martin at Robert Elkon” *Arts Magazine* 44, no. 7 (May 1970)
38. Ernst Kris, “Der Stil ‘rustique’: Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen, Wien, no. 1 (1926), 137-208, quoted in Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*, trans. Alastair Laing and Lottie M. Newman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 48. (Translation by the author).
39. Okakura, *The Ideals of the East: With Special Reference to the Art of Japan*, 159.

# Imaging Courtly Cosmopolitanism and Making of an Imperial Collection: An Exploration of Robert Clive's *Ganjifa* Cards from Eighteenth Century Bengal

---

**Mrinalini Sil**

Jawaharlal Nehru University

## **ABSTRACT**

*Ganjifa* playing cards has been part of a larger material culture of the political elites of the Islamic world in the early modern period. Its arrival, dissemination and creative adaptations within the South Asian subcontinent are associated with the Mughals. Through the 16th and 17th centuries, the Mughal *ganjifa* had spread to regional and subordinate courts of Northern India, Bengal and the Deccan as a component of Mughal courtly culture. More than just a game of cards, these cards served a purpose of political propaganda and reflected on the cultural preferences of their users. The Battle of Plassey (in 1757) saw the *masnad* of Murshidabad passing to Mir Jafar whose accession to the throne came with conditions of compliance and subordination to Robert Clive and the English East India Company. Situating a set of ivory *ganjifa* cards that was gifted to Robert Clive by Mir Jafar, this paper will study the courtly practices of the Bengal Nizamat in post-Plassey 18th century Bengal. Focusing on this 'Clive Ganjifa set' which was done in the traditional Murshidabad kalam of painting, this paper will go beyond the formalistic analysis and iconography of these cards to reflect on the cultural appropriation of Mughal courtly manners and customs by the Bengal Nawabs and its extension to an interlocutor like Robert Clive in the twilight period of late Mughal India.

## **KEYWORDS**

Early Modern India; Company Nabobs; Transregional Art Networks; Playing Cards; Islamic Material Culture.

### **Introduction**

The eighteenth century in India was characterized by two critical transitions which changed the structure of power and initiated important economic, social and cultural reconfigurations<sup>4</sup>. The first was the transition in the earlier half of the century from the Mughal political order to the regional political orders while the second transition saw the English East India Company steering its way to a position of political prominence in North India. While this century was indeed marked by violence it was also characterised by a great degree of political, economic and cultural adjustments, flexibility and pragmatism. The realignment and reorientation of power in several pockets of the erstwhile Mughal Empire led to the emergence of a number of regional successor states, of which some like the Rajput kingdoms, Awadh, Hyderabad and Bengal gained a position of prominence by the first quarter of the eighteenth century. Situating ourselves in the province of Bengal, through the course of this paper an attempt will be made to unravel a fascinating account of how complex transregional art networks were operating embedded in political nexuses that were ultimately getting constituted by reaching across lines of cultural and political differences in early modern India.

### **Mercantile Capital to Empire Building in Early Modern Bengal**

The eighteenth century in Bengal was dramatic to say the least. It recorded the passing away of one empire, the Mughal, and the advent of another, the British Empire, in less than a century. In the year 1711, Murshid Quli Khan, the last provincial Mughal governor or *Diwan* of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb effectively executed a clear break from the parent Mughal state structure as far as actual administrative subordination was concerned and proclaimed himself as the first autonomous ruler or Nawab of Bengal. From their capital at Murshidabad, the Nawabs of Bengal presided over the richest province of the Mughal Empire. Cotton, raw silk, saltpeter, sugar, indigo, opium and such other products seeming inexhaustible; all the European merchant Companies set up factories to trade in them. Traveling down river from the capital at Murshidabad was like traveling across a jumbled map of Europe: there were the Portuguese in Hughli, the Dutch at Chinsurah, the Danes at Sreerampore,



the French at Chandernagore and of course the British at Calcutta<sup>2</sup>. But among the numerous East India Companies that were constantly trying to carve out their mercantile and commercial niches along the Eastern coastline of India, it was the English East India Company that most successfully established its commercial supremacy and went on to lay the foundation stone of a colonial empire in the second half of the eighteenth century. Animosity ensuing between the Nawabs of Bengal and the English East India Company regarding trading rights and mercantile control eventually culminated into the historic battle of Plassey which was not just a pivotal point in the history of Bengal but also the event that marked the prelude to the British empire in the Indian subcontinent. It would, moreover thrust Robert Clive to the limelight of history.

