

TANIA CANDIANI'S *BORDADORA* (2012): THE INTERSECTING  
HISTORIES OF RELIGION AND WOMEN'S LABOR IN MEXICO

by

Aubrey Marie Hawks

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
The University of Utah  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Art History

Department of Art and Art History

The University of Utah

August 2016

Copyright © Aubrey Marie Hawks 2016

All Rights Reserved

**The University of Utah Graduate School**

**STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL**

The thesis of \_\_\_\_\_ **Aubrey Marie Hawks** \_\_\_\_\_

has been approved by the following supervisory committee members:

\_\_\_\_\_ **Elena Shtromberg** \_\_\_\_\_, Chair \_\_\_\_\_ **04/26/2016** \_\_\_\_\_  
Date Approved

\_\_\_\_\_ **Lela Graybill** \_\_\_\_\_, Member \_\_\_\_\_ **04/26/2016** \_\_\_\_\_  
Date Approved

\_\_\_\_\_ **Paul Monty Paret** \_\_\_\_\_, Member \_\_\_\_\_ **04/26/2016** \_\_\_\_\_  
Date Approved

and by \_\_\_\_\_ **Paul Stout** \_\_\_\_\_, Chair/Dean of

the Department/College/School of \_\_\_\_\_ **Art and Art History** \_\_\_\_\_

and by David B. Kieda, Dean of The Graduate School.

## ABSTRACT

Tania Candiani's 2012 work *Bordadora* invites participants to whisper secrets in one of three confessional booths and then uses voice recognition software and an embroidery machine with Computer Numerical Control programming to stitch those secrets onto a tapestry in graffiti style lettering. The work was created for Laboratorio Arte Alameda for the solo show *Cinco variaciones de circunstancias fónicas y una pausa* (*Five Variations on Phonic Circumstance and a Pause*). The Laboratorio is a new media art space housed in a former convent that was a site for public executions during the Spanish Inquisition in Mexico from 1596-1771, and the use of religious iconography in Candiani's work indicates that *Bordadora* is referencing the history of the building. Because of the site specificity of the work and the explicit social commentary in Candiani's oeuvre, the symbolism of the industrial embroidery machine and confessional booths in *Bordadora* function as a critique of textile manufacturing and Catholicism in Mexico. An interpretation of the symbols in the work leads to a discussion of how the textile industry and religion have historically overlapped, and more specifically, how they have shaped the lives of Mexican women. This thesis examines *Bordadora* and the ways in which it comments on the relationship between textile production and gender in Mexico, highlighting how industrialization has exploited and continues to exploit women

y qtngtu0"O { "cpcn{ uku'gZR mtgu"j g"hwpevkp"qh"eqphgukp"kp"Dqtf cf qtc"d{ "tghgevkpi "qp"ku"  
j kxqt { .r ctvwctn{ 'ku'f gr m{ o gpv'kp"eqmpkcn'O gzleq"cu'c'o gej cpkuo 'hqt'wtxglmppeg'"

and control over indigenous populations. This thesis considers how *Bordadora* invokes and explores the intersections of labor and Catholicism in Mexico by first recreating the factory space and confessional process within the art space and then subverting it.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
INTRODUCTION .....	1
THE ROLE OF TEXTILES IN CANDIANI'S WORK.....	11
WOMEN IN MEXICAN TEXTILE PRODUCTION.....	20
FACTORY LABOR.....	24
CONFESSION, SURVEILLANCE, AND SELFHOOD .....	30
CONFESSION AS CATHARSIS.....	38
INTERCONNECTIONS: EMBROIDERY, CONFESSION, AND GRAFFITI.....	43
CONCLUSION .....	50
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	52

## LIST OF FIGURES

1. Installation view of <i>Bordadora</i> , Laboratorio Arte Alameda, 2012.....	9
2. Plaque on Laboratorio Arte Alameda commemorating the use of the property as the <i>quemadero</i> for the Mexican Inquisition .....	10
3. Overhead view of the embroidery machine from <i>Bordadora</i> .....	16
4. Detail views of the sewing mechanism from <i>Bordadora</i> .....	16
5. Detail of the embroidery arm from <i>Bordadora</i> .....	17
6. Dresses sewn as part of <i>La constancia dormida</i> .....	17
7. Tapestry embroidered by the artist as part of <i>La constancia dormida</i> .....	18
8. Detail of <i>Telar</i> .....	18
9. Detail of <i>Telar/maquina</i> .....	19
10. Projected text as viewed from the balcony from <i>Bordadora</i> .....	29
11. Installation view of the confessional booths from <i>Bordadora</i> .....	36
12. Interior view of a confessional booth from <i>Bordadora</i> .....	36
13. Details of confessional microphone from <i>Bordadora</i> .....	37
14. Installation of <i>Habita intervenido</i> .....	48
15. ASCO's <i>Spray Paint LACMA</i> .....	49
16. Installation view of <i>Kaunas graffiti</i> .....	49

## INTRODUCTION

*Bordadora (Embroiderer)* is one of six artworks created by Tania Candiani in 2012 for the solo exhibition *Cinco variaciones de circunstancias fónicas y una pausa (Five Variations of Phonic Circumstance and a Pause)* at Laboratorio Arte Alameda (Laboratorio), a new media art space and former convent in Mexico City.<sup>1</sup> In each of the six artworks, or variations, a combination of digital software and analog technology is employed to map the translations between aural and sign-based forms of communication, or sound and text. Candiani did not invent the software used in these machines, and their functions would not be particularly notable in 2012 if not for the whimsical, often poignant and even ironic combinations of new and obsolete machinery. The machines that make up the physical interface of Candiani's "variations" synthesize industrial technology, futuristic minimalist design, and architecture that reflects back on Laboratorio's history as a church from 1591 until 1934.

