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Discursive Capabilities of Contemporary Artistic Practices in Honduras

Gustavo Larach

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**Discursive Capabilities of
Contemporary Artistic Practices in Honduras**

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Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfilment
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Doctor of Philosophy

Art History

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July, 2015

For David Craven,
in memoriam

Many thanks to Erica Segre
Kency Cornejo
Kirsten Pai Buick
and Szu-Han Ho

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by

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation constitutes a descriptive and interpretative analysis of modern and contemporary artistic practices in Honduras. This analysis is carried out comparatively, contrasting mainly the formative decades of Honduran “modernism” (1920s-40s) against the last 15 years of artistic production. Along this diachronic strategy, my interpretation of these processes is anchored in detailed accounts of the socio-historical durations that bear upon them. For each case, at least one case study is developed thoroughly, elucidating thus the dialectic entwinement of art and history. For such purpose, the modes of production and reception entailed by the practices of Arturo López Rodezno (active 1940s-1960s) and Lucy Argueta (active 2005-present) are read in close relation to the social historical processes in which they are incrustated. It thus becomes apparent how some practices, like that of López Rodezno, deny social history and contemporary realities, and others, like that Argueta, prompt participation in making sense of contemporary history, even while artists are too diffident or market-oriented to openly acknowledge meaning.

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Introduction

My dissertation has a dual purpose. In discussing at length diverse aspects of artistic production in Honduras, both modern and contemporary, I seek to shed some light on a transformation I perceive to be occurring in Honduras' artistic field during recent years. It pertains to the mode in which artists are approaching the nation's social history and contemporary crises, as well as their strategies to induce their public into critical reflection. Artists in Honduras have engaged the nation's social realities almost for a century now, if we take into account certain works by early Honduran modernists like Confucio Montes de Oca and Pablo Zelaya Sierra, both born in 1896. The implementation, during the 1940s, of the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes (ENBA), under the auspices of the Carías regime, incremented the gap between the world constructed through artistic form and the one actually lived by Hondurans in their quotidian environments. Starting the 1960s, a symbiosis of experimentation in pictorial practices with efforts to discourse about contemporary realities, such as social conflict and military repression, began to obtain. A case in point would be the artists grouped around the Taller de la Merced (1960s-70s), and later the Taller Dante Lazzaroni (1980s). A good example of a socially committed artist working during the 1990s would be Xenia Mejía, whose interdisciplinary practice engages social concerns at a more conceptual level, as opposed to the more narrative,

neo-expressionist works, or simply aestheticist canvases that came before her.¹ A shift starts happening here, a different type of vanguardist impulse is already taking place in the works of Mejía, exceeding pictorial innovation and expressionist surfaces to engage in the production of works that fill the exhibition space with objects that come from, or readily evoke, every day material life. This process, by which art in Honduras starts to become more mundane, starts to dialogue more with the social world that engulfs its production, and starts thus to acquire more significance, grows in tension with the aestheticist and *costumbrista* veins of Honduran art favoured by official institutions and commercial galleries in the country, a tradition very much alive today.

It is in the last 10 or 15 years that the number of young artists working under a vanguardist, socially committed impulse has grown, their practices disseminating this mode of production. When I was working with the curatorial team of the 2012 Honduran Biennial, artist Léster Rodríguez, a key agent within this new evolving process, observed the relevance Tristan Tzara's Dada Manifesto of 1918 has for understanding contemporary experimental practices in Honduras. I do agree with him, if some exceptions are granted. There is in these young artists a revolutionary impulse, a pervasive spirit of dissent, a consistent and programmatic effort to deny and oppose the values of established institutions in the nation, artistic, cultural, politic, and religious. Another Dada element,

¹ Regina Aguilar and Santos Arzú deserve also to be mentioned and studied in this juncture, which Ramón Caballero has elaborated on in his text "Canales de Tránsito." See Adán Vallecillo, *La Otra Tradición : Un Encuentro Con El Arte Contemporáneo En Honduras, 2000-2010* (Ciudad de Guatemala: Consultores de Arte, 2011), 125-77.

concomitant with the revolutionary impulse, is the chaos that captivates the Dada imagination. Its pursuit in artistic practices aims at demolishing an old symbolic system that precludes art from discoursing on the world that engulfs its producers. What Tzara saw, in the aftermath of the Great War, as a commendable mixing of genres, could be compared to the new interdisciplinary practices that develop in Honduras during the last two decades. The element I would problematise right away is Tzara's paternalistic attitude towards the art of Africa and Oceania, in which he saw "l'enfance de l'humanité," a source of spontaneity and *joie de vivre*.² This is a terribly reductionist understanding of African and Oceanic art, and it is indeed interesting to note that when a Creole artist in Honduras, like Arturo López Rodezno, would recur to a culture (partially) native to the national territory to modernise his art and generate a nationalistic visual culture, he would simplify and stylise its forms, saturate its colours, and in the process empty its visual forms from its native values and cosmology. López Rodezno implemented this nativist approach as a key component of official art in Honduras, as I show in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, first through his directorship at the ENBA during most of the decade of 1940, and then through his commissions by official and financial institutions in Honduras and Guatemala during the 1960s. Such nativist approach informs official "modernism"³ to this

² Henri Béhar. "Tzara, Tristan." *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed February 17, 2015, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T086786>.

³ Within the framework of this dissertation, a modernism is always a contingent form and never a unified, undifferentiated process: there were (and there still are) different and differing modernisms that occurred at different junctures of time and space, and even within a more simultaneous context. As David Craven wrote circa 1996 [his italics], "to speak with insight and

day, and, as I argue in Chapter 2 and 2, it is at odds with the vanguardist impulses of the last decade.

When one compares the most recent art produced independently in Honduras to the art produced at the ENBA by most faculty or students, the institution's artistic output starts to appear naive and dated. The symptoms of this discursive discrepancy start to appear at the end of the 1990s. One such symptomatic episode would be the faculty's accusation of artist Gabriel Galeano as a plagiarist, while he was a student at the ENBA, during 1999. Having been witness to more recent attacks on artists by the officials at the ENBA, I have noticed that what they tend to see in contemporary art as plagiarism is simply a recurrence of tropes and materials, elements of an inter-subjective, dialogical mode of artistic production and discourse richly at play within the younger generation. The tensions betrayed by the Galeano episode led eventually to a strike started by the students at ENBA. This dissenting artists constituted and nurtured the germ that would soon find embodiment in artist collectives,⁴ which broke with the domesticated and calcified mode of understanding and producing art that still obtains at the School; while neoconservatives at ENBA were still chanting the gospel according to López Rodezno, these young artists circumvented and outgrew the band of self-righteous Pharisees that sought to inhibit their impulse towards an artistic production anchored in social critique and

sensitivity of modernist art, from the late 1800s to the post-1945 period, is *to speak of a plurality of related but also notably divergent and even fractious tendencies*, some of which were grounded in a broad ranging multiculturalism and were part of an uneven, non-linear development that contravenes the linear concept of historical progress intrinsic to western modernization." See, "The Latin American Origins of 'Alternative Modernism'," *Third Text* 36 (1996): 30.

⁴ Lester Rodriguez, personal communication, 17 February 2015

the materials of everyday life. If composed mostly of ENBA's ex-alums, the collectives integrated other creators as well. The collective Manicomio appeared in 1999, and many of its members would regroup into Artería in 2002, year that saw the formation of yet another collective, El Círculo.⁵ The practices that evolved within these collectives shaped the mode of artistic production I discuss thoroughly in Chapter 3.

While the second chapter of this dissertation seeks to elucidate the mode of discourse at work in the productions of this new generation of artists, vis-à-vis social institutions and realities in Honduras, Chapter 4 constitutes an in-depth case study of a single artistic project: the video-installation titled *Merma*, by artist Lucy Argueta. *Merma* embodies a confluence of interdisciplinary practice, alienating experience, and dialogue with history. Such integration of discursive strategies in a single work sets up a sound artistic node for the engagement of social reality by artists and publics; it entails a great capacity for the induction of critical dialogues, and the confrontation of the diverging modes of understanding the Honduran nation today. This exchange is a pressing necessity in contemporary Honduras, since it is the mutually exclusive ways of narrating and making sense of the nation's history what splits it at its core and precludes trust among its differing constituencies or social groups—trust, a structural necessity of any healthy economy, has become very difficult even within what would

⁵ For a discussion of the practices of these collectives, see Adán Vallecillo's essay "Aproximaciones sociológicas al arte actual de Honduras," in Vallecillo, *La Otra Tradición : Un Encuentro Con El Arte Contemporáneo En Honduras, 2000-2010*, 178-221.

otherwise appear as a group of people tied together by similar concerns.⁶ I engage thus in a account of the process by which *Merma* was conceived and produced, a description of the experience that it entailed for viewers, an analysis of its inner structure, the histories it invokes, and its mode of emptying the pre-conceptions neoconservatives have of social affairs in Honduras. *Merma* has the power of generating intersubjective exchanges within the agents of artistic production and reception in Honduras, and in that way it can surely prompt an understanding about the ways in which art can transform the perception of our social world.

The other goal that guided the process of researching, drafting, and structuring the following essay is an effort to exercise and integrate into one single text the methodologies and textual strategies I learned from my mentor, the late David Craven. This entails a thorough reconstruction of the historical processes that inform and allow the semantic and discursive richness of artworks, as well as a close study into the forms and inner logic of artworks vis-à-vis that history. Within my working method, I do not give primacy either to the work or to the history it dialogues with, but rather oscillate between these two dialectically intertwined durations, going back and forth among the two in order to locate correspondences and oppositions, and thus ponder the solvency of the discursive operations at play. Through the duration of my study of works, documents, and other sources, I keep an alert mind to the inconsistencies that might betray any ideologies, i.e. the veiled processes of reason, the logical

⁶ I elaborate my perception and explanation of these multiplying subjective splits in chapter 2.

substrates, and motivations that, consciously or not, shape discourse for any of the agents involved in the production and reception of art in the framework of time/space under consideration. Along with a constant dedication to the reconstruction of the historical context that enwraps the production under my scrutiny and a steadfast radar for opportunities for ideology critique, I implement semiotic analysis in the discussion of different objects across the essay, recurring to the structural conception of codes and semiotic systems found in the early work of Roland Barthes (which apply to Argueta's use of clothes as elements of signification in Chapter 3), the Marxist-dialectic mode of reception set forth by Umberto Eco in his book *Opera Aperta* of 1968 (on which I rely to elucidate the mode of reception involved in the works by Jorge Oqueli, Lester Rodríguez, and Adán Vallecillo in Chapter 4), and Julia Kristeva's distinction between the symbolic and semiotic orders as posited in her 1974 book *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Interested as I am in the aesthetics of reception, I have studied thoroughly the concept of estrangement (recurring to Tzvetan Todorov's *Poetics*) and especially, for the case of Argueta, Kristeva's own re-elaboration of Freud's idea of the *uncanny*, which entails a denaturalisation of the evil we cast onto others. This conceptual frame is key to my discussion of the mode of reception entailed by Argueta's *Merma*. I recur to diachrony in several ways and cases, in order to make palpable the transformations occurring over time in a cultural field that does not always keep a record of its practices. López Rodezno's perverse form of *indigenism* is rendered futile when considered vis-à-vis the vernacular

photographic discourse that became ubiquitous in digital social media during the aftermath of the 2009 coup d'état in Honduras. Yet, while navigating the text throughout, López Rodezno's "modernism" is also compared, explicitly or not, with the practices of artists like Lester Rodríguez and Adán Vallecillo, in Chapter 3, and, more surreptitiously, with the work of Argueta in Chapter 4.

Chapter 1 starts with the section "The Myth of a Honduran Modernism," which de-mythologises the idea of a unified, all-heroic "modernism" in Honduras during the 20th century. This is my way of engaging the contemporary reception of modernist painting in the country, performing a critique of a 2009 text that overvalues it in detriment of the new interdisciplinary practices that are transforming today the field of artistic production in Honduras. The text in question, the introductory essay to an exhibition catalogue celebrating five Honduran "masters," is symptomatic of the anxieties one can read in advocates of official "modernism" in relation to the experimental practices disseminating presently around the country. The following section, "A Perverse Indigenism," examines the foundations of Honduran "modernism" through a critique of the artistic practices of Arturo López Rodezno, who founded the ENBA with the support of the dictator Carías, and was thus ensnared into the dictator's agenda of creating the visual culture of an indigenous Honduras, while violently repressing and murdering indigenous dissidents in the country. In Chapter 2, the agenda thus set forth by López Rodezno is evaluated in relation to the role the School plays today, in the section titled "ENBA today." To expose the vacuity of

perpetuating and reproducing the rather academic and aestheticist spirit that still obtains at the ENBA, the second section of Chapter 2, “Images that Contest the Nation,” opposes the forms and contents held at the school as essential to art in Honduras against the contemporary vernacular discourses of digital images produced by a broad variety of lay agents across the nation. ENBA’s artistic agenda is thus rendered outmoded, disconnected from the social world artists in Honduras feel pressed to engage everyday.

Once diverging artistic agendas have been contrasted in Chapter 2, I focus, in Chapter 3, on an elucidation of the artistic practices that entail a revision, a critique, and indeed a renovated groundwork for artistic practices in contemporary Honduras, paying particular attention to the objects alluded to by artworks and the artistic strategies used by artists to induce reflection upon those social realities or conditions. The section “Precursors of Dissent” traces a genealogy of socially committed impulses in Honduran culture, previous to the artistic practices of the last 10-15 years, and thus starts to locate the symptoms of disquiet in cultural agents during the last decades. The following section “Speaking the Unspeakable,” consists on an account of the conceptual frame that allowed for my grasp of diverging ways of thinking the Honduran nation today, its perceived realities as well as the ideological substrata and economic conditions that inform and shape dissenting subjectivities within the nation today. Such conceptual frame is informed by the aesthetic ideas of Herbert Marcuse, which I put into dialogue with social reality in Honduras, not only the social reality

indicated by the statistics put forth by foreign bodies, such as the UN, but, more importantly, the divorced perceptions and opposed subjective stances that split the nation at its core. That is why this section, “Speaking the Unspeakable,” is placed right before the one titled “Differing Subjectivities,” where I elaborate and explain the more theoretical ideas of the previous section upon the basis of a concrete historical example: the coup d’état of 28 June 2015. Such a disruptive historical process made painfully palpable the social divisions in the country and exacerbated dissent even within what seemed before like cohesive artistic, cultural, and political groups; it made it almost impossible to infer where anyone stood precisely in relation to current affairs in the nation, and, in that way, it brought unnerving instability to basically all forms of social interaction in Honduras. That is why this section, and the exposition on the aesthetic ideas of Herbert Marcuse that underpins it, are placed in the middle of my dissertation: they complicate the historical circumstances already laid out in Chapter 1, and articulate the frameworks, both conceptual and historical, for the art works discussed *in extenso* in the following sections. In that section titled “Constructing Subjects,” I elaborate on the third Honduran Biennial, which took place in 2010, in the aftermath of the 2009 coup. Especial attention is paid here to the mode of reception implicated in this production, which, in my view, is best understood through the psychoanalytic Marxism of Marcuse’s.

Finally, Chapter 4 integrates explicitly a long history of social repression into the dialectics of reception implicated by contemporary art in Honduras. Both

concerns are articulated into the discussion of a single work: Lucy Argueta's *Merma*, which dialogues closely with the history of exclusion and repression of working class groups not only in Honduras, but also around Latin America and globally. The elaboration of this history alternates with an account of the experience of the work: it is of course my own experience of *Merma* what informs the section titled "A Complex Experience." The following section, "Preliminary Analysis," introduces Argueta's work in general, paying particular attention to her recurrence to everyday material culture, a poetics of embodied garments, the semiology of clothes and its social values, and its peculiar way of simultaneously seducing and alienating viewers. Once I lay out the elements at stake in the work, I go on to elaborate on the following section the socio-historical context in which one must inscribe *Merma*, for only its study vis-à-vis such history can cast forth its full discursive potential, which is explained in the section "A Dialog with History," and fully elucidated in the "Final Analysis."

My dissertation constitutes a humble yet singular contribution to the historiography of Honduran. My thorough dialectical interweaving of contemporary Honduran artworks with a long history of repression and human rights abuses in the nation is a new exercise within this historiography, its extension and nuance inviting further exploration of this natural marriage of unnatural deaths and alienating works. The artworks themselves point at this fraught history, as though they were a warning. I simply follow the direction pointed to by the artworks' inner structure. In that way I prove the works'

discursive richness: it is another aim of my dissertation, perhaps the most pressing one, to convey to readers this richness as well as to convince them of the urgency of studying Honduran art closely, sustainedly, and urgently, since they speak of an ominous reality that is currently destroying the social fabric in and beyond Honduras: the generalised practice of human rights abuses in Honduras and across the globe to enforce and perpetuate the capitalist practice of accumulation by dispossession. My dissertation is made of a peculiar combination of formal analyses, an unveiling of works' inner logics, as well as an unravelling, through Marxist, semiotic and psychoanalytic strategies, of what we perceive as real. Throughout my dissertation, I sought to lay out a methodological pattern I could later follow and refine in order to sustain my study of socially engaged artworks.

ONE: A CRITIQUE OF HONDURAN MODERNISM

The Myth of a Honduran Modernism⁷

The year 2009 saw the appearance of a new exhibition catalogue on modern Honduran art. Titled *Cinco maestros de la plástica hondureña*, or Five Masters of Honduran Plastic Art, the book is a catalogue for the exhibition that made homage to Gelasio Giménez (Cienfuegos, Cuba, 1923), Benigno Gómez (Naranjito, Honduras, 1934), Mario Castillo (San Pedro Sula, Honduras, 1932), Moisés Becerra (Dulce Nombre de Copán, Honduras, 1926) and Miguel Angel Ruiz Matute (San Pedro Sula, Honduras, 1928), all of them working roughly during the last three or four decades of the 20th century. The catalogue, after the statements by the officials from the institutions which supported the exhibition, presents an introductory essay followed by short essays on the individual artists written by different authors, and, of course, plenty of fine colour reproductions of the artists' works, which fill most of the pages of the book. One might ask, what brings these five artists together, what is so natural about this grouping? If the answer is that they are all masters, as the book clearly implies, then one might ask, what is it that makes them masters or, for that matter, what is a 'master' anyways? The discourse about Honduran modern art is full of myth, and it is very likely that ultimately there is nothing beyond myth, or nostalgic anecdote, to sustain it. In the introductory essay to the catalog mentioned above, titled "Los

⁷ The vision of a unified modernism is a colonialist, exclusionary device. As much violence as liberal delusion is entailed in assuming a unified and coherent art-historical discourse around modernism. See Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *The Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (2008).

fundamentos de nuestra modernidad artística,”⁸ Carlos Lanza starts his discussion recalling events of the life of Pablo Zelaya Sierra, which has become a ritual evocation in conversations about modern Honduran art. Zelaya was indeed one of the very first Honduran painters to implement modernist pictorial strategies in his canvases. Lanza wrote that, “when Zelaya Sierra returned to Honduras in 1932, he encountered a climate of intestine wars and national hatreds that in six months took him to the grave, which deprived him from the possibility of developing a national pictorial tradition.”⁹ Zelaya Sierra, however, did not die at war: he died of a stroke. If an artist returns to his country after 12 years of absence with the illusion of doing and promoting a form of modernism in his native country after having lived the tumultuous spirit of inter-war vanguards in Europe, he is very likely to be frustrated. But to say that such disappointment is what “took him to the grave” is certainly an excess, and the idea that one single person can establish a “national pictorial tradition” carries as much fantasy as any other myth.

In his text, Lanza emphasises the “modernity” of these five masters, seeks to establish the “superior” quality of their work, and attempts to inoculate them from the practices of younger artists who are nonetheless contemporary to them, and who seek to build artistic discourses outside of the now calcified sphere of Honduran painting. He supports the argument for their “modernity” pointing out that their works articulated a new way of making art; he underscores

⁸ “The Foundations of our Artistic Modernity,” in English.

⁹ Carlos Lanza, et al, *Cinco Maestros De La Plástica Hondureña* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Fundación para el Museo del Hombre Hondureño, 2009), 16.

characteristics of the practices of these masters such as the treatment of paintings as “objects with aesthetic possibilities” that assume a narrative within them, and in which colour becomes the nerve of the work. Their narrative and figurative treatment of national history, he asserts, served to reveal “the conviction that painting is first and foremost painting.”¹⁰ This tautological statement gives away the vacuity of an argument that locates “modernity” in work’s heterogeneity in relation to nature, which is true of works as old as Roman frescoes, and in the narrative impulse shared by works as ancient as ancient Assyrian reliefs. The pictorial styles of these producers can be traced to works produced many decades before them beyond the Honduran borders—which does deny their claimed essential Honduran-ness.¹¹ Lanza’s pleonastic voice differs endlessly the task of locating stylistic or discursive elements that might shed light on the character of Honduran painting of the second half of the 20th century. To get close to the significance of such works, one would have to arrive through research at the dialectic between their formal attributes and their subject matter, as well as that between the works and the specific historical contexts in which they were produced. Once that work is carried out, it is very likely that Lanza’s five masters would stand in very heterogeneous grounds. Indeed, the richness of the works in question would be better apprehended through an

¹⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹¹ As I understand it, a nation is above all a cultural production, indeed a field of cultural and political oppositions that render nationalism an ever-unstable process of meaning. The question about nations is not whether or not they are authentic or legitimate, but the mode in which they are imagined. When you have several million subjects imagining their *own* nation-object, there is no possibility of a unified vision. See Benedict R. O’G Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. and extended ed. (London ; New York: Verso, 1991), 6-7.

inquiry into the dialogues among their peculiar visual strategies, subject matter, and specific socio-historical contexts, rather than assuming an all-elusive national essence and modernity, particularly in a nation that, almost two centuries after declaring itself “independent,” is yet to become one.

Unable to accept the “ordinariness” of their mundane practices, to use Raymond Williams’ term, Lanza essentialises his masters.¹² He states that pictorial “works of quality” become a valuable instrument for the edification of sensibility in the nation, stresses the masters’ attachment to their trade, and the “cleanliness” of their works, and states as fact their superiority vis-à-vis their younger contemporaries.¹³ He suppresses the history of these younger contemporary artists, who engage in more experimental modes of artistic production, indeed more akin to modernist strategies, and uses them to foil his

¹² My standpoint here is to see art and/or cultural products as something embedded (and never separate to) everyday life. The ideal separation between the two was instated around the Renaissance, where artists like Raphael are not seen as labourers but rather as creative geniuses. The idea was still alive, if not enthusiastically revived, during that earliest of all Modernist movements: Romanticism. About that period, Katherine Kolb writes that, : Rather than seeing humanity expressed collectively in the partial conformity of social structures to a divinely ordained archetype, individuals began to worry about how to win their particular places in the market.” See Eldridge, Richard, et al. "Romanticism." *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics. Oxford Art Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed April 9, 2015, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t234/e0450>. I find that such lenses, if applied to a context like the Honduran, casts forth a delusory account of artistic practices in Honduras. The idea of culture came about in relation to rural labour and the “process of intellectual, spiritual and material progress” thereof provided. See Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, Blackwell Manifestos (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 9.

¹³ Lanza, *Cinco Maestros De La Plástica Hondureña*, 18-19. I lament the precariousness of dialogue between artists who indeed worked hard to establish artistic discourses through painting and the younger artists whose artistic practices explore a variety of media. Fortunately I can say that, in Honduras, younger artists keep a healthy interest in the work of painters like the ones presented in ‘Five Masters of Honduran Plastic Art,’ even while they constantly pursue to weave discourses concerning the social reality of their nation through artistic practices that exceed in many ways the possibilities of painting.

masters, whom he also denies a history. Yet, he puts forward that it is art history itself which testifies to the legacy of five masters who “transformed their time into art... and explored with their lives the secrets of painting”¹⁴—a highly romantic vision that suggest value yet elucidates none. What Lanza’s text seeks to effectually establish and maintain is a hierarchy for which there is no foundation. If we think of an art that combines narration, neat craft, colour, figuration, attachment to its trade and, sometimes, history, we would come up with a body of work that would certainly exceed not only the production of these five masters but maybe even that of all other Honduran painters of the time combined. Yet the sum of these aspects, according to the discourse we have been analysing, constitutes the form of a Honduran “modernity,” one that stands separate from the social conditions in which Hondurans exist and is never affected or in dialogue with the crises that still today bear upon the social institutions of this Central American nation. Obviously, it is easier to discuss these painters in separation from Honduran social reality and set them apart from their contemporaries whose works do seek to incite a social sensibility.

Furthermore, there is an epistemic problem in confusing *modernity* with *modernism*, the first a historical condition and experience and the second a cultural practice.¹⁵ One thing Lanza intends through his faulty discourse is to

¹⁴ Ibid., 19.

¹⁵ Harrison and Wood nuance this distinction carefully in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory, 1900-1990 : An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1993), 126. They wrote, “In developing societies in Europe at the turn into the twentieth century the new was ousting the old at a pace for which there was no historical precedent. Modernity refers to the social and cultural condition of these objective changes: the character of

structure a hierarchy and place one group, that of the painters, over the other, i.e. artists engaging in multidisciplinary practices and concerned with a bridging of life and art as sought for in the heterogenous productions within historical vanguards internationally. What gives away this hierarchising impulse most blatantly is perhaps his clamorous use of the word master, which refers, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, to “a person (predominantly, a man) having authority, direction or control over the action of another or others.”¹⁶ The master thus has regulatory powers over others, and that is perhaps the signification of the mythical structure I have been discussing: it seeks to deform the field of Honduran contemporary art in order to impose on it the weight of an unfounded and inarticulate imperative, which desires to regulate artistic production and its meanings, thus forestalling the development and reception of progressive forms or discourses. The impulse to confine art to a harnessed, unchallenging sphere of self-complacent, market-compliant production is widespread in Honduras, specially in the self-appointed “official” voices and institutional agents in

life under changed circumstances. Modernity was a form of experience, an awareness of change and of adaptation to change. But it was also a form of effect on the person: a character these changes and adaptations gave one. It was, so to speak, both a social and an inner experience. The condition of modernity exists in a shifting, symbiotic relationship with Modernism: the deliberate reflection upon and distillation of - in a word, the representation of - that inchoate experience of the new. The boundaries between these concepts are not easy to draw. There is a sense in which experience cannot be grasped until it is represented; though at the extreme it would be absurd to say that the modern condition could not be experienced without a modern art to read the experience against.”

¹⁶ "master, n.1 and adj.". OED Online. November 2010. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com.libproxy.unm.edu/view/Entry/114751?rskey=4Y0PXP&result=1> (accessed February 22, 2011).

Tegucigalpa, which is a symptom of the perverse desire to own and control not only the meaning of art but also that of the nation itself.

A Perverse Indigenism

It is admittedly most elusive to assess the foundations for a Honduran artistic tradition of the 20th century. An art academy or school did not crystallise there until 1940. Arturo López Rodezno, its first director, sought to infuse his work and that produced at the school with elements of Maya art. One would think it very logical to use indigenous forms to render an artistic practice local. However, close attention to the works he produced within the particular Honduran context show how deceptive his practice actually was. By overemphasising and de-contextualising the specific Maya forms he appropriated, López Rodezno alienated his art from the very nation he assumed to evoke. I argue that, through his abstract and sensualist images of Maya forms, López Rodezno participated in weaving a spurious “official” discourse about indigenous peoples in Honduras in overt complicity with the Carías dictatorship (1933-1949).

I would like to consider in this section previous discussions of the artist's work and his role in establishing an artistic agenda at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes (ENBA). It is important to pay close attention to López Rodezno's working method and technique, as well as to perform formal analyses of key works. I will briefly discuss the broad context of 20th century artists who drew inspiration from to Pre-Columbian artistic traditions for the production of modern works, and then step into the specific context of conceptions of the indigenous during the first half of the 20th century in Honduras. I will critically evaluate the artist's work and his role at the ENBA in that context. For the purpose of my analysis, I will focus on those works and projects of López Rodezno that deal with Maya themes.¹⁷ I propose my discussion of López Rodezno as a key case study for understanding the process of inception of modernist practices in Honduras.

López Rodezno & ENBA

In 1990, the Spanish Embassy in Tegucigalpa, with the collaboration of local institutions, sponsored the first of a series of yearly exhibits of Honduran contemporary art. Until 2007, that survey of contemporary Honduran art continued to be presented to the public in Tegucigalpa with the name of *Antología de las Artes Plásticas de Honduras*. While every year the Anthology reunited recently produced work, it has also commemorated in every issue an important Honduran artist of the past, including Pablo Zelaya Sierra, Confucio

¹⁷ Murals by Arturo López Rodezno presenting themes of rural life, like those in the San Pedro Sula City Hall, deserve to be the subject of a separate study.

Montes de Oca and José Antonio Velásquez. The catalog for the first anthology comments on the lack of museums in Honduras, without which the Honduran public has no possibility of viewing the work of their artists. The great loss here is a reading of Honduran art by the Honduran public: "Visual art in Honduras ends, almost entirely, in private hands, and the great public continues to be alien to this production, which intends precisely to grasp the deepest core of things Honduran."¹⁸ Consistent with its vision of showing, cataloguing and memorialising, this new institution, the Anthology, was commenced "under the aegis¹⁹ of the great Honduran painter Arturo López Rodezno, founder of the National School of Fine Art, which today, year of 1990, commemorates 50 years of existence."²⁰ The catalog goes on to compare López Rodezno to important Honduran historical figures like José Cecilio del Valle, who in 1824 was elected the first president of the Federation of Central America, or to the Honduran historian, journalist and diplomat Rafael Heliodoro Valle (1892-1959). The catalog closes its introduction by calling the Honduran public to acknowledge López Rodezno's valuable presence through his compelling artistic heritage.

¹⁸ *Antología De Las Artes Plásticas De Honduras "Arturo López Rodezno"*, (Tegucigalpa: Embajada de España, 1990), 3. Original Spanish: La plástica hondureña va a parar, casi en su totalidad, a manos particulares y el gran público sigue ajeno a esta producción que, precisamente en Honduras, pretende y logra aprehender lo más hondo del ser hondureño.

¹⁹ Again, notice here the mythical nature of official discourse, referring with the word *égida* to the skin of a mythical goat that carries Medusa's head (Real Academia Española). Not only does the word choice denote Euro-centrism, but entail also the calcifying gaze of the medusa.

²⁰ *Antología De Las Artes Plásticas De Honduras "Arturo López Rodezno"*, 4. Original Spanish: bajo la égida del gran pintor hondureño Arturo López Rodezno, fundador de la Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes, que hoy, año de 1990, conmemora sus 50 años de existencia.

Arturo López Rodezno was born in 1908 in Santa Rosa, department of Copán, which is the most important area in Honduras for Maya archeology. He completed elementary, middle and high school in Santa Rosa, but moved to La Habana, Cuba, in 1920 for higher education. In 1930, he obtained an engineering degree with a focus on sugar agronomy from the Universidad de la Habana. Between 1930 and 1933, he studied painting in Habana's Academia San Alejandro, under Armando Menocal. Between 1938 and 1939 he studied fresco painting at the Académie Julian, the alternative Parisian art school that saw the formation of the Nabis group during the late 19th century, which included Pierre Bonnard and Eduard Vuillard. He resided in Rome from 1952 to 1956, where he engaged with yet more painting techniques, including the enamel on copper process he would use to develop most of his Maya motifs. The pictorial practices of López Rodezno thus include several media: oil, fresco, mosaics, enamel and ceramics. In their book *Honduras: Visión panorámica de su pintura*, Evaristo López and Longino Becerra single out López Rodezno as the most outstanding Honduran artist of the generation of 1930, in which they also include artists like Teresa Fortín and José Antonio Velásquez. They describe his work as a “neo-figurative” style of broad planes and emphasise the Honduran themes in it: “Honduran themes predominated always in Rodezno’s work, in which Maya motifs had an outstanding presence... he was the first national artist to elaborate a visual discourse from elements extracted from that great culture.”²¹ In contrast

²¹ Evaristo López and Longino Becerra, *Honduras, Visión Panorámica De Su Pintura* (Tegucigalpa: Baktún Editorial, 1994), 42. Original Spanish: En Rodezno predominó siempre una

to their stance, I will show how López Rodezno's two-dimensional practices actually disembodied Classic Maya art from its meanings, creating pleasing visual surfaces where Maya forms can be recognised, while the discourse is reduced to the compelling presence of glorified, authoritarian rulers.

These two authors also underline López Rodezno's agency in founding the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes (ENBA) in Tegucigalpa, with support from the government, then under the dictatorial rule of Tiburcio Carías. The school opened its doors on February 1, 1940. López Rodezno directed the school from 1940 to 1953, consolidating the institution upon the model of the academies he had seen in our continent as well as in Europe. López and Becerra observe that Carías, who governed Honduras from 1933 to 1949, officially endorsed his support to the ENBA mainly through his personal secretary, the poet Carlos Izaguirre, whose backing of López Rodezno was instrumental for implementing the school.²² Honduran historian Leticia de Oyuela notes that Izaguirre himself, commenting in writing in 1948 on the first eight years of the ENBA, said the school was the outcome of coupling two enthusiastic wills: those of Carías and López Rodezno.²³ Oyuela remarks that the ENBA started to function without the foundation of any legal instrument or budget, and thus understands its creation as part of a centralising and authoritarian program, as opposed to an academic

temática hondureña, en la que los motivos mayas tuvieron una presencia destacada, por lo que... es el primer artista nacional que elabora un discurso plástico a partir de elementos extraídos de aquella gran cultura.

²² Ibid., 157.

²³ Leticia de Oyuela, *La Batalla Pictórica: Síntesis De La Historia De La Pintura Hondureña* (San Pedro Sula: Centro Editorial, 1995), 89.

plan responding to the necessities of artistic production in Honduras. This situation, she argues, corresponds to the way the state was thought and managed under the Carías regime, which consolidated itself through the 1930's, at the time of the re-stabilisation of world economy after the 1929 depression. For Oyuela, Carías' centralising vision, modelled after the 19th century oligarchic republic, led to a conception of art as prophetic and preordained, where the artist is seen as a visionary and by that very conception distanced from actual society.²⁴ Stripped from meaningful connections to the social-historical context which engulfed him, López Rodezno would indeed reify, through the exploitation of a eviscerated Maya visual language, the vision of an all-mighty ruler, Carías himself, destined to persist indefinitely in at the centre of power.

Oyuela acknowledges various influences that impacted the school: Mexican muralism, which implied participating in a visual language that had developed in Latin America; *indigenism*, an artistic practice that cast its influence on the Central American isthmus from both Mexico and South America; the synthesis of European languages with Caribbean themes that was best exemplified by the work of Wifredo Lam; and finally, López Rodezno's own work, which she considers not only inspired by Mexican muralism but also by Maya painting itself.²⁵ At the ENBA, López Rodezno was not only director and professor, but he also set out to paint frescoes on the walls of the institution with the help of students, whom he sought to train in the technique. He also painted

²⁴ Ibid., 90.

²⁵ Ibid., 91.

murals at other locations in Tegucigalpa and the newly constructed City Hall in San Pedro Sula. The forms and content of these murals follow the aesthetics of both social realism and indigenism. The murals López Rodezno executed on the walls of the ENBA during the 1940's included pictorial elements, like the figures of courtiers, ceremonial implements, and glyphs, which can be traced back to original works of Maya art of the Classic period (3th to 8th centuries CE). He would also incorporate these elements in his painted enamels starting the late 1950's, upon the artist's return from Italy. According to López and Becerra, the incorporation of Maya culture as content for artistic projects was something López Rodezno promoted at the ENBA since its earliest years, and the workshops of carving and sculpture at the school developed Maya motifs on doors, chests and panels, which implies these motifs were also pre-worked on drawings and perhaps other two dimensional forms.²⁶ Oyuela considered that López Rodezno's strong drawing abilities were decisive in allowing him to work with different pictorial languages, but specifically important for the development of his painted enamels. For her, it was through this medium that he best developed a pictorial art evocative of the past, an Amerindian past that he rendered mythic. She recalls reading López Rodezno's own comments in a newspaper where he spoke with great enthusiasm about *Indoamérica*: it was for him the concretion of colours and rural and pre-Columbian themes, which should be the centrepiece of artistic production in Honduras.²⁷ Does not Oyuela's perception of López

²⁶ López and Becerra, *Honduras, Visión Panorámica De Su Pintura*, 157.

²⁷ Oyuela, *La Batalla Pictórica: Síntesis De La Historia De La Pintura Hondureña*, 92.

Rodezno's role in the history of Honduran art follow the same logic of a preordained 'master,' destined to be the centrepiece of a rather mythic story of art?

Maya Motifs

The word enamel refers to a vitreous paste used to decorate metal or ceramics. Enamelling is a process of fusion, where the vitreous substance is fused with a metal surface through temperatures as high as 850° C, to achieve hard, transparent surfaces. Lower temperatures of around 300° C are used to develop softer, opaque enamels, which seems to be the case with those produced by López Rodezno, who became familiar with this technique while he was a diplomat in Rome during the 1950's. Heat melts and then bonds the vitreous substance to metal. This combination of metal and molten glass, both components fused through heat, is referred to as enamel. López Rodezno's are "painted" enamels, which are developed on a copper plate. In this technique, the first step is to set over the plate a layer of white, opaque enamel by firing it. Color enamels are then applied gradually, requiring individual firings. López Rodezno's enamels, however, seem to have often begun from a dark first coat. A wet enamel layer can be scratched with a needle to create delineations or to achieve texture. Also, translucent enamel layers can be accumulated over darker grounds to create relief effects. While several of his enamels lack precise dating, we can logically place their production between the 1950s, when the artist was first experimenting with this technique in Italy, and the time of his death in 1975. Indeed, Oyuela dates the so-called "mural maya" in the lobby of Banco

Atlántida (Plaza Morazán, Tegucigalpa), made of dozens of enamelled copper plates, to 1960. Another mural, installed in a meeting room at the main building of the Banco de Guatemala (Guatemala City) and titled *Integración Económica de Centro América*, dates to 1965. We can reasonably locate López Rodezno's production of painted enamels in the Isthmus mainly during the 1960's.