A young East India Company clerk-turned-soldier, Robert Clive's fortunes turned on 23 June 1757 when he successfully managed to maneuver his way through the field of Plassey off the capital city of Murshidabad to win a decisive battle against the young Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah. The victory, like so many of Britain's early forays of conquest in the Indian subcontinent rested on a foundation of lies, spies and betrayal. For, during his one year on the throne Siraj-ud-Daulah had alienated not only the East India Company but many of his own subjects particularly those who did business with the Company. A powerful contingent of bankers, merchants and courtiers had joined forces with the Company agents to oust the Nawab of Bengal. At the heart of the conspiracy was one of Siraj's top commander named Mir Jafar. Through a series of backroom maneuvers, the English East India Company had signed a treaty with Mir Jafar in which he agreed to grant the Company huge cash rewards and privileges in exchange for its assistance in toppling Siraj-ud-Daulah and installing him as Nawab of Bengal instead. In effect, Plassey was won even before it was fought<sup>3</sup>. After their defeat, the Nawabs of Bengal had to accept dependency upon the English East India Company. With the compliant Mir Jafar now installed as Nawab of Bengal the access to great wealth presented itself to the English East India Company as well as its messiah in Bengal, 'Clive of India'. Robert Clive was ruthless in terms of amassing wealth from the Bengal treasury not just in monetary terms but in

terms of Indian arts and artifacts, valuable bejeweled objects of daily use, intricate and delicate ornaments, arms and armour and every other object worthy of a Mughal aristocrat. In India, Clive had committed himself to empire building for the Company but in Britain he used his Indian fortune to start building a vast material empire for himself<sup>4</sup>. The material gains from the East enabled Clive to buy himself Powis castle in Wales and systematically procure a wealth of artifacts which was then stored in his empire of Powis. Through these things, Clive made a deliberate attempt to refashion himself from just a ‘Nabob’<sup>5</sup> of India to a British aristocrat. However it was not the trappings of British aristocracy like Italian marble statues, classic antiquarian art objects, French and Italian paintings, lavish furniture that Clive had acquired but hundreds of Indian art objects like ivories, textiles, statues of Hindu gods, ornamental silver and gold, bejeweled huqqa sets, exquisitely carved pieces on jade, weapons and ceremonial armours that have presently rendered the Powis Castle ‘Wales’ very own Jewel of India.’ A complex process of looting, gifting, trading, capturing came together to constitute what is today the most exquisite private collection of Indian and oriental artifacts of the United Kingdom. Of all the Indian treasures in Powis Castle, this essay will be based on a set of eighteen ivory playing cards called *ganjifa* done in Murshidabad style of painting that has now found temporary shelter in a private gallery in London<sup>6</sup>. Symbolising at once remnants of Mughal legacy, assertion of power and authority of the Bengal Nawabs and the intervention from a foreign power in the form of the English East India Company, a closer study of these cards reflects upon the larger study of transregional material culture and cosmopolitanism in early modern India.

### ***Ganjifa* in the Islamic World**

*Ganjifa* in its several forms of spelling (e.g. *Khanjafah*, *khanjifah* گنجیفة / کنجیفة) is a word signifying playing cards and card games in India, Nepal, Iran, several Arab countries and Turkey. Etymologically most likely to have originated from the word *ganj* (گنج) meaning treasure, the earliest references to *ganjifa* as playing cards can be dated to the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries with some scholars tracing it back to the thirteenth century. A famous pack of

early playing cards at the Topkapi palace museum in Istanbul consists of four suits (signs): cups, swords, coins and polo sticks with thirteen cards in each, including one *malik* (king), a *nai'b* and *thani na'ib* (governor and deputy governor). These represent four important functions at the court of a Mamluk Sultan i.e., the cup-bearers, the commander of the palace-guard, the exchequer and the polo-master or *jukandar*. This iconography with its obvious association with symbols and insignia of governance and courtly life, points to the close link between courtly culture and *ganjifa* cards in the Islamic world.