*Bordadora* takes, as a fundamental premise, the idea that machines are carriers of meaning, not only in the theoretical sense of Marshall McLuhan's oft-quoted aphorism that "the medium is the message," but also in a social and historical sense. As technologies gain widespread use, they accrue significance based on how they are

---

<sup>1</sup> Tania Candiani, "Prix Ars Electronica/Cinco Variaciones," Tania Candiani Studio, accessed April 8, 2014, <http://www.taniacandiani.com/Works/projects/2013/arselectronica.html>.



implemented socially, developing their own histories and mythologies. Therefore, when an artist employs pre-existing machines and systems in an artwork, the social narratives embedded in the technology become part of the message communicated by the artwork.

In *Bordadora*, Candiani uses an industrial machine embroiderer to stitch rows of text (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> The machine is quite large, embroidering a roll of fabric a yard wide and occupying the width of the gallery. At one end is the sewing mechanism that glides back and forth across the fabric, embroidering text through coded coordinates. The remaining length of the machine is a series of tension bars that tent upwards in the center, keeping the fabric sufficiently taut as the text is embroidered and then winding the fabric onto a new roll at the end.

The text is generated by visitors to the exhibit, who speak into microphones hidden within booths designed to look like Catholic confessionals. The confessional modules have three unadorned white walls, with a small round screen in the middle of the center panel concealing the microphone and mimicking the screen that would conventionally provide a divide between the priest confessor and the confessant. A small kneeling bench in front of the screen positions visitors in closer proximity to the microphone and encourages a softer, more intimate mode of speaking. The confessions are recorded and translated into coded text using the open source software, CMU Sphinx,

---

<sup>1</sup> *Bordadora* was not available to view during the period in which this thesis was written. As such, descriptions are based on documentation of the original installation and information gathered from a visit to Laboratorio Arte Alameda. There are numerous detail and installation photographs of *Bordadora* available on the artist's website and in a PDF version of her dossier. There is also a brief video of the embroidery machine on Candiani's Vimeo page. There are several gaps in the visual information provided by these sources, so description will be limited at some nonessential points. An archive of the educational material from the exhibition was also made available at Laboratorio; however, the texts differ very little from the description and explanation available on Candiani's website.

and then relayed to the embroiderer's Computer Numerical Control (CNC) programming.<sup>2</sup> The embroiderer then stitches the transcript of the confessions onto a white tapestry in a text designed to resemble wild style graffiti, a style often associated with tagging. The text, while ultimately legible, is designed to be more difficult to read, with superfluous curls and flourishes.

*Bordadora* was installed in a two-story gallery space with a balcony overlooking the lower level. The embroidery machine was situated in the center of the lower level, with the confessional booths placed up above. The confessional booths were lined up against the railing of the balcony and the machine was turned in such a way that the embroidered text would be most easily read from up above. The text was also projected onto the wall opposite the balcony. The upper level is accessible by a spiral staircase located slightly outside the gallery, creating an experiential divide between viewers down below and the confessing participants on the balcony.

A social and historical analysis of *Bordadora* is encouraged by themes in Candiani's artistic practice as well as by site-specific elements in the work itself. As of 2016, Tania Candiani has become a well-respected artist both within Mexico and internationally, having been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2011, become a member of Mexico's National System of Art Creators in 2012, and collaborated with Luis Filipe Ortega on the Mexican Pavilion at the 56<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 2015, among other honors. Most existing writing about her practice consists of reviews of her exhibited work and brief artist profiles. The limited interpretive texts about Candiani's work have primarily been written either by Candiani herself or by the curator Karla Jasso, who has

---

<sup>2</sup> Candiani, Tania, e-mail message to the author, January 19, 2015. All translations by the author.

worked with her on several projects, including *Cinco Variaciones*. In her various artist statements, Candiani lists the politicization of the domestic, the poetic implications of machines and artifacts, and the prioritization of certain forms of production over others as key ideas explored throughout her body of work.<sup>3</sup> She notes textiles in particular as a key signifier in her artistic practice, explicitly connecting sewing and tailoring to narrative and labor. While these concerns are consistently listed in descriptions of her practice, there have been few substantive attempts to unpack how these ideas apply to specific works within Candiani's oeuvre. This analysis will compare *Bordadora* to earlier projects by Candiani in order to elaborate on how the work connects to Candiani's stated concerns, but will focus in particular on the uses of technologies and their histories.

In this analysis, I will be defining technology broadly, as a practical application of knowledge or skill to achieve a goal. Four technologies meeting this criteria are employed in *Bordadora*. The industrial embroidery machine and the software programs can comfortably be included in conventional definitions of technology. Candiani qualifies graffiti as technology by conceptualizing it explicitly as coded language.<sup>4</sup> Finally, French philosopher Michel Foucault has theorized confession as a technology of the self, and his understanding of confession will be considered at length as a means of understanding the function of confession in *Bordadora* as well as its relationship to the history of Mexico in particular. This thesis will examine the social histories of each of the four technologies utilized in *Bordadora*, focusing on the ways in which these histories have overlapped in Mexico. Exploring these intersections demonstrates both how

---

<sup>3</sup> Tania Candiani, "CV/About," Tania Candiani Studio, accessed June 6, 2016, <http://taniacandiani.com/cvabout.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Tania Candiani, "Bordadora (Embroiderer)," Tania Candiani Studio, accessed February 25, 2016, <http://www.taniacandiani.com/Works/projects/2012/bordadora.html>

technologies can be used in exploitative systems and how they can be reconfigured into new systems that allow for expression and agency.

In previous works, notably *La constancia dormida*, *Telar*, and *Telar/machina*, Candiani used embroidery or industrial textile processes to explore labor. Other works by Candiani, *Habita intervenido* and *Kaunas graffiti*, employ graffiti as a means of challenging the ownership of public spaces. By using the same technologies in *Bordadora* that she has focused on repeatedly in other work, Candiani is implicitly returning to similar themes and questions. The thematic ties between these earlier works and *Bordadora* (which will be elaborated upon later in this essay) combined with confessional booths highlights the complex historical dynamic between labor, technology, and religion, a dynamic that is further enriched by the history of the space for which the work was created, Laboratorio Arte Alameda.