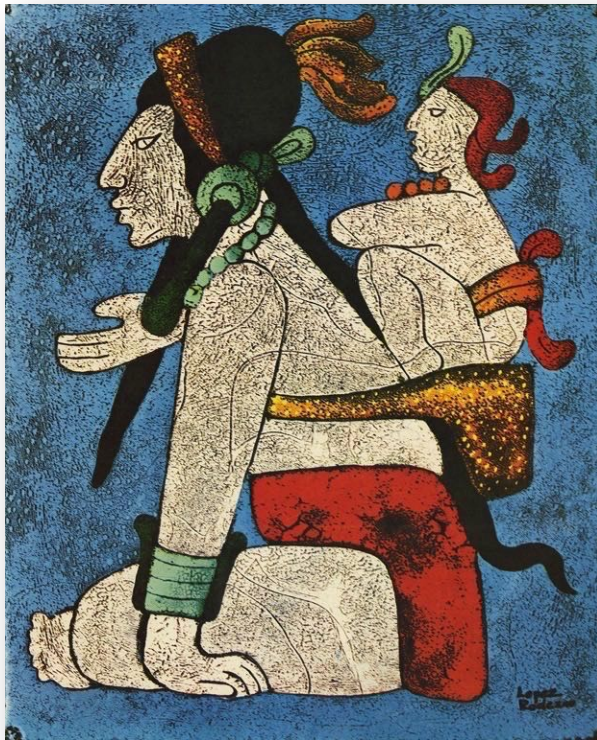


Figure 1: Arturo López Rodezno, *Mujer y niño*, enamel on copper, 1960s

While these mural commissions are made of multiple plates worked separately and then installed together on a wall, 240 plates in the case of the work at Banco de Guatemala, the artist also developed single plates as individual works, measuring roughly each 30 by 20 centimetres. These single-plate works, many of them part of the collection at the Banco Atlántida in Tegucigalpa, are

commonly referred to as *motivos mayas*, Spanish for Maya Motifs. They usually show one single figure that may be accompanied by varying implements, like an incense bag or a spear. One plate shows a snake winding up vertically behind a dancing figure. In another plate, a figure sits on a stone altar as he raises his arm and vegetable forms come down from his hand. In yet another plate, a woman sits in lotus position while she carries a baby on her back. Different sorts of headdresses crown these figures and jades decorate their chests, ears and wrists. The woman and baby (figure 1) are depicted in profile over a field of blue, a tone that seems to quote the so called Maya blue used as background in large areas of the murals at Bonampak. Texture has been developed on this field of blue, apparently by manipulating the wet layer of glaze, creating an irregular and scratchy surface that contains darker regions as well as areas of brighter, more intense cerulean. Dotty marks are also applied for further texture and atmosphere. The white areas that represent the figures are also textured, showing varied marks. This white layer does not seem the first one to be applied: it was applied over a black layer, as were all the other colours used to render the figures. Black areas remain visible, depicting the hair of the woman or outlining the figures with calligraphic marks that recall the fluid lines of ancient Maya vase painting. The colours fired over the black area achieve a more saturated quality. The red of the woman's loincloth, for instance, feels very dense by virtue of the black that surrounds or shows through it. Something like that happens with the child's hair. Greens to either side of the woman's wrist or

around her neck feel very deep: the same strategy seems to be used with them. This multiple layering of glazes is also used to create modelling and a rich interplay of colour. Orange is laid on black, and then yellow on orange. We see this layering in the woman's diadem, in the elongated forms that flow from the crown of her head, in the bag that goes around her torso to hold the child and in the child's loincloth. In the jades that deck her body, a celadon green overlays a darker green; the celadon seems to have cracked in the firing and so the darker green shows through, thus modelling a wristband.

This laying down of bright colour areas divides the picture plane into intensely contrasting hues and temperatures, indeed a modernist pictorial strategy one can trace back to the Fauves and other expressionists, no to mention López Rodezno's friend, the Guatemalan modernist Carlos Mérida. The rich, saturated colours create a strong sensation, a playful and dynamic interaction that can engross the viewer with the forms there presented. This compelling play of colour counterpoints the rather schematic distribution of forms López Rodezno implements in these Maya motifs. I find that this schematic quality is partially a necessity of his technique, that of defining rather homogeneous areas onto which deploy glazes. The other factor at play in the schematic configuration of his compositions is the fact that he extracts visual elements, mainly figures, from actual works of Maya art to incorporate them into his painted enamels, thus isolating those figures from the other forms that went in conjunction with them in the original work. This process implies rearranging the

extracted forms to fit a new one, the rectangular copper plate he was seeking to develop. This is indeed a process of abstraction, where the artist pulls out a figural unit from a Maya codex, sculpted relief, stairway, mural or vase, and frames it within his portable metal support. Not only does depriving the figure from its original physical form alter the visual concept but also, by separating a single component from a much larger artistic program, the abstracted figure is devoid of the meaning that was given to it by the context that originally enfolded it. Isolated from its context and constituted as a new signifier in the enamelled plate, the figure cannot anymore refer to the concrete historical or cosmological narration it was part of, and so can only refer to a very general signified, perhaps that of Maya culture per se, or, at best, to general categories for thinking that culture, like “ruler,” “warrior” or “priest.” Through this procedure of abstraction López Rodezno sought to incorporate an essential Maya value into his work. He pursued an art proper to Honduras, and his strategy for it was to imbue his work with aspects of Maya art. These aspects, however, were not only fragmentary, but their artistic nature was also altered. As we will see, Lopez Rodezno’s re-contextualization of the Maya images he appropriated entails an emphasis on the figure of a mighty, glorified ruler, which would ultimately legitimise Carias’ dictatorship.



Figure 2: Arturo López Rodezno, *Fragmento de escultura*, enamel on copper, 1960s



Figure 3: ball-court marker from Copan, (centre, ball-court II-b), early classic, photographed upon unearthing, undated photograph from Carnegie Institution of Washington, Collection of Maya Archaeological Photographs (Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology).

As an example of López Rodezno's practice of separating a visual element from the total syntagm it belonged to, we can look at a painted enamel plate that was presented in a publication that commemorates the 50 years of existence of the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes, under the title of *Sculpture Fragment* (figure 2). The figure in this enamelled plate comes from a ball court marker unearthed at Copán and now part of the collection at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in Boston (figure 3). In the round, sculpted volcanic tufa low relief, two figures confront each other. The one to the left was chosen by López Rodezno to include in his composition, but the other is excluded and so the sense of dire confrontation that animates the Mesoamerican ball game is lost. In the enamelled plate, at bottom right, we see an animal head that has been rendered as a kind creature, while in the original work it is a monstrous, rather terrifying head. Thus, López Rodezno was also sanitising his work from the more grievous aspects of Maya art. Many other elements are excluded in López Rodezno's composition. The forms of the figure have been simplified as well, and its facial gesture has been completely softened. In the marker, a quatrefoil border, which indicates that the scene occurs in a liminal space, frames all the glyphic and pictorial contents: the quatrefoil border situates the scene in portal to the underworld. Moreover, the marker is a component of a larger whole, the ball court, a space of synapse where sculptural and architectural forms come together to support the production of a congruous space charged with social meaning: the whole sense warring forces, not to

mention the iconological richness, of the artistic and architectural complex is erased by López Rodezno's practice of separation, a very convenient pictorial strategy if you wish to comply to and honour your patron/dictator.



Figure 4: Arturo López Rodezno, "Mural maya", detail, enamel on copper, 90 x 1200 cm



Figure 5: Temple of the Frescoes, Bonampak, Room 2, North Wall: detail fo warriors surrounding captives on a terraced platform. Copy by Antonio de Tejada (original mural c. 800 CE)

Although a few other figures from López Rodezno's Maya motifs could be traced back to the sculpture at Copán, it is interesting to note that most of the Maya "characters" in his enamels come from sites beyond Honduras. One plate shows the figure of Pakal, Lord of Palenque. The figure was extracted from Pakal's sculpted stone tomb cap, where the figure appears inserted within a complex mesh of Maya iconographic elements. The huge sarcophagus is part of the very elaborate sculptural and architectural program surrounding Pakal's burial at the Temple of the Inscriptions. Many other motifs come from sources in the Petén area and the Dresden Codex. The mural at Banco Atlántida (figure 4), made of some one hundred and fifty enamelled copper plates, shows a court scene drawn from the middle register of the north wall in Room 2 at Bonampak. If his images derive from such a variety of sources, it is also plausible that López

Rodezno was looking at different books to obtain material for his artwork. It is reported that he frequently spent time at Copán.²⁸ Furthermore, López Rodezno held correspondence with Dr. Adán Cueva during the early 1970's, who was a crucial figure in reactivating research and conservation at Copán.²⁹ His Maya motifs, however, incorporate figures from a variety of sites in Guatemala and México, which López Rodezno could have readily seen in contemporary publications. Books that could have been accessible to López Rodezno include Herbert Joseph Spinden's *A Study of Maya Art* and Sylvanus Morley's *The Ancient Maya*. In 1955, the Carnegie Institution of Washington published a volume titled *Bonampak, Chiapas, México*, which featured copies of the mural paintings by Antonio Tejeda (figure 5) and text by Karl Ruppert, Eric Thompson and Tatiana Proskouriakoff. This book may very well be the source for the Banco Atlántida mural.³⁰ If López Rodezno was seeking to develop an art proper to Honduras, why include motifs that come, in their majority, from different sites in Guatemala and also from as far as México? What rationalisation underpinned his bypassing of this problem? Furthermore, removing the motifs from the artistic programs they belong to erases their historical specificity. What was he seeking in these motifs? What ideals did they entail for him? The use of motifs extracted from sites well beyond his contemporary Honduras represents a symptomatic

²⁸ Humberto López Villamil, *Homenaje a Arturo López Rodezno En El Cincuentenario De La Fundación De La Escuela Nacional De Bellas Artes: 1940-1990* (Tegucigalpa: Banco Atlántida, 1990), 5.

²⁹ *V Bienal De Artes Visuales Del Istmo Centroamericano*, (San Salvador: MARTE, 2006), 156.

³⁰ Other possible sources include the color reproductions of Agustin Villagra Calleti and Román Piña Chan's book *Bonampak*, of 1961 (Lorenzo Bautista, José Luis, Raúl Pavón Abreu, and Román Piña Chán, *Bonampak* (México, DF: Inst. Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1961).

inconsistency in López Rodezno's project of developing an art proper to his nation. The abstractedness of his so-called Maya motifs, their separation from the specific historical narrative they belong to and his idiosyncratic individuation of the figures, betray the idealised production of a visual discourse rather alien to Maya culture proper, even while we can recognise the appearance in it of fragments of ancient Maya art. The rarefied and exalted air of such images mistakenly assume Maya culture as some type of prefixed essence, as a timeless, platonic kernel containing an identity that can be picked from the market as though some rudimentary commodity and inserted in art as an unquestionable warrant of authenticity. The figures in these works are presumed as free-floating signifiers for Maya culture, which, during the first half of the 20th century, indeed became idealised through the work of scholars like Morley and Thompson as the highest culture from the Pre-Columbian world. In her book *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World*, Barbara Braun explains that, even after 20th century anthropology started to produce specific cultural and developmental paradigms to understand ancient pre-Columbian cultures, fanciful interpretations of the pre-Columbian world continued to be favoured by many.



Figure 6: Arturo López Rodezno, *Untitled*, enamel on copper, 1960s

It is instructive to look at the more abstract compositions in the painted enamels of López Rodezno, of which there are multiple examples. One such work shows a picture plane broken up into chromatic areas of shifting sizes and shapes, their placement creating rhythm and interaction of colour (figure 6). Pre-Columbian forms appear embedded in this rich composition, sometimes overtly, as in the case of a green mask in the upper left quadrant of the image, sometimes less obvious, as the red shape in the lower left, which evokes a head in profile with the line of the nose extending into the forehead. The “T” shaped

element that lies horizontally on the upper right quadrant may be read as a utensil, while the smaller swatches throughout the composition might be read as jade beads. Compositions like this one show how López Rodezno appropriated Maya elements into his work through sensuous form and colour. Abstract art of the first half of the 20th century very often evoked more figural forms in its otherwise non-objective compositions. In the case at hand, López Rodezno seems to insert his appropriated Maya icons into the garb of an expressionistic aesthetic—a combination of historical styles that could very well be thought of as post-modern. I argue that this practice helped him to avoid the elaboration of a congruous rationale for appropriating Maya art. Does quoting original works of Maya art constitute in itself an aesthetic strategy? What can be achieved through such practice? What meanings can viewers read in it? If, for López Rodezno, “Indoamérica” allowed the concretion of colours and pre-Columbian themes, it is not logical, from any standpoint, to think Maya art as particular to Honduras. With his abstract, sensualist Maya motifs, López Rodezno participated, unwittingly or not, in the production of an officialist discourse about indigenous peoples in Honduras, one consolidated during the Carías dictatorship with the purpose of naturalising that very regime.

Maya Culture and Statehood

During the late 19th century, Pre-Columbian artefacts served artists and collectors as the source for a “primitive” aesthetic, one that came from an “unspoiled culture,” from people living in a state of “nature,” whose authenticity of thought and feeling could revitalise modern life. Indeed, one of the strategies used by European artists to modernise their work was to emulate aspects of the art of distant cultures, like those of Africa and Japan. One artist that set out to recover “the instinct of the primal artisan” was Paul Gauguin, who worked not only in painting but produced an array of objects in wood and clay, carving and painting the walls and furniture that surrounded him wherever he went. Andean ceramics influenced not only Gauguin’s own ceramics but also his paintings. Gauguin’s retrospective exhibition in 1908 in Paris prompted many other artists to look at “primitive” art objects to inform their work. “Like Gauguin, they appropriated primitive art with the intention of subverting the established aesthetic order, while at the same time conceiving of themselves as creative geniuses expressing the highest aspirations of their culture.”³¹

López Rodezno, himself educated in centres like Paris and Rome and working in London as chief of the Honduran diplomatic mission, seems to have fallen under the spell of such a paradoxical logic. While the incorporation of formal elements from Pre-Columbian art into modern works of art goes back to the late 19th and early 20th century, López Rodezno’s production of Maya motifs

³¹ Barbara Braun, *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World: Ancient American Sources of Modern Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 38.

in frescoes and enamelled copper plates took place much later, between the 1940's and the 1960's. It could be argued that the Honduran artist was concerned with authenticity, and sought to give life to the artistic production of his country. His quest for a modern Honduran art relied on supplying his production and teaching with the art of a culture indigenous to his country. He was indeed from Copán, and that could have rendered logical, for him, a predisposition to extend the Maya realm into a wider plane. Yet, this is a highly ideological stance, and thus the nature of his appropriation of Maya art must be critically examined.

In Honduras, during the first half of the 20th century, more than subverting a specific aesthetic, artists were attempting to construct a local one, an art proper to their nation.³² Artists invested in that effort include Pablo Zelaya Sierra (1896-1933), especially through his paintings of the late 1920's and early 1930's, and López Rodezno, who not only would have been aware of the work of Mexican artists like Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, but kept communication with Carlos Mérida, of Guatemala³³, who was active in México and Europe since the 1920s. The quest for a new national art, undertaken by these artists, was rooted in a return to indigenous forms. "After the revolution, the Mexican Renaissance flesh out a mythic past that would inspire the Mexican masses in the creation of a

³² Still at the end of the 19th century, artistic production in Honduras centered in portraiture and religious art (these would be part of the production at the ENBA as well, during the 1940s and beyond). Efforts towards a modern pictorial aesthetic start only in the 1920's with the work of artists like Pablo Zelaya Sierra and Confucio Montes de Oca. No academy really existed until 1940, when the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes was founded.

³³ Carlos López Luna, 25 June 2010.

new nation. Indigenist ideology venerated the Aztecs ... as the great ethnic group from which all Mexicans descended.”³⁴

Braun describes Rivera’s appropriation of Pre-Columbian sources as twofold. He used these sources to both promote an artistic revival and to engage in a nationalist agenda. For Rivera, working in Mexico during the years that followed the armed interval of the revolution (1910-20), this appropriation was:

an explicit sign of political affiliation to promote explicitly revolutionary purposes... He used it to construct a mythic past whose effectiveness could be experienced in the present... Rivera considered himself rooted in the ancient indigenous culture, and he was intent in using Pre-Columbian art as the basis of an autonomous and identifiably American aesthetic, independent of that of Europe.³⁵

Mexican *muralism* emphasised continuity between indigenous cultures and the modern Mexican state. Pre-Columbian culture was associated with statehood not only by virtue of its complex writing and calendric systems, but also on the basis of the monumental architecture and sculpture produced by large and stratified societies like those of Teotihuacán and the Maya city-states. In the larger context of Latin American culture, receptiveness to pre-Columbian culture was not exclusive to revolutionary artists like Rivera. *Conservatives also engaged with it for their own purposes.*

Honduran historian Darío Euraque notes that during the second half of the 19th century the Honduran state sought to construct an official national identity. In this context, political leaders saw the ruins of indigenous civilisations as the ancestral legacy of a nationality yet to be built. This mentality eventually fixed

³⁴ Braun, *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World: Ancient American Sources of Modern Art*, 39.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

eyes on the archaeological ruins at Copán, the main Maya site in Honduras situated 12 kilometres from the Honduras-Guatemala border. The ancient city of Copán was abandoned by its Maya inhabitants as early as the 8th or 9th century CE, and repopulated only until the 1860's by non-Maya inhabitants. Euraque argues that, centring on the ancient Maya through attention to the ruins left by them, the development of statist discourse overlooked almost completely the achievements of the indigenous populations still living in Honduras at the time, like the Lenca, Pech and others. Historically, only a slight portion of Honduras was Maya, while the rest registered a heterogeneous, ethnic indigenous population.³⁶

Federico Lunardi, the Papal Nuncio in Honduras between 1939 and 1948, studied the country's archaeology and ethnography. During those years, he promoted the idea that the indigenous Honduran population that survived during the colonial period and beyond was descendent from the Maya. Lunardi even perceived of a Maya populated Comayagua Valley, which we now know to be a primarily Lenca area.³⁷ Darío Euraque explains that Maya culture came to be considered the one indigenous heritage within official discourse in Honduras, what went in effective detriment to the other indigenous groups that still populated the country and continued to be marginalized, if not oppressed, by the very state that commissioned replicas of Mayan temples, staircases and motifs

³⁶ Darío A Euraque, *Conversaciones Históricas Con El Mestizaje Y Su Identidad Nacional En Honduras* (San Pedro Sula, Honduras: Centro Editorial, 2004), 44-45.

³⁷ Boyd Dixon, "A Preliminary Settlement Pattern Study of a Prehistoric Cultural Corridor: The Comayagua Valley, Honduras," *Journal of Field Archaeology* 16, no. 3 (1989): 261,67, passim.

from Chichen Itzá, Palenque and Copán.³⁸ If Lunardi was instrumental in this process, late 19th century American archaeology also played an important role in it:

Paradoxically, Lunardi's 'mayanizing' effort through improvised archaeologies and anthropologies re-emerged as a sub-discourse of the state. How? The Honduran lack of resources at the time and the imperial and 'civilizing' efforts of North American archaeology towards the end of the 19th century became fundamental axes to make of things Maya (through the ruins at Copán) the official indigenous heritage.³⁹

Euraque situates the process that constructed Honduras as indigenously Maya between the 1890's and the 1940's. He posits that when Doris Stone, a famed archeologist of the time who trained at Harvard, started digging in lands granted in concession to the banana company run by her father, Samuel Zemurray, the discourse of *mestizaje* was ready in place. This *mestizaje*, or racial mix of European and indigenous ancestries, was a homogenised one, in the sense that its indigenous component, seen as Maya, denied indigenous racial or ethnic heterogeneity. Stone followed the parameters already established by foreign archeology in Honduras, particularly through the work of Sylvanus G. Morley, who knew and accepted the Mexican version of *mestizaje* as put forward by his

³⁸ Euraque reports that during the early 20th century the Honduran state was still seeking ways of repressing what would be the last indigenous revolt in the country. He situates this process during the 1920's in the Lenca area. (*Conversaciones históricas*, 47-48).

³⁹ Euraque, *Conversaciones Históricas Con El Mestizaje Y Su Identidad Nacional En Honduras*, 47
Original Spanish: Paradójicamente, el esfuerzo mayanizador de Lunardi por medio de una arqueología y antropología improvisadas reapareció como subdiscurso del estado en sí. ¿Cómo? La pobreza hondureña de la época y los impulsos imperialistas y "civilizadores" de la arqueología norteamericana de finales del siglo XIX se convirtieron en ejes fundamentales para hacer de lo Maya (mediante las ruinas de Copán) en la herencia indígena oficial.

collaborator Manuel Gamio in a 1916 book titled *Forjando Patria*.⁴⁰ Gamio, who held several official posts in Mexico during the first half of the 20th century, conformed to the liberal agenda of ‘civilising’ indigenous peoples, whose culture, language and religion had to be changed so that they could be integrated into the wider nation. This homogenising process, leading to a unified *mestizo* Mexico, was for Gamio a necessity for achieving economic prosperity.⁴¹ According to him, the only thing that should be preserved from Mexico’s indigenous populations was their material culture: their architecture, sculpture and crafts.⁴² As Darío Euraque points out, Gamio’s indigenism was present in the Honduran cultural atmosphere of the first half of the 20th century:

In Honduras, Gamio’s indigenism had its presence not only through Morley, but also through local intellectuals who during the decade of 1920 and after fixed their eyes in revolutionary Mexico and inhabited the racial imaginary projected from that country, which informed the intellectual environment in Honduras even during the 1940s.⁴³

⁴⁰ Euraque notes that, if Stone’s field research extended well beyond the Mesoamerican area, her work was probably not under the attention of Honduran intellectuals or, very likely, her publications simply did not circulate in Honduras. See *ibid.*, 53-5.

⁴¹ For David Craven, Manuel Gamio’s ideas, as well as those of José Vasconcelos, were inscribed within hegemonic *indigenismo* in México and elsewhere in Latin America, “which was an objective correlative for Vasconcelos’ concept of *mestizaje* (or hybridity) and the so-called “*raza cósmica*”—presupposed a resolutely essentialist notion of race, a Rousseauian paternalism towards Native American culture, a stridently anti-Marxist conception of society, a strictly evolutionary as well as quite linear view of historical development, and an economic concept of progress that was entirely in keeping with the mainstream Western ideology of modernisation, however much Vasconcelos is often seen as having arrived at an alternative to it. See David Craven, “Postcolonial Modernism in the Work of Diego Rivera and José Carlos Mariátegui or New Light on a Neglected Relationship,” *Third Text* 15, no. 54 (2001).

⁴² Mintzi Martínez-Rivera, “Father of Mexican Anthropology, Manuel Gamio (1883-1960),” *Indiana University Department of Anthropology* (2007), http://www.indiana.edu/~wanthro/theory_pages/Gamio.htm.

⁴³ Euraque, *Conversaciones Históricas Con El Mestizaje Y Su Identidad Nacional En Honduras*, 56. Original Spanish: En Honduras, el indigenismo de Gamio tuvo presencia no sólo por medio de Morley sino también por medio de intelectuales locales que durante la década de 1920 y después fijaron sus ojos en el México revolucionario y ocuparon el imaginario racial proyectado desde ese país, y que penetraba el ambiente intelectual aún en los 1940.

The intellectuals that fell under the spell of this ideological trap included Eliseo Pérez Cadalso, who in 1946 attended an archeological conference hosted by Tiburcio Carías in Tegucigalpa (the conference featured Monsignor Federico Lunardi), and Rafael Eliodoro Valle, both of which valued positively Gamio's brand of indigenism. Other intellectuals, the historian Medardo Mejía for instance, favoured the ideas of José Vasconcelos, who in his book *La raza cósmica* implied that *mestizaje* would in the end better indigenous peoples. Euraque concludes that "Honduran indigenism never pursued concreted efforts to recover Lenca peoples or other indigenous groups, but exalted the nation's 'mayanization.'"⁴⁴ Once galvanized, the tradition of idealising Maya culture and perceiving the indigenous roots of Honduras as Maya continued into the 1960's and beyond.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 57. Original Spanish: el indigenismo hondureño nunca se vinculó con esfuerzos concretos por rescatar a los pueblos Lencas u otros, sino que exaltaba también la mayanización de Honduras.



Figure 7: 1940s photograph of the mural at the bottom of the "Maya corridor" from Carlos Izaguirre's 1948 book on the School.

In 1935, public spaces in Tegucigalpa began showing the incorporation of Maya motifs. The architecture and sculpture of important public spaces, such as the parks *La Concordia* and *El Picacho*, present forms taken directly from different sites in the Maya area. This was the work of Mexican architect Augusto Morales y Sánchez, and corresponds to the official agenda of conceptually and visually constructing Honduras as nation of indigenous Maya roots. Morales y Sánchez's task of filling the public spaces of the Honduran capital with Maya forms continued into the 1940's, the time when the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes (ENBA) was opened under the direction of Arturo López Rodezno. A book from 1948, titled *Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1940-1948*, promulgates the

achievements of the institution in its first eight years of existence.⁴⁵ In the prologue, Carlos Izaguirre, Tiburcio Carías's personal secretary, exalts the coupled wills of the dictator and López Rodezno. Composed mainly of photographs, the book shows an area of the school decorated with murals made of Maya forms, a space called the *Corredor Maya*, painted by Arturo López Rodezno during the 1940's (figure 7). The corridor culminates on a natural size, trompe-l'oeil mural. Such architectural nerve-centre is framed by the arch opening immediately anterior to it, which over flows with macaws and tropical vegetation over Maya glyphs and sculptural forms. These visual contextualisation is reminiscent of Frederick Catherwood's exoticising renderings of Maya ruins from the mid 19th century. Beyond the arched opening, the main mural depicts a staircase of simulated ashlar that frame the image of a seated Maya ruler surrounded by his paraphernalia. The image López Rodezno chose for corridor's visual climax was taken from one of the seated rulers sculpted on the Hieroglyphic Stairway at Copán, which tells the story of the dynasty that ruled the ancient Maya city from the 5th to the 8th century CE. The caption lauds the piece as the first fresco mural ever to be painted in Honduras. In another photograph (figure 8), taken during one of the many visits the dictator paid to the school, Tiburcio Carías and his wife Elena pose in front of the mural: the continuity

⁴⁵ Carlos Izaguirre, *Escuela Nacional De Bellas Artes, 1940-1948*. (Tegucigalpa: Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1948), passim.

between the living ruler of Honduras and a glorified ancient one seems to be the subtext of the photograph.⁴⁶



Figure 8: Tiburcio Carías Andino in one of his many visits to ENBA. Photo from Carlos Izaguirre's book on the School.

⁴⁶ This Maya framing of modern rulers has seen a revival in recent years. The inauguration of President Ricardo Maduro (2002-2006) took place in the archeological site itself at nighttime, which allowed for an arresting *mise-en-scène*, with the actors wrapped by the Maya forms of the set and the actual, dramatically lit monuments. During the inauguration, a Mexican company, using firelights, did a ball game "performance."

An Artistic Agenda to Glorify the Dictator

Maya art is largely an art of the court, exalting rulers and nobles in architectural and monumental freestanding sculpture, vases, mural paintings and other forms. From the extensive catalog of Maya forms he could draw on, López Rodezno chose as the centerpiece of the *Corredor Maya* at the ENBA a dynastic ruler from the Hieroglyphic Stairway at Copán, with all his sumptuous attire. For the mural at Banco Atlántida, he chose the court scene from the north wall of Room 2 at Bonampak, editing out the scenes of carnage and chaos that fill the other three walls in the room. The ruler remains as the central value within his localisation of things Maya. While in the court scene reproduced he still incorporated two captives (of the ten or so that in the original mural appear bleeding or passing out under the ruler), he centred his attention on the victorious ruler and the lavish pageant of warriors, nobles and musicians that surround him. In his public works containing Maya imagery, López Rodezno conforms submissively to the idea of a powerful, sacralised ruler. Metonymically, this artistic program corresponds perfectly to the agenda of a dictator who endorsed the construction of Honduras as indigenously Maya, while repressing or ignoring the rural populations coming from a variety of ethnic groups.

Oyuela's assertion that López Rodezno rendered the Amerindian past mythic holds true, as we consider myth as something opposed to history or to actuality. The artist did indeed confect a beautiful mixture of Pre-Columbian and modern forms and techniques, but the reality of contemporary indigenous peoples of Honduras is ignored in his construction of Maya themes. Rather, his

Maya motifs exalt something distant in time and space, something foreign to 20th century Honduras, when they are not merely glorifying the idea of power concentrated in one individual. The mythic air and aesthetic veil of the images obscure this fact, but the presence and configuration of figures and their attires substantiate this point. The lack of museums in Honduras, as commented in the catalog to the first *Antología de las Artes Plásticas de Honduras* in 1990, would account for unfamiliarity with international artistic languages among the Honduran public. Importing trends and contents seems to have been a strategy of López Rodezno not only in his own work but also in the agenda he set at the ENBA. Created through Carías's own will and without any legal instrument, the school appears as a device of the state, well suited for the elaboration and communication of statist discourse. Working closely with the Carías regime, López Rodezno directed the school during the 1940s. There he practiced and emphasised the development of Maya themes. He approached those Maya motifs with much fantasy, which in the end alienated him and his artistic practice from the actual context of his contemporary Honduras.

**TWO: OFFICIAL “FINE ART” VERSUS VERNACULAR
PHOTOGRAPHIC DISCOURSE IN CONTEMPORARY
HONDURAS**

ENBA Today

Still today, López Rodezno is perceived as a driving influence at the school, the students assigned to copy his works. We can commend the artist's introduction of a modernist language into Honduran art, specifically highly coloured, expressionistic surfaces. It is interesting to note, however, that this practice is not what is privileged in the school today. Rather, a more academic approach to bi-dimensional art obtains, centred on the figure. And of course, the emulation of classic Maya languages, however anodyne such practice remains. Abstract pictorial language was not a pursuit of most artists in Honduras after López Rodezno, with the significant exception of Ricardo Aguilar (active during the 1940s and early 1950s), whose production was limited to a few canvases that nonetheless count with strong reception today among critics and connoisseurs. Considered diachronically, the calcification of statist discourses have perdured at the school, while López Rodezno's sensibilities to form and colour remain part of a distant past, and provoke no critical engagement today at ENBA. While many

graduates of the school have gone beyond the traditional, prescribed formulas at the school to explore meanings through interdisciplinary practices and approximate themselves to realities in Honduras, teaching and discourses at the school prove regressive. This section explores that tension.

Discourses about art at the ENBA

On Wednesday 20 February 2013, I participated in a meeting between the management of the Centre for Art and Culture at the National Autonomous University of Honduras (CAC-UNAH) and managers and teachers of the ENBA.⁴⁷ The purpose of the meeting was to identify problems in the local field of artistic training and, departing from such problematic, establish a work plan for a curriculum review at ENBA, to be held in the CAC-UNAH 28 February and 1 March. CAC-UNAH's interest in becoming conversant with the problems of art education in Honduras's Central District was rooted in UNAH's ostensible initiative of expanding the academic offer of their Faculty of Humanities and Arts, which had expressed the goal of opening a program of undergraduate studies in the visual arts medium-term.⁴⁸ The first problem addressed in the meeting was the conditioning of artistic production in the country by the local art market. On this regard, Délmer Mejía said that there exists in Honduras a market that buys 20 million Lempiras worth of art a month (about a million dollars), and agreed that

⁴⁷ Between January and June of 2013, I was responsible for the Visual Arts Unit at the CAC-UNAH.

⁴⁸ While I was hired to design a program centred on artistic practices, the institution's declared intentions shifted soon after I was hired into a desire for a program focusing on fashion design, an area well beyond my abilities and research.

this market consumes almost exclusively figurative painting. For Mejía, instructor of painting at the ENBA and chairman of the Board of the Honduran Association of Visual Artists (AHAVI) since 1994, an expansion in the field of interest of this market was denoted through acquisitions of works by Aníbal Cruz and Ezequiel Padilla during the 1990s, whose artistic practices extend a Honduran pictorial tradition gestated in the 1970s (nominally circumscribed as the Taller de la Merced), and has recently regained interest (we do lack sufficient serious studies on this path of Honduran art).⁴⁹ Traditionally, the agents of such acquisitions have been national and private banks, prominently Banco Atlántida and the Central Bank of Honduras. While these buyers were, during the second half of the twentieth century, the principal agents in terms of acquisition of art in the country, Mejía expressed the opening of new junctures through private collectors, whose agency is felt most clearly in the auctions, called Idearte, organised by the Museum of National Identity (MIN) with the support of Bonnie García. The most recent auction (Idearte 2012, San Pedro Sula), sold about 2 million Lempiras, reported Mejía, including sales of works by artists whose canvases are abstract, like those of Byron Mejía and Santos Arzú. Despite this ostensible “expansion,” the art market in Honduras remains unstable and favours a comfortable naturalism that avoids confronting audiences with social or psychological realities as was characteristic of modern art, not to mention the diversity of

⁴⁹ I don't seek here to diminish the practices of Cruz and Padilla, whose discursive qualities are highly valued by critics and artists alike. Their pictorial languages comport expressionism in the form of distortion of the figure and subjective pallets, yet in a broader Latin American context they do not constitute innovations in form, although its content remain highly relevant today.

interdisciplinary practices that flourished in the twentieth century, such as performance and installation. It is possible to confirm the exclusion, or incredibly low intensity of acquisition, the market operates on the latter: Santos Arzú, who has exhibited installation (however centred on painted surfaces his practice remains) in and out of Honduras since the 1990s, says that in Honduras just one collector has ever bought from him an installation.⁵⁰ Blas Aguilar contributed to this discussion that what is missing in Honduran collectors, whether bank, government agency or private individual, is “a true appreciation for art.” This entails that, if artistic reception in Honduras’ political centre is not concerned with art’s imaginative or discursive capacities, then the purchases of artworks are guided perhaps by economic criteria, i.e., the exchange value of artworks.

One of the structural conditions that allow the perpetuation of this bubble of buyers absorbed in figurative painting is the lack of arts education at a higher level. The vast majority of Hondurans that graduate from college almost never have contact with art, not to mention engaging in conversations on the subject. Honduran artists stand to lose when attempting insertions in international exhibition and marketing circuits; their counterparts habitually have training at under and post-graduate levels, while the ENBA only offers high school diplomas. Furthermore, the ability of ENBA is negligible in relation to population densities of our largest urban centres: the school graduates an average of 50 students per year, spread over three courses: Diploma of Fine Arts (BAP),

⁵⁰ Santos Arzú, América Mejía, and Analía La Banca, *El Insectario, Inquietud En El Recinto De Clausura* (Tegucigalpa: CCET).

Diploma of Graphic Arts (BAG) and an Art Education Diploma (MAG). ENBA students acquire traditional techniques (drawing, painting in various media, modelling, wood carving, printmaking and ceramics). However, the articulation of content through these visual forms remains largely outside the curriculum. Critical appraisal of art is not a common practice in such community either. This capability could be acquired through courses in art history taught by properly trained art historians, but it is not the case. The curriculum includes a philosophy of art course, where students learn about the origin of art in the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods; about art as a human activity, framed through broad categories (aesthetic element, cognitive element, ideological element); they study a list of formal elements to a work; and finish talking about galleries and exhibitions. In other words, there is no philosophy in the philosophy course. How can we expect a critical attitude toward the local production of art if the only official educational institution specialising in visual art excludes most aesthetic itineraries, Western or otherwise, in their curriculum? Here lies the second problem faced by the art education in Honduras: without a constant dialectical movement between art and criticism, there cannot be an art that is close to the community, an artistic production that pursues reflection upon its communal role and the dialogues it can spark. Art's ability to generate an alternative vision of society is squandered.

ENBA's curriculum review meetings began on 28 February with a series of lectures by faculty members. The first speaker was Delmer Mejía, who formulated 5 key points to be considered through what became a review of

individual course designs rather than a comprehensive revision of the curriculum as a whole. I offer here my translation of them here:

1. Education, in the field of plastic art, goes beyond its educational role... educational training must result in the creation of works that transcend their own frame of reference.
2. The School of Fine Arts ... should contribute to raise the quality of Honduran art, providing technical and theoretical and practical frameworks for the creation of works and contributing to build a national culture and identity involved in solving social problems and cultural issues related to the plastic area.
3. The school is an academic means for transmitting plastic-artistic knowledge, in order to develop skills in the creation and configuration of two and three dimensional forms, allowing actions tending to meet the needs of production and artistic interests of the art students.
4. Given the need to harness the educational potential of the artist and help meet the quality requirements of the artistic product, the faculty and staff of the school should ... be aware of the role it plays within the national education system ... The National School of Fine Arts then must help establish a national cultural policy to raise the level of appreciation of art, providing a model to project our most representative values nationally and internationally.
5. The National School of Fine Arts will help establish a national cultural policy that raises the level of art appreciation by providing *its own model*... Its professional degrees provide the ability to interact in society with a critical, creative and aesthetic sense, in a multilateral participation that would enable an artistic-plastic and visual communication of ideas.⁵¹

⁵¹ Delmer Mejía, "Ponencia [Cinco Puntos a Considerar Por Los Docentes]," in *Programa de Revisión de Módulos* (CAC-UNAH: ENBA, 2013). Original Spanish transcription:

1. La educación artística, en el campo de la plástica, va más allá de su función educativa... la formación educativa debe desembocar en la creación de obras que trasciendan su propio marco de referencia.
2. La Escuela de Bellas Artes debe contribuir en ... elevar el nivel de calidad del arte hondureño, proporcionando el marco teórico y técnico-práctico para la creación de obras y contribuir a formar una cultura e identidad nacional participando en la solución de los problemas sociales y culturales relacionados con el área plástica.
3. La escuela constituye un medio académico de transmisión del conocimiento artístico-plástico, para desarrollar habilidades y destrezas en las creaciones y en las configuraciones de las formas bidimensionales y tridimensionales, permitiendo acciones tendientes a satisfacer las necesidades de producción y los intereses artísticos ... del estudiante de arte.
4. Ante la necesidad de encauzar la potencialidad educativa del artista y contribuir a satisfacer los requerimientos de calidad del producto artístico, el personal docente y administrativo de la escuela debe ... estar consciente del papel que desempeña dentro del sistema educativo nacional ... La Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes entonces deberá contribuir a establecer una política cultural nacional que eleve el nivel de apreciación del arte, proporcionando un modelo propio que proyecte en lo nacional e internacional nuestros valores más representativos.

It is very informative to analyse the ideas Délmer Mejía offered as an introduction to the “review of curricula” on 28 February, since they approximate us to the conception of art and education held by the older generation of teachers at the school, who have held posts there since circa the 1980s.⁵² The use of the word *plastic*, for instance, remits us back to Pliny, who used the post-classical Latin *Plastice* during the era of Tertullian. This Latin noun is associated with the Greek πλαστική τεχνή, plastic art, which specifically refers to the art of modelling or sculpting figures. So we have there already a first circumscription of artistic practices in the paradigm operating in this discourse: it locates art in figurative, sculptural forms, which constitutes a huge discrepancy with contemporary artistic practices in Honduras and specially beyond its borders, where the figurative, as traditionally conceived, has been displaced by practices where the physical object has lost hegemony to allow art to operate more as an articulation of ideas that elicit criticality, rather than an innocuous reproduction of the appearances of things.