**Fig. 1.** Mamluk *Kanjifa* Cards. From Left to Right : 6 of coins, 10 of polo sticks, 3 of cups and 7 of swords. Topkapi Palace Museum. Date : Circa 1500

Being part of a larger material culture of the political elites of the Islamic world in the early modern period, it is not surprising that we can trace these *ganjifa* cards to Mughal India as well. The Mughal emperor Akbar having standardized the game, most of the *ganjifa* cards we find commonly in pre modern India are of either of the two variations- of a twelve-suited *ganjifa* set

or an eight-suited set. The more commonly found eight-suited packs have twelve cards in each suit with ten numerical cards and two court cards, the two court cards being the *mir* or ruler card and the *wazir* or minister card. Some of the most luxurious *ganjifa* cards were made of ivory, carefully painted and delicately worked upon. They may have been used for gifting and as souvenirs as well. More than just a game of cards, these cards hence also served a purpose of political propaganda and reflected on the cultural preferences of their users. Through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Mughal *ganjifa* spread to regional and subordinate courts of Northern India, Eastern India and the Deccan as a component of Mughal courtly culture<sup>7</sup>. The court of Murshidabad followed the trend.

Murshidabad has been known for its beautiful ivory carving and artisanal skill. With the establishment of the autonomous rule of the Nizamat by Murshid Quli Khan, the demand for ivory as a luxury good for the court is likely to have increased, encouraging artists and ivory carvers to produce ivory artworks of superior standard<sup>8</sup>. Thus, it is not at all surprising that in the collection of the oriental riches of the Powis Castle we would find a complete set of ninety-six elaborate ivory *ganjifa* cards of finest workmanship and very high artistic excellence. Originating from the concept of different components of court, the *ganjifa* cards represents the crown or *taj* for court regalia, whites or *sefid* for the silver mint, swords or *shamsir* for the armoury, slaves or *Ghulam* for the household, harps or *chanak* for the *zenana* or the domestic quarters of the court, reds or *surkh* for the gold mint, letters or *barat* for the *daftari* or clerical office and furnishings or *qimash* for the stores<sup>9</sup>. Conforming to Akbar's eight-suited *ganjifa* pack, this Clive set had twelve cards in each suit (ten numerical and two court cards). On top of the regular cards this pack had another twelve duplicate court cards as well. Each circular ivory card was of eight-centimeter diameter, finely painted in lacquer on white ground with gold leaf.





**Fig. 2.** The board of eighteen *Ganjifa* cards from the Clive Set. Bengal, Murshidabad. Painted Ivory. Francesca Galloway Gallery, London  
Date : Circa 1757-60

Figure 2 a display board showing eighteen of the hundred and eight cards of the Powis ganjifa set that is currently in the collection of the Francesca Galloway Gallery. In it we find from left to right the topmost row contains the cards of *Mir* of *Ghulam* suit, *Wazir* of *Qimash* suit, *Wazir* of *Barat* suit, *Mir* of *Shamser* suit, Five of *Ghulam* suit, and Three of *Ghulam* suit. In the second row from left to right we have the *Wazir* of *Taj* suit, Seven of *Ghulam* suit, *Wazir* of *Barat* Suit, *Wazir* of *Chang* (or *chanak*) and the last one which remains unidentified. Finally, the bottom row (from left to right) contains the cards for Five of *Shamsher* suit, *Wazir* of *Shamsher* suit, two unidentified cards, *Wazir* of *Safed* suit and finally the Four of *Chang* suit. At the very outset it is clear that the cards are painted in the sophisticated and mature style of Murshidabad painting that we have seen prevalent from the time of Alivardi Khan. We find the attendant figures with flywhisk or *morchhals* rendered with the same formality and stiffness which is a characteristic feature of this court style. The illustrations on the cards when compared with the renditions of the contemporary illustrated manuscripts from

Murshidabad, bear striking similarities right from the composition, schematic arrangement of the figures to style of painting the dresses and turbans. A closer look at the numerical *Ghulam* suit cards draws our attention to figures which are stout with a kind of stumpiness that nearly makes them appear as rotund. These figures bear distinct parallel to the depiction of seated figures in contemporary court patronised illustrated manuscripts. This helps us forward the hypothesis that these cards were worked upon by the court's atelier of painters to whom the illustrated manuscript like that of the *Dastur-i-Himmat* can also be credited<sup>40</sup>. Based on the stylistic resonance and considered as patronized by the Nawab of Bengal, scholars like Robert Skelton and Rosemary Crill who had systematically catalogued the Clive collection of Powis have further conjectured that this *ganjifa* set had been a gift to Robert Clive from Nawab Mir Jafar<sup>41</sup>.