Laboratorio Arte Alameda occupies a building that was built as a convent and whose history is illustrative of the shifting roles of Catholicism in Mexico. The former Convent of San Diego was donated to the Catholic Church by Mateo de Mauleon and his wife, Juana Arellano in 1591.<sup>5</sup> Five years later, in 1596, the courtyard outside the convent became an important site for the Spanish Inquisition in Mexico, the *Quemadero*, or burning place.<sup>6</sup> From 1596-1771, public executions were held in front of the convent. A plaque near the entrance of the building memorializes those who were killed at the site, alerting visitors to the history of the space (Figure 2).<sup>7</sup> Candiani notes this particular use

---

<sup>5</sup> Manuel Zavala Alonso, ed., "Laboratorio Arte Alameda: El Edificio," Museos de Mexico, last modified 2015, accessed February 2, 2016, <http://www.museosdemexico.org/museos/entradamuseo.php?idMuseo=79&idMenu=4&Tipo=0>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

of the building as a factor that politicizes the use of confessionals in *Boradadora*.<sup>8</sup>

The function of the building was altered slightly under the secularizing laws of La Reforma in 1861.<sup>9</sup> The laws attempted to mitigate the power of the Catholic Church by reducing its property holdings and ownership of the convent was transferred back to the descendants of Mateo de Mauleon, the original benefactor of the church.<sup>10</sup> The friars were expelled from the building, but it continued to operate as a church under the family's private ownership until 1934. For thirty years the former church was utilized for a variety of secular functions before being dedicated by President Adolfo López Mateos as *La pinacoteca virreinal* (Colonial Picture Gallery) of San Diego, one of the institutions dedicated to exhibiting Mexico's national collection of colonial art.<sup>11</sup> In 1999, the collection was moved to Mexico's National Museum of Art (MUNAL) and the building was again repurposed as a contemporary art space with a focus on the intersections between art and technology.<sup>12</sup>

Although several of the artworks from *Cinco Variaciones* have travelled to other locations and function independent of the site, the original exhibition was designed for the *Laboratorio Arte Alameda* and comments on the history of this particular building, accruing unique significance in its context. The artworks included in *Cinco Variaciones*

---

<sup>8</sup> Tania Candiani, e-mail message to author, February 12, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> *La reforma* was a secularizing movement in Mexico that aimed to limit the political power of the Catholic church, often by reducing its property holdings. As suggested by the name of the movement, *La reforma* was not a break with Catholicism, but rather an attempt to combat corruption within the church by limiting clerical authority in government. See Adrian A. Bantjes, "Mexican Revolutionary Anticlericalism: Concepts and Typologies," *The Americas* 65, no. 4 (April 2009): accessed April 5, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25488178> .

<sup>10</sup> Alonso, "Laboratorio Arte Alameda: El Edificio," Museos de México.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

fulfill the current mission of Laboratorio by incorporating a number of electronic and technological components, but they also look to the origins of the space through allusions to religious practice.

Three of the artworks created for *Cinco variaciones* directly reference the history of the building through their use of religious fixtures. *Órgano* fills the space where the church organ would have originally stood with a modified version of the instrument, which speaks when the keys are pressed rather than playing music.<sup>13</sup> *Campanario* broadcasts a sound composition over loudspeakers located in the bell tower. In her description of *Campanario*, Candiani references both the religious use of the bell tower to call the faithful to prayer and the historical use of the loudspeakers and megaphones for political purposes. Doing so draws links between religion and politics that can be carried over to the other works that use religious artifacts and makes clear that she is using technologies symbolically.<sup>14</sup> In using confessionals as the location of audience participation and input, *Bordadora* also references the religious history of the building, and does so in a linear way that maps the shift from religious to secular, and private to public.

The Catholic Church and the act of confession historically intersect with factory labor and gender issues as concerns over female morality have often dominated debates over women's place in the workforce. The two-story installation of the work and the process of taking the private act of confession and making it public through embroidery reenacts a process of moral policing that has been common for women workers. By

---

<sup>13</sup> Tania Candiani, "Órgano" Tania Candiani Studio, accessed February 25, 2016, <http://www.taniacandiani.com/Works/projects/2012/organo.html>

<sup>14</sup> Tania Candiani, "Campanario" Tania Candiani Studio, accessed February 25, 2016, <http://www.taniacandiani.com/Works/projects/2012/campanario.html>

combining older industrial machinery with digital technology, Candiani elucidates the connections between historical and contemporary issues of labor and gender, serving as a reminder that women continue to face harsh conditions and discrimination in twenty-first century *maquilas*. Candiani engages the histories of each component in the work and the history of Laboratorio to encourage a dialogue about women's labor in Mexico. This is accomplished in large part because with *Bordadora*, Candiani recreates the spaces in which such issues are unfolding.



Figure 1. Installation view of *Bordadora*, Laboratorio Arte Alameda, 2012





Figure 2. Plaque on Laboratorio Arte Alameda commemorating the use of the property as the *quemadero* for the Mexican Inquisition

## THE ROLE OF TEXTILES IN CANDIANI'S WORK

*Bordadora* uses an actual, pre-existing industrial embroidery machine, materially connecting the space of the gallery to that of the factory. Over twenty feet long and eight feet wide, it is too large for domestic use, though its individual parts resemble those of a sewing machine (Figure 3). At one end of the machine is a roller with a wide ream of white fabric. The fabric is fed through the machine, stretched out flat and pulled taut, embroidered, and then rerolled tightly into a new spool at the other end. The length of the machine is punctuated by metal tension bars and divided approximately one third of the way from the top by the embroidery arm. The arm is made up of a series of metal tracks running the full width of the machine that support the back-and-forth glide of the embroidery mechanism. The mechanism itself looks like a domestic sewing machine, with needles attached to spools of thread on bobbins up above (Figures 4 and 5). The casing of the embroidery mechanism is a dingy ivory plastic, which accompanied by the grey metal bars and olive green supports appears utilitarian, aged, and decidedly industrial. As an object, the machine looks far more functional than aesthetically appealing and is operated in the gallery as it would have been in a factory. The embroidery machine does not simply sit in the gallery as if it were a static sculpture, but rather receives input in the form of confessions and embroiders the programmed text. The operation of the machine contributes to the sensory experience of a factory space by generating a noisy, repetitive rhythm.