Mejía insists on “works that transcend their own frame of reference,” which is symptomatic of a tautological way of thinking art as reference system.

5. La Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes deberá contribuir a establecer una política cultural nacional que eleve el nivel de apreciación del arte proporcionando un modelo propio que proyecte en lo nacional e internacional nuestros valores más representativos. Sus grados profesionales establecerán la capacidad para interactuar en la sociedad con sentido crítico, creativo y estético, en una participación multilateral que le permita una concepción artístico-plástica y comunicación visual de las ideas.

⁵² A new generation of artists/instructors is starting to grow at ENBA, which includes Medardo Cardona, César Manzanares, and Jorge Oqueli

Why? Stuart Hall distinguishes the moment of encoding from that of decoding.⁵³ During the process of encoding, frameworks of knowledge, relations of production and technical infrastructure weigh on the subject articulating the syntagm that structures meaning; the subject or artist is immersed in a particular set of structures of meaning while developing her or his work, which impacts her or his organisation of artistic discourse in a particular way. Decoding is performed by another subject, whose frameworks of knowledge, relations of production and technical infrastructure, as well as the structures of meaning in which she or he is embedded, are different from those that obtained in the encoding process. Thus we see how any work or object that is subject to interpretation (if in fact that effort is made at all) transcends its own inception, in the sense of going beyond the ideas (or even intention) originally inscribed on it. It is very difficult to assess the processes of signification induced by the artistic practices at ENBA, since the institution perceives itself as isolated from the socio-historical fabric that allowed its development. One of the teachers described the school at the meeting of February 20, 2013 as an island:

[W]e are an island in every aspect, we are an island within the education system, for there is no artistic training before or after us; the skills students come to us with after elementary school hurts artistic practice... We are an island in every respect, because even in terms of the promotion of art we are the only institution that has been training at an artistic level.⁵⁴

⁵³ Stuart Hall, "Introduction to Part Iii [Subjectivity]," in *Visual Culture : The Reader*, ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London ; Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications in association with the Open University, 1999), passim.

⁵⁴ Gabriel Zaldívar, personal communication, 20 February 2013

If the ENBA is an island in every respect, upon which reference systems might the art produced in the school acquire nation wide signification? Is that an art made to signify only their own producers, to cast a protective veil over the commodification of government jobs? It is important to emphasise here that there are ENBA graduates that have achieved insertions in national and international exhibition circuits and markets. Adán Vallecillo and Lester Rodríguez, to put two examples, have done so through conceptual, interdisciplinary practices very distant from the traditional forms promoted by the the school.⁵⁵ ENBA's isolation, if any at all, is self-inflicted. It is my perception that what motivates these procured non-involvement is the unwillingness of most teachers at ENBA to venture into artistic practices that would indeed discourse about the sobering realities most Hondurans cope with everyday, since our very official and State institutions, under whose dark umbrella they cover, is one of the biggest agents of social dismemberment in Honduras. Rather, works by teaching post holders at the school tend to romanticise poverty and suffering. More worrisome is the belief that before and after ENBA there is no artistic training, which offends artists who have found themselves in the need of seeking training outside the country, who are self-taught, or who train successfully under the guidance of private practitioners or institutions. The arrogance of this discourse ignores the formative agency of processes facilitated by international institutions in Honduras, as Women in the Arts since 1995, and the Cultural Center of Spain in Tegucigalpa,

⁵⁵ The most common practices among students ENBA are ceramics, drawing, sculpture, photography, printmaking, pastel and paint.

since the mid-2000s. During the last two decades, artist collectives have shaped practices more so than the school. Artería, Cuartería, and El círculo strongly deserve mention here. These artist collectives have been a true engine of the development of art in Tegucigalpa and Comayagüela during the last decade or two, creating opportunities for cooperation and exchange, education and exhibition, and facilitating access to equipment and experts in the variegated fields and practices required by new artistic languages. The Escuela Experimental de Arte (EAT), a project started by artists Lucy Argueta and Lester Rodríguez in 2009, has been an important framework in recent years for emerging artists to engage in conceptual, interdisciplinary practices. Along other short term programs devoted to training in specific media, the EAT carries out annually a program named *Nómada*, which provides emerging artists the opportunity to develop over the lapse of a year a specific project using a variety of art forms, receiving critique from colleagues, more established artists, critics and curators coming from the whole Isthmian region.

There are thus many contradictions to Mejía's claims. As an isolated institution, can the artistic practices at ENBA really "transcend their own frame of reference"? I do not think that is possible while these practices are circumscribed exclusively to "social problems and cultural issues related to the plastic area." Is not the ideal of harnessing artistic potential to the "quality requirements of the artistic product" a default conscription of art to its exchange value? Is this the model we ought to establish nationwide as cultural policy? I certainly hope not; I

would like art in Honduras and everywhere to elicit discussion on whatever problematics artists seek to induce us into. Mejía does not even contemplate that other institutions or agents of cultural production should participate in defining policy, no to mention how to include the public in the discussion. It would seem that ENBA perceives itself as the all-organising principle of artistic production in the country, a role that remains well beyond their agency. The idea that its own model would rise the level of art appreciation in Honduras is largely a delusion, since younger artists and publics, as well as ENBA's own students, are seeking to exceed the aesthetics of naive naturalism that has obtained in the school for decades.

Art Students at a Historical Juncture

On Thursday March 21 we (Visual Arts Unit at the CAC-UNAH) applied an instrument for curriculum evaluation to the students in their final year at ENBA. 39 students attended, which amounted to a 70% of all seniors. We decided to address this group because they had been at the school the longest, and they soon would be facing the reality of the field of art in Comayagüela and Tegucigalpa. The instrument consisted mostly of closed questions, but did include an open-ended question: "In your own perception and experience, what do you need your school to facilitate to you in order to reach your artistic goals?" The answers to this question were revealing, and indeed confirmed many of the claims I made above. Of the 39 students surveyed, 12 (31%) expressed in various ways the need to revise and/or update the educational curriculum ENBA,

11 (28%) expressed their desire for a broader range of course offerings and artistic practices, and 7 (18%) expressed the need to improve and/or actualise classroom practices, and even in terms of ethics. Other needs expressed with relevant frequency by students were better facilities and/or equipment (13), financial support (10), more time for instruction and/or practice (6) and more freedom in artistic expression (4). The need for more time in the processes of instruction and practice manifests already a need to update the actual curriculum, not only a revision of course designs, and the desire for more freedom of expression is a sign that teachers seek their own aesthetics to prevail over that of the students, a bad sign for an art training center since it inhibits the flowering of artist's subjectivity.

The instrument asked students to identify the artistic practices they engage with, both within and without the school curriculum. There were 7 art forms that were marked as personal practices in the case of 20 or more individuals: ceramics, drawing, sculpture, photography, printmaking, pastel, and painting. It is interesting to compare these forms with those practiced by a smaller yet significant portion of the student body, such as "body art" (8), collage (9), comics (7), graffiti (8), installation (5), montage (6) and video (7). Each of these forms count with 5-10 practitioners. However, they are not part of the school curriculum. Lets compare these two groups of practices: the first group constitutes mainly practices focused on two-dimensional works, which entails easy portability and, in the Honduran context, marketing. It's hard not to recall

here the classical analysis conducted by Pierre Bourdieu in the 1970s, who showed that the very workings of the artistic field separates art from the worldly conduct and material interests that shape everyday experience.⁵⁶ And it is pertinent to recall Bourdieu's analysis here because circumscribing art to two-dimensional, figurative practices and bourgeois themes (Maya "motifs", female nudes, still-life, landscapes, "primitivist" languages, bucolic scenes) constitutes an atavistic attitude. This regression results from the peculiar trajectory of Honduran art during the second half of the 20th century, which continues today to be the most rewarded by the market. This is so even while an alternative path developed concurrently, namely a dissenting form of neo-figuration marked by the experimental spirit of the Taller de la Merced (1970s—1980s). Let us recall how Délmer Mejía, in February 2013, noted how only during the 1990s a market opened that would buy the work of Anibal Cruz, for many critics an artist emblematic of the Taller. It is symptomatic, for that matter, that only a quarter of the total last year students at ENBA practice collage, when it was this practice that helped modern artists such as Picasso and Kurt Schwitters to reinvent and transform pictorial language during the early century 20th century. This denotes that there is not much interest in ENBA in promoting the quest for personal or idiosyncratic languages, nor can one perceive a desire to evolve in the construction of space in two dimensions, not to mention three dimensional work or new languages with which Honduran artists have inserted themselves Isthmus wide and beyond it since the 1990s. And I insist in collage because it already

⁵⁶ Paul Mattick and Loïc Wacquant, "Bourdieu, Pierre," *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*.

carries in it the impulse for juxtaposition of forms, ideas and languages that, from the times of Dada and Surrealism on, continue to inform contemporary practices. It is important to sketch out and understand this newer itinerary of Honduran art, characterised by an aesthetic we could locate somewhere between conceptualism and minimalism, and whose visual languages are associated precisely to the practices less privileged at ENBA: installation, montage (or art-object), video, etc.

The Artistic Field in Honduras' Political Centre

In concurrence with the process of exploring the curriculum operating at ENBA, I interviewed, between February and May of 2013, several agents in the field of cultural production in Honduras, including artists from different disciplines and rooted in different parts of the country and even outside it. Among other concerns, I was interested in extracting from these interviews some knowledge of the institutional field, to locate precisely the institutions that control symbolic goods in the country. These institutions include the bureaucratic state apparatuses: the Department of Culture, Arts and Sports (SCAD), the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History (IHAH), the National School of Fine Arts (ENBA), the Central Bank of Honduras (BCH), the Ministry of Education, and the National Library. There are also private institutions that receive significant audiences in the Central District: Women in the Arts (MUA), the Cultural Center of Spain in Tegucigalpa (CCET), the Alliance Française (AF) and the National Identity Museum (MIN, which is state-funded yet privately run). Among all the

above, contemporary Honduran poet Fabricio Estrada points out the Ministry of Education as the “spearhead” of this conglomerate, with “its opprobrious national basic curriculum. Such is the starting point for the emptying of the imagination and the creation of absent being that is then planted in front of artworks or texts.”⁵⁷ This tenacious criticism by Estrada is in fact very relevant, as it is common in Honduran educational institutions to consider artistic products as something independent of the individual’s imagination, something that has value in spite of her or him. Art is thus thought as an agency external and superior to viewers, as an all-preponderant fixed script placed well beyond the audience, which is there only to value or admire it as lofty accomplishment or technical skill. In order to produce meaning, the work must activate a cognitive process on the viewing-subject, whose agency must be acknowledged. While many viewers empower themselves with and indeed perform such agency, the education system in Honduras inscribes students in a logic that inoculates them from realising and releasing this potential; as a whole, it does not provide people with the theoretical or critical tools that would enable their critical agency as producers of meanings. The artists and spectators who do understand and pursue such capabilities of art have obtained their own notions abroad or through their personal inquiries and autonomous study.

State and private institutions are either not in possession of the basic culture necessary to understand the potential of cultural production in the process of establishing a community, and even the nation, or simply deny or choose not

⁵⁷ Personal communication, May 9, 2013

to pursue this potential, which makes them suspicious of compliance with the regime. In this regard, Honduran conceptual artist Miguel Angel Romero notes that “the MIN, the Museo del Hombre Hondureño (FMHH), and several other institutions operate with public, private and even international cooperation funds from the idea of generating identity, defining and representing *lo nuestro* [things Honduran], many times without being fully aware that this involves creation more than creating discovery.”⁵⁸ For Romero, we do not have in Honduras consciousness of the existence of our own symbolic goods, and we do even poorer in the process of their assessment. This Honduran artist living in Germany coincides with Fabricio Estrada in that “the institutions with the greatest influence on our identity are the schools,” for in them we communicate a national anecdotal, whose “dominant stories ... are quite arbitrary.”⁵⁹ The problem drawn by Romero represents for Honduras a critical point, as the cultural capital is key to constitute the nation, it is just as important as economic capital; yet capital, economic, social and symbolic, remains beyond our grip because we have never drafted a national project inclusive of the cultural and labour force constituted by the sum of *all Hondurans*: Honduras is a country of exclusions, of sharp social divisions, marked by a recalcitrant conservatism that inhibits the production of the nation itself, because although its formation depends on an economic basis, its production is fundamentally a cultural process. Like many agents in Honduras,

⁵⁸ Personal communication, April 9, 2013

⁵⁹ Ibid.

performance artist Jorge Oqueli recognises the existence of our cultural heritage as well as the profound deficiency of our institutions in putting it at work:

Our institutions have been historically weak, porous, insufficient, and of limited credibility, so on the field of symbolic goods only a minimum 'control' has been achieved... rather, there has been a lack a proper assessment, systematisation, documentation, circulation, conservation, etc. of cultural production... such symbolic goods are there, but they remain veiled.⁶⁰

Given these conditions, it is difficult to draw the structure of the artistic field in Honduras—in the face of a lack of clear official positioning, oppositional or counter discourses become more difficult to infer. Oqueli explains that there is not a dominant position in the field, but rather a variety of "positions, conditions, reflections and actions of the various agents of art," and adds that, "paradoxically, the market's criteria, which is decisive in other contexts, in ours... does not determine or condition contemporary art."⁶¹

In the perception of other artists, certain polarities can indeed be located. Honduran playwright and actress Sandra Dean Herrera opposes traditional, aestheticising practices to an emerging non-conforming art, in which case the field does appear to reveal the deep social divisions that characterise our national community:

At one end I would place the art for the elite, which operates upon such criteria as 'beauty' and are purchasable (in the case of the visual arts) to decorate the walls of large halls. At the other end I would put the emergent practices, which entails a function of social criticism and therefore is hardly appealing to the aforementioned strata.⁶²

⁶⁰ Jorge Oqueli, personal communication, April 2, 2013

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Personal Communication, May 15, 2013

The market favours a vacuous beauty while it punishes emerging practices that seek to engage the interstices of our social fabric. Miguel Angel Romero also sees the market as a sort of balance beam:

For me the difference between such practices lies in their positioning in relation to the market. The first are made to satisfy a petty bourgeois group prone to ostentation. The second is informed with a rebellious impulse not only against the works of the first, but—though not in all cases—also as an effort to interpret our reality [against the grain], and an effort to be framed in the production of avant-garde art beyond our borders. Interestingly there are artists who, depending on their economic situation, move in both spheres.⁶³

Conceptual artist Johanna Montero concurs also in opposing the “art for the gallery⁶⁴” to conceptual art, nomination under which we can include many of the practices and emerging art groups Herrera and Romero refer to. Montero, as Oquelí, is also inclined to underline the arbitrariness that until the 1980s sprang from the agents who had “control over the productions,” explaining that “such agents were limited to support only the artists they personally liked (guided by a very particular vision) or whom would generate them profits.”⁶⁵ The same artist outlines the idea of a professional artist, favoured by contemporary institutions, specifically the Bienal de Honduras, operating since 2006 under the management of Mujeres en las Artes (MUA). She stresses MUA understands as a professional that person who “can argue for an artistic production through concepts, research and experience in some cases, and manages to fill the requirements of an institutional frame created to support any of the ideas proposed, consistent or not

⁶³ Personal communication, April 9, 2013

⁶⁴ In the Honduran context *gallery* refers mainly to commercial spaces that do not opt for critical and educational programs in conjunction with their small exhibits, if any, as in other contexts.

⁶⁵ Personal communication, April 30, 2013

to the context or artistic practices⁶⁶". This view seems to incorporate some artistic freedom, although it is subject to the artist's ability to operate concepts into production with clarity and consistency, conduct research and advance their career in other concurrent areas, conditions that, given the limitations of our educational system and institutional infrastructure, are quite pressing. I would add that, from my experience as curator in this context, personal preferences and ideologies are certainly at work in the agents in charge at institutions in Tegucigalpa and Comayagüela, the discourses laid out in calls for art and institutional self-description working often as little more than a veil.

All these aspects illuminate the causes for the dismemberment that prevails among the agents of artistic production in Honduras' Central District. Fabricio Estrada draws with his words the artistic field there in devastating terms:

In a milieu that faces everyday desolation and a massive indifference, artists have taken to heart the achievement of high levels of specialisation and sober solemnity. I am not certain if this condition has produced specialists in solemnity, but it has indeed created hierarchies where the artists mount their own criteria and seek to shine by any means, almost as an act of desperate survival on a desert island, crushing others in order to have the ships passing in the distance see their torch.⁶⁷

For Estrada, relations among the various actors of artistic production in Tegucigalpa and Comayagüela are marked by complicity and denial at the same time, and compares the pressures that these cultural actors suffer to those lived in a ghetto. Estrada's image makes the arid field palpable: "What is presented one day is forgotten by the next, without any text to keep memory, without any echo or comment. That makes it impossible to obtain the intellectual framework

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Personal communication, May 9, 2013

necessary to boost the milieu⁶⁸.” Miguel Angel Romero states that such relationships are characterised by unfounded suspicions: “such is the evil of living in a small pond: you have to push in all directions to avoid drowning. In our environment cunning obtains much more than the academy, than reflection.⁶⁹” Sandra Herrera wrote, “mostly, these relationships lack the necessary cultural comport that could sustain them. This does not mean that productive relationships and true collaboration between artists do not occur: they are just too few.⁷⁰” Thus she coincides with Johanna Montero in locating the grounds for a disjointed artistic field in the absence of efforts to cultivate and practice criticism and critical theory: “Relationships in Honduras are limited because of the lack of formal criticism, one that would point towards constructive changes within the development of the arts... I do not sense a professional, open, and constructive criticism that would procure us a glimpse into a better mode of artistic production.”⁷¹ Honduran video-installation artist Hugo Ochoa, who like Romero has preferred to settle in Europe to advance his career, highlighted the urgent need to renew the relationship between artists and institutions; he calls for “new forms of exchange and sustainable relationships that strengthen the symbiosis between parties.”⁷² Ochoa’s claim is valid: should institutions in this context sit idly waiting for artists to bring them their work already finished, ready to show it in its headquarters? I have seen institutions and commercial bodies recede into non

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Personal communication, April 9, 2013

⁷⁰ Personal communication, May 15, 2013

⁷¹ Personal communication, April 30, 2013

⁷² Personal communication, May 15, 2013

artistic practices because of this lack of commitment; they become vacuous commercial bodies, mercenary agents of conforming silence. Being a true agent of art involves actively participate in its production, and that production, like any other, is an economic process. Ochoa raises the question:

Can experimental art survive without the help of state funds, private patronage or any forms of sponsorship? We live in times where the way we produce, distribute and consume art is constantly changing. It is important that the various institutions that serve as a showcase and/or stage for art interpret these changes and take actions and initiatives that give real support to artists ... Otherwise all forms of non-objective art, such as performance art, video, street art, to name a few among many, may not develop and flourish.⁷³

Jorge Oqueli argues for significant linkages between the different agents of artistic production, while denouncing the fragmentation of the field and the 'politicisation' of the state sector. He denounces "immediate interest, short-term look, [as well as] an exotic and peripheral self perception." It is precisely research on the very field of artistic production what can lead us into a better functionality, since drawing it out entails knowing well its dynamics: "the benefit is that we can ask a number of questions about the quality and depth of the relationships among the various agents of artistic production, and then make appropriate connections on the basis of the construction of a consistent artistic community."⁷⁴ Much remains to be inquired, and circulation of research as well as open discussion of its findings remains crucial for the realisation of such a goal.

It would be a misrepresentation to present this image of the artistic field in Tegucigalpa and Comayagüela without emphasising the inhibiting agency of the

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Jorge Oqueli, personal communication, April 2, 2013

State. While foreign and private institutions tend to favour the production of innocuous, conforming artistic productions, the State does indeed severe any cultural or educational impulse that may lead to any accurate representation, not to mention empowering, of any popular or working-class group or individuals. Local agencies that facilitate cultural production oriented to rural and industrial working communities around the country are being shut down. A case in point are the 'Casas de la Cultura' [Houses of Culture, as they were called], the number of shut down houses amounting to 15 of them as of July, 2013.⁷⁵ This is part of the neoliberal agenda of recent governments, the present one included, where culture and education become a private matter, indeed a luxury. The Secretaría de Cultura, Arte y Deportes (SCAD) is a central player in this process, which, while supposed to overlook the operation of such culture houses, denied their closing.⁷⁶ During the last decade, SCAD has flashed ministers of Garífuna or Black origin, who nonetheless remain faithful to neoliberal policy. Fabricio Estrada criticises this illusion of inclusiveness within the regime, while remembering that SADC was created by the military juntas of the 1970s upon the pressure of popular groups.⁷⁷ Garífuna groups, in the mean time, continue to be disposed of the lands they have occupied for centuries. The government continues to deploy its army along Honduras' Caribbean Coast, not to mention its lush islands and keys, which are handed over, in greedy complicity, to the hands

⁷⁵ Fabricio Estrada, interview by Jorge Miralda, 7 July 2013, 2013.

⁷⁶ EFE, "Denuncian Abandono Del Patrimonio Cultural De Honduras," *La Prensa*, 15 August 2013 2013.

⁷⁷ Estrada, "Situación De La Scad."

of a multinational industrial complex, which carries out ever larger tourism operations with no respect for ecological concerns or labour rights. Indeed, the destruction of resources is already jeopardising people's capacity of subsistence from fishing, and reefs, which are the motivation for tourists to visit in the first place, are being rapidly destroyed by fuel emissions and the emptying of black waters and waste into the sea. This situation exemplifies the destructive agency of the State, and hints clearly to the regime's motivations to preserve deluded and dysfunctional cultural and educational apparatuses.

Images that Contest the Nation

A lack of social justice has overwhelmed Honduras since its very inception as a nation sometime during the first half 19th century, a process lead and profited by elite groups then and still unrealised today. Social mobilisations in the 1950s, famously the Big Strike of 1954, which summed several thousands of Banana and related industry and commerce workers, lead to the writing of a Labor Law, inexistent until then. That is more than a century after the old Spanish colonial province of Honduras proclaimed itself a sovereign republic (1838). Neoliberal governments of the last two decades have reversed the social conquests allowed by the social mobilisations of the mid-20th century, increasingly militarising the State and making endless amendments to laws and the constitution in the legislative. During the last few years, however, social mobilisations have intensified. Since late June of 2009, thousands of Hondurans have gone out to the street to manifest their disagreement with the illegitimate seizure of power carried out then by congress, the judiciary and the military (28 June), with strong support from local and corporate elites, whose concealment of social unrest in its media outlets was perhaps the newly-installed regime's best ally in the effort to naturalise what was obviously a military coup d'état. Most socioeconomically privileged Hondurans promptly subscribed to the fraught logic that sought to justify the coup and defended it ardently. The police and the military met the thousands of Hondurans, who openly expressed their disagreement in the streets of Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, and throughout rural

localities, with tear gas, batons, high-pressure water hoses, arbitrary detentions and torture. Students, activists, journalists and educators have been killed. Political murders persist up to this day, yet the mainstream media reports none. The desire to expose the media's vile misrepresentation of events, concealing dissent and criminalising dissidents, was perhaps one of the motivations for producing the countless camera images of social unrest and street confrontation that circulated electronically, which often had to be shut down or renamed for the threats received by those who used them to externalise their concern with current events and seek dialogue or international solidarity. Photographs of large crowds, people running away from gas bombs and policemen, bleeding beaten demonstrators, and dead activists have circulated now for months and years through electronic supports, creating a vision of the Honduran crisis completely heterogeneous from the version sold by dominant institutions internally. This photographic, often anonymous discourse, initially pushed cautiously through email, then simply ubiquitous in social networks, blogs, personal pages, YouTube, etc., ran against the grain of the vacuous aesthetic prized by official institutions in the country, particularly that taught at the ENBA.

Through its visceral documentary force, these images facilitate and circulate an apprehension of social reality in the country that exceeds its national frontiers; they frame and focalise aspects of the social process lived contemporarily in Honduras, a process in which the popular classes and its concerns are bypassed by the government and economically privileged groups.

They seek to give visibility to the violent repression these ruling elites command towards those who dissent to a highly exclusionary system. In a broader context, the images I discuss in this section entail a resistance to the operating ideology of dominant groups. They do indeed carry their own ideological weight, as they point to the historical necessity of conceiving and producing a Honduran nation where the state is no longer an instrument of repression at the service of corporate elites, local or foreign. The strongest proof that this images do refer to what has become a strong social movement in Honduras are the unreported and illegal actions the militarised Honduran state continuously takes to repress social mobilisations, with no regard to human rights or the rule of law.⁷⁸ I argue that these images attest to a now ubiquitous visual culture, whose production betrays desires for a widespread awareness of the disagreement and resistance the largest sectors of the Honduran population hold against the State in general, and against the violent and unlawful ways by which that illegitimate government represses its opposition in particular.

What are the repressed historical necessities that now stimulate this visual production of social confrontation? How do the images, as an extensive and

⁷⁸ Take for instance the murder of Renán Fajardo Argueta, a 22 year-old student of architecture in Tegucigalpa and active member of the resistance movement that sprung in the aftermath of the coup. The Committee of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared of Honduras, COFADEH, stated on 23 December 2009 that, “his die-hard activism in the National Front of Resistance included participation in marches, sit-ins, and all the activities by that organization of which he was always in the front lines and where he took photographs with the camera that they stole from him.” COFADEH to 23 December 2009, 25 October, 2009, <http://hondurasresists.blogspot.com/2009/12/another-young-member-of-resistance.html>. His killers took with them his camera and computer from the murder scene; it contained a vast photographic documentation of the Resistance’s activities. Ibid. Fajardo was a graduate from ENBA.

heterogeneous production, contest the nation? What role do they play in the construction of the memory of the coup and its broader historical context? What implications do they carry for the future? The coup in Honduras deepened the wounds of an already divided society. The coexisting yet deeply contrasting narratives of the historical processes that preceded and followed the coup d'état of 28 June 2009 provided ample evidence of the perceptual and ideological gaps among diverse social groups. The photographic culture I am referring to constitutes a visual component of a vernacular counter-discourse that runs against the grain of the incongruent positions of dominant institutions and economically privileged groups in Honduras. The irreconcilable perspectives of opposed social groups, namely the popular classes and the economic and political elites, can be traced in a series of discontinuities and splits in representation, which signal the dislocation of these diverging sectors of the Honduran population. In this context, the suppression from representation of the historical process by which the militarised Honduran state has continuously excluded the popular classes from the project of the nation, a process invisible within official discourse, inhibits the possibility of forging a vision of the nation grounded on its historical necessities, a perception without which it is not feasible to lead Honduras beyond its present crisis.

The fictional film *Utopía*, from 1976, also known as *El cuerpo repartido y el mundo al revés* (*The Scattered Body and the World Upside Down*), depicts Honduras as a nation unable to articulate itself. Released in West Germany in

July of 1976, this one hour length film was written and directed by Chilean filmmaker Raúl Ruíz (b. 1941), an exile in Europe since the coup d'état of 1973 in Chile. *Utopía* was produced for German television and shot in Honduras, featuring the cinematography of Honduran filmmaker Sami Kafati (1936-1996) as well as a mainly Honduran cast. In the film, two salesmen look separately for a friend and colleague they have in common, Saúl Ramírez, who is missing. Eduardo, one of the two salesmen, arrives at a small rural village, where people claim to hold common and assume shared responsibilities; women are out in the fields carrying out arduous labor, and men stay home in shared dwellings taking care of children. What on the surface might look like utopia begins all too soon to be suspect of an uncanny dysfunction. Indeed, utopia and dystopia become undistinguishable when we analyse the character of Ramón Flores, referred to by villagers as *licenciado*, which within such context can translate either as graduate or lawyer.⁷⁹ Ramón is contemptuous of the villagers and charges them as immoral. He constantly utters a sublime, idealistic speech, as when he is asked to receive the liberal politicians who have come to visit town. The visitors and Ramón exchange, in front of the crowd, speeches that invoke progress and liberty. Ten minutes further into the film, Ramón, who had abandoned his academic and professional life in the capital with the purpose of marrying Violeta, one of the utopian villagers, is having a conversation with a local politician, a man whose straw hat and paused speech contrasts with Ramón's black tie and inflamed voice. Ramón accuses his interlocutor of having corrupt personal goals

⁷⁹ The German subtitles in the film use "Herr Doktor".

as the drive for his participation in the party. Tension mounts until Ramón strangles his interlocutor with his sock, while Eduardo, who at this point has heard that Ramón might be involved in the murder of his friend Saúl, holds Ramón's gun toward the victim. Soon after Eduardo finds out that a leg belonging to Saúl Ramirez's body is found at the heart of the utopian village. Before killing himself, Ramón gives to Eduardo his testament, a lofty letter full of recommendations for the successful realisation of not only the Honduran nation but the whole of Latin America as well.



Figure 9: "Would you like to die?" A peasant activist is threatened by Ramón Flores, a character in Raúl Ruiz's film *Utopía* (1976, still at 23:19).

Fosi, the other salesman, travels across Honduras, locating parts of his friend's dismembered body in various places. When he meets again with Eduardo, we hear him recite [my translation]: "A leg in Choluteca, the identity card in El Paraíso, a family photograph in Colón, a foot in Puerto Cortés, an ear in Chamelecón."⁸⁰ Paradoxically, the articulation of the nation is a crimson endeavour, put in effect through the disarticulation of Ramirez' body. This type of "articulation," one that involves murderous violence, echoes strongly the times of the dictator Tiburcio Carías (1876-1969), who ruled Honduras between 1933 and 1949, but continued to be the strong hand behind the government into the 1950's and 60⁸¹'s. Carías' strategy for centralising power in Tegucigalpa was to create militias nationwide out of rural, disenfranchised populations. He controlled and communicated with these military bodies with the help of his partners in transnational Banana corporations, as well as with regional media and air companies.⁸² This forceful and indeed murderous junction of authoritarian government, local business, and multinational capital amounts indeed to a negation of nationhood, it inhibits its formation since in such case a people would not come together because of their shared vision of community, a vision Hondurans could locate in the future and which would fuel the resolve to pursue the construction of an inclusive national community. Rather, the State configured by Carías assimilated the colonising capacities of 'modernisation,' namely

⁸⁰ Raúl Ruiz, "Utopía," (West Germany: Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen, 1976).

⁸¹ Darío Euraque, 23 June 2010.

⁸² Thomas J. Dodd, *Tiburcio Carías: Portrait of a Honduran Political Leader* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 86-101.

weaponry, tele-communications, aerial transportation, financial capital, etc., to subject the people to a militarised state that would warranty the bourgeoning of private capitals, those of foreign and local elites, in overt exclusion and criminalisation of the vast majorities. Excluded from the 'national' project lead by Carías, dissenting rural populations were violently murdered within this liberal model. Carías discerped a nation of already uncertain beginnings. This suppression is evoked in *Utopía* through the disarticulation and dispersal of Ramírez's body, in which case the space of the nation is marked as negation, a radical denial of the constitutive political body, rather than the cultural space where the subjective interaction among citizens allow people to weave their own sense of the nation into its social fabric. The dismembered body is an allegory of the forceful disarticulation, destruction and silencing of the Honduran working classes. Through this allegory the film poses the question of the nation's own becoming, of the possibility of collectively weaving a narrative that can provide sense to it, of the adding up of the very voices that might actually turn a space of denial into the cultural and imaginative space where the nation is possible.

In the search for an unknowable character, such as the allegorical Saúl Ramírez, its focalisation within the narratively constructed space becomes a central discursive element. This focalisation is performed by other characters in the narrative: Fosi and Eduardo alternatively. Their will to find and identify Ramírez mobilises the story. Since Ramírez's pieces are dispersed all around Honduras, any perception of him is conflated with the nation; his insidious murder

colours the whole territory. It is up to his co-workers to focalise him and thus produce a vision of this allegorical character, which they only hint at through speech and remembrance. At different times of the film, Eduardo and Fosi list the places where pieces of Saúl have been found. Yet, how can such a subject be focalised or coherently perceived at all? Its envisioning demands perception to expand so much as to dissolve, and thus can only be inferred narratively, in the movement of diegesis. It becomes an elusive reality, dark and allegorical, a symbol for a nation denied of its becoming. Ramirez' cannot be contained within the gaze of his fellow salesmen. Knowledge of him becomes impossible, and the assurance of his identity improbable. Such is tragedy we witness in the film *Utopía*, which allegorically conveys the failure of a nation to objectively envision itself, to distinguish and recognise the historical necessities it must address for its development. In narratological terms, what remains unaccomplished is the process by which the nation might locate itself in history. Visual disorientation is a constant aspect of Ruiz' films and, as he would have it, "the elements of a story are ... used like a landscape and the landscape is used as a story."⁸³ Ultimately, the 'fabula' elaborated in *Utopía*, to use Bal's term, comports an arresting paradox: the process thought to give cohesiveness to the nation actually dismembers it; its unity can only be imagined through a body cut into pieces.

The Honduras of the 1970s, which Ruiz inscribed in film, a Honduras ruled by a *Junta Militar*, a nation where the distinctiveness between utopia and dystopia has been effaced, uncannily resembles the Honduras of today. Léster

⁸³ Carole Ann Klonarides and Raúl Ruiz, "Raúl Ruiz," *BOMB*, Winter 1991., 14

Rodríguez, an artist that explores contemporary Honduran reality through diverse visual languages, posits the egregious failure of the actual Honduran state to articulate and govern the nation. In an interview with the Chilean journal *Clarín*, Rodríguez stated:

In Honduras, after the coup d'état, the reaction of the dictatorship against the independent press was devastating, which was very different for the media corporations that aligned themselves with the government and so became accomplices to the repression carried out by the regime. I remember an occasion in which the army arrested a large group of people and took them to a soccer field, which is very close to where I was living at the time, to interrogate and beat them. Neither radio nor television reported anything of what had happened, it never made it to the news, although this human rights scandal was huge and known to everybody.

(...)

This media dictatorship was institutionalised as editorial policy. The intensification of brutal repression against educators by the Lobo regime is an example of this working policy: each image transmitted by the press entails huge manipulation, and anything that does not agree with state policy runs the risk of criminalisation.⁸⁴

The Honduran regime installed through the coup, as well as their partners in the media, focus in superfluous discourses that not only deny flagrantly the reality pointed at by Rodríguez, but also entail the most misleading constructions. It is difficult to think of a more delusive speech. Indeed, after leading the country to bankruptcy, institutional crisis and a seemingly irreversible state of un-governability, the conservative politicians who conducted the coup d'état and now perpetuate the criminal effort of denying it, sought to implement in 2010 a four year program, which they named *Honduras is Open for Business*, to attract foreign investors to Honduras. The webpage to the program featured Porfirio Lobo, who was elected president through a militarised process and appeared in

⁸⁴ Léster Rodríguez, interview by Mario Casasús, 27 March 2011, interview unpaginated.

the page as the head of the “Government of National Unity.” The first paragraph of his statement reads, “*Honduras is Open for Business* aims at re-launching Honduras as the most attractive investment destination in Latin America.”⁸⁵ This delusional practice of the Honduran State to look beyond its borders to solve its socio-economic challenges goes back to the second half of the 19th century. For over a century, Honduran governments have not been able to look onto the nation to figure out a way its own people can become the agents of its prosperity. Instead, like Lobo wished to go on doing and failed, governments have historically sought the ways to wholesale the nation’s resources, particularly its lands and peoples, making sure over the decades that its popular classes remain uneducated and in poverty, so they can be sold as cheap labor to transnational corporations. From the early 1990’s on, the state has also legislated so that these firms do not need to pay taxes during the first 20 or 30 years of their operation. A major component of the means of that transnational production has been the historical dilapidation of the Honduran working classes. Today, they take the streets seeking to have a voice in the necessary reconstitution of the nation, a necessity arising not only from the institutional crisis brought about by the coup d’état of 2009, but also by the perpetual betrayal of the Honduran people by the State.

⁸⁵ Porfirio Lobo Sosa, "Honduras Is Open for Business," Gobierno de Unidad Nacional.



Figure 10: Anonymous photographer, San Pedro Sula, August 14, 2009

It is this context what allows us to perceive the urgency of the photographic counter-discourse that has been disseminated during the last few years or so through email, blogs and other electronic pages. A photograph from August 14 of 2009 (Figure 10), made only a couple of weeks after the coup, contradicts the deluded pro-coup outlook, repeated with symptomatic frequency, that “there are only some four bums protesting.” It shows a numberless crowd gathered in downtown San Pedro Sula, Honduras’ second city and centre of industrial production, in front of the town’s cathedral, which is being guarded by a line of riot police. The photograph was perhaps taken from the north tower of the cathedral, looking south-west with the Merendón Mountains in the

background. Just right of center of the composition a banner reads “Become an idiot in 5 days: read La Prensa.” La Prensa is the newspaper with the highest circulation rates in Honduras, issuing some 60,000 copies daily. To give an idea of La Prensa’s editorial policy we can recall the case of Armando García, a well read Honduran author who published a biweekly column in La Prensa since the early 1990’s, and was fired by the media corporation for describing the events of June 28, 2009 as a coup d’état⁸⁶. This relates to the media dictatorship referred to by Rodríguez, which effaces such huge demonstrations of social dissent, as we see in the photograph, even when that very popular assembly is gathered only some six blocks away from its headquarters and press.

La Prensa’s distortion of events has gone as far as digitally erasing the blood of victims of military repression. On July 5 of 2009, when the ousted president Manuel Zelaya tried to return to Honduras by airplane, the military blocked the landing pad at the Tegucigalpa airport of Toncontín. Thousands of protesters gathered around the airport. Amnesty International, in a document titled “Recommendations to the New Government of Honduras after the Coup d’État of June 2009,” reports as follows [my translation]:

Isis Obed Murillo, 19 years old, died from a bullet wound in the head on July 5th, when members of the army fired real ammunition during a manifestation in the airport of Toncontín, in Tegucigalpa. According to reports, military agents lingered before cooperating in the ballistic tests during the judicial investigation and, at the moment of writing this report [dated to January of 2010], there was no news of any advance on the research of Isis’ death.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Gustavo Campos, personal communication, 19 January 2011.