#### **Political Significance of the Clive *Ganjifa* Set**

As noted before, the association of *ganjifa* cards with courtly practices was very well versed. The Clive set becomes an even more interesting subject of study when we realize that it has twelve extra court cards. Each suit has a *Mir* and *Wazir*. With eight suits there should be sixteen court cards but in fact the set has twenty-eight. Every court card in this collection (barring the *Ghulam wazir*, *Chang wazir* and *Surkh mir* and *wazir* cards) has an inscription written on the *chatris* of the *mir* cards and the haloes of the *wazir* card which corresponds to the name of the entire Mughal line of rulers from Timur upto Alamgir II. The great early princes of the Mughal dynasty from Timur to Shah Jahan are represented on the *mir* cards while the *wazir* cards represented the Mughal line from Aurangzeb to the later Mughal rulers ending in Alamgir II. It is probable that the extra twelve court cards that are a part of this set were added by the artist to represent the entire Timurid Mughal line from Timur to the contemporary Mughal Emperor Alamgir II. These portraits of Mughal royalty are also situated within typical *darbar* or court scenes: the royal figures are dressed in Mughal court attire with attendants bearing torches positioned behind them embodying the usual Mughal courtly formalism. It is significant that in a polity such as Bengal which had broken away from the

Mughal empire there was a constant effort at seeking the Mughal connection and political-cultural legitimacy associated with it. The embellishments on the playing cards by taking the form of portraits of the Mughal dynasty together with their ancestor Timur poses a poignant reminder to the users of these cards of the long and illustrious Mughal line with its Timurid origin and how the Bengal Nizamat sought a continuity with that.

Mir Jafar's act of gifting Clive with this precious ivory *ganjifa* is also significant. This was a time of considerable socio-political tumult where seeking legitimacy and claiming a continuation with the Mughal rule became a prerogative for a person like Mir Jafar whose accession to the throne happened under dubious circumstances. Firstly, it reminds us of the dependency of the Bengal Nawab on the English, an arrangement that was ushered in by Mir Jafar after the Battle of Plassey. By giving Clive this specific gift, the Nawab was making a political statement that stressed the connections between the two and perhaps emphasized the Nawab's indebtedness to the Englishman. Secondly, drawing from the imperial Mughal ideology in appropriating the gifting practices from the Mughal emperors and extending it to Robert Clive, the Nawab of this eighteenth century successor state was trying to forge an idea of kingship that sought legitimacy and continuation of the very same Mughal rule that they have broken away from. Hence the emphasis on gifting an exquisite *ganjifa* set highlights the emulative imperial ideology as well as the cultural appropriation of courtly manners and customs. Taking into consideration the political authority of the donor and recipient and the strategic timing of gifting this *ganjifa* set, we find an extension of this Mughal cultural significance to someone like Robert Clive; He was one of the pioneer interlocutors between the East and the West, and the life and the legacy of the huge material remains of his collection testifies for it.

### **Conclusion**

Robert Clive was the first imperial collector of British India. He had assumed that mantle in Bengal, in a metaphoric sense, by acquiring territory and resources for the English East India Company. He had also collected a

tremendous fortune for himself. Clive returned to Britain after the Battle of Plassey as the Baron of Plassey and rumors of egg-size diamonds and chests of gold followed him through the capital. Meticulous calculations found in the textual records of the Clive papers confirms that Clive's net worth at that point was roughly around half a million pounds, more than fifty million pounds by today's standard. It was the first and possibly the greatest rags to riches story of the British Empire. With his Indian fortune Clive systematically bought all the trappings of a British aristocrat: property, political power, great houses, fine arts, stylish furnishings, a British peerage and the social and dynastic securities that came with it. This self-fashioning that Robert Clive undertook from the 'Baron Clive of Plassey' to 'Clive of Britain' is probably best represented in a portrait that he had commissioned from the artist and his cousin Charles Clive in 1764.



**Fig. 3.** Baron Robert Clive (1725-1774), 'Clive of India'. Charles Clive. Date : 1760. Oil on Canvas. Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery, Accession Number-SHYMS: FA/1990/36