*Bordadora* is not the first work in which Candiani has explored the experience of factory spaces. Three of Candiani's previous works directly engage with factory textile production and considering the earlier works helps clarify the role of the factory technology in *Bordadora*. *La Constancia dormida*, *Telar*, and *Telar/machina* each address social concerns related to industrialization and labor conditions. The consistent use of embroidery and textile production also ties the work to a gendered type of labor, implicitly slanting the discussion of industrialization towards economic and social problems that are most commonly faced by women.

The conversion of the gallery into a factory in *Bordadora* is an inversion of Candiani's 2006 work, *La constancia dormida*, in which Candiani occupied La Constancia Textil, an abandoned textile factory in Puebla, México.<sup>1</sup> La Constancia Textil was once the second largest textile factory in Latin America.<sup>2</sup> Built in 1835, it was the first textile mill in Puebla and its founder, Esteban de Antunano, was among the first voices to advocate for the employment of women in factories. He noted that women commonly worked in factories in Europe, and suggested it would raise family incomes. De Antunano further argued that the presence of women in public places would lead to greater morality and less public drunkenness.<sup>3</sup> For *La constancia*, Candiani worked and lived in the factory, sewing clothing and embroidering texts onto long swathes of fabric. The clothing was of her own design and many of the dresses appear to be more decorative than wearable, with irregular shapes and bright colors (Figure 6). The

---

<sup>1</sup> Tania Candiani, "La Constancia" Tania Candiani Studio, accessed February 25, 2016, <http://www.taniacandiani.com/Works/projects/2006/constancia.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Susie S. Porter, *Working Women in Mexico City: Public Discourses and Material Conditions, 1879-1931* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), 52-54.

embroidered texts are Candini's own stream of consciousness diary, which Candiani compares to an act of confession (Figure 7).<sup>4</sup> In both instances, her labor in the factory is expressive, implicitly suggesting that the factory need not be a place of quiet conformity or repression, but rather a place for communication and personal fulfillment.

On her website, Candiani describes her work at La Constancia as a struggle against abandonment and obsolescence.<sup>5</sup> This refers, of course, to using the building as a way of preventing abandonment, working to keep the building and its history from being forgotten. However, Candiani's mention of obsolescence in conjunction with the history of La Constancia suggests that her struggle is not so much a literal one to save a specific building, but a poetic reminder of the disappearance of certain kinds of jobs that can result from industrial progress and the potential removal of the personal and human from large-scale production.

The loss that comes with industrial change is referenced more directly in Candiani's *Telar* (2011) and *Telar/maquina* (2012), both of which address how the kinds of labor available have shifted as technology has enabled mass production. In *Telar*, a machine is programmed to sew an endless line of labels reading "Hecho a Mano," (made by hand) (Figure 8).<sup>6</sup> A video documenting the tags being sewn was included in the installation of *Telar/maquina*, accompanied by a hand-cranked machine that generated sound through the use of punch cards (Figure 9).<sup>7</sup> The punch cards are the same types of

---

<sup>4</sup> Tania Candiani, "Re: Last minute Thesis," e-mail message to author. February 12, 2016. Mexico City.

<sup>5</sup> Candiani, "La Constancia," Tania Candiani Studio.

<sup>6</sup> Tania Candiani, "Telar" Tania Candiani Studio, accessed February 25, 2016, <http://www.taniacandiani.com/Works/projects/2011/telar.html>

<sup>7</sup> Tania Candiani, "Telar/Machina" Tania Candiani Studio, accessed February 25, 2016, <http://www.taniacandiani.com/Works/projects/2012/telar.html>

cards used by industrial looms as a means of programming patterns like the words sewn into the tags. Used in a loom, the holes indicate when and where threads are to be included. In Candiani's installation, they are instead used to indicate notes to be played by a digital reader. As the gallery audience turns a hand crank, the cards pass through the reader and combinations of mechanical noises are generated. These works are a reminder that historically, items were made by hand and numerous people were employed as skilled craftsmen to produce textiles and clothing. These same material goods are now mass produced more efficiently, but there is less distinctiveness to the product and a different kind of labor and skill involved. To produce the tags, a knowledgeable programmer created the appropriately punched instruction cards, replacing with a single design the hours of human labor that would once have been necessary to make the same number of tags by hand. The work that is now available is represented in *Telar/maquina* by the turning of the crank: repetitive, unskilled physical tasks.

The question of labor is at the core of all three of these artworks. *La constancia*, *Telar*, and *Telar/maquina* each describe part of the change that has taken place in México over the last two centuries as artisanal craft has been replaced by assembly lines and machinery as the dominant mode of production of textiles and clothing, as well as numerous other consumer goods. In her description of *Telar*, Candiani indicates that the disappearance of labor is a key concern: "This gesture seeks prompting a reflection about the handcraft and mechanical processes of the textile making. Labor is regarded as an act that must be rescued at any price."<sup>8</sup> The use of the term "handcraft" suggests that Candiani is thinking of labor not simply in terms of jobs, but also in terms of creativity

---

<sup>8</sup> Candiani, "La Constancia," Tania Candiani Studio.

and human investment. As the machine stitches the lie “made by hand,” it not only draws attention to the absence of human hands doing the sewing, but also an absence of human sensibility that is frequently associated with the hand made. This prompts a series of questions or reflections that extends beyond the ethics of automation and subsequent job loss. Is there a qualitative difference in goods produced by hand rather than by machine? Is there a different value in the labor required to produce hand-made items? How do we value the laborers who make them? What part of a person’s labor do we pay for, their time, energy, or skill? It also raises questions about the visibility of the laborer, not only in the factory space, but also in the final product. In the specific instance of textile production, sewing, and embroidery, this issue can be tied to gender in significant ways.