⁸⁷ Amnistía-Internacional, "Recomendaciones al nuevo gobierno de Honduras tras el golpe de Estado de junio de 2009," news release, 2010, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AMR37/003/2010/en/fc7baf41-d596-4d46-b5ea->

In July 8th La Prensa published a note correcting “an error in their process” and thus acknowledged its manipulation of a photograph of a speckles Isis Obed Murillo (figure 11), which they had published on July 6th, where we see Murillo as he is moved away from the crowd. The July 8th note included the original image, in which not only stains of blood cover Murillo’s t-shirt but also a stream of it casts from the back of his head. This concealment of the murderous effects of repression and, especially, its agents is also tangible in the text that accompanies the two images [my translation and my italics]:

Because of an error in *its* process, the graphic published in our edition of Monday July 6 of the young man *who died* in Sunday’s demonstration, Isis Obed Murillo, *came out distorted* (above), differing from the original. We apologize for this *mistake*, which goes against La Prensa’s editorial policy.⁸⁸

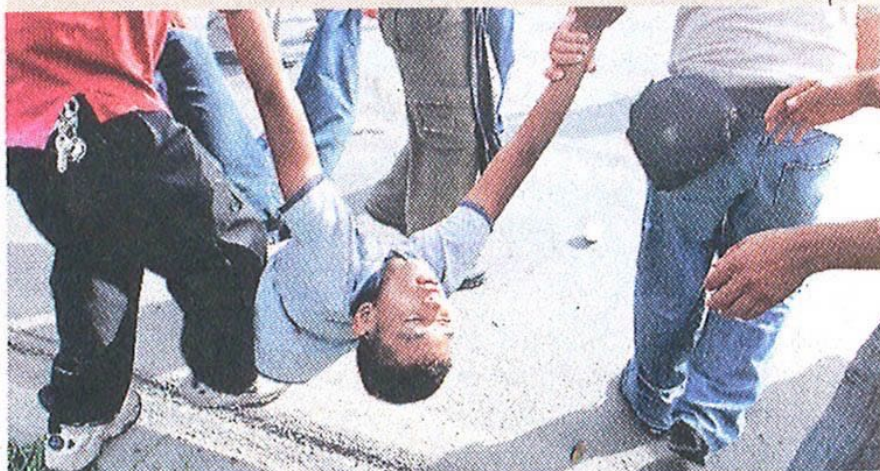
Of course that was no mistake; the erasure of the blood is, as Rodríguez would have it, the policy itself, a policy that denotes a very poor intelligence when there is a whole crowd to witness the murder. It is here where the very history of a repressive State is suppressed; it is here where we can locate the disjunction between a state that seeks to wholesale the nation as an investment paradise and the popular classes that struggle to find their place within the project of an

672ffdf24b37/amr370032010es.pdf. Original Spanish: Isis Obed Murillo, de 19 años de edad, murió por herida de bala en la cabeza el 5 de julio después de haber disparado miembros del ejército munición real durante una manifestación en el aeropuerto de Toncontín, en Tegucigalpa. Según los informes, los militares se demoraron en cooperar en las pruebas balísticas durante la investigación judicial y, al momento de redactarse este informe, no se tenía noticia de que se hubieran producido avances en la investigación de la muerte de Isis.

⁸⁸ "Que Conste," *La Prensa*, 8 July 2009. Original Spanish: Por un error en su proceso, la gráfica publicada en nuestra edición del lunes 6 de julio del joven que murió en la manifestación del domingo, Isis Obed Murillo, salió distorsionada (arriba), difiriendo de la original. Pedimos disculpas por la falla que contradice la política editorial de La Prensa.

inclusive, economically prosperous nation. One must locate Honduras' dismemberment in the very process of imagining itself a nation, of asserting a coherent historical narrative that would provide sense and direction to it. Social atomisation is a carefully manufactured devise, both economically and culturally, by the State and its clients; it guaranties that the Honduran nation will remain dismembered.

QUE CONSTE



Por un error en su proceso, la gráfica publicada en nuestra edición del lunes 6 de julio del joven que murió en la manifestación del domingo, Isis Obed Murillo, salió distorsionada (arriba), difiriendo de la original. Pedimos disculpas por la falla, que contradice la política editorial de LA PRENSA.

Figure 11: La Prensa's obliged apology for image manipulation.

The complicity of state and media corporations procure at every moment the invisibility of the actions the popular classes undertake in the pursuit of their rightful insertion into the affairs of the nation. The economic and political elites and their implementing instrument, the state, seek to perpetuate the conditions of disadvantage in which the popular classes are immersed, excluding and silencing them violently. The state has become an instrument of terror at the service of economic elites, local and foreign. A case in point is the murder of Pedro Magdiel Muñoz, a young builder who approached the Nicaragua-Honduras border to greet the ousted Manuel Zelaya, when Zelaya approached the Honduran border from Nicaraguan territory on July of 2009. The Comité para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos en Honduras (CODEH⁸⁹), reported his homicide in the following terms [my translation]:

On June 24 of 2009 he [Muñoz] traveled to the Nicaraguan border to incorporate himself in the actions of the resistance, who waited the return of President Manuel Zelaya Rosales. Members of the army and police detained him. This happened at the end of the day while he was smoking a cigarette under the shade of a tree. The following morning, on July 25, in his body were found signals of torture and 42 cut weapon wounds.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Honduras

⁹⁰ CODEH's full report on Muñoz read: Tenia 25 años, este hecho ocurrió en el Municipio de Alauca, departamento del Paraíso, es originario de Tegucigalpa, departamento de Francisco Morazán; el 24 de julio de 2009 viajó a la frontera con Nicaragua para incorporarse a las acciones de la resistencia que esperaban el retorno del Presidente Manuel Zelaya Rosales fue detenido por elementos del ejército y la policía, su detención ocurrió al finalizar la tarde mientras fumaba un cigarro a la sombra de un árbol, a la mañana siguiente, 25 de julio su cuerpo fue encontrado con señales de tortura y 42 heridas de arma blanca, en esta zona estaba operando el Comisionado Bonilla mas conocido como el tigre Bonilla, oficial de la policía con antecedentes, en el pasado se le libró requerimiento fiscal por la muerte de un joven a quien le dieron más de treinta disparos con fusil AK47, para lograr su libertad, según ex comisionada, alteraron la identidad balística de las armas que presentaron en calidad de prueba; hay una fotografía publicada por un diario en primera plana cuando ocurre la detención, hay contradicciones en el informe de la policía con el forense al calificar la posible hora de su muerte (Comité para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos en Honduras).

Since the coup, the State intensified its practices of intimidation and terror; it reanimated a dirty war that had been in place for decades, and sought to erase it from visibility through the complicity and partnership of the main media outlets. In the effort to subvert these conditions, not only the resistance but also citizens in general have sought the ways of giving visibility to the atrocities carried out by the Honduran regime. It is here where electronic means of communication, like emails and blogs, have offered an alternative mode of dissemination. Within this scenario, photographs have been a much more poignant means of inciting an awareness of the dirty war.



Figure 12: Anonymous photographer, Pedro Magdiel Muñoz, July 2009



Figure 13: Manuel Alvarez Bravo, *Assassinated Striking Worker*, 1934

In relation to CODEH's statement regarding the murder of Pedro Magdiel Muñoz, the image of the dead young worker can provoke a more visceral response (figure 12). Deformed by death, the appearance of the victim inhibits a rational apprehension of the image. The viewer travels erratically over the surface of the photograph, perhaps lingering a moment over the silent eyes before looking at the open mouth, locating the stabs in the forehead and cheeks, noticing the surrounding grass that creeps over his body, a red rose resting over his chest. For its subject, the image recalls Manuel Alvarez Bravo's 1934 photograph of an assassinated striking worker (figure 13). In the Alvarez Bravo's

image we actually see a lot of blood, streaming down from the head of the dead worker. Here the frame captures the dead body from below the waist to the head. This distances the viewer from the victim's head, which is positioned in profile and largely covered in blood. The lack of colour further distances the viewer from the rather grim subject of the photograph. In contrast, the shot of the dead Muñoz closes in on its subject, to include only the head, neck and a portion of the upper chest. While it shows only the dried blood over the wounds, we are brought so close to his face that the image confronts us more vividly with the visual signs of his lifelessness. The use of colour results in an even more immediate apprehension of the body as dead. Contextually, the image of the dead Muñoz relates more directly to a 1989 Larry Towell photograph of two mutilated dead youths, put on display by government soldiers to terrorize the Salvadoran population, in the aftermath of a *guerrilla* offensive against San Salvador in November of that year (figure 14).⁹¹ If the narratives surrounding the photographs might differ in that the youths in the Towell photograph were ostensibly participating in *guerrilla* activities, Pedro Magdiel Muñoz, as CODEH reports, was not engaging in violent actions. Both narratives, however, fit into a larger one: the irrational development of repressive military apparatuses in contemporary Central America, through the combined agency of local governments and the United States military, centred specially in Honduras during the so-called Reagan era.

⁹¹ Larry Towell, "El Salvador, 1989," Magnum Photos, <http://www.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&VBID=24PVHKDBQDR7K&SMLS=1&RW=1222&RH=734>.

This ill-intentioned impulse of militarisation became ingrained in Honduran politics, and military agency is yet to be subordinated to civilians.



Figure 14: Larry Towell, *San Salvador*, 1989



Figure 15: Anonymous photographer, *Seat of the Honduran Congress, Tegucigalpa*, late 2009

The performatic gesture of artist Leonardo Montes de Oca of taking of his clothes and exposing his naked, defenceless body to the army and police members that guard the seat of the National Congress (figure 15), whose members have traditionally represented the interests of private enterprise more than those of the Honduran people, connotes the resolute attitude with which a large sector of the Honduran population now confronts the corrupt and dysfunctional state institutions that have excluded them throughout history, and whose ill mode of operating became evident through the illegal ouster of Zelaya, recognised worldwide as a coup d'état, except by its cynical perpetrators and their corporate partners. In a metaphorical reading of Monte de Oca's gesture, one can imagine that dismembered Honduras, broken in pieces and mutilated through military repression, re-articulated and embodied in the vulnerable naked figure of the artist. The gesture thus points to the daring and audacious attitude of numberless Honduras who constantly disobey the impositions of the regime, and who wish to articulate and convey an alternative and accurate perception of what goes on in the nation. I posit that this impulse for a subjective engagement with current events in Honduras, one that incites in the population a revised and less deluded way of picturing the nation, is one of the drives for the vernacular and widespread production of photographs that perform dissent. Images representing civil disobedience (figures 15 & 16), public demonstrations (figures 10 & 17), blockades (figures 18 & 19), confrontation with police and military forces (figures 20 & 21), repression (figures 22 & 23) and fleeing demonstrators (figures 24 &

25), among so many other subjects, weave a vast canvas whose fragments circulate against the grain of an official discourse, enforced through economic and military power, that not only denies the social, economic and institutional crisis lived today in Honduras, but also seeks to continue selling the nation to foreign capital “as the most attractive investment destination in Latin America.”

In today’s Honduras, heterogeneous ways of making sense out of current events coexist, a condition that must be understood vis-à-vis the dislocation of its different social groups, whose apprehensions of the contemporary crises seem irreconcilable. In regard to such a condition, Hayden White wrote:

The breakdown of narrativity in a culture, group or social class is a symptom of its having entered into a state of crises. For with any weakening of narrativizing capacity, the group loses its power to locate itself in history, to come to grips with the Necessity that its past represents for it, and to imagine a creative, if only provisional, transcendence of its “fate.”⁹²

In the case at hand, while demonstrators and activists, students and educators, artists and writers, journalists and intellectuals assume the challenge of creating a sound account of the nation’s past in order to infer and discern the very sense of the nation and the possibilities for the future, the state persecutes these groups, criminalises their actions, and fails blatantly to devise a course of action grounded on the historical necessities that the nation should confront. The visual culture produced and sponsored by official institutions in Honduras, as discussed in this chapter, presents an abysmal gap with the socio-historical process lived by its populations. The agents of official culture haste to distance themselves

⁹² Hayden V White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

from any effort, artistic or otherwise, to pursue an account of contemporary Honduran history. No dead workers, streets on fire, or bleeding demonstrators will ever figure as subject matter in their production, which seems forever fixed in stereotypes of 'charming' *campesinos* selling flowers at colour-exploding markets, sanitised beaches and labour-less rural landscapes, de-contextualised Maya forms, self-indulging portraits, and, mainly, your sensuous female nudes. No, art, for official institutions and commercial galleries in Honduras, exists outside of history; it has nothing to do with the real. The tacit, all-governing premise seems to be, "emulate the appearance of pleasing things, but never let art offer an actual account of the world—it's bad taste, it won't sale." They find themselves, however, caught in a dialectic of truth and deception, where they inhabit a fragile bubble fostered by execrable state funds and a pitiable market, outside of which they perceive nothing. Yet, beyond such sphere of deception, people run everyday through the heart of an ominous world, snapping at every turn the confrontations sparked by a reality no thaumaturgy can ever dissimulate. Every day, subjects focalise the Honduran crises from the standpoint of any street, any person, any house. This vernacular counter-discourse, this newly discovered subjectivity, proves, shot by shot, post by post, the vacuousness of official Honduran culture.



Figure 16: Anonymous photographer, *Todas la voces*, UNAH-VS, San Pedro Sula, 21 October 201



Figure 17: Anonymous photographer, San Pedro Sula, 14 August 2009



Figure 18: Anonymous photographer, undated



Figure 19: Anonymous photographer, Choloma, 16 July 2009



Figure 20: Anonymous photographer, undated



Figure 21: Anonymous photographer, undated



Figure 22: Anonymous photographer, undated



Figure 23: Anonymous photographer, undated



Figure 24: Anonymous photographer, Comayagua, 8 August 2009



Figure 25: Anonymous photographer, Election Day, San Pedro Sula, 29 November 2009

**THREE: MAKING SENSE OF ARTISTIC PRACTICES IN
HONDURAS TODAY**

Socio-Historical Context

In order to perform a sound analysis of contemporary artistic concerns for Honduras in particular and the Central American Isthmus in general, an awareness of the socio-historical context that informs local and regional practices must be first elaborated. This is the area of the world where the artworks I will discuss in the following sections were produced and received; therein live the people that most immediately concern these artists; Central America constitutes their geopolitical and ideological sphere of production and reception, as well as the socio-historical fabric that informs signification in their artistic endeavours. Honduran artist Lucy Argueta, for instance, has seen in recent years a strong reception in Northern Central America, and has exhibited regularly in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua during the last few years. A good reason why Central America is a sound object of artistic discourse is that an overwhelming two-thirds of its population lives in dire poverty—we are talking about some 23 million people.⁹³ The region has seen a worsening crisis since the 1980s, a decade usually referred as the “lost decade” for the diverse social and political conflicts that plagued the region. Economic adversity started in the 1970s and became exacerbated during the war period. During the late 1980s and early 1990s neoliberal programs were implemented across the board, which led to stagnation and growing misery in the Isthmus, which intensified popular unrest. In spite of the diverse rubrics that might diversify Central American production in

⁹³ John A. Booth, Christine J. Wade, and Thomas W. Walker, *Understanding Central America : Global Forces, Rebellion, and Change*, 5th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2010), 3.

general and the land-ownership concentration in the hands of the region's elite, John A. Booth et al lucidly state, "Central America's main resource is clearly its people."⁹⁴ The United States has been a mayor foreign player in the course of Central American modern political and economic history, and its meddling with local affairs has intensified the region's internal divides, inhibiting development most particularly in Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. Booth et al wrote in 2012, "the United States worked hard, devoting enormous diplomatic and political energy and spending several billion dollars trying to determine winners and losers locally and affect institutions and policies."⁹⁵ Central America was not always poor, or at least not as poor as today. Poverty has been exacerbated constantly since the 1970s: the turmoil and deepening conflicts of the 1970s-80s impoverished people further, and the fundamentalist credo of subsequent neoliberal policy of reducing or completely abandoning social spending during the late 1980s and 1990s led to the overwhelming statistics cited above. It is this decades-long process of becoming impoverished that Booth et al link to popular unrest.⁹⁶

It is important that we understand the social fabric and historical process in which Honduran artworks are entangled before we can assess their full

⁹⁴ Ibid., at 6. The authors explain this dramatic structure of exclusion, which stemmed from the elite's impulse to hinge themselves into the dynamics of international capital: "responses to the international market demands by the region's elite led to land-ownership concentration, an overemphasis on export, and inadequate production of consumer food staples. Instead of growing beans, corn, rice, plantain, and cassava for local consumption, big landholders normally concentrated on lucrative exports such as coffee, cotton, sugar, and beef."

⁹⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁹⁶ They right in page 17, "It was not the grinding, long-term deprivation of persistent poverty, but this change—impoverishment, declining living conditions—that motivated much of the region's unrest."

discursive import, since in them an anonymous common citizen belonging to an unspecified (or at least blurry) temporality is the central subject for the production of meaning. The analysis presented by Booth et al of Third World countries in relation to global economics and politics help us apprehend the condition in which more than half of the isthmian populations exist [my italics]:

The tiny upper and middle classes that control the political systems derive most of their income directly or indirectly from exports or from the products manufactured by multinational corporations that the upper and middle classes—but not the masses—consume. In such a system *the common citizen becomes important not as a consumer but as a vulnerable source of cheap labor.*⁹⁷

This socio-economic condition, however, is not new. It was instituted by Spanish colonialism in previous centuries. If Central America has today only modest resources, one ought to ponder the impact of the Spanish imperial system in the Isthmian economy long term: it forced its administration over the indigenous populations, it extracted precious metals and slaves, it drained the region from its most valuable resources and decimated its native populations.

In the 19th century, the United States became concerned with transit across the isthmus; it sought to establish and control trade patterns in the region, countering British naval power. An intervention into Panama in 1903 led to the construction of the canal. The US had secured trans-isthmian navigation. During the Cold War, US interests focused on countering Soviet-inspired “communism” in Caribbean and Central American nations. One must point out that in spite of how US diplomacy perceived social mobilizations in the isthmus, these had and still have local historical necessities at its source. In spite of the hopes of millions

⁹⁷ Ibid., 24

of people for a more just social structuring, the entrenched local elites reacted, backed by the US, with state terror, as it continues to happen today. From post-war times onward, Central American elites knew they only needed to frame mobilizations as “communist rebellion” for the United States to join their crusade against the efforts of a people that only sought participation in the political and economic projects within the nations they themselves constitute. Misanthropic misconstruals legitimized armed repression of vast populations, which were brutally demobilized and atomized. Booth et al report that,

US personnel on occasion actively promoted the use by their Latin American colleagues of what they euphemistically called “counterterror” ... Most Latin American militaries and police received technical and material assistance and training including techniques of counterterror. It is not surprising, therefore, that the tactics of torture, murder, and disappearance employed by security forces in government-sponsored death-squads were similar from country to country.⁹⁸

Internal political configurations vary from one Central American nation to the other, as do the levels on entrenchment of state terror or how systematic it becomes over time. The death-squad activity in Honduras during the 1980s, for instance, was less intense than in Guatemala or El Salvador during that time. Yet, in the aftermath of the coup of 2009, state-sponsored terror gained new life as demobilization is taking on a growing death toll.⁹⁹ Despite the specific aspects of

⁹⁸ Ibid., 222.

⁹⁹ In February of 2012, The Huffington Post had counted over 60 assassinations of “subsistence farmers and indigenous leaders” since the coup d'etat of 2009: Eric Holt Jimenez and Tanya Kerksen, “Honduras: The War on Peasants,” *Huffington Post* (2013), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-holt-gimenez/honduras-the-war-on-peasa_b_2632033.html. Note also that few months after the coup the UN working group on mercenaries reported that Honduran authorities and landowners hired paramilitaries to counter the extensive demonstrations aroused by the coup: “a 120-person group of paramilitaries from several countries in that region was reportedly created to support the coup in [Honduras](#).” See Associated Press, “Landowners in Honduras Hired Colombian Paramilitaries, UN Says,” *The Guardian* (2009),

each historical process, Booth et al locate a constant objective [my italics]: “to *atomize* and make *docile* the ordinary citizenry of Central America. This would facilitate rule by traditional, conservative, pro-US elites or, where necessary, their replacement with friendly, if ineffective, reform-oriented moderates.”¹⁰⁰ To emphasize the method behind this geopolitical stratagem, I would like to reflect on the meaning of two words used by Booth et al: *to atomize* can be read as a process of fragmentation, thus obfuscating the power of a united people. One must note, however, that to atomize also refers to the use of firepower against a people. The other term I wish to emphasize is *docile*, which the OED defines as “ready and willing to receive instruction,” or, alternatively, “submissive to training; tractable, manageable.”¹⁰¹ There are several reasons for which I am emphasizing this two terms here, but at this point I will mention only one: Is not ‘divide and conquer’ an old dictum of colonialist powers? Does this atomization of rural, indigenous populations not entail a constant effort on the part of the US and its elite clients in the Isthmus to thwart self-determination efforts within the Central American nations? And is not this fabricated docility, this ‘readiness to receive instruction,’ a most desirable attitude for the advancement of transnational,

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/oct/09/honduras-colombia-auc-landowners>. On occasion of the fourth anniversary of the coup, Edgar Soriano was writing, “Después del 28 de junio de 2009 se desató una brutal represión que le costó la vida a muchos hondureños y hondureñas, se violaron mujeres, se torturaron personas, se cerraron medios de comunicación independientes, se amenazo vía teléfono e internet, obligaron a cientos al exilio y las personas que se quedaron sufrieron la amargura de la desesperanza y la burla sanguinaria de los opresores sin control.” See Edgar Soriano Ortiz, “A 4 Años Del Golpe De Estado Civil-Militar,” *Diario Tiempo* (2013), www.tiempo.hn/editorial/noticias/a-4-anos-del-golpe-de-estado-civil-militar.

¹⁰⁰ Booth, Wade, and Walker, *Understanding Central America: Global Forces, Rebellion, and Change*, 226.

¹⁰¹ Oxford English Dictionary, “*Docile, Adj.*” (Oxford University Press).

corporate capitalism—the very engine that for centuries has fed from the exploitation and extermination of peoples-turned-commodities?

These questions draw the context for my discussion of Lucy Argueta's *Merma* in the following chapter: US-sponsored, corporate terror in Latin America. To understand why, we need to look at that very history. In the introduction to his book, *The Last Colonial Massacre*, Greg Grandin draws a fruitful parallel between two different massacres occurring at different times around the municipality of Panzós, on Guatemala's Polochic Valley. In relation to the 29 May 1978 massacre at Panzós, he writes [my italics]: "forensic anthropologists exhumed thirty-four skeletal remains in 1997 from the *mass grave*, but survivors then and now insist that the dead numbered in the hundreds."¹⁰² Grandin set this 1978 massacre in the context of "the hundreds of other indigenous protests and elite reactions that had taken place throughout the course of colonial and republican rule in Guatemala to that day."¹⁰³ Such form of recurrent confrontation lies at the heart of the very establishment of Panzós as a municipality back in 1860s. Here I quote *in extenso* a narrative that would help us grasp the social forces at play in these persistent deadly encounters:

In the early dawn of June 29, 1865, after months of petitions, the "octogenarian" Jorge Yat led hundreds of Q'eqchi'-Mayans into the center of San Pedro Carchá, an indigenous town above Panzós at the high end of the Polochic Valley. As in Panzós a century later, they protested the influence of Ladinos—the term used to identify those Guatemalans not considered Mayan—on the village's administration and economy. As in Panzós in 1978, Q'eqchi's in 1865 appealed to higher authorities to side with them against the enemies, in this case the newly arrived merchants, coffee planters, and priest. Mixing the millenarian

¹⁰² Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

with the mundane, they demanded both the expulsion of foreigners and the reduction of taxes. Ladinos, for their part, worked, as they did later in Panzós, to keep all but the most repressive elements of the state out of their jurisdiction. When Yat presented a “note” supposedly given him by the president, Carcha’s priest flew into a rage, yelling that “an insignificant man” like Yat could never had obtained an audience with the president. He struck Yat, which led the protesters to imprison the cleric and a handful of other Ladinos. In response, militiamen from the region’s nearby capital marched on Carchá, laid siege to the square, and opened fire, killing eight Q’eqchi’s. State violence against Q’eqchi’s—no Ladinos were injured or killed—hasted an already established migration down the Polochic Valley to areas that would soon become the municipality of Panzós.¹⁰⁴

Notice the forceful seizing of land, the imposition of capitalist modes of production into native-controlled and managed lands, the denial of any voice or subjectivity to the Q’eqchi’s, and specially the armed attack and forceful dislocation of a rural, native population. Furthermore, the alliance of foreign and Ladino agro-industrials and merchants with state violence not only prolonged itself all the way to the present, but also became even more murderous through its course. Grandin’s account of the killing of indigenous, rural populations in the context of Cold War Central America is devastating:

Beginning in 1981, the army executed a scorched earth campaign that murdered over one hundred thousand Mayans and completely razed more than four hundred indigenous communities. Anti-communist zeal and racist hatred were refracted through counter-insurgency exactitude. The killings were brutal beyond imagination. Soldiers murdered children by beating them on rocks as their parents watched. They extracted organs and fetuses, amputated genital and limbs, committed mass and multiple rapes, and burned some victims alive. In the logic that equated indigenous culture with subversion, army units destroyed ceremonial sites and turned sacred places such as churches and caves into torture chambers. By the time the war ended in 1996, the state had killed two hundred thousand people, disappeared forty thousand, and tortured unknown thousands more.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 1-2.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 3.

This process reflects the oppressive brutality with which forcible plantation regimes have been imposed in Central America, and as such illustrates much of the history of Latin America during the second half of the 20th century.

The contemporary history of Latin America has to be understood vis-à-vis US foreign policy and economic interests worldwide. A colonialist impulse informed the spirit in which the United States of America was constituted since its earliest inception. It was born, in the words of its founding father, as an “infant empire,” Noam Chomsky recalls in a book of 2010: George Washington, after liberation from England, observed that the growth of settlements would little by little dispel “savages” away. Describing them as beasts of prey, he pointed out the necessity of inducing natives to relinquish what he already termed “our territories,” which became “ours” by right of conquest as the “aborigines” were regularly instructed.”¹⁰⁶ The practices of ‘atomize and make docile,’ of settling in already occupied lands, characterize the very inception of the newly born empire. In this juncture, Chomsky understands empire as a form of class warfare within the imperial societies themselves, since the profits of imperial enterprises are privatized and the costs are socialized in the colonies as well as within the new imperial soil. He discusses the work of Adam Smith (in relation to England) to explain this configuration: “The “merchants and manufacturers” of England were the “principal architects” of state policy, and made sure that their own interests “were most peculiarly attended to,” however “grievous” the effects on others,

¹⁰⁶ Noam Chomsky, *Hopes and Prospects* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 17.

including the people of England.”¹⁰⁷ In Washington’s discourse, expansion is equated with security, and the demise of the ‘induced away’ other becomes but an aspect of the socialization of costs. According to Chomsky, the doctrine that “expansion is the path to security” prevails today, and should be interpreted in the light of Smith’s principle of international affairs: “The phrase “security” does not refer to the security of the population; rather, to the security of the “principal architects of policy”—in Smith’s day “merchants and manufacturers,” in ours megacorporations and great financial institutions, nourished by the states they largely dominate.”¹⁰⁸ As a broad conglomerate of resources and markets, control of Latin America was the earliest goal of U.S. foreign policy and remains a central one today.

During the second half of the 19th century, US policy in the Central American Isthmus was concerned with control of trade routes and coping with great British naval power. A growing concern, as the 20th century approached, was the creation of a US controlled, trans-isthmian canal. From the late 19th century, US interventions in the region, economic, political and military, inhibited the development of the new isthmian nations, which guaranteed certain dependence on American economic power. Once the Cold War had ensued, the major concern of US policy in relation to the Isthmus was the suppression of Soviet communism—a truly unilateral perception since what popular nationalisms in the Isthmus pursued was but their self-determination. As early as the 1950s,

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 27.

Honduras was becoming the site of military training and provisions for US operations in the Isthmus. Take for instance the 1954 overthrow of reformist president Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala, whom Washington kept in good regard until he sought to nationalize lands held by the United Fruit Company:

Washington feared Arbenz because he tried to institute agrarian reforms that would hand over fallow land to dispossessed peasants, thereby creating a middle class in a country where 2 percent of the population owned 72 percent of the land. Unfortunately for him, most of that territory belonged to the largest landowner and most powerful body in the state: the American-owned United Fruit Company. Though Arbenz was willing to compensate United Fruit for its losses, it tried to persuade Washington that Arbenz was a crypto-communist who must be ousted.

(...)

Eisenhower's attack on Guatemala was brilliantly executed. A faux invasion force consisting of a handful of right-wing Guatemalans used fake radio broadcasts and a few bombing runs flown by American pilots to terrorize the fledgling democracy into surrender. Arbenz stepped down from the presidency and left the country. Soon afterward, a Guatemalan colonel named Carlos Castillo Armas took power and handed back United Fruit's lands. For three decades, military strongmen ruled Guatemala.¹⁰⁹

This invasion was launched from Honduras, and training for the operation was carried in the Comayagua Valley, in what today is the Base Aérea Soto Cano, usually referred to as 'Palmerola.' The internal armed conflicts in El Salvador and Guatemala during the 1980s constituted Honduras as a central locus for US hemispheric interests. Esteban DeGori asserts that, during that time, Honduras

¹⁰⁹ Stephen Schlessinger, "Ghosts of Guatemala's Past," *The New York Times* (2011), http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/04/opinion/04schlessinger.html?_r=0. Notice also that it was this very episode, the violent ouster of a democratically elected president who sought reform, that would convince socialist leaders in Latin America, such as Che Guevara, that armed struggle was the path to liberation in the region. Greg Grandin writes: "In Guatemala, for example, a young medical doctor named Ernesto Guevara sought asylum at the Argentine Embassy following the 1954 US-backed coup. While he waited safe conduct to Mexico (where he would meet Fidel Castro), he started a life long friendship with Ricardo Ramírez, who went on to lead Guatemala's most formidable insurgent movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Both men would cite their 1954 experience as central to their subsequent rejection of reform politics and embrace armed revolution." See Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre : Latin America in the Cold War*, 12.

not only operated as military and training base for counterinsurgency policy, but became itself an “ideological and geographic frontier” for revolutionary movements. The Argentinian Grupo de Tareas Exterior del Batallón 601 advised Honduran officials in aspects of internal repression and the Reagan administration provided an unprecedented amount of funds for such activities. One hundred and eighty four Hondurans went missing in this context.¹¹⁰ While in Nicaragua a Sandinista government was established upon the overthrow of the US-backed Somoza-family dictatorship (1933-1979), revolutionary fronts in Guatemala (Unidad Nacional Revolucionaria Guatemalteca, UNRG) and El Salvador (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, FMLN) were, by the beginning of the 1980s, in growing tension with their corresponding governments. For its strategic geopolitical position, Honduras was the perfect place for the US to build up military resources: the Reagan administration turned Honduras into a US platform for counterinsurgency, and one of the poorest nations in the Western Hemisphere went from receiving \$ 3,9 million of US military aid in 1980 to \$ 77,5 million in 1984.¹¹¹ Since its use as a launching stage for the attack against Arbenz in 1954, Honduras increasingly became a laboratory for the production and dissemination of a “communist threat” discourse, deludedly alive up to this date in this most conservative of the Central American nations, and specially a laboratory for counterinsurgency and counterterror military operations in the region.

¹¹⁰ Daniel Feierstein et al., *Terrorismo De Estado Y Genocidio En América Latina*, Estudios Sobre Genocidio (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2009), 63.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 66.

The United States' empowering of the Honduran military led to the creation of a war machine more powerful than the highest political ranks in Honduras. Its head, General Gustavo Alvarez Martínez, organized, with the help of Argentinian officers and under the supervision of CIA and FBI personnel, a clandestine paramilitary group, the Batallón 3-16. This battalion was the responsible entity for the forced disappearances, tortures, and persecutions of dissidents in Honduras during the 1980s. It also established *clandestine cemeteries* in the Honduran territory. According to declarations of an ex-officer of the 3-16 Battalion, its members received training in interrogation techniques somewhere in the American South-West; their *modus operandi* was not very different from the practices of Argentinian death-squads.¹¹² In this way the Honduran military was becoming part of a US-controlled, hemispheric military apparatus, put in place to secure the preponderance on US interests in the region. If the 3-16 Battalion worked as a dirty-war instrument against militants of social change and popular leaders, the Military Base in the Comayagua Valley became a central component of US geopolitics in the region, a force dedicated to counterinsurgency not only in the Isthmus but also in the whole Caribbean Basin. As such, one must recognize that the democratic façade created by the 1980 constitutional convention as well as by 1981 presidential election in Honduras, usually assumed as a restoration of democracy after two decades of military rule, was but another ideological stratagem, as was the constructed necessity of countering a Soviet enemy in the region: It was meant to cover up what was

¹¹² Ibid., 76.

indeed a military regime, one that facilitated killings, repression and genocide well beyond the Honduran borders, as we have seen in the case of Guatemala above.

These ideological devices are in fact part of what Daniel Feierstein calls the Doctrine of National Security. He situates the emergence of this doctrine in the 1950s, contemporary with the coup against Arbenz. For the purposes of fully comprehending the socio-historical context for the artworks I am discussing below, it is important to understand this phenomenon [my italics]:

From the late 1950s onwards, the so-called Meetings of American Armies became a regular institution and an ideal channel for spreading the National Security Doctrine among the military all over Latin America. US involvement ... helped to spread the new American vision of conflict in Latin America, a vision focused on the 'war against the Communism' in which Latin America was seen as a key battleground in a cold war—and sometimes even a Third World War—of global dimensions. The 'enemy' was not only revolutionary movements but any populist, religious, or indigenous movements with progressive ideas aimed at bringing about social change.

(...)

[T]he concept of 'dirty war', 'counter-insurgent war', or 'anti-subversive war' became the ideological justification for turning Latin America's armed forces into *armies of occupation on their own territories*. Generally, a military regime took control of government and/or paramilitary forces operating in conjunction with the armed forces. The regime then proceeded to transform society through the institutionalization of terror at every level of daily life. To do so, it resorted to a whole arsenal of terror, including concentration camps, systematic murder of entire groups (families, villages, ethnic and religious communities), and extensive use of torture and rape as weapons of physical and psychological destruction.¹¹³

Notice how Latin America became, in the imagination American leaders and their allies in the region, one the very battlegrounds for a global war. When talking of the Cold War, Feierstein has the care of writing the word enemy inside quotation

¹¹³ Daniel Feierstein, "National Security Doctrine in Latin America: The Genocide Question," in *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*, ed. A. Dirk Moses and Donald Bloxham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 491-92.

marks: how are progressive people an enemy? How would social change in the Latin America affect the United States negatively? Feierstein starts to give us a clue when he finds the source of dirty wars in French counter-insurgency doctrines used in Indochina and Algiers:¹¹⁴ Were these not colonial practices? Did the diverse social movements in Central America call for the disproportionate ideological war against them, not to mention the extermination brought upon them? The very local forces crafted ideologically as defenders of national integrity and sovereignty became, under this model, the very forces of occupation within the territories of Central American nations. Terror became institutionalised to a degree that, up to this day, most people in Honduras are incapable of thinking outside its perverted prism. The mind was uncannily colonised; if you dared to think, you would probably face murder, torture, rape, or any form of physical or psychological annihilation. One must ask what drives this machine of death. In the very last paragraph to his book *The Open Veins of Latin America*, Eduardo Galeano offers an eloquent elucidation:

In these [Latin American] lands we are not experiencing the primitive infancy of capitalism but its vicious senility. Underdevelopment isn't a stage of development, but its consequence. Latin America's underdevelopment arises from external development, and continues to feed it. A system made impotent by its function of international servitude, and moribund since birth, has feet of clay. It pretends to be destiny and would like to be thought eternal. All memory is subversive, because it is different, and likewise any program for the future. The zombie is made to eat without salt: salt is dangerous, it could awaken him. The system has its paradigm in the immutable society of ants. For that reason it accords ill with the history of humankind, because that is always changing. And

¹¹⁴ "In particular, the methods applied by the 'French school' in Indochina and Algeria and adopted by the Americans during the Vietnam War were later taught at numerous military and ideological training centres in Latin America. The most important of these was the School of the Americas, first established in the Panama Canal Zone in 1946 to train Central American forces." See *ibid.*, 489.

because in the history of humankind every act of destruction meets its response, sooner or later, in an act of creation.¹¹⁵

In other words, 19th century liberalism developed into an exacerbated repressive hemispheric (and indeed global) policy, its motto “buy into our ideology or perish.” Under the sway of this machinery of exploitation and murder, art in the Central American Isthmus has developed a sharper edge.

Precursors of Dissent

It is most elusive to grasp what is it that obtains in the imagination of Hondurans when they speak, or otherwise signify, their nation. The cultural production of the Honduran nation has been, throughout its modern history, endlessly deferred. Yet, its possession, by “revolutionary” *caudillos* or liberals ruling a militarised state, has been murderously pursued throughout most of its modern history. This possessive individualism, leading recurrently to armed conflict and ultimately to a repressive state still in place today, has historically precluded dialogue and the cultural exchange that might allow a community to develop a sense of itself. It is this possessive individualism what Raymond Williams finds at the heart of liberalism:¹¹⁶ the doctrine that during the 19th century united local elites in the Central American Isthmus, in their effort to “free” themselves from burdening connections with the Peninsula, became the mentality that permeated the political formation of the individual nation-states. In

¹¹⁵ Eduardo H. Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America : Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997), 238.

¹¹⁶ Raymond Williams, *Keywords : A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Flamingo ed. (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1983), 181.

the case of Honduras, the nation-state became the fetish object with which caudillos sought to seduce the collaboration of rural populations—recruited into militias, forced into forms of labour beyond human rights—, and monopolistic transnational corporations, conceding them vast stretches of land without ever taxing their operations in the national territory. The role of the Honduran State came to be the brutal vindication of this ownership against the very interests of the community, who's dismembering, in both the figurative and literal sense, became a central strategy towards such goal. Obscuring and denying such practices, as most blatantly the Micheletti regime pretended to do just in 2009, is another strategy for inhibiting the formation of a national community that pervades and riddles the history of 20th century Honduras.