A flattering portrait where Clive is seen donning a baron's robe cuffed with brocade, garlanded with gold braid, on the table next to him sits his coronet he poses with the elegance of a nobleman. What makes this painting interesting is the painting of Nawab Mir Jafar, his Bengal ally, hanging over Clive's shoulder on the wall behind him. What accounts for this portrait within a portrait? A very interesting letter from Clive's wife Margaret dated February 1764, about the same time when this painting was painted, suggests that it may actually have been intended for Mir Jafar, a "present as a mark of our lasting sense of his favours<sup>42</sup>". The exchange of portraits between rulers being a common means of cementing alliances, this painting was the celebration of a remarkable symbiosis, that of transcontinental peers, of Nawabs and Barons, Robert Clive made Mir Jafar and Mir Jafar made him.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Alam Muzaffar, *The crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab 1707- 48*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Alavi, Seema (ed), *The Eighteenth century in India*, New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Archer, Mildred., *India and British Portraiture*, London, Sotheby Parke Bernet, 1979.
- Chatterjee, Kumkum, *The Cultures of history in early modern India: Persianization and Mughal culture in Bengal*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Chatterjee, Kumkum "Cards & Culture: Cultural Cosmopolitanism in Mughal India" .Incomplete transcripts of this lecture obtained from <https://kumkumchatterjee.weebly.com/papers.html>
- Chatterjee, Ratnabali, *From the karkhana to the studio: A study in the changing social rules of patron and artist in Bengal*, New Delhi: Books & Books, 1990.
- Das, Neeta and Rosie Llewellyn-Jones (eds) *Murshidabad: Forgotten Capital of Bengal*, Mumbai: Marg Publications: 2013.
- Falk, T., and Archer, M., *Indian Miniatures in the India Office Library*, London: Sotheby Parke Bernet, 1981.
- Jasanoff, Maya, *Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture and Conquest in the East (1750-1850)*. New York : Vintage Books, 2005.
- Jasanoff, Maya "Collectors of Empire: Objects, Conquests and Imperial self-fashioning" *Past and Present*, No 184, 2004. 109-135.
- Leach, Linda York, *Mughal and Other Indian Paintings from the Chester Beatty Library. Volumes I and II*, Dublin: Chester Beatty Library, 1995.

- Marshall, P.J., *The Eighteenth Century in Indian History: Evolution or Revolution?* New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 2005
- Mukherjee, Tilottama, "The co-ordinating state and the economy: The Nizamat in eighteenth century Bengal" *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Mar., 2009).389-436.
- Pal, Pratapaditya "Indian artists and British patrons in Calcutta" in *Changing Visions, Lasting Images: Calcutta through 300 years*, Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1990.
- Schmitz, Barbara. ed. *After the Great Mughals: Painting in Delhi and the Regional Courts in the 18th and 19th Centuries* (Vol. 53 No. 4), Mumbai: Marg Publications 2002.
- Skelton, Robert., "Murshidabad painting" *Marg*, vol. 10, Bombay, 1956, pp. 10-22.

### Endnotes

1. Seema Alavi(ed), *The Eighteenth Century in India : Debates in Indian History and Society* (New Delhi :Oxford University Press, 2002)
2. Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of empire: Lives, culture and conquest in the east, 1750-1850.* (New York : Vintage Books, 2005) p. 29.
3. Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of empire: Lives, culture and conquest in the east, 1750-1850.* (New York : Vintage Books, 2005) p. 29.
4. Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of empire: Lives, culture and conquest in the east, 1750-1850.* (New York : Vintage Books, 2005) p. 32.
5. An anglicized distortion of the term Nawab; Referring to British agents and officers who had amassed enormous personal fortunes in India through business or dispensation of other administrative functions in the name of the English East India Company.
6. The eighteen *ganjifa* cards discussed in this section are currently housed in the Francesca Galloway Gallery in London.
7. Kumkum Chatterjee, "Cards & Culture: Cultural Cosmopolitanism in Mughal India". Incomplete transcripts
8. Pratapaditya Pal, "The mastery of Tulsiram's Durga and Ivory Carving of Murshidabad" in *Murshidabad:Forgotten Capital of Bengal* (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2013) 110.
9. Toby Falk and Mildred Archer, *Indian Miniatures in the India Office Library* (London: Sotheby Parke Bernet, 1981).
10. *Dastur-i-Himmat*, MS.12 Chester Beatty Library Collection, Dublin.
11. Quoted from the object description of the Francesca Galloway gallery which cites the work of Rosemary Crill's, *Treasures from India- The Clive Collection at Powis Castle* Catalogue, 112.
12. Margaret Clive to John Carnac, February 27, 1764, OIOC :MSS Eur Fr28/27., British Library, London.

### Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to my supervisor Prof. Kavita Singh for her insightful comments and feedback on this paper. I also benefitted from my discussions with Amrita Chattopadhyay and Deepashree Dutta. Further, I am grateful to Deepashree for graciously reviewing my draft. All mistakes are my own.