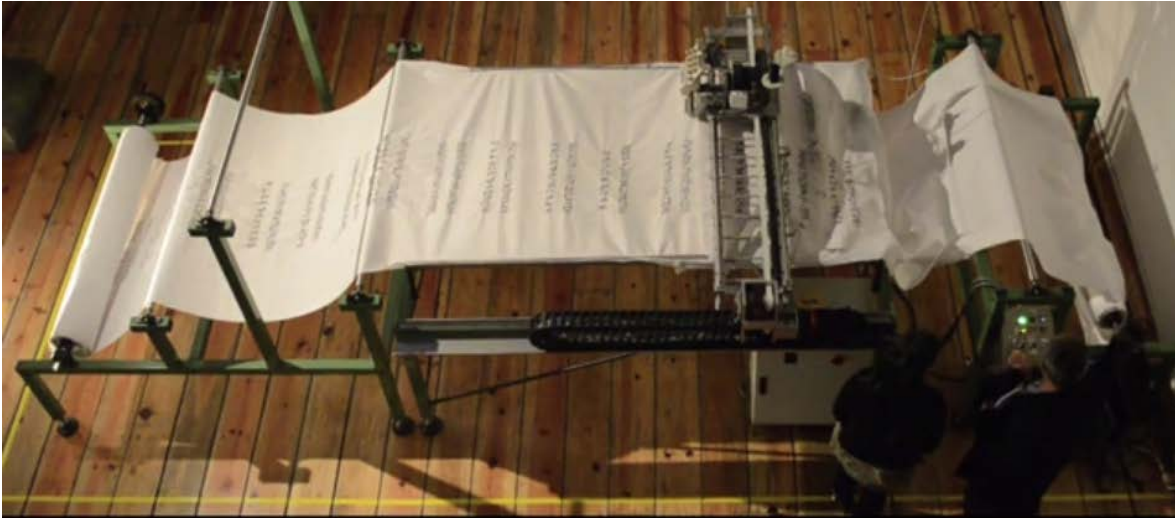


Figure 3. Overhead view of the embroidery machine from *Bordadora*

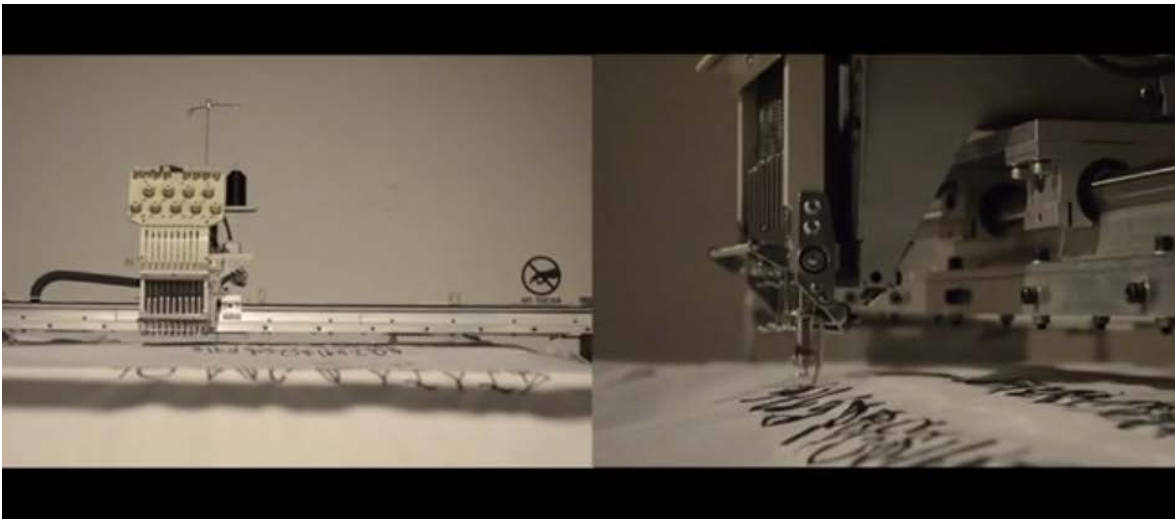


Figure 4. Detail views of the sewing mechanism from *Bordadora*



Figure 5. Detail of the embroidery arm from *Bordadora* Figure 5. Detail of the embroidery arm from *Bordadora*