The very idea of community implies equality among its members, a sensibility to the needs and rights of others. In a recent public conference at the Universidad de San Pedro Sula, prominent Honduran novelist and cultural critic Julio Escoto expressed that rulers in Honduras have, over the centuries, found desirable the absence of such a sensibility.¹¹⁷ For Escoto, cultural processes are the very basis for political and economic ones. He called out major institutions in Honduras—the Secretary of Culture, universities, local governments... even churches—as having no real cultural policies. This scenario is all too similar to the one in which Pablo Zelaya Sierra, one of Honduras' earliest modern painters,

¹¹⁷ Julio Escoto, "Un País Sin Políticas De Cultura No Alcanza El Desarrollo," *Conexihon*, no. 9 julio 2012 (2012), Original URL: <http://www.conexihon.info/noticia/cultura/unpa%C3%ADssinpol%C3%ADticasdeculturanoalcanzaeldesarrollojulioescoto>.

sought an education in art. Seeking schooling, Zelaya left his native town of Ojojona for Tegucigalpa, then Tegucigalpa for Managua, then Managua for San José. Eventually he reached Madrid (1920). In his personal manifesto, *Hojas escritas con lápiz* (c. 1930), one reads identification with academicism, perhaps a symptom of what in his own country was lacking. He desires math and geometry for art, something upon which to construct, or perhaps play off, his work. Reading *Hojas escritas con lápiz* one infers the anguish of not knowing where to locate culture, and the question of a purpose for art outside of religious practice is perhaps sensed for the first time within the written history of Honduran art. Zelaya's work, so much of his paintings undated, resists categorisation and periodization. His modernist project was interrupted by an untimely death (1933), only a few months after his return to Honduras. During that short lapse, however, he authored an image that would become a frightful and lasting avouchment of the carnage induced among rural populations by power-greedy caudillos: *Hermanos contra hermanos*, which unfortunately remained an isolated piece of discourse and did not have the influence of the more domesticated work of López Rodezno.

During the early 1950's, while Juan Manuel Gálvez, Tiburcio Carías' Secretary of Defence, had become president, Honduras witnessed its first major general strike. In 1954, a general strike, lead by banana plantation workers, opened a process of social transformation in the country. Lasting several weeks, from April 30 to July 8, it became a national movement, prompted the formation

of labor unions and even transformations in the State—the writing of the first Labor Law (Código de Trabajo). Yet, in 1959, when Luis Mariñas Otero, a Spanish lawyer serving as diplomat in Honduras at the time, published a small booklet titled *La pintura en Honduras*, the material he conceived as a departure for art is the Honduran landscape, its “melting pot” of races, its Spanish, as well as pre-Hispanic, heritage:

Honduras is rich in nuances, intense in colour, a complex and varied country. Its landscape varies from the temperate world of the Sierra, to tropical lands on the coast, unlimited coniferous forests in the highlands, and huge banana plantations and mangroves of its lowlands. Its humanity is a melting pot of the three races, Spanish, Indian and African, its Spanish heritage as well as its pre-Hispanic wealth is unique with interesting and original facets.¹¹⁸

Mariñas Otero finds Honduras isolated and lacking in artistic education. He deemed that the ENBA did not form an actual pictorial school, giving only a “minimal and initial” technical training to painters at the time. This diminishing form of thinking art became predominant in Honduras. As we see in the case of Mariñas Otero, even in the face social turmoil and transformation, the gaze is expected to turn to an assumed “natural, empty space”—a coloniser’s gaze that negates local history. In the quoted lines, even banana plantations are thought as colour. To say that three races, Spanish, in fact a nationality and mentioned first, indigenous and African peoples simply mixed constitutes actually an erasure of

¹¹⁸ Luis Mariñas Otero, *La Pintura En Honduras* (Tegucigalpa: Secretaría de Turismo, Cultura e Información, 1977), 5. Original Spanish: Honduras es un país complejo y variado, intenso en color, rico en matices. En su paisaje encontramos desde el mundo templado de la Sierra, a las tierras tropicales de su costa, los ilimitados bosques de coníferas de su altiplano, y las inmensas plantaciones bananeras y los manglares de sus tierras bajas. Su humanidad es un crisol de las tres razas, española, indígena y africana, su herencia cultural tanto española como pre-hispánica es de singular riqueza con facetas interesantes y originales.

the history people suffered through the centuries. To periodise Honduran cultural heritage in Spanish and pre-Hispanic is a lurid simplification, the defining factor of this division being the “conquest.” This form of convenient misconstructions largely shaped the categorisation and reception of art in Honduras during the second half of the 20th century, and it still constitutes a generalised mode of thinking art, especially in economically privileged groups, inside and outside the State. This separation of social history and cultural production is ideological, in that it disconnects the fetishised product from the social relations that shaped its production and reception. “Colonial” and “pre-Hispanic” became hollow categories, in so far as they validate objects yet become empty of meaning by virtue of the great heterogeneity of works they are applied to.

While Mariñas Otero was writing his accommodating account of art in Honduras at the end of the 1950’s, an artist like Alvaro Canales (1919, San Pedro Sula – 1983, México) was in experiencing the cultural atmosphere of Mexico City, as well as exhibiting his work continuously there as well at different other places in that northern nation. According to Oyuela, it was in Mexico where Canales came to understand art a locus for strife: “In this environment, Canales defines his life and internal ideological structure, which leads him to conceive of art as a form of social consciousness.”¹¹⁹ Canales’s work shows the horrors of war, the inhumanity of working at mines, wounded native warriors: it depicts the striving people of whom the Honduran landscape as imagined by Mariñas Otero

¹¹⁹ Oyuela, *La Batalla Pictórica: Síntesis De La Historia De La Pintura Hondureña*, 143. Original Spanish: En este ambiente, Canales defina su vida y su estructura ideológica interna, que lo lleva a concebir el arte como una forma de conciencia social.

is empty. In 1978, Canales painted, by commission of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras (UNAH), a mural in the University's main auditorium. When David Craven saw this mural in June of 2011, he commented to me that it has an unusual synthesis of visual and thematic elements from the three masters of Mexican Muralism, a blend that was indeed rare. One can also sense in the work, however, especially in the section where it deals with war, a dialogue with Pablo Zelaya Sierra. The mural engages a grand narrative of industry, labor, education and war—the liberating aspects of modernity, simultaneously its elements of alienation and destruction. Generations of students have sat in front of this mural, and in 1982 a group of students from ENBA painted another mural at the seat of UNAH's union. A periodical note of the time connects the student project to the work of Canales:

In terms of murals with socio-political content, a practice with very little development in our country [notice that this is being said in the face of the extant López Rodezno murals], only one project similar to *History of the Honduran Labor Movement* [the student's mural] is known: the mural [titled] *Liberation*, painted by compatriot Alvaro Canales, who died recently in Mexico. *Liberation* is located in the Central Auditorium of the leading academic institution in the country.¹²⁰

Painted by students from ENBA at the headquarters of the Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras (SITRAUNAH) *Historia del movimiento obrero hondureño* was inaugurated on December 11 of 1984 to commemorate SITRAUNAH's 21st anniversary. The paper, *Tribuna*

¹²⁰ "Mural: Historia Del Movimiento Obrero," *Tribuna Sindical* 6, no. 41 (1984): 6. Original Spanish: La técnica del Mural con mensaje de contenido político-social, muy poco se ha desarrollado en nuestro país, solo se conoce una obra similar a "Historia del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño"; el Mural "Liberación" pintado por el compatriota Alvaro Canales, recientemente fallecido en México. "Liberación" se encuentra en el Auditorio Central de la Máxima Casa de Estudios del País.

Sindical, a diffusion organ of the Union, explained that teachers and students from ENBA came to them with the proposal, and that the mural's production entailed research: looking at the book *Historia del movimiento obrero hondureño*, by Honduran author Víctor Meza, as well as consulting the National Archive and different periodicals. The mural is composed of three canvases, arranged chronologically: the first shows the displacement of local rural groups by the implementation of transnational agro-export operations; the second shows the great strike of 1954, public demonstrations and the constitution of unions; the third shows the achievements of *campesinos*, including the new Labor Law, yet also their massacre, the interference of the military in the affairs of the state and their abuse of its resources, and showing clandestine cemeteries.¹²¹

There has been art in Honduras that has engaged the social history of the nation critically, which official institutions and markets have carefully censored it out of public affairs. Such practices, at least until the 1970s, were limited to isolated instances, pursued by individuals who gravitated around institutions but where not their main agents. Canales is a case in point: he was López Rodezno's main collaborator at ENBA, after he graduated from the school. Yet, he is not mentioned in the historical documents I have been able to examine in relation to the institution. I asked Honduran historian Rodolfo Pastor Fasquelle why might that be: "it's simple, he was a *ñángara* [communist]" was his reply.¹²² *Hermanos contra Hermanos*, to take a key example, has been known to publics mainly

¹²¹ Ibid., 6-7.

¹²² Rodolfo Pastor Fasquelle, 25 February 2013.

though reproductions. Honduran filmmaker Darwin Mendoza, whose 2010 thesis *Theorizing on Honduran Social Documentary* discussed the painting in length¹²³, told me that he had not seen the work first hand until its owner, Banco Atlántida, included it in an exhibition that highlight its collection in 2013, with which the bank celebrated its 100th anniversary—this takes us back to the heyday of banana production in Honduras: Banco Atlántida, which holds the largest art collection in the country, came into being as a financial instrument of the Vaccaro Brothers banana company, the very predecessor of the infamous Standard Fruit Company, which prompted many US military interventions in early 20th century Honduras. These interventions sought to establish in the Honduran government caudillos favourable to the company's business, and constitute thus a US military involvement in local wars, the very ignominy condemned in Zelaya Sierra's *Hermanos contra Hermanos*. Very few examples of committed art are know from Honduras in the early and middle 20th century; most are carefully kept from publics.

While a century ago artists in Honduras had to leave their country to pursue instruction, today they must mayor in a subject different than art when they arrive at college after attending ENBA. An interesting case to consider is that of Ezequiel Padilla Ayestas (active since the 1960s). Like most contemporary artists in Honduras, he studied art at ENBA, which does not offer any higher education degrees. Padilla Ayestas obtained, for instance, a civil

¹²³ See Darwin Y. Mendoza, "Theorizing on Honduran Social Documentary" (Ohio University, 2010).

engineer degree at UNAH, and has practiced as engineer most of his life. He did become a very committed artist, his work dealing with a range of social issues, rural ones as well as urban ones. His reception inside and outside Honduras has been strong, especially during 1980s, when he became, through his painterly, expressionistic canvases, one of the strongest critics of US military presence in Honduras. Renowned Honduran critics like Julio Escoto, mentioned above, and Helen Umaña, whose critical writings on Honduran literature are authoritative, have celebrated Padilla Ayestas for his character as an artist, and written illuminatingly about his work in various occasions. It is important to emphasise, however, that while painting dominated the Honduran 20th century, it was not always critically committed work like that of Padilla Ayestas. Consumers promptly valued decorative or dilettantish canvases and most artists followed this demand. This enthusiastic commerce of pictorial figuration burdened the potential discursiveness of art in Honduras. As Adán Vallecillo would agree:

Since colonial times until the late twentieth century diversity was not a relevant feature in the plastic arts of Honduras. Not even the momentum of modernity—which in other Latin American countries activated experimentation and managed to captivate the minds of the followers of the vanguards—prompted a transgression of the boundaries of painting.¹²⁴

Indeed, it was only during the last two decades that artistic practices have seen in Honduras a diversification, to use Vallecillo's word. Not only painting sees a renovation starting circa 1990—larger formats, a new variety of supports, the

¹²⁴ Vallecillo, *La Otra Tradición : Un Encuentro Con El Arte Contemporáneo En Honduras, 2000-2010*, 181. Original Spanish: Desde la época colonial hasta finales del siglo XX la diversidad no fue una característica relevante en las artes plásticas de Honduras. Ni siquiera el ímpetu de la modernidad—que en otros países de Latinoamérica activó la experimentación y logró cautivar el pensamiento de los seguidores de las vanguardias—hizo que los límites de la pintura fueran trasgredidos

ways of setting them in relation to space and to each other—, but new practices—assemblage, installation, performance—come to undermine its preponderance. This break in media, themes and interests corresponds to the vocation of a new generation that wishes to engage publics at a more intellectual level, a community of artists who interpellate the critical subjectivity of the public.

Adán Vallecillo is a key example within this important trend. He was born in Danlí, in 1977. He graduated from ENBA in 1995, and from Escuela de Artes Plásticas, San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 2000. In 2010 he obtained a degree in sociology from UNAH, yet producing art all along. His studies in sociology have greatly impacted his artistic practice, specially the writings of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault. A leader among this young generation of artists, Vallecillo participated during the early 1990's in the formation of new collectives, like the workshop *El círculo*, and the project *La artería*, both of which gathered artists who produced and showed works beyond institutional frames. He has written critical texts and curated exhibitions in and beyond Honduras. Léster Rodríguez, another emblematic figure of this renewal of artistic practices in Honduras, was born in Tegucigalpa in 1984. He constantly creates workshops at different institutions, and has recently instituted an experimental art school with artist Lucy Argueta (who will be the focus of the following chapter). After graduating from ENBA, Rodríguez pursued and culminated a degree in sociology from the Universidad Nacional Pedagógica Francisco Morazán. He studies the work of Marxist authors like Henri Lefebvre, as well as the relational aesthetics of Nicolas

Bourriaud. The interaction of Rodríguez and Vallecillo with other artists has created the space for discussing artistic practices beyond the figurative focus of ENBA. I would like to stress these artists' personal drives to embark in a study and practice of art in dialogue with a rich variety of visual and textual works and languages, a vision and effort that has gone far beyond the constraining conceptions that operate within institutional frames in Honduras. The formidable leap the practices of these individuals entail in the context of the history of art in Honduras could not have come about if they would have operated solely on the basis of the premises at work within the Honduran institutional framework.

Speaking the Unspeakable

Given this strong reclamation of vanguardism in Honduras, one feels prompted to ask, what happened in the last decade or two in that Central American nation that rekindled the desires to reconnect art to life? For the sake of analysis, I will pursue answers from a psycho-social perspective in this section, and a more historical explanation in the next. Herbert Marcuse explored the dialectic of viewing in several essays and lectures on art and culture, elucidating the way works of art allows viewers to set their imagination into play at the heart of the social world. In my personal experience, Marcuse's thought has been very helpful in understanding artistic practices that seek to induce social change in Honduras today. *Eros and Civilization*, a critical study of the ideas of Sigmund Freud, contains a chapter entitled *The aesthetic dimension*, where Marcuse fuses the notions of aesthetics from German idealism with the psychoanalytic ideas of Freud. In 1978 Marcuse published an incredibly insightful book: *The Aesthetic Dimension*. This book prompted me to ask, where from do we perceive? To what world, or vision of the world, do viewers plug the signs set at play in the work of art? I'm interested, first, in highlighting the utopian impulse Marcuse's aesthetics locate in spectators, or more precisely in their desire to overcome the conditions of their being-in-the-world, understanding utopia as a non-place, an outer space to the world of signs we inhabit more than a prescriptive or idealised view of community. I am emphasising the spectator's agency to generate from this *other* space, from this alternate mode of sensorial

experience and interaction, a vision of community that runs against the grain of the conglomerate of representations constituted by social institutions in Honduras today.

One must recognise that what is offered as 'real' in the media, in the speeches of spokesmen of national states and corporations, and even in the educational system, are merely *representations*, which involve an abysmal gap with *the real* as it transpires in our everyday experience. In other words, there is an overwhelming gap between these 'official discourses' and our own experience, between the fictions confabulated by dominant institutions and our own psychic impulses, which unconsciously impact at every turn our behaviours, our attitudes toward the world that engulf us, and, especially, to others. Post-Structuralism, permeated as it is with the psychoanalytic understanding that subjects are unstable and de-centred, has taught us that we inhabit a world of signs whose occasional overlap with reality is incidental—awareness of the real is not a primary process of our psychic life. Our signs and the real are not only two very different things; they remain separate most of the time. The real is outside of our consciousness; our psychic apparatus constantly represses it because is too ominous a material to be aware of it all the time. I emphasise: It is key to recognise that we communicate and interact as social beings through signs that keep great distance with the real. Our words are more conventional and subjective than we would be willing to accept. Typically we feel we are talking about something concrete, but most of the time our signs obliterate the

real rather than reveal it. Located beyond the world of signs we inhabit, the real remains an inarticulate mass and, when it does occasionally slip into our language, it has already been disrupted: in the process of finding articulation in pre-set language structures, whether contemporary Spanish or video-art, it loses the form and meaning it had before entering or becoming language. In the process of seeking consciously for ways of expressing the deepest core of our humanity, the real eludes us and displaces itself: thus come into circulation the disjointed and always unstable forms and signs that surround us and constitute the symbolic space of our interactions. The beating, internal core that motivates us to express ourselves remains always beyond that expression, since such drives, aspects of a biological process more than elements of any language, elude articulation.

This condition cannot be ignored when one seeks to understand art's capability to build community, and, primarily concerned as I am with art's capacity to produce communities, I must ask, what implications does this split between life and systems of representation have on a project of communitarian life? Our efforts to meet our needs, both material and immaterial, gestate our culture, i.e. they form a system of social relations that should facilitate the production of our common welfare. The production of art and culture is embedded in that very process; it does not happen in a vacuum. Paradoxically, this same movement, this impulse to create a culturally unified community, creates contradictions among people. In fact, if we were to put into play all our impulses uninhibitedly,

would not that produce constant clashes among people? As we indeed know, there are serious conflicts every day, although it is assumed that state officials and businessmen (which now appear to be the same thing), pastors and bishops, military and police, teachers and educators seek only “a shared well-being.” In Honduras, for instance, around 20 people are killed every day.¹²⁵ Both, the realisation of our dreams and its inhibitions, rest on the very same continuum. It is very important to acknowledge this profound contradiction when talking about communitarian visions, because it seems difficult to distinguish the moment at which our dreams become nightmares. This is so because the constructions of reality pushed by social institutions in Honduras—the State, the different churches, the education system, not to mention political parties and the media—are scarred with deceit, and as such it can only produce a very fraught future. Subjects embedded in such symbolic structures go into a denial of the real via a conglomerate of imaginary identifications, which comfortably distances the ego from the vacuity of the signs it holds on to. As Slavoj Žižek writes, the ego “is a series of imaginary identifications upon which the consistency of a subject's being depends, but as soon as the subject “knows too much,” gets too close to the unconscious truth [the real], his ego dissolves.”¹²⁶ A surplus of knowledge destabilises, or even empties, the symbolic world inhabited by the subject, and a

¹²⁵ Gustavo Palencia, "Honduras Murder Rate Falls in 2013, but Remains World's Highest," *Reuters* (2014), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/17/us-honduras-homicides-idUSBREA1G1E520140217>.

¹²⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry*, October Books (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 44.

restructuring of meaning is then needed. Art is the proper launchpad for such a reconstitution.

Consider for a moment how our subjective processes are related to art. Artworks appear to us as a structuring of signs. An artist sets in interaction a few signifying elements, either on a canvas or at a less material plane. During the last few decades, some artists in Honduras have sought to structure signs at a more conceptual level, trying to offer publics the possibility to participate in the integration of meaning around their work. In this structuring, both syntactic-semantic and social, signs can interact dynamically and differently each time we apply our imagination to them. Our understanding of the world wells up largely of our personal experience, through our effort to understand and adapt to our environment. When a viewer approaches a work with the intention of finding meaning in it, her imagination leads her to establish relationships between its various elements. By creating connections, she establishes a particular, personal syntax, which involves meanings peculiar to the imagination that has been decanted into the work. Therefore, the meaning acquired by a work is not necessarily the same each time or for each viewer. Signification is unstable. You can read a book and produce its significance in a coherent manner, yet reread it (yourself or someone else) and develop during this second reading another meaning also consistent to the work but completely dissimilar to the former reading. When driving a car, it is very important that we stop at a red light and advance to the green; not so in art, since it is minimally coded. In our

contemporary culture, art comports a structure open to the peculiar imagination of subjects, their way of understanding things. Thanks to its ability to incorporate heterogeneous subjectivities, which would produce differing meanings in relation to the same work, art can help subjects realise that the way they have come to think the world is not the only possible (much less the best: it simply cannot be if a community reports 22 homicides a day). The demand to come to terms with the contingency of meaning, the realisation of the very indeterminateness of any sense we may grant to the world around us, pushes us, viewing subjects, to rehearse different subjective (dis)positions, not only in relation to specific artworks, but also in relation to the worlds thereby instated: reception becomes a process of constant modifications, and thus opens the door for shifts in consciousness and social transformation.

Herbert Marcuse taught that art entails the conscious denial of the lifestyle we have established, with all its institutions, with our material and intellectual culture in its entirety, with all its immoral morality.¹²⁷ He understood of art as an alienating *otherness*, as a substance heterogeneous to the “reality” we have come to conceive of. From art, or, put another way, from that *other* place art establishes, we can distance ourselves from the world-image we have crafted and inhabited, we can question it, and, above all, become aware that it is, certainly in today’s Honduras, a production that rather separates us from a world of wellbeing and contentment. Marcuse did not think it advisable to seek in art an

¹²⁷ Herbert Marcuse, "Art as a Form of Reality," in *On the Future of Art*, ed. Arnold Toynbee (New York: Viking Press, 1970), 124.

aesthetic experience that would keep us from an oppressive world: that mode of “sublimation” is for him rather repressive, because it *does not* lead to a critique of the alienating prisms we have inherited and built to perceive the world. It’s vital to question how we might be contributing to keep things as they are. Social institutions, through which we most pass in our seeking insertions into the world of economic production, reproduce the modes of interaction established over centuries by the capitalistic mode of production. In order to succeed, capitalist production necessitates a divided world, and thus has long instated ideological devices to justify the exclusion and dispossession of large populations without which capitalism would collapse. Yet, all that resists us in our world results from the mode we perceive social relations; the veil capitalism has set over our eyes inhibits the realisation of the functional community in which we would be content. By locating myself, as spectator, in another territory, in a no-place, I can actually bracket out “reality,” intuit its nature as socio-cultural production, and thus reflect critically on its configuration. The nation itself is one of those cultural products emerging from a long history of approaches and clashes between social groups; such processes constituted the world we inhabit today. If we are not all satisfied with such world, would it not be worth it to extract ourselves from it at least momentarily, if only in order to recompose the picture and try to imagine a different way of configuring ourselves into society?

If we want to improve the conditions of existence within Honduran society, it is key to recognise that the language and images established in contemporary

culture does not express our actual experience. To acknowledge and accept this scissure is a precondition to the process of conceiving a better way of production and coexistence. All images we consume, artistic or not, correspond to cultural habits. For example, it is common to attend the cinema and recognise in the film scripts and ideas that we already carry within us, instead of trying to infer and critically ponder the world introduced by the film. Such iterative mode reception is extremely alienating, because in re-enacting scripts and finding embodiments for old ideas we avoid integrating new meanings into the film. We thus protect ourselves from the ludic risk of setting our imagination at play and dodge the vital impulses that, stemming spontaneously from our psyche, could break with the habitual structures of discourse: we consciously facilitate the process that prevents the articulation of our deepest concerns, the alarming dysfunctionality of our society and its dominant institutions for instance.

Marcuse proposed an entirely different mode of artistic production and reception. He insisted on trying to infer the world established in each work, in which its men and women, their words and music, objects and images reveal what in everyday life remains silent and invisible.¹²⁸ Art has the ability to set separate us from the established world, to alienate us in way that is not repressive but rather liberating. I must emphasise here the peculiar mode in which Marcuse understood, in the context of artistic reception, the process of alienation: he used it in a positive sense, as something favourable. That is to say, art allows us to distance ourselves from the world instituted within the

¹²⁸ Ibid., 127.

representations created by the dominant institutions: government bodies, educational system, churches, military and police forces, the media and their customers. These constantly draw a world in the service of capital, where individual needs are sacrificed in favour of a system that fails to provide for all who work for it. In the particular case of Honduras, this system has created a rigid mesh of social relationships marked by exclusion, abuse and violence. Art, if thus understood and cultivated, allows us to dwell on terrain from which we can not only objectify the loss of humanity in our society, but also picture a different world. This *other* world, produced by viewers in opposition to the fraught and alienating panorama instated in the work, will in all probability run against the grain of the spotty discourses cast forth by the dominant institutions, will deny the validity of their version of “reality,” thus allowing insights into its fictitious character as well as the immoral motivations for its production.

As part of the established culture, art affirms and supports a vision that obliterates the concretion of a communitarian ideal. As alienation from the established world, art constitutes a negation, i.e. it gives us the opportunity to rebel, to oppose our own vision to those that have been formulated against our own communitarian interests. Art allows us to dismantle them, to empty them and create the autonomous and ludic space where we can invest our intelligence to imagine forms of experience more equitable and humane. In this sense, art constitutes a negation of what we experience in the present. To better understand the ability of art to facilitate the opposition between versions or

visions of “reality,” we can think about the different moments or durations of our experience. For instance, we witness the artwork at a specific time, located before and after that other “real” time, that of everyday experience. This creates the opportunity to contrast the world that the work allows us to imagine against that other world in which we must struggle every day. Therein lies the dialectical capacity of art. This art of negation coexists with a “positive” formulation of culture. Over time, the experience of art entails an approximation into the real as much as it demands a departure from it, a repression of its immediacy. This interaction of opposites allows us to oscillate between, or transit through, contrasting representations; this motion appeals to our critical sense, it calls forth a need to know apart divergent ways of thinking society, some more liberating and others more repressive. Marcuse appeals to our intellectual capacity to discriminate among the fleeting images offered to us by a kaleidoscope in constant revolution, knowing that all are constructions that appear as real, and asks us to have the fine judgment and intelligence, as well as the fidelity to ourselves, to recognise what and how is the experience we would like to procure. Once it has been set at play, our imagination can produce the world to which we would like to belong, and, from the exchange between individual subjects, there can arise the social relations necessary to produce the space we would like to inhabit.

In today’s Honduras, many artists rebel against the assimilation of art to the “positive” or official. Such rebellion is triggered, to use Marcuse’s terms, by

“the intolerable conflict between the actual and the possible.”¹²⁹ The conditions upon which the vast majority of Hondurans must subsist today is so precarious that the “positive” function of art, one that alienates us from the present world by focusing only on the beauty of the work, offends the human condition. The impulse into this revolutionary mode of artistic production and reception dates (at least) from the Romantic era, and palpitates today in efforts to restore art by destroying the dominant forms of perception, by opposing the familiar appearance of aesthetic objects, since those constitute mutilated forms of experience. I am for an art that confronts us with the dreams we betray, with the crimes we forget. Art’s predicament, as articulated by Herbert Marcuse during the 1970s, proves alive today: artistic practices will join the ranks of rebellion only to the extent that they face publics with a de-sublimated object: “a living form that gives word and image and sound to the unnameable, to the lie and its debunking, to the horror and the liberation from it, to the body and its sensibility as the source and seat of all “aesthetics”.”¹³⁰ As the locus of experience, the human body is also the prison-house of the biological processes that stimulate the production of meaning.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Ibid., 129.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 130.

¹³¹ Julia Kristeva has brilliantly argues for this thesis in Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

Differing Subjectivities

In the process of refining our consciousness of the world in which we are embedded, contrasting visions have a very important role to play. Arcadian images of rural life, colourful constructions of a national “heroic” past, or manufactured fragments of a national identity that remains outside of experience can’t but obscure the path of our development. Against such external forms, the work of an artist like Santos Arzú Quioto (San Pedro Sula, 1963) focuses on internal subjective processes. The lush surfaces of his abstract compositions allow spectators to unfold their own inner experiences; they afford a sensual experience whose fruition can only be realised within the subjective core of the viewer. His installations address subjective experience more specifically. *El almario* (1998) centres on a narrative of loss, and, as such, has the capacity of bringing on a process of foreboding remembrance, which is not the exceptional domain of any particular social group. In *El insectario* (2010) we are seduced by beautiful life forms in their becoming. Yet, we might be, conversely, participating in the inhibition of this flourishing through our own indulgent objectification of their ever-present crystallised state. Arzú confronts us, through his dialectics of object and subject, with the sociological ramifications of our perceptions, and prompt us, in this way, to complicate our own subjective stance, always imperfect, always insufficient, always becoming.

I have always been absorbed by the lush surfaces of Arzú’s work. The artist incorporates into his installations a great variety of materials, from natural ones like seeds and shells to more chemical ones like resins and artificial sands.

He also incorporates images of his relatives, photographic or through varying two-dimensional media. His work has a broad, rich scope, its reception of one of the most enthusiastic I have seen in Honduras in recent times. In 2012, Santos Arzú shared with me an image that shows a partial view of a 1998 installation of his (figure 26). The installation is structured as an interior space, not a functional one where people may live, but a subjective artistic creation intended to evoke a past. The subtitle of the piece, *Memories of Irma Leticia*, indicates that it refers to a woman's memories. Irma Leticia de Oyuela was an art patron, gallery owner and author of one of the few histories of Honduran painting.¹³² The artist, however, has collaged into the painterly surface of this evocative space a dual portrait, which he modelled after a very old photograph of his great-grandparents. He notes that he found the photograph in his grandmother's old chest at her house in Trujillo, Honduras's first colonial capital on the Caribbean coast.¹³³ The noun that titles the piece, *almario*, means *armario* or wardrobe.¹³⁴ The choice of the less common form of the noun, *almario*, is significant, since it incorporates the word *alma*, or soul, and thus suggests the space as a deposit of things spiritual. The sensuous formal features of the work, its highly textured surfaces and dramatically contrasting values, its down-flowing impasto reds, and the intimate, closed configuration of the space seduce the viewer into a sustained

¹³² While the original edition of this work goes back to 1995, it is now circulating as Leticia de Oyuela, *Constructores Artísticos Entre Siglos* (San Pedro Sula, Honduras: Grupo OPSA, 2010).

¹³³ Santos Arzú Quioto, Personal Communication, 2012

¹³⁴ Real Academia Española

process of fruition, during which the viewer might seek to recuperate the shared subjectivity implied in the work, one that transcends race and gender.



Figure 26: Santos Arzú Quito, *El almario*, partial view of installation, 1998

People's experience, their endurance of the physical and social environment in which they are engulfed, impacts their subjective disposition. I perceive in both Honduran artists and Honduran publics a desire that emerges from profound discontents with how society works, or rather not, in Honduras, and much opposition to the widespread misconstructions and misrepresentations that sustain the dysfunctionality of our social dominant institutions today. Of course such disquiet is not new; it was always there, only that people felt it dangerous to articulate it, to play it off; they were afraid, and many still are, of

how others would respond, not to mention the State and its institutions, especially the military, which disappeared thousands of people during the 1980s—particularly those who opposed the use of the national territory by the US military to intervene and wage wars against popular movements in Guatemala and El Salvador, and the Sandinista Government in Nicaragua. In the context of overwhelming events in recent Honduran social history, which I discuss below, people in general and artists in particular have found an echo among themselves, and the desire for a less deluded construction of reality continues to motivate exchange, inside and outside artistic groups. The social institutions that have been established over the decades in Honduras are, more conspicuously than ever, dysfunctional: they do not seek the interests of the people; they are violent against the popular classes. Dissenting discourses, artistic or otherwise, weigh large as a threat to the permanence of those dysfunctional institutions, as it makes apparent the deceitful constructions of “reality” that allow them in the first place. I seek, in the following paragraphs, to sketch out the oppositions I perceive in contemporary Honduran culture. I will proceed by elaborating from my own standpoint.

On Sunday 28 June 2009, I woke up to a cup of coffee and to see who was online that day. This is a way I keep in touch with friends back in Honduras. A friend told me that they had woken up to no electricity, and that, when it was reactivated, TV channels were showing the usual soccer game—no news. At about 11:00 am or so, all TV stations showed the President of Congress being

sworn in as Head of the Executive Branch. Alternatively, media around globe reported that the Honduran President had been kidnaped by shooting assault squads from his residence at 5:30 am, taken to the US Military Base, and flown from there to San José, Costa Rica, where he came before the international media to describe the way in which he was forced out of the country.

A few weeks later I was in Honduras. I recall many conversations I heard and often took part of. In one of them, an associate of a large textile export consortium, explained to his friends why it was important to name what had happened in June 28th as a *sucesión constitucional* (constitutional succession): calling it a coup d'état would hamper international business. A merchant told me later that it was indeed a coup, yet that we needed only be *careful* of not calling a *military* coup d'état, but "a technical one" (what he meant by that I never understood). For most people it was clearly a coup d'état, and the forms of reasoning why it had been done were extremely varied and nuanced: the ousted president was seeking actual reforms (which did not please conservative groups usually allied with the military); he was instating social programs that industrial and merchants denounced as thefts; he wanted indeed to reform a constitution that was written in the 1980's by an improvised convention, with the purpose of giving the appearance of democracy to what at bottom remained a militarised State throughout, so that the Reagan Administration could deploy troops and armament in the national territory and wage its wars against in the region. The supporters of the coup went out to the street, wearing white, to defend 'peace

and democracy.’ The opposition waved banners of red and black, demanded the restitution of the ousted president, and the immediate convocation of a convention to write the constitution anew.

It was difficult to traverse across these interpretations or narratives of the process when conversing with others. The people that wove them felt extremely strong about them, they felt almost everything was at stake. As I had never seen before, people were completely invested in giving sense to what was happening in their country. It was a critical moment where agreement was extremely difficult, too often impossible. The more I conversed and thought about it all, I suspected that there was in people something larger than reasoning and arguments, feelings and attitudes; something of which they were not fully conscious yet largely shaped their arguments and behaviour. There were not only two fronts either. Disagreement was, for instance, very pronounced among the people who, calling out the self-interest that motivated the supporters of the coup, organised themselves as a resistance front. The more time passed, the more splits one would find all around. I felt that there was so much to learn from the process. I asked myself, how can there be such heterogeneity of ways of thinking what is going on, and for people, at the same time, to feel so convinced about the particular positions they held? I lacked a language for all of it.



Figure 27: Santos Arzú Quioto, *La sala prohibida, o inquietud en el recinto de clausura*, partial view of one of the rooms, mixed media, 2010

In 2010, Santos Arzú opened his exhibition *El insectario* (figure 27). In the catalogue to the show, elucidating the work, the artist wrote:

The Honduran individual has created his/her space and lives shut away. This seclusion would be interesting if its purpose were to do a fruitful reflection or contemplation; but it is evident that it is contaminated by fear and indifference, the individual becoming a prisoner of others, of himself/herself, of his/her circumstances, of his/her hostile environment.¹³⁵

Arzú was addressing the very division so much of us were experiencing. Hostility within Honduras has only increased, and its two main cities, Tegucigalpa and

¹³⁵ Arzú, Mejía, and La Banca, *El Insectario*, 4. Original Spanish: El hondureño ha creado su espacio y vive enclaustrado. Esta reclusión sería interesante si fuese para hacer un alto de reflexión o contemplación fructífera; pero es evidente que está contaminada por temores e indiferencias convirtiéndolo en reo de los otros, de sí mismo, de su circunstancia y entorno hostil.

San Pedro Sula, are today among the five most violent cities in the world. *El insectario* was an extensive and complex exhibition; yet suffice to discuss here briefly a section of it, *La sala prohibida, o inquietud en el recinto de clausura*.¹³⁶ There, the artist put in pedestals, around complete darkness, several organic forms contained in amber. Seen through their translucent, congealed cases, the forms suggest biological processes, yet they are set in a resin whose colour suggests they have been there forever. They seem congealed in their becoming, their incapacity to interact with others precluded. Arzú describes this section as museum or cemetery, but also as laboratory,¹³⁷ questioning thus our reluctance to experiment. It seems that for many Honduras to engage in dialogue became too high a risk. So the question was posed, through artistic language, what is it that immobilises us? What is it that so strongly precludes dialogue?

The habitual way of expressing or constructing reality had indeed become insufficient; it did not seem to provide a minimum of common elements for exchange to take place, it just did not hold up anymore. We were, and still are, alienated from each other. Or, as Arzú puts it, fear and indifference had made us prisoners of others and of ourselves (“reo de los otros, de sí mismo”). In Spanish, ‘reo’ is synonymous of accused, guilty. Are we *subject* to punishment and control by our equals? In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams affirmed that at least one sense of early the English noun *subject* persists today: “a person under the dominion of

¹³⁶ The Forbidden Room, or Restlessness in the Precinct of Closure.

¹³⁷ Arzú, Mejía, and La Banca, *El Insectario*, 59.

a lord or sovereign.”¹³⁸ A structure of domination is still in place in Honduras today. Instead of feudal lords, we have a spectral State, as mask people wear to dominate their equals. The mask can be a police or military uniform, the robe of an ecclesiastic official, the façade of a governmental building, like Seat of Congress or the Presidential House. Think of a president for a moment. Certainly, a particular individual, who has his/her own agency and wears that mask, i.e. the symbolic positioning of being “head of the State.” But there is, behind this person, a hidden structure, economic and military, that exceeds in its power and complexity not only the president but also the nation itself. This structure is dynamic enough to adapt its illusory presence to the fancy of the public, and also powerful enough hold them in subjection by brutal force if necessary, as it happened in 2009 with the forcible removal of the president and the murderous repression of large crowds who went out to the street in support of him. Those economic and political forces revealed themselves not only to exceed the president and the constituencies that did find representation in him, but also proved to be more brutish and enduring.

Through a vicious disruption as a coup d’état, that phantasmic engine of domination became conspicuous: who had been governing the nation if not the president? Who was benefiting from an order that was obviously not democratic? In a dramatic inversion, the beast behind the government lost its veil and became the “the topic or theme which is studied, or written or spoken about.”¹³⁹ The will of

¹³⁸ Williams, *Keywords : A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 308.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 308-09.

the State to dominate for the sake of private interest was clearly cast in the mind of the public by the inconsistencies of an explanatory official discourse that lacked any real sense, and a discourse about, and critique of, the State became ever more urgent, its material opposition to the people it was supposed to represent ever more vicious. A great many people, coming from a heterogeneity of backgrounds, went on to weave very lucid threads into a discourse that went *in opposition* to the State and its clients, and as such they constituted themselves as subjects whose production of reality ran against the grain of the fraught and constantly shifting justifications state officials offered for their barbarous actions against dissenters. A new *subjectivity* emerged, a disseminating group of dissenting subjects grew ever more stronger, agents for the construction of alternative visions of what was happening in Honduras, and, therefore, new ways of giving sense to the nation as well as new ways of thinking what should happen next in that centrepiece of Central American geopolitics. Artists, like Lucy Argueta and Léster Rodríguez, whose work induced a reflection upon the crisis provoked by the State and its clients, as well as the viewers who willingly participate in the process of weaving meaning into their works, participated then and now very consciously in the process of building that new discourse and perceptibility. As such, and as so many other dissenting Hondurans, they took care to play a careful role as the people actively shaping an apprehension of this peculiar nation.