Figure 6. Dresses sewn as part of *La Constanca dormida*





Figure 7. Tapestry embroidered by the artist as part of *La constancia dormida*



Figure 8. Detail of *Telar*

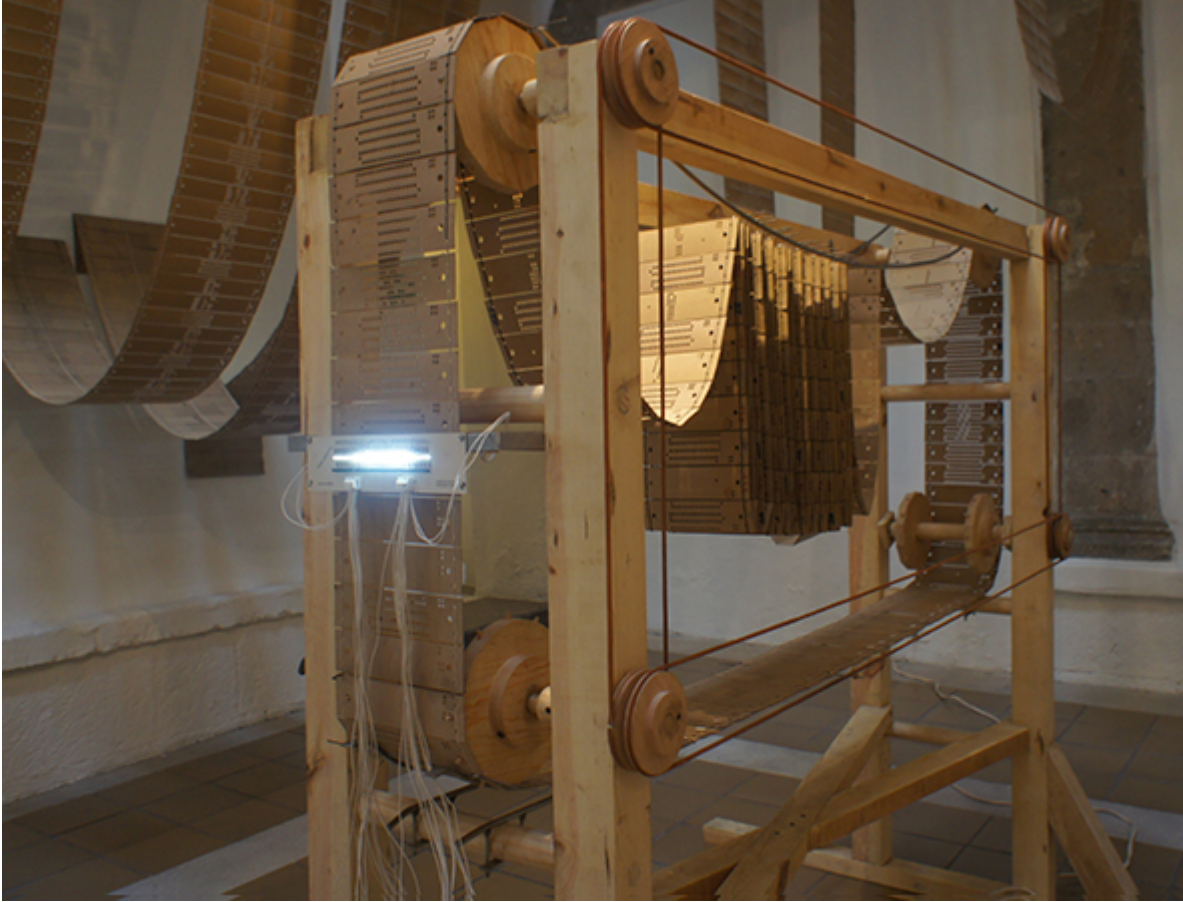


Figure 9. Detail of *Telar/maquina*

## WOMEN IN MEXICAN TEXTILE PRODUCTION

In the communities indigenous to present-day Mexico, textile making was and is traditionally a task assigned exclusively to women.<sup>1</sup> This included domestic production, but was also an important economic and political responsibility as textiles were among the goods used for ritual gifts and tributes. The quality and pattern of woven items were signifiers of ethnic and social identity. Geoffrey G. McCafferty and Sharisse D.

McCafferty, an anthropologist and archeologist who focus their studies on the domestic artifacts of Post-Classic Mexico (the period before Spanish colonization where the major Mesoamerican civilizations began to fracture), suggest that textile production was not only a gendered practice, but that it was symbolic of and helped to construct female identity.<sup>2</sup>

Textile production was frequently used as a metaphor for the female life cycle and for reproduction.<sup>3</sup> Further, weaving and spinning thread were associated with various goddesses that were also responsible for the fertility of the earth, childbirth, and the

---

<sup>1</sup> Sharisse D. McCafferty and Geoffrey G. McCafferty, "Spinning and Weaving as Female Gender Identity in Post-Classic Mexico," in *Textile Traditions of Mesoamerica and the Andes: An Anthology*, ed. Margot Schevill, Janet Catherine Berlo, and Edward Bridgman Dwyer (New York: Garland, 1991), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 22-25.

protection of women.<sup>1</sup> Spinning whorls from pre-Colombian sites in Central Mexico were often ornamented with the iconography of these goddesses, who were often depicted with spindles.<sup>2</sup> As such, McCafferty and McCafferty argue that textile production was not only part of women's contribution to these societies, but an emblem of female power.<sup>3</sup>

The Spanish Conquest of Latin America led to changes in both textile production and, more generally, to gender roles in indigenous communities. Women were ushered out of the public sphere by European social codes, and as textile manufacturing was expanded into a commercial export industry, the craft of spinning and weaving was increasingly taken over by men.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that women no longer wove their own textiles for domestic use, but rather that men were more likely to be employed in artisanal workshops, taking over a social and economic space previously occupied by women. There were notable exceptions within this system, as some women were able to find contracted work or employment in smaller workshops, while those with more economic means or social connections even owned their own workshops.<sup>5</sup> Textile production remained an occupation considered appropriate for women, but only within certain contexts, neutralizing any symbolic association with female empowerment.

From Spanish colonization until the late 1830's, the majority of textiles and clothing made and used in México were produced in artisanal workshops where the workers were predominantly men and labor was divided by gender<sup>6</sup>. In large part this was the consequence of

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. 25-29

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 30-32

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Kimberly Gauderman, "Record Title: A Loom of Her Own: Women and Textiles in Seventeenth-Century Quito," *Colonial Latin American Review* 13, no. 1 (June 2004): 51, accessed April 10, 2016, DOI:10.1080/1060916042000210819.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Porter, *Working Women in Mexico*, 8. See also Dawn Keremitsis, "Latin American Women Workers in Transition: Sexual Division of the Labor Force in Mexico and Colombia in the

a guild system that allowed only men to work in certain professions. Although guild restrictions that limited the jobs available to women ended in 1799, few women attempted to secure employment in jobs that had historically been reserved for men. As México transitioned into factory production, concerns for women's morality led to the popularization of segregated workplaces, reinforcing the gendered division of labor.<sup>7</sup> Men dominated jobs manufacturing fabric, tailoring men's clothing and cutting fabric while women handled the raw materials for making fabric, spun thread, and sewed clothing for women, children and military uniforms. Women also added final touches and embellishments to clothing, ironing, making lace and embroidering.<sup>8</sup>

Gendered divisions of labor correlated to a marked disparity in income between men and women. Tailors made significantly more money than seamstresses and the men who cut fabric were paid more than the women who sewed the fabric together.<sup>9</sup> Workers in factories made more than those who labored off-site and men in factories were paid more than women, often justified based on the ways tasks in factories were assigned. In 19<sup>th</sup>-century Mexican factories, men were more likely to work with machinery, while women sorted and packaged goods, both before and after they were assembled. Women were preferred for tasks that required patience and dexterity, but little training or problem solving ability, such as rolling cigarettes and making lace. The jobs available to women paid less than factory jobs offered to men, but more than women could make in smaller workshops and factory jobs were seen as desirable when compared to alternatives.<sup>10</sup>

---

Textile Industry," *The Americas* 40, no. 4 (April 1984): accessed February 5, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/980858> .