This apprehension is *subjective* because it is *their* production as agents of perception. The fact that their cultural production is subjective does not mean that it is less valid. Rather, it constitutes an assertion by people of their vision, and especially of what they perceive to be wrong; it is a way of opening a field for discussing issues that the State and the partnering media suppress with violence from public opinion. It is indeed a *critique* of the fictive *objectivity* of State officials and their partners in the media and corporate enterprise. The artists and their viewers, as well as producers in other media—journalism, poetry, narrative, blogs, song—constitute a interwoven collectivity, agents and subjects of a new and alternative way of making sense of their nation; they are the producers of a dissenting, subjective mode, a style, to use Benedict Anderson’s term, of imagining the nation.¹⁴⁰ While there is diversity of opinion among them, overall they see a serious problem in the collusion of agencies in the State that seek personal or corporate interest at the disadvantage of the majority of people. Their mode of giving sense to Honduran history is radically different than that of those who defended a coup d’état in the name of peace and democracy, who actually celebrated and honoured a *de facto* president who kept himself in power through bloody repression, the shutting down of alternative media outlets, torture and killings. To impose amok their convenient version of national reality and deny crimes against humanity before the international community does not constitute any type of objectivity.

¹⁴⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 6. Anderson writes, “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”

The collective of cultural agents who propitiated an inclusive exchange in which the deceptive practices of the State become apparent performed a critique of such pretence objectivity, which endures today. Through their work, they instated a discursive field that made critique possible. A field of intellectual production that allows for a critique of simulated objectivism constitutes, a *subjectivity*, a willingness and capacity to locate, within that which assumes itself objective, the elements that motivate its deceptive operations. There is no absolute objective reality; 'reality' is constructed through social interaction and, as such, it is also a production. In the Honduran context, those who wear the mask of the State do not seem realise that their pretended objectivism is as invisible as the Emperor's new clothes. While so many of them pretend that they are in the possession of truth, artists prefer to perform their agency through a ludic interaction that has the capacity of signalling inequality and abuse, and prompt the public, dialectically, to imagine less dysfunctional social formations, to picture them in their mind.

The Argentinian poet Alicia Genovese defines *subjectivity* as "the subjective substratum with which writing conforms itself through the interaction between conscious and unconscious contents within the process of writing itself."¹⁴¹ This writing entails thus a re-positioning of the subject through its very movement across the contents she or he considers, and challenges others to

¹⁴¹ Alicia Genovese, "Poesía Y Subjetividad: Enrique Molina Y Leónidas Lamborghini," *Hispanamérica* 37, no. 109 (2008): 28. Original Spanish: el sustrato subjetivo con el que se conforma la escritura a través de la interacción entre contenidos conscientes e inconscientes dentro del proceso de escritura.

acknowledge and reckon with this particular stance. It entails also that such subjective strata is dynamic, since writing in particular and cultural production in general are subject to layers of codification and de-codification. The subject is in constant search of its positioning, “it places itself simultaneously and contradictorily between ideas and drives, between intellectual operations and emotional flow.”¹⁴² Subjectivity then is as dynamic as the subject, and that is why it has the capacity to challenge and contest. One can read in Arzú’s *La sala prohibida* a panorama in which no one is willing to consider someone else’s stance, where any ludic exchange upon the engulfing world is precluded. Subjects seem frozen in their selfish capsules, blind to others and locked in their personal subterfuges.¹⁴³ This is an extreme situation where people deny themselves and others the opportunity to converse, and thus the formation of community is held at a deadlock. The fear to interact had been infused in the population blow-by-blow, murder-by-murder. It was, ironically, strengthened by a diffused solidarity to the regime. Violence did suppress expression and dialogue. In this state of affairs, not only are human relations threatened, but development itself is also inhibited.

Yet, culture as political combat flourished more than I had ever witnessed in Honduras. The affirmation of regional, ethnic, sexual—not to mention national—identities were defiantly expressed all around. Political contention was

¹⁴² Ibid. Original Spanish: se sitúa simultánea y contradictoriamente entre las ideas y las pulsiones, entre las operaciones intelectivas y la fluencia emocional.

¹⁴³ In contrast to the world instated in Arzú’s piece, emotions in post-coup Honduras were hardly contained; they, however, stimulated outright violence, especially on the part of those who deemed themselves in possession of “objective truth.”

playfully integrated to literary and visual forms. Culture as political contention is, of course, not new. As Terry Eagleton writes, over the past few decades, “culture as sign, image, meaning, value, identity, solidarity and self-expression is the very current of political combat.”¹⁴⁴ In Honduras, political contention through literary and artistic forms has been common at least since the 1980s, as can be sensed in the writings of Helen Umaña and the paintings of Ezequiel Padilla Ayestas, for instance. In such a repressive and conservative society as Honduras, those manifestations did not circulate widely. Since the 1990s, and especially in the context of the current crisis, there has been in the visual production a more widespread engagement with politics. For Eagleton, the idea of subjectivity constitutes the very kernel that links cultural production to politics. “Culture means the domain of social subjectivity—a domain which is wider than ideology but narrower than society, less palpable than the economy but more tangible than Theory.”¹⁴⁵ It is my perception that, in Honduras, since 2009, the domain of social subjectivity has grown significantly.

¹⁴⁴ Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, 38.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

Constructing Subjects

Contemporary Honduran artworks incorporate dissident discursive elements about the current situation—not to mention the role played by an overly dominant national government and military. This has been evidenced by recent exhibitions, such as the Third Honduran Biennial, which was open to the public at the Galería Nacional de Arte, in Tegucigalpa, between August 13 and October 3 of 2010. Several of the works in this Biennial refer to unjust social conditions that are suffered by many Hondurans today, and most of these artworks present an open-ended configuration that demands the subjective participation of the spectator. In that way, the viewer's critical subjectivity can play an active role in the elaboration of meaning, a process through which the sense given to recent events by dominant institutions can be contested on a popular basis.

Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras and principal centre of cultural production in this Central American nation, is home to a heterogeneous artistic and intellectual community, constituted both by local citizens and international people. Visual artists, musicians, actors, dancers, poets, novelists, historians, sociologists, and people from a broad variety of professional and occupational backgrounds, not directly related to the arts, participate actively in weaving meanings into the art publicly exhibited at different venues in the city. It becomes important then to study the production and reception of contemporary art in this community, in order to articulate, or at least to approximate the diverse meanings

circulating through visual works and their modes of producing signification in the public sphere.

How can one analyse the dynamics between artists and the public, as well as those between engaged art and social reality, in the context of contemporary Honduras in general and this most recent Biennial in particular? For this purpose, I would like to remember the dialectical approach conceived by Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse to a given reality and artistic avenues of liberation in relation to it:

The radical qualities of art, that is to say, its indictment of the established reality and its invocation of the beautiful image of liberation are grounded precisely in the dimensions where art *transcends* its social determination and emancipates itself from the given universe of discourse and behaviour while preserving its overwhelming presence. Thereby art creates the realm in which the subversion of experience proper to art becomes possible: the world formed by art is recognized as a reality which is suppressed and distorted in the given reality. The experience culminates in extreme situations (...) which explode the given reality in the name of a truth normally denied or unheard. The inner logic of the work of art terminates in the emergence of another reason, another sensibility, which defy the rationality and sensibility incorporated in the dominant social institutions.¹⁴⁶

The argument elaborated here by Marcuse constitutes the thesis of his book *The Aesthetic Dimension*, of 1978, and it allows us to start grasping the aesthetic strategies implemented in numerous works exhibited in the Third Honduran Biennial. Many of these works can be taken as evidence that their producers understand the role of art along the lines adumbrated by Marcuse. Taking the Biennial as a case study, we can ask, for instance, how does contemporary Honduran art disrupt the official discourses of a militarised state and the media

¹⁴⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension : Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 6-7.

corporations that veil that reality? What dissenting dynamic do the works in the exhibition pursue between the artists and the public, or, for that matter, between art and social reality? Do they contradict the given state of affairs in a way that points to an alternative order? How are these works structured aesthetically? Do they elicit the critical subjectivity of the viewer and, if they do, how? What meanings can be integrated to them? I would argue that the works in the Third Honduran Biennial have the potential to induce a new sensibility in the viewer for contesting the discourses of dominant social institutions, like those of the state and the armed forces. As, this art directs the spectator to the historical necessities and contemporary realities that, irrupting within spectator consciousness, will reveal the contradictory and implausible logic of official discourse in the country.

The social and political context in which the biennial developed and took place was the illegal ouster of Manuel Zelaya, discussed above. On June 28th of 2009, some fourteen months before the Biennial opened to the public, the democratically elected President of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya, was ousted via a military coup d'état, and the Honduran National Congress illegally appointed its President, Roberto Micheletti, as head of the executive branch. Three decades of continuous democratic rule were cancelled out and the country went back to the precarious state of institutional crisis it had known throughout most of the 20th century.¹⁴⁷ The illegal ouster of the president produced discontent, popular

¹⁴⁷ In his analysis of the "transition to democracy" in Honduras during the 1980's, historian Marvin Barahona writes: "Los militares se comprometieron a devolver el poder a un gobierno civil electo

mobilisation, and strong resistance to Micheletti's spurious regime, which in turn unleashed the power of its military against the people. Reconstructing the details of this whole process, still unresolved as I write this essay, is much more complex than I can account here, but a few lines from the writings of North American historian Greg Grandin, published some four months after the coup, provide a very eloquent picture:

The government has suspended civil liberties and shut down independent sources of news, including the TV station Choluta Sur and Radio Globo. In response to rolling protests throughout Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, security forces continue to round up demonstrators, holding some of the detained in soccer stadiums—evoking Chile in 1973, after Augusto Pinochet's junta overthrew Salvador Allende, when security forces turned Santiago's National Stadium into a torture chamber. The Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH) says Hondurans are indeed being tortured, burned with cigarettes and sodomized by batons, and that some of the torturers are veterans of Battalion 316, an infamous Honduran death squad from the 1980s.¹⁴⁸

Deaths of activists and journalists continue up to this day. Elections took place in November of 2009, with the military participating in the management of the electoral process at the same time that they forcefully shut down media outlets. The new President, Porfirio Lobo, took power in January of 2010, and the status

democráticamente, a cambio de conservar su poder y privilegios en el nuevo régimen político. La alianza político-militar establecida por el nuevo régimen con los Estados Unidos, que implicó la intervención de Honduras en el conflicto regional como ejecutor de la estrategia estadounidense de contrainsurgencia en Centro América, supuso también el endurecimiento de la política interna para controlar la disensión local y una política exterior orientada a contener el avance de la revolución centroamericana. En tal contexto, la transición a la democracia en la década de 1980 no se tradujo en una democratización efectiva, sino en un proceso mediado por el enorme poder alcanzado por los militares, que contribuyó a limitar las expectativas sociales respecto al poder civil y frenó el alcance potencial de la democracia política. El pluralismo político e ideológico, la tolerancia, el respeto al régimen jurídico y a los derechos humanos fueron actores marginales en el modelo de democracia inaugurado en 1980. El poder del estado, sobre todo su poder militar y el de sus medios de coerción, creció a un nivel sin precedentes y cuestionó la realidad del cambio producido por la transición a la democracia." Marvin Barahona, *Honduras En El Siglo Xx: Una Síntesis Histórica* (Tegucigalpa: Guaymuras, 2005), 326-27.

¹⁴⁸ Greg Grandin, "Honduras Coup Regime in Crisis," *The Nation* (2009), <http://www.thenation.com/article/honduran-coupregime-crisis>.

quo has been reasserted. The new government was only recognised by four nations in the Western Hemisphere (the US, Panama, Colombia and, only later, Chile). Honduras is still not invited to international conferences (OAS or other). It continues to exist in its own self-made limbo, imposed by the ruling order.



Figure 28: Léster Rodríguez, *Dispersión*, 2010, detail of installation, chess pieces, white paint, latex, wood, rubber. 365 x 400 cm

A work exhibited at the Third Honduran Biennial, *Dispersión* by Léster Rodríguez (figure 28), becomes very meaningful within the context described by Grandin. In a portion of a gallery wall 4 meters wide and 3.65 meters tall, Rodríguez installed several hundred chess pieces, all of which are white and

contrast softly over the light cool gray of the wall. Pawns abound and we see way more of them than knights, bishops or rooks. Only a very few kings or queens can be seen on the periphery of the composition. Closer to the center of the piece, placed freely, are patterns of intermingling knights, bishops and rooks. On this peripheral area, however, we can also see knights regimented in lines, in obvious reference to military force, which face the more consolidated central arrangement of the composition, made exclusively of pawns. The central mass of pawns covers a loosely circular area, and receives the brightest illumination. They are arranged in circular, concentric patterns, and they seem to all draw or orient themselves toward a figure in the center, which is also a pawn. The lighting over the chess pieces, coming from different sources, creates an expanding web of overlapping shadows, which shift in value, duration and direction.

Since the days of Marcel Duchamp chess has been used to play games in the modern art world. *Dispersión*, by Rodríguez, is structured in such a way that it allows multiple readings. At one level, the work operates upon the metaphoric values that can be ascribed to the elements of chess. Implicit to the game is a confrontation between two adversaries, each of which is at the top of a hierarchy. A structure of power is already indicated here, where the lowest rank with the least mobility constitutes the vast majority and the ones actually held in check by all the mobilized forces around them. Another layer of meaning is open by the fact that all the chess pieces in the composition are white: the suppression of the

bi-chromatic structure of chess, which suggests two kingdoms or states, leads us to think that the ensuing conflict is taking place within the same society, not between two conflicting parties. The contest is between the largest, most disenfranchised group or class and the higher “feudal” ranks of society. Bishops, knights and rooks signify almost literally different statuses or positions within Honduran society. In that way, the work invites the viewer to infer the archaic structuring of his or her society, and evaluate critically the role of the clergy, as suggested by the bishops, and the military, as suggested by the knights. The rook, enjoying great mobility in chess, could be associated with the exceptional status of an economically privileged group, sustained in power with help of military coercion.

Within the organisational solidarity of the composition, all these higher forces flow together to immobilise and eventually disperse the mass of pawns. The title, *Dispersion*, indicates, at least potentially, that this mass is to be broken up; it implies that its organisation is against the interests of those around it, and here it leads to a larger, more general signified: the idea of dispersing a gathering of people, of suppressing their right to come together collectively to organise themselves for various purposes. Within the context of contemporary Honduras, where the state continues to illegally and brutally repress a people who have started, since the coup of 2009 and even before that, to develop a new and much less deluded apprehension of their nation’s political system, a work like *Dispersión* acquires great poignance. It is a poignance that distances itself from

mere pathos, for the hierarchical social processes that unfold around it are not referred to figuratively, but rather evoked through the metaphorical values the chess game acquires through the structure of the work.

Rodriguez's alert work *Dispersión* helps us to understand an artistic trend in contemporary Honduran art, one that shows a concern with the nation's social reality along with aspiring to build on and consolidate its discursive potential, thus engaging the public in opposing the oblique reality reconstructed in artworks to the manifest misconstructions of the media and official discourses. The Third Honduran Biennial is representative of this trend. We can see in it how different artists adopt different strategies for inducing in the viewer critical reflections upon the world that surrounds them. Assemblages, installations, video, performance, photography, painting and other media are used to incite the viewer to ponder a range of issues. These concerns, including military repression, range from constructions of femininity, child abuse, homophobia, and the role of state institutions to the ambivalence of high "moral" officials within the Catholic Church. I argue that there is, within the contemporary artistic production of Honduras, a tenacious desire to generate, through a dialectical counter-positioning of the self-contradictory discourses of the state and its clients with the sober reality known to the 65% of Hondurans who live under the poverty line (according to UN statistics), a new sensibility that would resist and lead beyond the false forms for the present way of representing the nation's reality. Rationalised by the system are deep inequality, systemic impoverishment, the marginalisation of native

ethnic groups, offences against human rights, the illicit accumulation of wealth and the forceful closure of alternative media outlets. As a result, coup d'états and militarised electoral procedures are seen as normal elements within the functioning of society. Many Honduran artists within the current generation seek to destabilise this disenfranchising mode of thinking the nation.



Figure 29: Adán Vallecillo, aspect of *La fisiología del gusto*, 2010, human teeth, brushed steel tray, 27 x 40 cm

I have pointed out how Léster Rodríguez's work *Dispersión* brings attention to the violent mechanisms of coercion that constantly discourage dissidence, inducing in the viewer not only an awareness of this sober reality but also a playful sense of how to use imagination transformed to integrate

experience into the structure of the work. Another interesting work to consider is Adán Vallecillo's *La fisiología del gusto* (*The Physiology of Taste*) (figure 29), also exhibited at the Biennial. This assemblage is composed of hundreds of extracted human teeth, all of them with cavities, fractures or other problems. The artist collected these imperfect teeth over the course of three years in the Western region of Honduras, the one with the highest indexes of poverty. The teeth are placed in a sleek tray of brushed stainless steel, which rests on a black pedestal 115 cm high. That is all we are presented, so that the title is all we have for the elaboration of meaning about these objects. As spectators, we need to structure these elements conceptually in order to apprehend the meaning of the work. There is a paradox implicit in this juxtaposition of two elements: what we need to process the food we consume seems here to be offered for intellectual consumption, or at least for artistic display. If what materially constitutes the work seems to imply a contradiction in terms, there is still much that is left for the viewer to sort out. The abstract intellectual operations demanded from the viewer compel her or him to engage the work actively with his own subjectivity, and to bring in contextual information that would reside in the viewer's own experience and cultural context.

In a work like *La fisiología del gusto*, however, rational inquiry does not seem enough; it might very well be that its strongest communicative power resides in how it affects the viewer viscerally. An encounter with a tray of human body parts can provoke in a viewer a strong sense of empathy even prior to

understanding, and unleash a reflection about the conditions in which these other people live, the ones whose fragmented, decayed, and broken teeth we see in front of us. From a phenomenological perspective, “empathy consists in reproducing imaginatively the form of the other’s experience. Empathy is the means by which we understand the motivations of others, both emotional and rational.”¹⁴⁹ Seeing so many severely damaged teeth in a huge pile provides the viewer with an indexical marker of the pain that others have suffered, and creates a vivid impression of the large numbers of people who most endure a lack of human rights, such as the right to good health. Vallecillo’s piece then constitutes a visceral rendering of the diminished experience of millions of disenfranchised Hondurans, an insight into what drives the now pervasive social mobilisations in the streets that occurs in spite of the beatings, illegal arrests, sexual assaults and general criminalisation faced by dissidents.

The juxtaposition of teeth and tray in *La fisiología del gusto* amplify its discursive possibilities. A tray is meant to hold, display or serve something often very palatable, something that tastes good. The tray in the work is of a modern, elegant design, industrially crafted in brushed stainless steel that also evokes the sterile space of the clinic, and thus connotes the experience of having a tooth removed or repaired to restore the eater’s sense of taste. One might also think of it as a domestic utensil, in which case it is not likely that we would find it in the homes of the people whose teeth are owing to decay and lack of hygiene. The

¹⁴⁹ Allan Casebier, "Phenomenology," *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t234/e0399>.

tray would refer us rather to a more accommodated stratum of society. The teeth in it show extremely large cavities, often affecting the whole crown, thus implying that these teeth were never treated properly and that their owners ate poorly. Eventually they were extracted, but these extractions could have been prevented with prior health care. In this way, the work chronicles the lack of health assistance in the impoverished rural areas of Honduras, where the artist collected the teeth over the course of the years. This loss of health, of the physiological potential of a population, the country's largest, is now on display in the stainless steel tray. It represents metonymically the dilapidation of conditions for rural people never integrated into the economic project of the nation. This work leaves the viewer with an unsettled question: why?

This "archaeology" of the recent past harbours anthropological ambiguity, which allows for a multiplicity of readings, as is also present in the title. Taste, for instance, can refer to the taste of a person who chooses a stainless steel tray over a wooden one or to the choice of a particularly sleek design as opposed to vernacular or *campesino* cultural forms. It can also refer to the process of savouring a meal, though not a pleasant one if you can't get your teeth fixed. Physiology refers to the functioning of an organism. It can refer of course to one organism within society, but it can also be a metaphor for society as a whole and how it works unevenly or otherwise. The functioning of society suggested by *La fisiología del gusto* seems tragic, but indeterminate. At the same time that it makes possible different ways of reading the work, ambiguity adds to the

poignancy of uncertain poetics. Taste does entail the idea of liking, which in relation to the juxtaposition implemented by Vallecillo in the work under discussion, can very well refer to the over indulgence of affluent society and state officials at the expense of the lives and living conditions of “the masses.”



Figure 30: Jorge Oqueli, *Honduras*, performance, 2010. Photo by Alejandra Mejía

A third work must be mentioned here. Artist Jorge Oqueli participated in the Honduran Biennial with a work titled *Honduras* (figure 30). In this performance, the artist dug a hole 2 meters long, 1 meter wide and 1.50 meters deep in the interior garden of the Galería Nacional de Arte, where the performance could be seen from most of the hallways that in the building lead to

the galleries. He then filled the pit with water. At the announced time, the night of the opening, the artist—dressed all in white and with bare feet—walked down into the garden and filled two cloth bags with some of the soil he had dug from the ground, he stitched the bags closed and placed them on the grass, next to one end of the pool. He then proceeded to enter the body of water and float on it for a few minutes, with his back up to the sky and his head submerged in the muddy water. He neither walked on water nor was baptized by it, but left the performance literally soiled by his artwork.

Perhaps the most melancholic connotation of this piece derives from the fact that the pit used not only felt a lot like a grave, but was also located in the garden and surrounded by planted flowers, the symbol of “new life.” The dictionary of the Real Academia Española (RAE) offers two senses for the Spanish word *hondura* (literally depth): one, it indicates the depth of something, like a concavity in the land, and two, it refers to tackling difficult or profound matters without having much knowledge about it.¹⁵⁰ There are many connotations that arise from different aspects of this work. The soil that is put away in the small sacs, for instance, perhaps refers to the great “unused” extensions of land that in Honduras remain uncultivated and unproductive. For the artist, the relation between the people and their land accounts for many of the social

¹⁵⁰ Real Academia Española, definition of ‘hondura’ in the Diccionario de la Lengua Española, http://buscon.rae.es/draeI/SrvltConsulta?TIPO_BUS=3&LEMA=hondura, accessed 12 December 2010.

relations that constitute a society, especially a predominantly agrarian one like Honduras.¹⁵¹

The way I would like to engage the work in concluding this chapter, however, relates to the second sense the RAE grants to the word *hondura*. I find that the action performed by the artist of submerging himself in the muddy waters has an allegorical import: it is as though he is enacting a subjectivity that withdraws itself from the surrounding world and shuts the subject's senses off from reality. Imagine a person immersed in his own world, who assumes a deep knowledge of the society he inhabits but in fact turns his back on it, a person whose limited vision or dim optic does not allow him to swim with society, a person who separates himself physically from the world around him and suffocates in his own misapprehension of the world. Such is one of the forms of subjectivity necessary to sustain a state that not only seeks constantly to exclude the popular classes, but also to repress them militarily. This is the kind of subjectivity the works in the Third Honduran Biennial wish to contravene. The reality that can be inferred through works like *La fisiología del gusto* can make the viewer aware of that which is suppressed in the given reality of the status quo, or, to use Marcuse's terms, fabricated by the state's version of reality and disseminated by the mass media corporations in order to continue managing things in ways that benefit their own interests and sacrifices the needs of the popular classes. The words of government officials or the reports from the mainstream media outlets, however, become "surreal" when one inhabits the

¹⁵¹ Jorge Oqueli, personal communication, 29 July 2010

punishingly real world depicted in *Dispersión*. Experiencing these works can indeed stimulate a new sensibility, one that can empty the subjective sphere of existing society and lead to an alternative vision beyond it.

These “open works” trigger a dialectic between the non-conforming work and the conformity of reality. Through a sustained process of interpretation, the viewing subject must negotiate between the material and structural organisation of the work and the reality that surrounds him or her. During the process by which viewing subjects register a mental representation of the work before them, going back and forth between the work and the encompassing world, a new sensibility can emerge, one that might make the subject aware of the flawed, deluded manner in which the world around us has been defined. However utopian the desire to expose the deceptive nature of such rationality might be, it cannot be renounced, as we must keep the future open. As Marcuse insisted, “the encounter with the truth of art happens in the estranging language and images which make perceptible, visible, and audible that which is no longer, or not yet, perceived, said, and heard in everyday life.”¹⁵² Many works of contemporary Honduran art, inside the 2010 Biennial and beyond it, induce that visionary perceptibility, which constitutes a crucial development if Honduras is ever to see its deep social divisions overcome and its dysfunctional social institutions reformed.

¹⁵² Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension : Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, 72.

**FOUR: LUCY ARGUETA'S MERMA: THE RETURN OF
THE REPRESSED**

Introduction

*La Historia de Honduras se puede escribir en un fusil,
sobre un balazo, o mejor, sobre una gota de sangre.*

~Roberto Sosa, 1984

We were soliciting a little piece of land. For this they killed my husband.

~Doña Juanita, 1997¹⁵³

All routine. And all forgotten (which is also routine).

~Noam Chomsky, 2014

Lucy Argueta's work demands awareness and reflection on the processes of dispossession being implemented today across the globe by multinational corporations. She lifts the carefully crafted veil that hides discomfiting truths, and thus faces well-to-do Hondurans with the violence they tacitly or overtly consent; she evokes the murders of working class people carried out by repressive apparatuses, both national and private, in favour of multinational enterprise and its illicit operations in the national territory. She thus raises questions among the public regarding the nature of the relations among the Honduran government, local and international companies, and foreign financial bodies. Many Hondurans prefer to comfortably inhabit the disquieting farce produced by medias and official discourses in the country; most have no option

¹⁵³ This is part of a testimony given in 1997 in relation to the Panzós massacre of 1978. See Victoria Stanford, "Breaking the Reign of Silence, Ethnography of a Clandestine Cemetery," in *Human Rights in the Maya Region. Global Politics, Cultural Contentions, and Moral Engagements*, ed. Pedro Pitarch, Shannon Speed, and Xochitl Leyva Solano (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2008), 246.

but to acquit to the unworthy necessities of an unjust socio-economic system. Increasingly, Hondurans are coming to know themselves forced into dehumanising mechanical routines; they are forced, by lack of opportunity, straight necessity, or point of gun into work that does not produce a shared wellbeing; everyday, workers are more aware of the ideological import that configures official discourse, of the delusional rationalisations political and economic leaders offer to the public as justification for continuing to adhere to imported neoliberal policy. It is indeed hard to think of a more violent attitude than the one comported by a elite group in Honduras, who think that their way of achieving livelihood is *the* proper or *only* way to do so; to celebrate a socio-economic system that allows for the well being of a small part of society yet depends on the exclusion, dispossession, and even murder of its disposed, multitudinous other betrays a truly flawed morality. To think that the current state of affairs in Honduras must be maintained at all costs constitutes a utopianism of the most fraught kind. Such is the case with adherents of neoliberal policy, which centres itself on the premise of private interest and property, both elements of a 'natural law.' Can we continue to deposit blind faith in the magic of free markets? Do these indeed spontaneously 'regulate' themselves? Argueta would like to open our eyes to the fact that there is nothing natural or spontaneous about such 'regulation.' It is rather stilted to pretend that the process of capital accumulation operates spontaneously, simply following its 'natural, eternal laws.' There is indeed a lot of artifice and cunning in the centuries old process of separating workers from the

conditions necessary for the production of their own wellbeing. It does indeed take vast and ceaseless effort “to transform, at one pole, the social means of production and subsistence into capital, and at the opposite pole, the mass of the population into wage-labourers, into the free 'labouring poor:’ that artificial product of modern history.”¹⁵⁴ There is nothing natural, for instance, about the interminable palm plantations you see to either side of the road as you travel towards the Eastern Caribbean Coast of Honduras. There is nothing equitable about the disproportionate amount of land granted to the partnership of local and transnational elites, not to mention the murderous repressive apparatuses at work for the protection of such an unlawful land grab. Most people in Honduras would just lower their heads in the face of a State sustained only through its implementation of terror, yet many others choose to run against its course: perhaps they can’t afford to acquiesce to a ‘national project’ that depends on their forceful exclusion or even extermination for perpetuating its vicious economy, indeed a form of colonial policy that, while shifting its forms over time, has been in place for centuries. Many would prefer to shut their eyes towards the precarious shacks around which emaciated children sit on rotting potties, and their pregnant mothers whose means of sustenance have been taken away to give to foreign investment. It is indeed very easy to qualify them as lazy, ignorant land workers when one does not have to survive the burning humidity of a tropical plantation. Perhaps such rosy Hondurans, fain to be blind, prefer to

¹⁵⁴ Karl Marx, cited in David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's 'Capital'* (London-New York: Verso, 2010), 300.

marvel themselves with the horizon-reaching geometry of plantations that conceal the ominous truths that allow for their wellbeing. This blindness is not casual: it is a very carefully fabricated device, a terse veil whose zealous production goes hand in hand with the separation of people from the sources of wealth. It is indeed a necessity of multinational economic regimes, whose perpetuation depends on this very silencing of truth. Yet, there are in Honduras artists that would like the truth exposed, however uncanny it may be.

To travel in a car fast through those unending miles of African palm trees amounts to fleeing from the terror of our history, as in that unnatural forest still gapes the wound that forced a liberal nation-state into being. The agro-industrial project at work in the Lower Aguán Valley in Northeast Honduras is indeed a case of what David Harvey calls accumulation by dispossession. Since the 1970s, global capitalism, as an aggregate, has turned more strongly to this form of accumulation as a way of consolidating class power. The reason for this is that, in itself, the dynamics of international capital have not been very successful in generating growth over the past half century.¹⁵⁵ The violent dispossession of rural populations as a strategy to concentrate power and capital is centuries old. Karl Marx talked about this mode of capital accumulation as the 'pre-history' of capitalism in the last part of *Das Kapital, Volume 1* (1867). Yet, Rosa Luxemburg, writing at the beginning of the 20th century, argued that Marx was wrong about such claim: it constituted not only the 'primitive' stage of capitalist development, but indeed the form of its progress all the way to the present. Using a phrase of

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 312.

Marx's as a subject to her sentence, he wrote: "Sweating blood and filth with every pore from head to toe' characterises not only the birth of capital but also its progress in the world at every step, and thus capitalism prepares its own downfall under ever more violent contortions and convulsions."¹⁵⁶ If constituencies have remained sceptical of capitalism's downfall on the one hand, on the other we could serve ourselves better than being blind to its continued and increasing violence today, a full century after Luxemburg's words. Indeed, David Harvey, in agreement with Luxemburg, emphasizes how the 'primitive' practices of capitalist accumulation are not only alive today but are carried out ever more rampantly:

[T]he dispossession of rural and peasant populations; colonial, neocolonial and imperialist politics of exploitation; the use of state powers to reallocate assets to a capitalist class; the enclosure of the commons; the privatization of state lands and assets; an international system of finance and credit; to say nothing of the burgeoning national debts and even the shadowy continuation of slavery through the trafficking of people (women in particular)—all these features are still with us and in some instances seem not to have faded into the background but, as in the case of the credit system, the enclosure of the commons and privatization, to have become ever more prominent.¹⁵⁷

The dispossession of land workers in Honduras' Aguán Valley is a case in point. Nina Lakhani has reported of the dirty war going on there, a war fuelled by the expansion of a transnational palm oil economy. "US-backed security forces are implicated in the murder, disappearance and intimidation of peasant farmers involved in land disputes with local palm oil magnates."¹⁵⁸ Activists report a deployment of 8,000 troops in the Lower Aguán region, where more than 100

¹⁵⁶ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, trans. Agnes Schwarzschild (London: Routledge, 2003), 433.

¹⁵⁷ Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's 'Capital'*, 306-7.

¹⁵⁸ Nina Lakhani, "Honduras and the Dirty War Fueled by the West's Drive for Clean Energy," *The Guardian* (2014), <http://www.theguardian.com/global/2014/jan/07/honduras-dirty-war-clean-energy-palm-oil-biofuels>.

people have been killed since late 2009. “Peasant farmers say they are the victims of a campaign of terror by the police, army and private security guards working for palm oil companies since a coup in June 2009 ended land negotiations instigated by the deposed president, Manuel Zelaya.”¹⁵⁹ The conflict continues to intensify, and tragically exemplifies the ever deepening pit between the poor majority of Hondurans and a few oligarch families, which partner with foreign entrepreneurs and financial bodies for the privatization and exploitation of resources. The Aguán Valley conflict is only the most salient case within of a wider struggle for lands and resources across Honduras, the world’s most violent country (‘outside a war zone’) since 2011. A weak and corrupt government, whose historical role has been not only to exonerate the atrocities committed by national and transnational enterprise but especially to partake and profit from them, complicates things further. About its operation in the present, Lakhani notes,

Activists say the use of state security forces to suppress protests against landgrabs, dams, mining and oil concessions has intensified since the 2009 coup. Over the same period the US has built up its military presence, with several bases in the country, which has become a major transit point for the international drugs trade. Between 140 and 300 tonnes of cocaine are believed to pass through Honduras every year en route from South America to the US and beyond.¹⁶⁰

The violent, transnational machinery that guarantees the dispossession necessary to facilitate the accumulation of capital seems to take a stronger hold every time one looks at this complex and everlasting conflict. The question ‘how does the drug traffic impact the process of dispossession’ will be addressed in

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

the last section of this chapter. For now, what I would like to emphasize is that the practice of accumulation by dispossession addressed by Lucy Argueta's work is not limited to the Aguán Region in Honduras, or to Central America for that matter, but is rather a practice implemented worldwide, including 'developed' countries as much as those described as 'developing.'¹⁶¹

In the following pages, I will explore the intricate connections between the experience of Lucy Argueta's video-installation *Merma*, and the experience of land workers in North-eastern Honduras. For this I depart from a basic premise of avant-garde movements since the early 20th century: avant-garde artists have longed to make artistic practices a central part of the production of the world inhabit, to have a forming agency over our reality.¹⁶² Art has been understood by most avant-garde movements as praxis, and however different the aesthetic strategies engaged by, for instance, Dadaists or Surrealists, such was the spirit

¹⁶¹ David Harvey elaborates on how this form of accumulation has gotten more and more ingrained within the economies of so called 'First World' nations: "Accumulation by dispossession has been more and more internalized within the core regions of capitalism even as it has widened and deepened throughout the global system. We should not regard primitive accumulation (of the sort that might reasonably be considered to be the case in China) or accumulation by dispossession (as it has occurred through the wave of privatization in the core regions) as simply being about the prehistory of capitalism. It is ongoing and in recent times has been revived as an increasingly significant element in the way global capitalism is working to consolidate class power. And it can encompass everything-from the taking away of rights of access to land and livelihoods to the retrenchment of rights (to pensions, education and healthcare, for example) hard-won in the past through fierce class struggles by working-class movements. Chico Mendes, the leader of the rubber tappers in Amazonia, was murdered for defending a way of life against the cattle ranchers, the soybean producers and the loggers who sought to capitalize the land. The peasants of Nandigram were killed for resisting land takeover for capitalist development. The Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil (the MST) and the Zapatistas have both fought to defend their right to autonomy and self-determination in environments rich in resources and either coveted or locked away by capital. But then think of how the newly minted private-equity funds have been taking public companies private in the United States, stripping them of assets and firing as many employees as they could, before taking the restructured companies back on the market and selling them at a vast profit (for which the CEO of the private-equity fund receives an astronomical bonus)." See Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's 'Capital'*, 310.

¹⁶² Peter Bürger, "Avant-Garde," *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*.

that informed both interwar movements. This outlook did not make it all the way into the 21st century without serious, philosophical probing. It is no coincidence that John Dewey was writing precisely during the 1930s his *Art as Experience*, where, as Albert Hofstadter and Richard Francis Kuhns explain, the philosopher conceived of experience as “an interaction with, as well as a reconstruction of, the environment. In this process both self and the world undergo change... Dewey sees process as the experimental adjustment of the living organism to its environment, and the reorganisation of the environment by the living organism.”¹⁶³ In that book, Dewey wrote, in a spirit very akin to that of Dada, “most European museums are, among other things, memorials to the rise of nationalism and imperialism... They testify to the connection between the modern segregation of art and nationalism and militarism.”¹⁶⁴ This separation of art from actual experience is, again, a fabricated veil; an inquiry into the motivations critics and theorists in the ‘art world’ might have to separate art from ordinary experience is of central importance. When we relegate art to the museum and gallery, a separation is created that precludes people from experiencing art spontaneously, holding themselves from releasing their imagination in the same way they would at their quotidian environment. Most people, when they are making sense of a work, bring in experiences that are shaped by their interaction with their environment, the very a socio-historical world process they most cope

¹⁶³ John Dewey, “[Selections from] *Art as Experience*,” in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty; Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*, ed. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Francis Kuhns (New York: The University of Chicago Press, 1976 [1964]), 577-78.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 583.

with every day. The interaction of an organism endowed with sense perception with an environment transforms it. Such transformation is the individual's reward for experiencing her or his environment fully. Interaction becomes transformation, and transformation engenders communication. In Dewey's words [my italics],

the distinguishing contribution of man is consciousness of the relations found in nature. Through consciousness, he converts the relations of cause and effect that are found in nature into relations of means and consequence. Rather, *consciousness itself is the inception of such a transformation*. What was mere shock becomes an invitation; resistance becomes something to be used in changing existing arrangements matter; smooth facilities become agencies for executing an idea. In these operations, an organic stimulation becomes the bearer of meanings, and motor responses are changed into the instruments of expression and communication.¹⁶⁵

In this chapter, I set out to reconnect *Merma* to the world of experience that makes it a full, meaningful interaction; I place it in the socio-historical world from which it was separated when it was articulated into the hollow halls of a museum which, funded by the Honduran State and ran by private enterprise, produces a version of Honduran identity in total separation from the reality lived every day by the majority of Hondurans.¹⁶⁶ I start with a thorough account of my experience of *Merma*, which I wrote with the aid of textual, photographic and video-graphic documentations, as well as my own interaction with the artist and her public. This section is followed by a preliminary analysis, where I perform a first attempt to circumscribe the experiential field to which the work remits its

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 595.

¹⁶⁶ This separation of the sphere of 'culture' from every day life constitutes again a condition vehemently implemented by the dynamics of capital. Dewey wrote, "the growth of capitalism has been a powerful influence in the development of the museum as a proper home for works of art, and in the promotion of the idea that they are apart from common life... Generally speaking, the typical collector is the typical capitalist. For evidence of good standing in the rearm of higher culture, he amasses paintings, statuary, and artistic biyoux, as his stocks and bonds certify to his standing in the economic world." Ibid., 584-83.

viewers. In this same section I locate the semiotic elements that configure *Merma's* discourse, and elaborate upon its mode of getting through to the spectator. Next, I weave an account of the socio-historical context in which one can logically situate Argueta's video-installation, in order to cast forth its full discursive potential. The final section brings all these elements together to convey the full scope of *Merma's* discourse. I argue that experiencing this work fully, and in relation to the quotidian experience of millions of disposed people around the globe, can indeed spark a transformation in the way viewers approach the world.