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 35-36.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 32-33, 44-45.

Over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, the jobs assigned to men and to women alternated somewhat, but the trend of segregated labor and unequal pay was generally consistent. Women's labor was cheaper and hiring women was seen as a way to cut costs for unskilled work.<sup>11</sup> When profits were up and factory work appeared desirable, more men were hired to replace women except in industries where factory managers believed that women would be more suited to the work, usually work that required small hands and patient temperaments, characteristics women were perceived as possessing.<sup>12</sup> This preference for women workers in certain fields of manufacture has persisted into the 21st century and has contributed to what Melissa W. Wright, a gender studies scholar, terms the myth of the disposable woman.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 24-25.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 22-23.

<sup>13</sup> Melissa W. Wright, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

## FACTORY LABOR

The idea of the disposable woman worker is the product of the kinds of tasks women are assigned to and the profit maximizing mentality that has evolved with global capitalism. In order to maximize efficiency, workers are trained only to repeat a single task in the making of an object.<sup>1</sup> This once meant rolling cigarettes or embroidering. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it usually means installing parts of small appliances and electronics. These tasks share the requirement of a certain amount of dexterity and fine motor control from the worker, which is why these jobs overwhelmingly hire women.<sup>2</sup> The physical demands of this kind of small repetitive work usually lead to vision impairment and rheumatism within two years. Consequently, employers in *maquilas*, as well as in Asian factories, are faced with a dilemma. It takes time for a worker to develop maximum efficiency at a task and new workers make more errors, but past a certain point, the physical toll of the work causes workers to slow down as eyesight and joint pain become debilitating.<sup>3</sup> Rather than improving working conditions, shortening days, offering more breaks and variety in tasks, employers rely on fact that poverty conditions will supply them with an endless source of women who are desperate for work. This is the idea of the disposable woman: a worker with a short

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

shelf-life who can easily be replaced by any other woman who needs work.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, experienced workers are preferred as they can work faster and with fewer mistakes. Employers do not fear women workers leaving because the work is hard. Workers will tolerate conditions because they need the job, but factory managers worry that experienced workers will leave due to marriage or pregnancy.<sup>2</sup> In reaction to this assumed threat, many factories have implemented policies of closely monitoring the lives of their workers, keeping men and women apart in the workplace and insisting on two-year contracts that stipulate that the worker is subject to a fine if they quit early.<sup>3</sup> This type of surveillance is generally masked as an expression of paternal concern for the moral and financial well-being of the workers, many of whom are making the transition out of the domestic space for the first time.

Candiani's *Bordadora* invokes three important themes in the history of women's labor. First, the machine as the sole worker/embroiderer stands in for the complex relationship between the female body and the machine body. Second, the two-story installation and the confessional booths reenact the history of workplace surveillance and the religious, paternalistic rhetoric often used to justify the moral and sexual policing of women workers. Finally the recording and embroidery of whispered confessions is a negotiation of public and private space, reflecting the intense debates that surrounded the movement of women from the private domestic sphere to the public sphere of the workplace.

A comparison with Candiani's previous works involving sewing is useful in

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid, 1-3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 28-30.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



positioning the role of the worker's body, the machine and the distribution of labor in *Bordadora*. In *La constancia dormida*, Candiani herself performed the action that is enacted by the machine in *Bordadora*, embroidering 400 meters of text as she occupied the factory.<sup>4</sup> In *La constancia dormida*, her physical presence and the act of operating the sewing machine constituted the artwork. As she worked in tandem with the machine, technology allowed her to use her skill to produce an artistic product. In *Telar/machina*, the audience is required to activate the work by turning the crank on the machine, but the labor requires no skill and no tangible product is produced. There is still a body, but the body has become part of a mechanical process rather than making creative decisions. Finally, in *Telar*, the body is removed except as observer as the machine completes production entirely through automation. *La constancia dormida* is a celebration of creative labor, *Telar/machina* marks the shift to manual labor and *Telar* reflects a move towards complete automation. Of the three, *Bordadora* appears initially to be closest to *Telar*. There is no visible hand operating the embroiderer, suggesting that the body has been removed from its place in production or manufacturing. The machine is the essential element that remains fixed as the body of the worker gradually disappears.

The shift to automation is a controversial one, especially in economies that rely heavily on factory jobs and is part of the circumstances that contribute to and strengthen the myth of the disposable woman. Machines can do more work but are expensive to replace, while workers are easy to come by and, because the work has become less specialized, new workers are easy to train. The cost of machines relative to workers has led to ugly instances of machines being valued over workers, one of the most startling

---

<sup>4</sup> Candiani, "La Constancia," Tania Candiani Studio.

examples of which is the way factory owners reportedly responded to the earthquake that devastated Mexico City in 1985. According to accounts by factory workers, many women were trapped in the ruins of poorly constructed or old factories that collapsed in the quake. Survivors claim that when rescue crews were sent to dig through the rubble, factory owners instructed them to ensure the safety of the machines first, then turn to the workers.<sup>5</sup> The lack of concern for the lives of the workers discredited the claim of fatherly concern supervisors and owners had put forward as a justification for their strict discipline and harsh policies for workers. This nearly became a transformative moment in labor relations as the story spread and galvanized female workers to organize, however disagreement within unions and pressure to return to work or lose jobs eventually defeated the nascent union.<sup>6</sup> By 1991, when Melissa Wright began her investigation of factories in Mexico, little had changed in terms of women's value in the workplace and paternalistic supervision of the workers had resumed.

In the course of her research, Wright has found the frequent use of panoptic architectural construction in factory spaces was among the most widely used forms of surveillance. Factory equipment is generally installed on the ground floor and this is where the women work. Supervisors watch from balconies on the second floor, observing unseen from up above. In some cases, managers occupied offices up above the supervisors, many times with reflective windows. The effect is that workers are constantly watched and must closely monitor their job performance and what they say.<sup>7</sup>

This standard architecture for factories is echoed in the installation of *Bordadora*.