A Complex Experience

You are in Tegucigalpa's old city centre. Neoclassical façades surround you; they belong to official buildings commissioned by liberal reformers during the late 19th century, reformers whose conception of 'progress' inclined them to market their nation into an international division of labour. You climb a few steps and you are inside what was an official building then (first, Public Hospital, then, Ministers' Palace) and is still an official building today: the Museum for National Identity (MIN). It is a cool September evening of 2012. You step into the museum and cross a courtyard crowded with people and cocktail tables to reach a set of dual staircases at the opposite end of the lobby. Above, you still sense a strong rumour of voices and the hallways you begin to traverse are also filled with visitors and conversation. After going through a long hallway, you reach a small,

smoked glass door with an aluminium frame—it feels like the access to an office more than the entry to a gallery or exhibition space. Next to this door, there is text on the wall. A card warns you are about to see the work *Merma*, by Lucy Argueta. There is an artist statement as well:

Through *Merma* I seek to develop further ideas that have informed my work over the years: the material trace of our passage through life, the past forever lost. My project entails diverse exercises: firstly, I want to develop a conceptual platform to provoke a reflection on the relationships we establish between the physical, the temporal and the spatial, and, secondly, weave a temporality that, as subjective production, would exceed time and matter.

Between our space and our material heritage remain the trails that articulate our course [in life]. However, these traces arise from our own dialogue with matter. I am therefore interested in an 'archaeology of memory'.¹⁶⁷

You push the door and, once you look to your left, you get a first impression of the installation. The space is some 25 meters deep, and the sidewalls are always at an angle from the black box's longitudinal axis. First, they widen outwards at a soft angle, and the room widens as you advance towards the bottom wall. At about two-thirds the depth, they shift their direction and start tapering inwards, the transition marked by a meeting of surfaces at a very obtuse angle. The ceiling is high up, reaching some 4 or 5 meters. All surfaces are black except for the

¹⁶⁷ Original Spanish of Argueta's statement for *Merma*:

Con *Merma* busco un nuevo desarrollo de ideas que han informado mi trabajo durante años: el rastro material de nuestro tránsito por la vida, el pasado para siempre perdido. Mi proyecto se desplaza entre ejercicios diversos: por una parte me interesa desarrollar una plataforma conceptual que provoque una reflexión sobre esas relaciones que como sujetos establecemos entre lo corporal, lo temporal y lo espacial; por otro, busco elaborar una temporalidad que, como producción subjetiva, exceda el tiempo y la materia.

Entre el espacio y nuestra herencia material queda el rastro que articula nuestro recorrido. Sin embargo, ese rastro puede surgir sólo de nuestro propio diálogo con la materia. Me interesa, pues, procurar una 'arqueología de la memoria.'

wooden floor, and, even though there are lights cast on objects on the floor and a projection on the bottom wall, you wait for your eyes to adapt to the very dim environment. You become very cautious; you try to avoid bumping into other spectators, to walk around the objects on the floor. You respectfully slow down, once you are inside this gigantic coffin.



Figure 31: Lucy Argueta, *Merma*, video-installation, partial view, 2012

At the foot of the coffin, a collection of begrimed vestures extends in front of you for several meters on the floor and into the depth of the long, dark gallery. Several light sources mix within this space: the gallery lights from above, the reflection from the white surfaces that contain the clothes on the floor, and the shifting light of the projection at the end of the room, which seems to float

amid the dark. The images in the projection move slowly, and their reflections on the floor move about you as you walk down the room. The gallery lights emphasize several garments, or pieces of them, laid on sheets of white plastic. These five glossy rectangles on the floor, of about 1 by 2 metres each, are placed perpendicularly to the coffin/gallery's long axis. Their placement is structured around this axis, ordering them symmetrically and in rhythmic flow toward the end of the room. The torn, heavily soiled garments contrast with the white plastic. There are 2 or 3 of them on each of the 5 plastic sheets. A red shirt, for instance, lies extended between two other pieces: a blouse of a flowery pattern, with thick stains of reddish clay, and a compacted mass of soiled white fabric with a sleeve extending from it (figure 31). The red of the shirt in the middle is only partially visible, as dirt and grime is encrusted all over it: dim ochre tones prevail. Its two frontal sides are open apart, making visible several rips on the back. On its left side, the cuff has been torn off the sleeve, and is almost completely separate from the rest of the shirt. Resting on another piece of plastic, there is a small sleeve-less blouse. It must have been white at some point, but now it is heavily soiled and stained, showing a wide range of middle-value greys and shades of ochre. It is torn open bellow, at the height of the belly. All the garments in the installation share, to varying degrees, the conditions in which these two appear. Many pieces present a heavy incrustation of soil, which hides the fabric itself; hard crusts of desiccated mud are seen instead. Unintended puckers, missing parts, or sheer soil obscure their forms and shapes; some

appear just crumpled into an unrecognizable bundle. The composition is maculate throughout, and, overall, the installation on the floor feels like a regular disposition of irregular elements, rugged bodies of fading yellows, reds and greys, which make you wonder about the individuals whose clothes lie in front of you.

While you are examining all these vestures, you hear the wind blow and the singing of birds. These are the sounds with which open the video sequence at the head of the coffin. The camera pans horizontally over piles of soil and rock, excavated from the ground. The screen splits into sections: first, the quadrant on the lower right takes us inside a concavity in the land. We experience the depth of the hollow, some two or three meters deep, and its rugged interior surfaces, which extend for several meters. As the camera moves down to show the whole extension of the dig on the right, and as we hear the sound of a shovel repeatedly hit the ground, another plane of the same proportion appears to its left. In it we look closely at a greyish-brown pattern of dried, crackled mud. Now the upper half of the frame lights up, closing frontally a mound of dirt, which soon covers most of the screen. This initial sequence is closed with panning takes of the dig, emphasizing its extension. No figures or objects appear in it, which grants ambiguity to our reading of scale and proportion: it can be as big as you can imagine it.



Figure 32: Lucy Argueta, *Merma*, video still at 2 min 45 sec

Now the screen has gone black and for a few seconds you are left with the sound of a scrubbing brush and the vestures on the gallery floor. The projection returns with a screen split in four quadrants, each showing a set of gloved hands brushing off dried leafs and soil. This work is being carried out in a forest, with the trees and foliage casting shadows on most of the ground. Rays of light break through, creating accents that emphasize the roughness of this wild environment. Lines of white string demarcate the areas on which work is being done. The image on the lower right now takes on the whole screen. As the brush removes dirt, the neck of a sweater starts to appear. Another take shows another piece of fabric slowly making it through the soil. Take after take present you with the exhuming of clothes, sweeping over dramatic details that make you think of people young and old, male and female. As the clothes start to become exposed,

there is much left that remains unseen. Take for instance a still from this sequence (figure 32). In a palette predominated by deep umbers, the geometric perfection of a large plastic button (to the lower right) contrasts with the more organic flow of the lines created by the crinkled surface of the fabric around it. Folds and creases slip out and back into the ground, its waving surfaces retaining the harsh texture of the soil, and thus obscuring our apprehension of the garment being unearthed. Furthermore, fibres of thread project out of the dirt or from the gritty edges of the fabric, which give out the rips in the garments. As the camera moves and closes in on the details, confusion and anxiety grows.



Figure 33: Lucy Argueta, *Merma*, video still at 4 min 14 sec

The last minute of the projection consists of close-ups like the one just described. A take extends for a few seconds only, showing an arm and brush

going around a half-unearthed circular object. A pattern of decorative plastic bows runs through its diameter. They are pink or peach—it is hard to tell, since the photographic image seems to have been filtered sepia. They make you think of a girl's attire, but the image cross-fades before more information is revealed. In another frame, shot with a wider angle, different types of fabric can be inferred: one has thin blue stripes; another is of a warm mid-tone. There are at least six different kinds of fabric on this frame, yet one might be only able to guess a sweater, for its thick embroidery, or a set of jeans, for the color and texture of denim. The video closes with a close-up to a set of blue jeans that has been unearthed, yet is almost completely covered in mud and dirt (figure 33). It lies down on what appears to be removed soil and clods. It occupies the whole screen. We are looking mainly at the frontal pocket and upper leg area of the garment. High up on the thigh, the denim is damp and ripped at several points. In this area, which appears at the very centre of the screen, the fabric is hidden by the heavy concentration of dirt, mud and debris. One experiences an obscure, reddish surface, irregular and broken. It is as if one were looking at flesh deeply wounded. It looks like a contaminated wound, its full thickness resulting from a puncture or penetration into the body.¹⁶⁸ The screen fades into white, and the video is over.

¹⁶⁸ Josué Euceda, 7 April 2014. April 7 2014. I showed this image to Dr. Josué Euceda, a physician who works at the emergency room of a public hospital in Tegucigalpa: I did not want to rely on my own eyes or experience in comparing the rotten and ripped surface of this blue jeans to a wound. Dr. Euceda's eyes would be better equipped to 'read' a wound. His reading of the image as a wound was spontaneous, and I use his terms in this description.

Preliminary Analysis

Merma is a very complex work that integrates heterogeneous elements: spatial, visual and auditory; rudimentary objects and electronic imaging; significant contrasts of light and dark and especially of texture. To start structuring these elements coherently, let's see first if we can find some clues in the title of the work. 'Merma' is a noun in Spanish. The Real Academia Española defines it as a portion of something that is subtracted, naturally consumed, or stolen.¹⁶⁹ This noun also refers to the action of 'mermar,' meaning to reduce something or to take away from someone a part of what corresponds to them. It is logical to think that what has been reduced or taken away in the world constructed in *Merma* is human, since we are left mainly with the clothes of absent peoples to which the vestures refer to by metonymical necessity. The work suggests that it is the humanity of individuals itself what has been taken away; individuals whose existence reach our consciousness only through excavated traces. A *merma* would be in English a lessening or weakening, indeed a loss or at least a minimization. So the question is posed, whom have we lost, by what means, and why? A diminishing can occur in quantity or in intensity, or both. In terms of quantity, we are losing a social group, or a portion of it, out of the whole fabric of society. In terms of intensity, the role such a group plays in society has been diminished, faded away through force. I would like to emphasize and make clear why and how I propose that the loss referred to by the title is human. The central iconographic elements in *Merma* are the clothes,

¹⁶⁹ "Merma," in *Diccionario de la lengua española* (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 2014).

the soil under which they remain buried, and the anonymous hands that reveal them—perhaps the hands of artists and activists united in praxis. Clothes cover the bodies of persons, and in that way they metonymically signify people, i.e., they signify them through their habitual contiguity to human bodies.¹⁷⁰ This is how *Merma* discourses about people without focusing on the body: the quotidian *covering* of the human body by clothes constitutes them as a sign for it. Furthermore, clothes create identity, in terms of gender and in terms of class; they are an element of how people style themselves, of how they pursue their identities and, consciously or not, insert themselves in the social fabric.



Figure 34: Léster Rodríguez, *Lucy & Bosnia*, digital image, 2014

¹⁷⁰ I follow Roman Jakobson in my understanding of metonymy as a relation of contiguity in a syntagmatic structure. See Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," in *Selected Writings of Roman Jakobson* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972).

Any analysis of Argueta's video-installation would depend largely on the garments, those digitally captured on the video as well as those placed on the exhibition floor; they are a central signifier in the work, the material that constitutes it, the surface of observation upon which viewers must edify meaning. In his *Elements of Semiology*, Roland Barthes discussed clothes as a semiotic system. In his discussion, he used French words and expressions as *mode* and *système de la mode*. *Mode* does not refer exclusively to vestures and our way of carrying them. The dictionary of the Academie Française gives two interrelated senses to the noun *mode*: first, it speaks of ways of seeing, acting or fantasizing, which are enduring processes, and then defines *mode* as a subject's way of being, behaving, expressing or dressing herself or himself, as prevails in a specific society during a specific frame of time.¹⁷¹ It is through these processes that a person or group understand themselves as placed in the world. One could contrast this understanding of fashion from that sense of 'style' felt as the latest admiration in things material, which is induced by the necessities of an economic system where fashion and trending is an inherent structural necessity. Both ways of thinking fashion are useful, nonetheless, in an effort to understand Argueta's artistic discourse as a whole, especially when we step outside of *Merma* to look at photographs where she enacts garments from her collection (figure 34). For Barthes, fashion magazines and similar publications structure a 'fashion code,'

¹⁷¹ "Mode," *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*,
<http://atilf.atilf.fr/dendien/scripts/generic/cherche.exe?15;s=1286830215;;>

i.e. a system of signs and rules. Upon this juncture, he emphasizes, “the language of fashion does not emanate from the ‘speaking mass’ but from a group which makes the decisions and deliberately elaborates the code.”¹⁷² When photographed, the language of clothes still issues from such elite group, and the model wearing a garment *formalizes* such codes. In Argueta’s piece *Merma*, indeed a cultural production of a nature different from the visual discourse of fashion publications, the model is absent. We are thus left with a more open signifier, and a less formalized structure—indeed, quite the opposite of a formal, official or mainstream discourse, since, as a conceptual artist, Argueta is not seeking to establish behaviour patterns but rather to induce critical reflection upon certain behaviours or attitudes.

Let us look into this situation more closely. Actual garments structure a language along two lines: first, the variation of individual pieces, parts or details within an outfit entails changes in what they signify (paradigmatic axis); second, the interrelationships among these individual elements in a particular outfit, or free association of clothes as worn by an individual, set these elements into a structure capable of delivering a more precise signification (syntagmatic axis). How worn or clean the piece is constitutes as well, at its varying degrees, an element of signification. On the first axis, that of the peculiar *choice* of an individual element, as opposed to any other that would play the same function in the outfit, we find paradigmatic values: Barthes emphasizes how “to wear a beret

¹⁷² Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, 1st American ed. (New York,: Hill and Wang, 1968), 26.

or a bowler hat does not have the same meaning.”¹⁷³ A beret could refer us to a Basque peasant, or a casual or informal disposition; or it may indicate an individual at the service of a militia. The colour of the beret would also carry its own connotations. We would need to see what other garments are worn along the beret to draw its meaning with more precision, i.e. what place it holds in a syntagmatic structure and what relations it has to the other elements in that structure, and how this relationships actualize its value. A bowler hat would imply a heterogeneous set of associations: it would imply civilian life, for instance, as opposed to the military associations the beret might have. Yet, in relation to the body as provider of syntagmatic coherence and discursive formalization, it is relevant to notice that in *Merma* clothes are not structured along the lines of an outfit or an individual’s own subjective free association of garments, which would be facilitated by a particular individual wearing them and thus uniting them syntactically (i.e., creating associations around the centre of gravity constituted by her or his body). In the process of producing her work, Argueta buried the clothes *en masse*, without much attention to which garments would come into proximity. And it goes without saying that she did not bury any bodies. As such, the way they signify is less specific, and one must then attend to the general categories or associations they might entail. The fragmentary mix of garments thrown all together in the same pit could be read as an atomization or dispersion of the social group referred to by the garments. In terms of *Merma’s* mode of creating meaning, this coming apart of signifying units has very important

¹⁷³ Ibid., 27.

ramifications. One is that the work, at the level of its most basic signifiers, calls for an articulation of its elements from the part of the viewer; it is an open structure that not only allows spectators but also induces them to colligate its elements together in an effort to conceive a coherent whole. Two, its discourse is not centred on an individual or specific person, and in that way it demands an elaboration of sense that entails a larger unit: a whole social group, which must be drawn from the paradigmatic values of the unearthed, disjointed garments. This condition actually adds up to the reality of language (the “garment system” in this particular case): “a language is a system of contractual values ... that resists the modifications coming from a single individual, and is consequently a social institution.”¹⁷⁴ The values of clothes, or the way they relate to the modes of understanding oneself or the social texture in which one is embedded, are socially constituted.

Instead of appearing as coherent, signifying aggregates structured around the syntax of a body, clothes in *Merma* become visible as a unnerving flow of incoherent fragments, shifting fragments of a painful *larghissimo* that seems rather to blind us towards the identities at play. In this way, the work alienates us from our habitual ability to circumscribe individuals socially; it takes away our capacity to quickly and ‘safely’ situate the values we routinely grant to people, it disrupts the logic by which we discriminate who has entered our field of perception and interaction. The absence of the body and its attributes situate us viewers in a locus of overwhelming ambiguity, all the more anxious since the

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 14.

(metonymically) involved *subjects are coming back from under the ground*. Conversely, this semantic ambiguity, located right at the heart of the work, opens the possibility of examining correspondences between the signs that float through it and the material world engulfing the artist and her audience. The internal 'logic' of the work is disconcerting, its signs become weak, and its symbolic structure recedes into obscurity. In the words of Julia Kristeva, "the material reality that the sign was commonly supposed to point to crumbles away to the benefit of imagination."¹⁷⁵ Imagination is given power, 'reality' loses autonomy, and signs, freed from symbolic values, fall under the sway of fears and desires. Kristeva explains this phenomenal condition in relation to Sigmund Freud's aesthetic concept of the 'uncanny.' She points out that our psychic processes reify signs, i.e. signs of an abstract nature are considered as real. "Such a particularity also evinces the fragility of repression and, without explaining it, allows the returned of the repressed to be inscribed in the reification under the guise of the uncanny effect."¹⁷⁶ This recurring strangeness constitutes an encounter with those with whom we are conflicted, others whose 'moral sensibilities' are at odds with ours. The abyss that separates us from strangers marks the experience of the uncanny:

Confronting the foreigner whom I reject and with whom I at the same time identify, I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container, the memory of experiences when I have been abandoned overwhelm me, I lose my composure. I feel "lost," "indistinct," "hazy." The uncanny strangeness allows for many variations: they all repeat the difficulty I have

¹⁷⁵ Julia Kristeva, "Strangers to Ourselves," in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 285.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 286.

in situating myself with respect to the other and keep going over the course of identification-projection that lies at the foundation of my reaching autonomy."¹⁷⁷

The process of identification of subjects in *Merma* is thus interwoven with the process of self-construal in its viewers, and as such it entails the performance of an uncomfortable self-criticality. In other words, for a viewer to produce meaning upon this work entails a critique of self. What has been repressed that now disrupts our perception? Who are the strangers who surreptitiously return to dissolve the contours of our identity? A probing of these questions is key for any understanding of the conceptual operations of *Merma*. Yet, before we can examine them more closely, we need to locate the specific terms in which we can discuss them.

In an artist's statement from 2010, Argueta expressed that through the documentation of her *objet trouvés* she seeks to create a dialectic of presence and absence, an evocation of the body that would prompt an inquisitive mode of remembrance, imagining the people who could have worn the depicted vestures. She affirmed at the time that if she was concerned with an exercise of memory, she was not necessarily interested in a historical memory, but rather with a memory created or imagined by the spectator herself, so she or he can arrive, through experiencing the documented or installed objects, at making associations or feelings of belonging with someone close.¹⁷⁸ The artist seeks to offer viewers an experiential field upon which they can enact their own longings or fears. The garments and its photographic accounts can prompt the viewer to imagine

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Lucy Argueta, "Racional," (Tegucigalpa: Mujeres en las Artes, 2010).

different people, known or unknown, build narratives about such subjects, or weave into images or installed objects the loose threads of her or his own memory. In her statement for *Merma*, two years later, she wrote, “Between our space and our material heritage remain the trails that articulate our course [in life]. However, these traces arise from our own dialogue with matter. I am therefore interested in an 'archaeology of memory'.” The word archaeology stands out as an amplification of her discourse, since it entails more historical and systematic description. Also, archaeology refers generally to the vestiges of historical subjects, and in this way Argueta’s statement constructs the unearthed vestures as traces, or at least throws our frame of reference to an earlier point in time. In this way *Merma* has a twofold aim: one, it aims at affecting the viewer emotionally and activate his or her subjective processes; and two, it demands that these subjective processes engage with a reconstruction of things past, since the objects of traces can only be inferred through imaginary re-enactments of displacements in time. There are in *Merma*, as in previous works by Argueta, elements that will refer viewers to a world outside ourselves, and in the process of inferring the world posed by the work we might modify our consciousness of what is real. The idea of an external world is a central component of Jerome Bruner’s folk psychology,¹⁷⁹ which “posits a world outside ourselves that modifies

¹⁷⁹ Our reading and perception of artworks happen in the mind, and it is thus fitting to depart from a psychological frame to investigate the dynamics at work in artistic reception. I have studied for this effect Jerome Bruner’s concept of a folk psychology: Jerome S. Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*, The Jerusalem-Harvard Lectures (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

the expression of our desires and beliefs.”¹⁸⁰ Such world constitutes the context in which human acts are situated and take meaning. The mental or emotional states in which we perceive the world impact our attitudes toward it. Bruner brings our attention to the way in which we shape the world, as much as the way in which it shapes us: “Folk psychology is about human agents doing things on the basis of their beliefs and desires, striving for goals, meeting obstacles which they best or which best them, all of this extended over time.”¹⁸¹ Argueta’s work invites viewers to weave stories around the objects she configures into significant syntagmatic structures, traces she arranges loosely in installations and still and moving electronic images. The vestures elicit personifications or characters, their style and conditions connote temporalities, and the objects and spaces to which they are juxtaposed have the potential of implying specific situations. These are elements of narrative, and structuring them narratively a spectator can make sense out of the work’s constitutive elements. In photographs, these elements appear simultaneously. Here the viewer’s journey across the surface of the image will impact the structuring of elements, and in that way it might elicit unexpected readings of the piece. In *Merma*, where the video has its own sequence, the discursive structuration of the work acquires certain stability. Yet, the video sequence is but an aspect of the work, whose totality incorporates a variety of elements: it remains an open structure. The imaginative (or aesthetic) dimension in which artworks operate comports a capacity for the interplay of

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., at 40.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., at 43.

binding social roles. Bruner reminds us that, for Paul Ricoeur, stories, whether factual or imaginative, invite re-construal of the past. For Bruner himself, narrative “can be ‘real’ or ‘imaginary’ without loss of power as a story. That is to say, the sense and the reference of story bear an anomalous relationship to each other. The story's indifference to extra-linguistic reality underlines the fact that it has a structure that is internal to discourse.”¹⁸² As viewers set out to perform ludic manipulations of this internal structure, as they most in their effort to make sense of it, they re-construe the past. The way for new interpretations is open and communal meanings might be thus re-negotiated.



Figure 35: Lucy Argueta (in collaboration with Walterio Iraheta), *Amalia*, digital image, 2009

¹⁸² Ibid., at 44.

How does this indeterminacy of meaning operate in Argueta's work? The artist has explored the connection between dress and ostensible human subjects in previous projects. In a photograph from a project titled *Amalia* (figure 35), from 2009, we see the outline of a hill flow and, above it, covering most of the picture plane, a twilight sky of mid-toned bluish greys. Oranges lightly contour the scattered clouds, and the silhouettes of branchy trees rise against the sky. Between two of the trees a rope has been stretched, and somewhere in the middle of its extension a hanger is set from which a laced white dress of full length is suspended. The dress is set in a way that makes its inferior hem overlap lightly with the edge of the silhouetted hill. Yet, it extends completely above it completely and so it feels as though it is embodying a person, an effect that is underscored by the frontal angle in which it is photographed and by the soft tilt it has in relation to the sloping hill (the dress maintains a vertical position while the hill slopes down). It gives the impression of a woman walking across the top of the hill. The long distance suggested by the perceived size of the dress in relation to its surrounding context and its being set up against the sky grants a soft corporeality to the dress, sustained perhaps by the darker value that the dimming light confers to the more opaque parts of the dress. We get the sensation that we could grasp that figure in progressing movement, but at the same time we are totally aware of the mechanism that in the photograph creates that illusion. The sense one might grant to this image will inevitably vary from one viewer to another. Its effect is illusory, unstable. Yet, for that very reason it

invites viewers to supplement the image with the substance of their own imagination. The photograph seems to refer us to a woman walking across a hilltop, yet the sense the image might take in more specific terms is not firmly established or foretold.

The sensation of embodiment created in *Amalia* is not absent in *Merma*, if it might take different values. Santos Arzú expressed to me that, while experiencing the work the night of the opening, people around him thought bodies would become visible as the digging continued in the video.¹⁸³ This uncanny sensation is important: the viewer has not yet made sense of what she or he is experiencing, yet it is he or she who will have to supplement an explanation that would dispel the mystery. Such moment of intrigue, of uncomfortable wonderment, can preclude the operation of preconceived notions or moralities in viewers. We approach an unfamiliar world filled with familiar objects: this incommensurability poses strong demands on spectators, whose subjective readings will have to bridge the unearthly world constructed in the work with the world they have come to know through quotidian representations. The same as in mysteries, in Argueta's video-installation we are left but with a few traces, constituted mainly by the soiled, contaminated vestures on the floor and in the video, and the semantic operations video and spatial arrangement perform on them. Yet the video presents us with a temporality, a sequence in time that is of great import when structuring discourse in *Merma*. It is not a closed structure, but in that way it elicits subjective supplementation by the viewer. The

¹⁸³ Santos Arzú Quito, 25 October 2012.

work is indeed very provocative, and perhaps its central and open question is the identity and history of the people referred to metonymically through the vestures.

A Dialog with History

Argueta acquires garments second hand at uncomplimentary, catchpenny shops called *bultos*, or bundles, precisely because that is how clothes are arranged. These shops are unfurnished spaces in old buildings, warehouses or even open-air lots where clothes are piled up in wooden or cardboard boxes, or simply on the floor, for people to come and dig for whatever suits them. Mainly people of modest means frequent these stores. The artist dresses herself from such shops, and often poses in attires she fancies out of her incredibly extensive collection (figure 36).

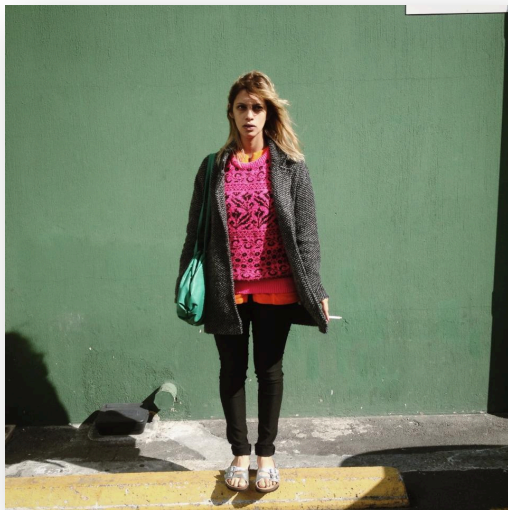


Figure 36 (left): Andrés Asturias, *Untitled (Lucy Argueta)*, Ciudad de Guatemala, 2014



Figure 37: Andrés Asturias, *Untitled (Lucy Argueta shopping for clothes)*, San Salvador, 2014

A snapshot from January 2014 shows the artist on top of a tall heap of clothes in San Salvador (figure 37). This image gives us an idea of the social sphere in which the garments unearthed in *Merma* come from. Certainly they do not come from a boutique, and were not, in all probability, fancied by someone looking through a glass. They are even beyond, at least at the point in which Argueta acquires them, the most inexpensive departmental store. They have in all probability been worn, kept in a closet or drawer for months or years. In general, when Argueta chooses clothes for her works, she seeks in them a referent to people. For the case of *Merma*, she selected items for man and women, boys and girls, that were not necessarily elegant or refined but that would rather bring to mind a working class person. For this purpose she used the garments anyone can buy at a *bulto* for a buck or less.¹⁸⁴ The artist buried a large amount of clothes and waited several weeks before going to test the progress of their

¹⁸⁴ Lucy Argueta, Email, 3 June 2014.

decomposition with sampling digs. Eventually, they performed the excavation simulating archaeological method. She registered the whole process video and photographically, from collecting, and burying to the excavation or 'exhumation.'¹⁸⁵ From all the clothes unearthed, she chose a few of the most visually striking to include on the installation. In relation to people, the torn, begrimed clothes on the exhibition floor can be seen as metaphors of the violence perpetrated against the people they metonymically signify. We have seen how these girls, boys, women and men would be working class, that the garments are not only intended to connote people of modest means but they do indeed come from a market where the 'popular classes' seek vestment. It is relevant to consider that the clothes remained buried under the soil for a long time. This constitutes a re-enactment of death as well as of illegal, clandestine burial. It also has poetic connotations in relation to memory, since they remained veiled, repressed from consciousness as it were. Eventually, they uncannily returned into vivid awareness. The rips, perforations and missing parts signify the violent aggression this people suffered, wounds and dismemberments included, previous to their secret, illegal burial.

Argueta is herself an outspoken critic of the marginalization and violent silencing of people who mobilize in opposition to the generalized injustice and foreign intervention that has historically plagued rural populations in Central America inhibiting indeed the development of the isthmian nations. She is a

¹⁸⁵ Argueta counted with several collaborators for this project, among them artists Léster Rodríguez and César Chinchilla.

founding member of the collective Artistas en Resistencia [Artists in Resistance, or AenR], who saw its formation in the aftermath of the coup d'état of June 28, 2009, in Honduras. Within this context, Argueta, along poets Mayra Oyuela and Samuel Trigueros, curated an exhibition in 2010 titled *Tierras del Nunca Más* [*Lands of Nevermore*], which included 50 photographs, out of the hundreds that circulated online, showing the brutality of the repression exacerbated in Honduras since the coup. Discussing in an interview AenR's program of activities for 28 June 2011 (the second anniversary of the coup), the artist mentioned a mobilization in front of the US Military Base in the Comayagua Valley (popularly referred to as Palmerola).¹⁸⁶ This mobilization counted with Human Rights Observers from the Tucson-based Alliance for Justice. The news page of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill reported on this mobilization, as its alumnus David Craven was involved in it [my italics]:

The second (of three capacities) in which Professor Craven was in Central America involved being a Human Rights Observer for the Alliance for Social Justice (based in Tucson, Arizona) in Honduras at Palmerola, the huge US Military base, on the second anniversary of the June 28, 2009 military coup in Honduras, when the democratically elected-government of Zelaya was overthrown. He and a dozen or so Human Rights Observers were a "shield" between the 200 student/activist demonstrators and the 100 or so Honduran military personnel and National Police stationed in front of the US-funded military outpost, all of which was covered on national television in Honduras. For much of the day, the situation was calm until students tried to graffiti the wall in front of the military base and then a conflict occurred that led to students being beaten and tear-gas being fired at the demonstrators—and indirectly at the Human Rights Observers—many of whom were hit by the tear-gas ... Fortunately, though the Honduran military, desisted from further aggression after this conflict—a fact that the demonstrators from Honduras attributed to the presence of the Human Rights Observers from the US at the demonstration in Palmerola. *In fact, at least 400 political dissidents (labor organizers, journalists, student dissidents, and indigenous leaders) in Honduras have been killed*

¹⁸⁶ Lucy Argueta, interview by Mario Casasús, 28 June 2011.

*over the last few months by para-military squads linked to the military junta in Honduras.*¹⁸⁷

The human rights situation in Honduras worsens every day, and disappearances and police and military violence toward activists is more common today than back in the 1980s. Guadalupe Marengo, Amnesty International's Americas Deputy Programme Director, pointed out at the juncture of the November 2013 Honduras election that "those defending human rights face terrifying risks every day to carry out their vital work, in a society blighted by high levels of inequality, insecurity and impunity."¹⁸⁸ The different militias and constabularies created in Honduras during the last decades complicate things rather than ameliorate them. Marengo states, "a key concern is that the police and army are actually contributing to the violence instead of combating it, something which is exacerbated by an almost total lack of accountability for the abuses they have committed."¹⁸⁹ Lawmakers in the US have addressed the State Department about this issue. In May of 2014, 108 members of the US Congress presented a letter to Secretary of State John Kerry pointing out that the policies implemented by President Juan Orlando Hernández actually threaten to worsen the human rights situation by "promoting

¹⁸⁷ Art-Department, "Alumnus David Craven Has Adventure-Filled Visit to Central America," The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <http://art.unc.edu/news/page/21/>.

¹⁸⁸ Amnesty-International, "Honduras: Elections Should Mark a Turning Point for Human Rights," <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/honduras-elections-should-mark-turning-point-human-rights-2013-11-05>.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

a militarized police force and using its army for domestic law enforcement.”¹⁹⁰

Elisabeth Malkin reports,

The letter called on the State Department to evaluate Washington’s support and training for the Honduran police and military.

In its 2013 human rights report, the State Department acknowledged the severity of human rights abuses in Honduras. It described the “corruption, intimidation, and institutional weakness of the justice system leading to widespread impunity,” along with “unlawful and arbitrary killings by security forces, organized criminal elements, and others.”

The letter from House members mentioned the tear-gassing of opposition legislators and activists during a protest in the Honduran Congress building two weeks ago [i.e. 13 May 2014], as well as the killings of lawyers and human rights defenders, among others.¹⁹¹

This points right in the direction of the socio-historical process engaged by Lucy Argueta, both through her art and through her activism, which constitutes a continuation in the present of the colonial policies described by Grandin and cited above.¹⁹² Palmerola is not only linked to the training and funding of repressive forces in Honduras; historically the role it has played has been infamous. I already mentioned that the strategy to oust Jacobo Arbenz stemmed from this American military base right at the heart of Central America. Ronald Reagan’s war against the Sandinista national project of the 1980s in Nicaragua was suffocated by the US government through an economic embargo and, crucially, by armed attack issuing from Honduras. Nokolos Kosloff writes,

¹⁹⁰ Elisabeth Malkin, "Lawmakers Ask State Dept. To Review Support for Honduras," *The New York Times* (2014), http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/29/world/americas/lawmakers-ask-state-dept-to-review-support-for-honduras.html?_r=0.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² The OED defines ‘neocolonialism’ in the following terms: “The use of economic, political, cultural, or other pressures to control or influence another country; esp. the retention of such influence over a developing country by a former colonial power.” See Oxford English Dictionary, “*Neocolonialism, N.*” (Oxford University Press).

The airport [at Palmerola] was built more recently in the mid-1980s at a reported cost of \$30 million and was used by the United States for supplying the Contras during America's proxy war against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua as well as conducting counter-insurgency operations in El Salvador. At the height of the Contra war the U.S. had more than 5,000 soldiers stationed at Palmerola. Known as the Contras' "unsinkable aircraft carrier," the base housed Green Berets as well as CIA operatives advising the Nicaraguan rebels.¹⁹³

Palmerola has been, at least since the 1980s, a national sovereignty issue in Honduras, which has sparked widespread dissent, mobilizations and, as seen above, confrontation between the people and the repressive apparatuses it fosters.

Argueta is very cautious when she frames her work through artist statements, as overt expressions of her political commitment might affect the circulation of her art in official spaces like the Museo para la Identidad Nacional (MIN) or the Bienal de Honduras.¹⁹⁴ Organizing agents in institutions are aware of Argueta's commitments; they accept her work with reserve. Indeed, the work was accompanied in the fourth Bienal de Honduras with a rather 'institutional' discourse.¹⁹⁵ One could also interpret that Argueta prefers not to narrow the sphere of *Merma's* discourse, which constitutes a sound strategy for facilitating the integration of a diversity of (perhaps related) meanings into the work. Yet, all elements considered—the simulated archaeological dig of an ostensibly

¹⁹³ Nikolas Kozloff, "The Coup and the U.S. Airbase in Honduras," *Counterpunch* (2009), <http://www.counterpunch.org/2009/07/22/the-coup-and-the-u-s-airbase-in-honduras/>.

¹⁹⁴ Both of these institutions allowed *Merma* to enter public space in 2012.

¹⁹⁵ Here I refer to the wall text that accompanied the piece and of which I offer a translation in note 1. By 'institutional discourse' I understand a rationalization of artworks conditioned by power relations. About the subject, James Elkins writes "If you conceive of the art world as a matrix of institutional and power relations, then there is no immediate sense to words like "quality" or "value": they are determined by divisions of labor within the art world, and produced for different purposes including academic power and market value." See James Elkins, "On the Absence of Judgment in Art Criticism," in *The State of Art Criticism*, ed. James Elkins and Michael Newman (New York: Routledge, 2007), 85.

clandestine cemetery, the formal and iconographical elements in the video and installation, and the very socio-political process surrounding the production and reception of *Merma*—prompt a reading of the project in the light of the current human rights crisis in Honduras, which results from dissent towards the corporative strategy of dispossessing and disenfranchising people in order to perpetuate processes of accumulation that benefit only national and foreign elites. The institutional conditioning of artistic discourse may be countered by the agency of spectators in processes of interpretation. As David Craven wrote during the late 1990s,

At a time when both progressive interpretations of art and advanced artistic production per se are often concerned with the construction of the subject, the institutional mediation of subjectivity, and with the consummative role of spectators for signification, the practice of centring an analysis on the avowed intentions and internal dynamics of an individual artists' *oeuvre* is not always defensible.¹⁹⁶

It is reasonable to exceed Argueta's linguistic framing of her work in the process of situating it in the proper socio-historical context that casts forth its full discursive import. On the one hand, Argueta serves the interests of dominant social groups by bringing her sophisticated artistic practices into the frames of their institutions, which enriches and brings attention to the MIN and the Honduran Biennial. On the other, she confronts the politics to which these institutions tacitly consent. How is this confrontation performed?

Argueta's work is embedded in an aesthetic that has social relations at its core. While the conceptual operations performed by *Merma* are rich and

¹⁹⁶ David Craven, *Poetics and Politics in the Art of Rudolf Baranik* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997), 1.

complex, it operates more immediately in a region of human perception and sensation. This brings us back to the questions I proposed in my preliminary analysis in relation to the sensation of the uncanny that pervades the experience of Argueta's video-installation: What has been repressed that now disrupts our perception? Who are the strangers who surreptitiously return to dissolve the contours of our identity? Let us depart from Julia Kristeva's assertion that "foreignness is within us: we are our own foreigners, we are divided."¹⁹⁷ There is an inherent contradiction in the aesthetic category Sigmund Freud termed the 'uncanny': what ought to have remained secret and hidden comes to light in this type of experience. Uncanny strangeness betrays a defence played out by a narcissistic self still unable to distinguish between him and the world; what threatens this overwrought self is projected into an alien demoniacal double, into which it discharges the destruction it cannot contain. Compulsory in nature, the uncanny strangeness experienced by viewers frightens them as it is sensed as something repressed that returns: the externalized compulsory drives we had located in an otherized equal returns to confront us. In the words of Kristeva:

Strange indeed is the encounter with the other—whom we perceive by means of sight, hearing, smell, but do not "frame" within our consciousness. The other leaves us separate, incoherent; even more so, he can makes us feel that we are not in touch with our own feelings, that we reject them or, on the contrary, that we refuse to judge them.¹⁹⁸

Merma's discursive force resides in the difficulty it presents us spectators in situating ourselves in relation to the crimes we have wipe out from our

¹⁹⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 181.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

consciousness, it questions the identifications in whose production we have taken part, or denied, and it destabilizes the projections that lie at the foundation of our presumed autonomy. Indeed, elite groups in Honduras take for granted the vast populations they have otherized: their being 'other' is an ideological production of which all privileged sectors partake, and which is so old that people learn and assume it without even thinking about it. We have repressed this hostility into our unconscious. The deluded leadership, political and economic, in Honduras perceives itself in the whole extension of the Honduran nation, not only in the deluded mainstream cultural production of the nation but also in what materially constitutes its resources, its people included. In this way they perform a vicious denial of the reality of rural groups and their way of life, they negate their rights into any national project, they negate their rights to the land, they negate their capacity to produce the nation culturally and economically: they see in their equals a threat to the vicious mode of production in which they are embedded. Rural and indigenous populations are seen as a hindrance to 'progress.' This very progress, in the form of violent dispossession and murder, is what diminishes [lo que *merma*] the vast rural populations in Honduras, which mostly constitute the nation and whom political leaders are supposed to represent. *Merma* plays out the incommensurability of such unreal, destructive conception of progress with its actual requisite crimes, which amount to xenophobia. The return of this 'otherized' victims, this coming face to face with rejection of the other, which Freud placed at the heart of the self, shows that very

self to be “a strange land of borders and othernesses ceaselessly constructed and deconstructed.” Kristeva asks, “Are we nevertheless so sure that the “political” feelings of xenophobia do not include, often unconsciously, that agony of frightened joyfulness that has been called *unheimlich*, that in English is *uncanny*, and the Greeks simply called *xenos*, “foreign”?”¹⁹⁹ Yet, as she points out, the strange is in ourselves, and our real struggle is with the foreign within us, with the drives of love and death we must indeterminately contain. Merma allows for a vital reflection—sparked by the discomfort it provokes, which in turn demands a reflection that would make still the disquieting experience—that if we learn to detect foreignness in ourselves we might indeed learn how not to persecute it relentlessly outside of us.

By virtue of its subversive nature, of its undoing or decentering of the self, Argueta’s practice of signification ran against the grain of the official discourse projected by the institution that housed her work: first, as a work that rekindles the victims of violent military state repression, it operates as a discomforting flow of consciousness within a frame that deludedly celebrates a nation which is still yet to become. In this way, it disrupted a narrative constituted by past presidents and their beguile speeches, the dreariness of thinly devised folklores, and a celebration of ancient Maya dynastic rulers whose bloody crimes our present ‘leaders’ and institutions perpetuate. Essentialist discourses in the form of wall text short of any historical sense plague the walls of the MIN’s permanent exhibition—there are almost no objects to spark historical discussion and most of

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 191.

this futile nation-building effort is made of printed texts and images right out elementary school textbooks. The permanent rooms at the MIN perform a terrorizing erasure of the innocent blood spilled throughout the modern history of Honduras by foreign interventions and complicit elites with the purpose of controlling the territory, its resources, and, specially, its people. The identification of the nation with its past leaders and the obsession of rooting it in an exotic construction of ancient Maya culture inhibit a whole nation from dealing with its actual and most immediate past. As long as the tensions between social groups and these fraught modes of imagining the nation persist, Honduras will not become a healthy national community. There is a real history that needs to be taken into account and dealt with, a history in which our actions take meaning, to use Gerome Brunner's terms. Our narrative as a people cannot come from the makers of neoliberal policy and its transnational partners: it must be negotiated, and our beliefs and desires reshaped through the meeting of warring projections and identifications.

Another identification *Merma* questions, when read in its proper historical context, is that of most middle and upper class Hondurans (and indeed Central Americans) with US power and military might. A case in point was the discomfort of well-to-do Honduras with the alliances Manuel Zelaya was forging with socialist leaders across Latin America, most notably the late Hugo Chávez, whom was regarded with viral hatred across elite circles. It is symptomatic that while political and economic elites sought the forceful deposition of Zelaya

virtually on the grounds of his relations with Venezuela, of Honduras being run by or *a là Chávez*—such is the degree of delusion among such groups—they still hoped to count with Venezuela’s low interest and long term credit oil offer, as opposed to the more onerous transactions with US-based corporations.²⁰⁰ The ideological identification of elite groups in Honduras with the American mode of production and security ideology is indeed uncanny. Let us see why. That governments exist primarily for the purpose of ensuring security is a commonplace and tacit premise of official discourses, as well as of many institutions and medias. Chomsky puts this doctrine to the test through a historical example:

There are a number of ways to evaluate the doctrine [of national security]. One obvious question to ask is: What happened when the Russian threat disappeared in 1989? Answer: everything continued much as before.

The US immediately invaded Panama, killing probably thousands of people and installing a client regime. This was routine practice in US-dominated domains—but in this case not quite as routine. For the first time, a major foreign policy act was not justified by an alleged Russian threat.²⁰¹

In the absence of the so-called ‘Russian threat’ the excuse for an exacerbated militarization became the growing ‘sophistication’ of technology in developing nations. The shift to this new security rhetoric took place during the administration of George H.W. Bush, which insisted that the US must maintain its ‘defence industrial base.’ A symptomatic contradiction of this rhetoric is that while it “relies heavily on extensive state intervention for research and development,

²⁰⁰ See Arturo Cano, "Derecha De Honduras Rechaza a Chávez Pero Codicia El Petróleo De Venezuela," *La Jornada* (2013), www.jornada.unam.mx/2012/10/13/mundo/021n1mun.

²⁰¹ Noam Chomsky, "Should We Stop Talking About National Security," *The Nation* (2014).

often under Pentagon cover,” such ‘industrial base’ constitutes the centre of gravity of what passes in the official and popular discourse as a US ‘free-market economy.’ Chomsky thus interprets that the threat were not the Russians per se, but any independent nationalism that would escape US control. He turns, as an example, to post-1989 El Salvador, the leading recipient of US military aid in the Western Hemisphere—a situation he correlates to the terrible human rights record of this Central American nation, one of the worst worldwide. He notes,

The Salvadoran high command ordered the Atlacatl Brigade to invade the Jesuit University and murder six leading Latin American intellectuals, all Jesuit priests, including the rector, Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría, and any witnesses, meaning their housekeeper and her daughter. The brigade had just returned from advanced counterinsurgency training at the US Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and had already left a bloody trail of thousands of the usual victims in the course of the US-run state terror campaign in El Salvador, one part of a broader terror and torture campaign throughout the region. All routine. Ignored and virtually forgotten in the United States and by its allies, again routine. But it tells us a lot about the factors that drive policy, if we care to look at the real world.²⁰²

So what is it that shapes policy? What makes Jesuits and intellectuals in Latin America so dangerous as to awaken this murderous ‘industrial’ machinery? They simply think that the beneficiaries of the development of resources in those nations should be the people of those nations. For Washington, however, the first beneficiaries should be US investors. Latin America should limit itself to the fulfilment of this service, to which local elites vehemently comply. “The US somehow finds it difficult to appeal to the poor with its doctrine that the rich should plunder the poor,” Chomsky remarks. How is the ‘bug’ of independent nationalism to be dealt with? “The way to deal with such a threat is to destroy the

²⁰² Ibid.

virus and to inoculate those who might be infected, typically by imposing murderous national security states.” The uncanniest thing about it is perhaps that the object secured is not even the people of the United States, but is rather a matter of security of state and private power *from* populations in the USA and abroad. As such, the apparatus that instruments such privileges most remain secret, readily felt yet never seen. As an example of the currency of ‘national security’ doctrine, Chomsky cites the institution by the Obama administration of a massive surveillance program, indeed a radical attack on the American Constitution justified by such very dogma. The security of populations on either side of the Mexico-United States border is a most marginal concern for policy makers. Such proves to be the reasoning of contemporary Anglo-American state capitalism: “the fate of our grandchildren counts as nothing when compared with the imperatives of higher profits tomorrow.”²⁰³ I personally can’t think of a better way of undoing a national community.

If in the US the future of children counts as nothing, in Central America this same doctrine entails the desolation of native and rural communities of all ages. The silencing of such history is a crucial instrument of ‘national security,’ since presumably most Americans would not like to know that their tax dollars are being used to wipe out rural populations south of the border. Victoria Sanford’s experience when reviewing death records from 1978 to 1985 at Panzós is telling. On her first day of research there, in early September of 1997, she and her staff worked in the morning looking at the municipal archives. When she returned that

²⁰³ *Hopes and Prospects.*

same day after lunch, “we were informed that the municipal employee responsible for this records (...) was on vacation and would not be returning until the end of October.”²⁰⁴ After much discussion and serious confrontation with the municipal secretary and mayor, Sanford was able to look again at the book of minutes of local municipal meetings: “the page containing the minutes for the first council meeting held after the massacre had been meticulously marked out with cursive circles in blue ink, completely covering all writing below.”²⁰⁵ Sanford directed the exhumation of the clandestine cemetery at Panzós, one of 626 villages wiped out by the army in Guatemala between the late 1970s and late 1980s. She sets the exhumations of these cemeteries in the context of contemporary Maya struggle for human rights, as a way of forestalling future occurrences. Indigenous peoples in Central America mobilize themselves up to this day seeking to empower themselves, to heal and regain control over their histories and futures. Sanford’s investigation at Panzós showed that “those who had gone to the plaza had done so because they needed lands to cultivate their subsistence maize crops.”²⁰⁶ The testimony given by survivors of the massacre to Sanford and her staff are chilling. Consider the account offered by María Maquín:

With just one burst of gunfire they killed the people. It was just for a moment and everyone fell there. I was surprised because we had just arrived a few moments ago. My grandmother was going to ask for a favor. She said she wanted to speak to the mayor. But they didn’t respond to her. They were asking, “What do you want?” She just wanted to speak to him, ask him a favor. She wanted to ask for help, for a littler bit of land. “For a

²⁰⁴ Stanford, "Breaking the Reign of Silence, Ethnography of a Clandestine Cemetery," 239.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 240.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 248.

little bit of land, that's what we came for," she said. They responded, "There are your lands, there in the cemetery." The soldiers were the ones who said this to her. So then my grandmother said nothing. That's when they opened fire at the count of three. One. Two. Three. They opened fire, and I was in shock as I watched the people die.²⁰⁷

Again, the beneficiaries of the development of resources in Central America cannot be the peoples of Central America; they belong rather to 'foreign investment.'

Final Analysis

In 25 April 2013, the Anthropologic Forensic Foundation of Guatemala (FAFG), with which Sanford collaborated at the Panzós unearthing, exhumed José Antonio López Lara from a clandestine cemetery in northeastern Honduras. This clandestine graveyard is located in a palm plantation owned by Miguel Facussé, whose "security guards" had threatened López Lara, the latter's family reported.²⁰⁸ The proper context for this ghastly situation is the so-called Bajo Aguán conflict, where Facussé has acquired disproportionate amounts of land in excess of what Honduran law allows any one Honduran to own. Campesinos had acquired legal rights to those very lands as early as the 1970s, as part of an agrarian reform project—hundreds of campesino cooperatives and collectives were established in the region by the government at that time. During the 1990s, however, neoliberal governments started promoting the transfer of these lands to wealthy elites, who coerced *campesinos* into selling their lands, and very often

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 250.

²⁰⁸ Refugia Gaintain, "Honduran Community Demands Forensic Investigation of Clandestine Gravesite," *The Nation Report* (2013).

tricked them out their property by outright fraud. It is through such strategies that Facussé now comes to claim at least a fifth of the whole Lower Aguán region.

Regarding this conflict, Dana Frank reported in October of 2011,

Since 2009, beneath the radar of the international media, the coup government ruling Honduras has been collaborating with wealthy landowners in a violent crackdown on small farmers struggling for land rights in the Aguán Valley in the northeastern region of the country. More than forty-six campesinos have been killed or disappeared. Human rights groups charge that many of the killings have been perpetrated by the private army of security guards employed by Miguel Facussé, a biofuels magnate. Facussé's guards work closely with the Honduran military and police, which receive generous funding from the United States to fight the war on drugs in the region.²⁰⁹

In 2011, Wikileaks cables revealed that the US Embassy in Tegucigalpa had known since 2004 of Facussé's activities as a cocaine importer. Thus, remarks Frank, "US 'Drug War' funds and training are being used to support a known drug trafficker's war against campesinos."²¹⁰ In July of that same year the World Council of Churches, Foodfirst Information, Action Network (FIAN) International, and other international organizations jointly carried out a fact-finding mission. According to the witnesses and members of the peasant movements they interviewed, Facussé's 'security guards' constitute the primary actors of campesino deaths in the valley. Juan Chinchilla, a journalist and activist who had been kidnapped in the Aguán Valley, escaped after two years of being held captive. He reported, in January of 2011, he had been tortured and interrogated,

²⁰⁹ Dana Frank, "Wikileaks Honduras: Us Linked to Brutal Businessman," *The Nation* (2011), <http://www.thenation.com/article/164120/wikileaks-honduras-us-linked-brutal-businessman#>.

²¹⁰ Ibid. Frank further profiles Facussé with these words: "Miguel Facussé Barjum, in the embassy's words, is "the wealthiest, most powerful businessman in the country," one of the country's "political heavyweights." The New York Times recently described him as "the octogenarian patriarch of one of the handful of families controlling much of Honduras' economy." Facussé's nephew, Carlos Flores Facussé, served as president of Honduras from 1998 to 2002. Miguel Facussé's Dinant corporation is a major producer of palm oil, snack foods, and other agricultural products. He was one of the key supporters of the military coup that deposed democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya on June 28, 2009."

and that most of his captors wore the uniforms of the police or military, if not those of Facussé's guards. The whole Aguán Valley remains occupied up to this date, with the police and military constantly intimidating the population. Small campesino communities are raid and have even been devastated by large military operations. The death toll continues to grow.



Figure 38: Greg McCain, photograph of exhumation near Paso Aguán, 2013

This decades long marriage of transnational capital and repressive forces composes the murderous agency that rips open the fabric of Honduran society; it

dismembers it and reduces its substance, inhibiting its becoming. It works viciously against the possibility of a national community to become the very source of its own wellbeing, seeking always to ensure the dependence of the Honduran economy on international financial bodies. The humanity of this community is lost to the insatiable greed of foreign capital. This is already a very long history, a vicious old war that extends into the present. Lucy Argueta's work *Merma* unearths, as it were, the victims of this war, of this continued human loss, which constitutes a *sine qua non* of multinational capitalism. *Merma* points at the gruesome symptoms of this decades-long disease. Let us see how its artistic forms are linked to a real object in the external world. In 3 April 2013, the tire of a truck got stuck in the mud while circulating inside a palm plantation in the Aguán Valley. Digging out of the burrow made by the tire, a boot stuck out: the vehicle was stuck on a graveyard—it goes without saying this is an illegal site for a burial. At that point, the Unified Campesino Movement of the Aguan (MUCA) contacted the Committee of the Families of the Detained and Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH), which arranged for an exhumation. "Upon exhumation, Lopez Lara's skull showed a fracture on the right side above his ear. There also appeared to be broken bones consistent with torture and his hand was detached from his body"²¹¹ (figure 38). His wife was able to identify him by the clothes he was wearing the day he went missing. His fishing bag was also buried with him: that day he had gone fishing. He was found months later by chance. Mainstream media in Honduras did not report this exhumation. The Facussé family owns the

²¹¹ Gaintain, "Honduran Community Demands Forensic Investigation of Clandestine Gravesite".

main newspaper printed in Tegucigalpa. Other papers of high circulation belong to other oligarchic groups in Honduras, which also enjoy the sweet fruits of the collaboration between international financial bodies and US funded and trained repressive apparatuses in Honduras. In *Merma* we are faced with the ever returning repressed, a grisly necessity of such multinational order. What was supposed to remain hidden and secret comes to light, and it is indeed uncanny. In a work like *Merma*, Argueta confronts the agents of transnational capitalism with the destruction they cannot contain: the assassinations of its demonized other, i.e., native peoples and land workers.

In its aesthetic strategy, the work can arrest the viewer in a paroxysmic state that is inherent to our psychic constitution. The return of the repressed can indeed engulf spectators in anxiety; alienate them through its strangeness. The viewer might reject or step out of this alienation, but if she or he is willing to experience it there is certainly much to be gained: he might come to realize that he himself inhabits and is an agent of the *aporia* articulated into the work. Giorgio Agamben has written a wonderful elucidation of this dialectic:

If the spectator consents to the radical alienation of this experience [i.e., the experience of something absolutely other], leaves behind all content and all support, and agrees to enter the circle of absolute perversion, he has no other way of finding himself again than wholly to assume his contradiction. That is, he must split asunder his own split, negate his own negation, suppress his own being suppressed; he is the absolute will to be other and the movement that simultaneously divides the violin from and unites it with the piece of wood that has found itself to be a violin, divides the bugle from and unites it with the copper that has woken up as bugle. In this alienation he owns himself, and in owning himself he alienates himself.²¹²

²¹² Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*, trans. Giorgia Albert (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 48.

In a society that prefers to deny its most shocking truths, to inhabit one's contradictions is an invaluable experience. There is a high degree of delusion to a society that prefers to remain silent and inactive in the face of such horrific a history as that of contemporary Central America. It is a silence that pays well: it grants people acceptance into elite circles, whose economic activity is nonetheless embedded in the fraught marriage of transnational capital and repressive forces. In the broader Honduran context, the very production of art is not only embedded in this large-scale machinery, but is indeed part and parcel of its production of consent. I commend artists who confront publics with their complicity in an economic order that proves indeed to be destructive. Argueta's work entered the public space months before there was any news of López Lara's exhumation. The fact that it was enthusiastically received by publics proves that there are people in Honduras who would indeed like to see their country move beyond the state of murderous coloniality it sees continues to see in the present, and that understand that the production of art from within dissent is a centerpiece for the production of a renewed national community.

Most people would deny their complicity in the current socio-political order, not to mention the actual occurrence of the ghastly murders that constitute the objects referred to by *Merma*. Therein resides the uncanniness experienced in the face of the work: psychic contents have been repressed, and thus sent into the unconscious. The experience of the video-installation disconcerts the viewer, sets him in a state of intellectual uncertainty. Because they are not readily

recognizable, signs appear weak; they resist the easy integration of meaning publics have been habituated to by educational institutions, themselves devices deployed for official consent. Arbitrary symbolic structures facilitate the repression of fears. Yet, when they stop operating, the physical reality of the work is intensified. In the absence of an easy structuration of meaning, imagination must step in and fantasy comes to the fore. This is the perfect scenario for our fears to arise. The images in the video are experienced almost as a spontaneous flow of psychic content. Something entirely other unfolds before us. It is indeed uncanny how we recognize our sensations yet remain incapable of naming the object that produces them. In spite of ourselves, we are brought into the difficult question of how do we situate ourselves with respect to the repressed other, an uncomfortable question that lies nonetheless indeed at the core of our own becoming. Two things might happen upon our experience of the uncanny, which has indeed the potential of de-structuring the self: it might just remain in the viewing subject as psychotic symptom, or it may indeed incite a pondering upon the incongruous character of the world around him. This is possible because the boundaries between imagination and reality are erased in uncanny experience. Relying on Maurice Bouvet, Kristeva elucidates Freud's concept of the uncanny as "a crumbling of conscious defences, resulting from the conflicts the self experiences of an other."²¹³ The ego retains a fraught and compulsory tie with this "stranger;" while it needs to identify with it, that very unfamiliar individual, both real and imaginary, overwhelms the ego with fear; it threatens the autonomy

²¹³ Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 188.

of the self. This threatening of the ego's autonomy constitutes a centrepiece of Merma's aesthetic strategy. Let us plug the unexpectedly re-appeared López Lara into the equation in order to grasp this strategy more clearly. We can start asking, why is he threatening? For starters, he can indeed claim rights to a contested territory, the very land a corporation needs to wholly possess in order to carry on not only their monopolistic production of foodstuffs, which go into markets people like López Lara cannot access, but also to perpetuate a multinational maze of drug traffic. Also, by procuring his own wellbeing through his unindustrialized interaction with the land, thousands of people like him resist not only the devastating mode of production preferred by transnational capitalism, but resists being fed into such atrocious machine as cheap labour. This is indeed threatening to a multinational economic apparatus that survives by virtue of a violently produced and ever reproduced widespread inequality, ideologically justified through the vehement otherizing of *campesino* and native populations over centuries. Producing these populations as a radical, undeserving others has been for the longest time an ideological necessity of multinational systems devoted to capital accumulation. The production of art, embedded as it is in these global economic structures, can resist from within such ideological productions. *Merma* exemplifies such capacity in its effort to confront viewers with the fraught assumptions that they themselves inhabit, consciously or not, i.e. it has the potential of inducing in viewers the question, do

we really need to acquiesce to practices like dispossession and murder in order to produce a functional national community? Would not the contrary be the case?

The conditions of exclusion and extreme poverty suffered by López Lara are not 'natural' ones; they have been carefully crafted over decades of hemispheric relations, which have indeed produced the huge amount of 23 million people living in dire poverty: two thirds of the totality of the people living in the Central American Isthmus. Through *Merma*, López Lara returns from the dead, as it were, to speak for them. As Booth et al stated blatantly, Central Americans constitute the main 'resource' of this area of the world, rendered vulnerable in order to pursue its unquestioned exploitation. The major inhibitor of social development in the Isthmus, through its forceful control of economic policy in the Hemisphere, its forestalling of self-determination efforts, and its enormous efforts in creating internal divides within the particular countries, is a neighbour called the United States. This exacerbation of poverty through the decades has intensified popular unrest, and local governments ally one more time with the industrial-military complex up North to guarantee military repression, as efforts to create consent cannot possibly succeed anymore: disagreement turns everyday more into outright conflict, where State and political-economic elites count with all the force of extermination machinery and *campesinos* count but with their own hands to survive. External development continues to feed from the underdevelopment of vast disenfranchised populations. Even in the absence of such news as López Lara's exhumation, *Merma* refers to these large popular

sectors through the clothes that constitute the physical expression of the work, the material of everyday life ludically set up to signify workers, both urban and rural. The simulation of archaeological method, as well as the photo and videographic registration of the process, connects *Merma* not only to López Lara's exhumation but to the broader context of ritual exhumations being carried out not only in the Isthmus but across Latin America, as a way of actively coping with and producing awareness of the State terror that continues to be practiced in the region. Navarro García et al have described exhumation processes in 14 Latin American countries, and locate four main causalities: collective massacres (Guatemala, El Salvador, Colombia and Peru), persons detained and disappeared as a result of state policies (Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil and Paraguay), collective violence (Venezuela, Mexico and Panama) and selective deaths under democratic regimes (Ecuador and Honduras).²¹⁴ The rips, perforations and missing parts in the clothes unearthed in Argueta's project speak of the violent aggression towards these disenfranchised peoples. In the case of López Lara, not only his hand had been removed but his skull had also been broken. The dirt that covers the clothes has many connotations. Metaphorically, it could entail the horrific, hidden truth of the repression of vast Central American populations, which reveals the *modus operandi* of transnational enterprise capitalism, throwing dirt at its own image during a time when it seeks to white wash itself through petty discourses of 'social responsibility.'

²¹⁴ Susana Navarro García, Pau Pérez-Sales, and Alberto Fernández-Liria, "Exhumation Processes in Fourteen Countries in Latin America," *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology* 2, no. 2 (2010): 48.

Metonymically, it sits as a stain in the very name of local regimes and the elites they protect: their murder and illegal burial of the very populations whose interests they are suppose to represent and pursue both nationally and internationally. One could easily say that *Merma* drags the name of repressive Central American governments through the dirt when it faces publics with the (simulated) traces of their barbaric deeds. Its uncanny strangeness works as a proper device within the mental processes by which individuals might become human, which is at the end of the day the goal of all, and not only cultural, production. Conversely, as Kristeva explains, the suppression of strangeness—in this case the peculiar incongruity of a system of production that needs to eliminate its own people in order to perpetuate itself—leads to an obliteration of the psyche, to spiritual impoverishment, and to the perpetuation of paranoia and murder.²¹⁵

²¹⁵ Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 190.

Final Observations

Writings on Modern Honduran art have traditionally exalted producers. It has been a habit of the Honduran literati to pen laudatory excursus on the work of painters who, like Miguel Angel Ruiz Matute or Ezequiel Padilla, enjoyed a strong reception between the 1970s and 80s. While these texts, driven as they were by aesthetic emotion and individual response, strengthen the reception of neo-figurative canvases into the 1990s, they failed to establish a durable critical dialogue among Honduran cultural producers broadly. The fetishizing of works and the becoming brands of artists' names might help to build a market for such productions, but only methodical investigations into their visual languages and contents can sustain overtime their symbolic or cultural values. Celebratory speech fails to engage new generations with the artistic problematics engaged by modernist producers in Honduras. An understanding of those important precedents needs to be developed with the pertinent critical tools, before it can fuel and inform the practices of younger generations of artists. This would entail research into the dialectic between their formal attributes and their subject matter, as well as that between the works and the specific historical contexts in which they were produced and received. We are yet to carry out this study systematically. A key factor inhibiting the process of discussing Honduran art

critically is the danger that doing so will indeed prove that, as I am convinced, the art being produced today by young artists, like Lucy Argueta and Lester Rodríguez, is better positioned to engage the critical subjectivity of publics than has been the generally more accommodating canvases of previous generations. Yes, the notion that art can revolutionise consciousness is more widely shared today by younger publics than it was only a couple of decades ago, and that certainly allows for a stronger, more engaged mode of reception than works sanctified by decadent institutions ever will incite. But then again, such circumstances only make support and study of the processes of production and reception presently at work all the more valuable.

Artistic production in Honduras, from the standpoint of my own experience and most practitioners I have conversed with over the decades, has been and continues to be marked by an elitist, exclusionary behaviour. It has worked as a means for producers, generally involved in other economic activities, to gain social standing, visibility and prestige, as well as access to institutional and state funds. Only a few practitioners have concerned themselves with art's capacities to set people in dialogue and create community inclusively. When an modernist artist like Arturo López Rodezno looked at a native culture to pick up a dialogue with it, his visual production actually erased Maya cosmology to derive into aestheticizing visual planes that pursue the emotion of colour and form; pleasing as it was, his practice fell short of conveying the social realities of native groups in Honduras, ancient or modern. It is completely symptomatic that his largest

commissions, and also most enthusiastically received works, centre on the regal figure of warring cleric-rulers. When he does show common people, they seem blithely at play in or around a water source, or blissfully content with their rural environment and work. The Maya world constructed through López Rodezno's visual works is largely incommensurable with the probing realities endured by that People throughout history. The world it represents is not modern, maybe not even Maya. It is rather a disrupting construction, a contrived vision that corresponds to the artist's fantasy much more than to objects and subjects that constitute the beating life and cosmology of Maya civilisation. Artistic fantasy is not a bad thing in itself, but it will be when an artistic discourse pretends and claims to represent an *otherised* group, to reconstitute it within nationalistic discourse, and succeeds mainly in distorting its cosmology and historical realities.

This type of artistic agenda, as Leticia de Oyuela had suggested in 1995, embodies a liberal agenda, a 19th century vision of the republic, indeed a very oligarchic one. In such outmoded vision, of strong romantic, logocentric tannins, "artistic vision" forecloses the representation of the real. These symptoms point directly at a malady still affecting severely the production of visual discourses in relation to the Honduran nation: the impulse in authors to locate themselves within an order of symbols they presume to constitute the nation. What was a very subjective vision became, through López Rodezno's agenda for the ENBA in particular and the State in general, an equivocal visual culture of "Maya" motifs,

sensuous nudes of “native” damsels, content banana-harvesting *campesinos*, exoticised animals and fruits, all which continue to occupy the canvases of students and established practitioners alike.

Still today, López Rodezno is perceived as a driving influence at the school, the students often assigned to copy his works. While we can commend the artist’s contribution to modernist pictorial practices in Honduran art, it is interesting to note, however, that today the school does not cultivate freedom in pictorial investigations. Rather, a more inductive approach to bi-dimensional art obtains today at ENBA, centred on the human figure. And of course, the emulation, or rather distortion, of classic Maya languages, however anodyne such practice remains. Diachronically considered, the calcification of statist discourses have survived at the school, while López Rodezno’s sensibilities to form and colour remain part of a distant past, and provoke no critical engagement today at ENBA. While many graduates have gone beyond the traditional, prescribed formulas at the school to explore meanings through interdisciplinary practices and approximate themselves to realities in Honduras, teaching and discourses at the school prove regressive for the most part.

ENBA’s curriculum and production perpetuate a taste for technical achievement at the expense of richer and more challenging thematic approaches. Exchange value predominates over the exhibition value of works, i.e. their capacity to induce the production of meaning within the public sphere, and as such the mode of artistic production and reception kept alive by the

school burdens art's community-building capacities. Students at the school feel indeed constrained, and have demanded an actualisation of the school's curriculum. They desire to cultivate a broader range of practices, and to produce with freedom. Many practices that stimulate their imagination are not incorporated into the curriculum: collage, comics, graffiti, installation, montage, video, as well as interdisciplinary work. Indeed, interdisciplinary practices, prompted by historical and contemporary vanguards, are what obtain internationally, and it has allowed artists like Lester Rodríguez and Adán Vallecillo a sound international reception.

Most official institutions that manage symbolic goods in Honduras frame art as an agency external and superior to publics, as an essence impregnated with genius and technical prowess well in excess of the public's capacity to create, not to mention assign value or integrate meaning into works. Most often, art is offered to the public as a thing to be admired, as something that lies well beyond the capacities and interpretative impulses of viewers. The cognitive processes that works would activate on viewing subjects are thus curbed, their agency denied or seriously jeopardised. While many viewers empower themselves with, and indeed perform, such agency, the education system in Honduras, on the other hand, inscribes students in a logic that inoculates them from releasing and realising their potential to produce meanings. In effect, the educational curriculum in Honduras does not effectively lead people to recognise and realise the emancipatory potential of art. The artists and spectators who do

understand and pursue such capabilities of art have obtained their own notions through their personal inquiries and autonomous study. The limited markets inside the country prize pleasing images and technical skill, and punish interdisciplinary and committed works.

The contents suppressed by official and commercial institutions in visual discourse re-emerge nonetheless in vernacular images that circulate in all types of electronic supports, not to mention the unbridled speech weaving itself everyday into the walls of urban centres. They direct people's attention to the social injustices that have plagued Honduras throughout its history. Through its visceral documentary force, a vernacular, electronic discourse pushes an apprehension of social reality in the country, framing and focalising aspects of the sobering social processes lived contemporarily in Honduras, processes in which the popular classes and its concerns are bypassed by the government and economically privileged groups. Anonymous producers seek to give visibility to the violent repression these ruling elites command towards those who dissent to a highly exclusionary system. In today's Honduras, heterogeneous ways of making sense out of current events coexist, a condition that must be understood vis-à-vis the dislocation of its different social groups, whose apprehensions of the contemporary crises seem often irreconcilable. These vernacular discourses, visual and otherwise, consciously and powerfully oppose the visual culture produced and sponsored by official institutions in the country. The gap between vernacular and official discourses is often abysmal. The motivation for these

strong oppositional discourses has a shared source, if their forms and contents appear through a rich heterogeneity: the opprobrious socio-historical realities lived by vast Honduran populations throughout history, which have been marked by exclusion, an intense phobia against indigenous and rural populations, and murder.

Vernacular images and cartoons growingly engage the historical necessities Hondurans have grown so conscious of: the negative effects of 19th century liberalism and contemporary neoliberalism are felt today more strongly than ever, in a country where the seeming impossibility of social cohesion is underscored by its overwhelming homicide rate, one of the highest worldwide. Throughout the 20th century, Honduras not only lacked an economic policy that would allow most of its populations to contribute and participate in the nation's growth, but also leaders lacked a sound understanding of the cultural nature of the process by which nations become unified, and thus never fuelled this process in an inclusive, democratic manner. In both Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, most producers have been very invested in a fetishizing mode of production, their aspiration leaned to the values of a society of the spectacle; the community-building capacities of cultural production have been grossly ignored. Alternatives arose during the 1970s and 80s, which we can exemplify by the works of Aníbal Cruz and Ezequiel Padilla, who sought dialogues with the nation's historical necessities through vanguardist pictorial explorations. Yet glib productions continued to grow and, given the very low intensity of intelligent, committed

practices, those marked by a lack of intellectual depth gained publics and clutched markets.

An engagement with the nation's historical necessities and contemporary realities started to obtain in the practices of a younger generation of artists during the second half the 1990s. At that time, artist collectives like *El círculo* or *La artería* invested themselves in vanguardist strategies to address the exclusionary mode of production consolidating itself through that decade, namely an exploitative economy of outsourcing, the production of consumer goods intended for consumption in the United States, yet carried out in Honduras with no respect for labour law, ecological concerns, and indeed human rights. This conjugation of vanguardist, interdisciplinary practices and the impulse to engage the nation's losses and failures within the international division of labour has brought new air to artistic practices in Honduras. The Honduran Biennial of 2010, produced in the tumultuous aftermath of the coup d'état of 2009, emphasised this reality. The art included in it triggered a dialectic between the non-conforming work and the pervasive and otiose conformity to reality. It was an exhibition in which several artists sought to induce viewing subjects to negotiate between the material and structural organisation of the work and the reality surrounding him or her. It showed how contemporary Honduran artworks sought to incite a sustained process of interpretation. In such a process, viewing subjects register a mental representation of the work before them, going back and forth between the work and the encompassing world. The point is to stimulate new sensibilities in people,

so that they might become aware of the flawed, deluded manner in which the world around us has been defined. This desire for discursivity in art and subjective exchange in publics is by no means confined to the 2010 Biennial; some artists seek to disseminate such practice nation-wide. It has become a key aspect of the new marriage of vanguardist practices and engagements with social history that now inform the most exciting art being produced today in Honduras.

People's experience, their endurance of the physical and social environment in which they are engulfed, impacts their subjective disposition. I perceive in both artists and publics a desire that emerges from profound discontents with how things fail to work everyday in Honduras, and much opposition to the widespread misconstructions and misrepresentations that seek to perpetuate our dominant yet dysfunctional social institutions. In the face of the overwhelming social processes in contemporary Honduras, i.e. the ever deepening social divisions in the nation, the growing inequality, the exclusion and repression of vast populations, people seek and are finding echoes among themselves, and the desire for a less deluded construction of reality continues to motivate exchange, inside and outside artistic groups. The social institutions that have been established over the decades in Honduras are, more conspicuously than ever, broken and vitiated: they do not seek the interests of the people; they are violent against the popular classes. Dissenting discourses, artistic or otherwise, weigh large as a threat to the permanence of those dysfunctional

institutions, as they make apparent the deceitful constructions of “reality” that allow for them in the first place.

The work of Lucy Argueta is a prime example of contemporary interdisciplinary practice with great potential to induce reflection on social concerns. Her work engages directly the old capitalist practice of accumulation by dispossession, among other concerns like gender inequality and the contingency of identity. Her work *Merma*, whose forms and contexts I discussed in detail above, dialogues with diverse contexts, both general and specific. It simulates an anthropologically performed exhumation within a forrest, where begrimed and broken clothes are disinterred. Metonymically, the begrimed and broken clothes stand in for the victims of homicides, carried out to quite and terrorise those who claim rights to their only source of wellbeing: the land in which they dwell. Argueta divests *Merma* from specific markers of time and place, and thus enables the work into a broad and complex territory of meaning; its capacities for reference and discourse become not only pertinent but necessary for a specific contexts like the Bajo Aguán region in Honduras, the international policies that not only lead to but depend on homicide in Central and Latin America, and the criminal actions of capitalist enterprise around the globe.

The aesthetics put into play by Argueta within a Honduran and Central American public is shaped by a concern with social relations broadly. They entail a process of estrangement and a renewed perception of precisely those social divisions individuals carry within themselves. The crimes that we silence every

day splinter society and, not being able to cope with social divisions, we repress them; our very consciousness becomes split. When an individual comes to represent for himself the world around him, that internal representation will inevitably carry the splinters of a disjointed society. Our habitual way of coping with social divisions is simply to ignore them. Yet, in Argueta's allegorical exhumation, the human actions that dismember society are placed at the centre of the subject's consciousness. The repressed other, the murdered *campesino*, becomes a visual sensation, something physical and palpable, and so viewers are faced with the destruction authored by the repressive state apparatuses at the service of transnational capital, which the international media seeks to make invisible. In individuals, murder and destruction is suppressed from consciousness because of their necessity to wrap themselves up in neoliberal ideology, in turn a necessity of insertion into production and financial circuits. Yet, in face of the (re)presentation of murder, the stable world viewing subjects comfortably assume is flung asunder, and so the subject will find herself in the necessity of re-negotiating and re-structuring her perception of the world she carried within her.

The necessity of inserting themselves and surviving within the economic system impacts the subjective constitution of individuals consciously and unconsciously. This constitutes indeed an ideologizing of subjects, a masking of political issues and realities through alleged "cultural concerns." The insistence on a "culture of service," for instance, redirects the problematics of labour and its divisions into an empty cultural construct: it circles around what is indeed a

political question into a frivolous “cultural” concern. Antonio Gramsci described this masking of social realities through cultural or traditional values, and, as David Harvey sustains, it was instrumental in implementing neoliberal ideology from the 1970s onward, along with the fierce repression of solidarities within communities.²¹⁶ The agents for the dissemination of neoliberal ideology are to be found in universities, schools, churches, and professional associations. Once people came to inhabit the logic of neoliberalism, it became an internal yet invisible frame that allowed elites to instrument destructive, divisive, and indeed murderous economic practices. For artists like Argueta, art has to render estrange the very worldview subjects have come to inhabit. Looking into a work like *Merma* offers viewers the possibility of examining the world they participate of. Such examination, performed simultaneously upon the self and the world inhabited, is a key exercise for any community that wishes to pursue its wellbeing through solidarity and cooperation.

The question that remains open is how will artistic production emancipate itself from the institutional frames that allow for it, since those very institutions are coextensive with the governmental and financial bodies that inscribe themselves within transnational capital. If Argueta dismembers the logic that naturalizes transnational capital, how can we carry out an artistic production that exceeds the innocuous frames demanded by the very institutions that naturalize themselves through the consumption of presumably dissenting artworks? A radical break in

²¹⁶ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 39.

the mode artistic production should remain be a primary concern, because, if we have moved from practices that deny social history and contemporary realities to practices that prompt critical participation in making sense of contemporary history, most producers remain too diffident or market-oriented to openly acknowledge meaning.

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