---

<sup>5</sup> Evangelina Corona Cadena, *Contar las cosas como fueron* (México D.F.: DEMAC, 2007), 71-78.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 85-95, 119-135.

<sup>7</sup> Wright, *Disposable Women and Other*, 45-69.

The machinery was installed on the ground floor of Laboratorio, while the confessional booths were located on the balcony above (Figure 1). The loom was also turned so that the balcony offered the best vantage for seeing the text. Down below, the audience experiences the sound of the factory as well as the experience of being watched from above. From the balcony, viewers are placed in the position of the supervisor and can observe the work being produced from a privileged perspective, with the text both oriented towards them and projected onto the wall across from them for increased visibility (Figure 10).

The location of the confessional booths up above the loom aligns them physically with the practice of surveillance. The booths stand in for the practice of confession and for the Catholic Church as institution, serving as a reminder for the role Catholicism played in shaping dialogues about women in the workplace. When the first factories appeared in Mexico, the nation was overwhelmingly Catholic and the Catholic Church had considerable political sway as well as property holdings. Catholic beliefs about morality and sexuality played a large role in the debate about women in the workplace.<sup>8</sup> Nineteenth-century newspaper editorials express a general anxiety that the more public presence of women will lead men to lust and that women, unaccustomed to the roughness of the world, would fall into moral decay.<sup>9</sup> Concerns about sexual promiscuity led to segregated workplaces, with some factory planners going so far as to create separate exits on opposite sides of the building for men and women to discourage workers from walking home with members of the opposite sex.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Porter, *Working Women in Mexico*, 50-72.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 53-54.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 9



Figure 10. Projected text as viewed from the balcony from *Bordadora*

## CONFESSION, SURVEILLANCE, AND SELFHOOD

Confession has also served as a form of surveillance and moral policing from the time the first Spanish missionaries introduced the practice to the indigenous people of Mexico, requiring that individuals reveal both actions and thoughts to a priest confessor. Catholicism is a colonial religion, not indigenous to Mexico, and it became both a rationalization for and a tool of Spanish colonization. The Church established a strong missionary presence early on, and opinions and dictates of the clergy had a direct impact on Spanish policy in and towards Latin America. According to Luis N. Rivera, the Spanish government was able to legally justify their claims to land in the Americas because of a papal mandate to spread Christianity to the indigenous people there.<sup>1</sup> Colonization was directly connected to religion, and conversion of the native peoples of the New World was a priority for the colonial government, not only because of spiritual conviction, but also because it aided in establishing Spanish authority.<sup>2</sup> "Through conversion and through the practice of Catholic ritual, colonizers were able to reshape both the social structures and the thought processes of indigenous cultures. However, in colonial Mexico, those subjected to the confessional rite adapted the practice

---

<sup>1</sup> Luis N. Rivera, "The Theological Juridical Debate," in *The Church in Colonial Latin America*, ed. John Frederick Schwaller (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources Books, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

in ways that reshaped the ritual as well. The use of confession in *Bordadora* points to the historic use of confession as a mechanism of surveillance and power, but because it places confession in an expressive, artistic context, it also invokes the ways in which the people of Mexico repurposed confession to assert their own cultural codes.

The allusions to confession in *Bordadora* are direct. The booths that hide the microphones are recognizable icons for a particular type of speech act and guide participants to confess, rather than speaking in a more casual mode. The booths in *Bordadora*, though more sparse than the booths found in many churches, follow the basic architecture of the confessional and recreate the initially isolated experience. Walls enclose the speaker on three sides as they kneel on a small bench and speak into a screen that sits at eye level a few inches from the face (Figures 11, 12, and 13). This imitates the exact position of traditional confession and encourages a similarly intimate mode of communication, speaking in a low voice into the microphone behind the screen, whether or not the participant is familiar with the confessional rite.

However, it is safe to assume that most of the participants who engaged with *Bordadora* in its original installation had at least peripheral awareness of the practice of confession. Despite secular reforms and strong anticlerical sentiment during the revolution, Mexico still maintains the second largest Catholic population in the world, with over 85% of Mexicans self-identifying as Catholic in 2010.<sup>1</sup> And due to the important role Catholicism has played in the history of modern Mexico and the ubiquity of Catholic imagery in Mexican culture, it seems unlikely that even the portion of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Pew Research, "The Global Catholic Population," Pew Research: Religion and Public Life Project, last modified February 13, 2013, accessed December 21, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/02/13/the-global-catholic-population/>.

population that does not consider itself Catholic would fail to recognize the iconography associated with confession. Consequently, visitors would have some familiarity with the manner in which they ought to interact with the work, as well as with the history the booths represent.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault describes confession as a ‘technology of the self,’ examining the history and language of confession as a means of asserting individuality through verbal self-disclosure.<sup>2</sup> Foucault breaks down the processes of confession that have remained consistent over time, recognizing that a key element of the confessional process is an awareness of one’s actions in the world. The individual must accept accountability for their actions personally, placing blame for hurtful or ostensibly sinful actions on one’s own character traits or weaknesses. This process, the self-examination, or *examen*, builds a sense of individual identity, but is also only the first step in a dialogical process that situates the penitent as a subject in relation to the priest-confessor who holds authority to judge a person for their behaviors and to assign them punishment.<sup>3</sup> Foucault’s accounting of the history of confession shows that despite significant changes to the ways the rite has been enacted, the structural framework has consistently been a process of organizing and disclosing sin as a means of knowing oneself.<sup>4</sup>

Employing Foucault’s concept of confession as a technology of the self, Serge Gruzinski examines the role confession played in reshaping the thought processes of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *An Introduction*, reissue ed., vol. 1, *The History of Sexuality* (n.p.: Vintage Press, 1990), 83.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

Aztec people in Mexico, using manuals designed to instruct indigenous people in proper confession as his primary source material.<sup>5</sup> Gruzinski, a historian focusing on the colonization of Mexico and trends of globalization, contends that the very structure of confession caused indigenous people to comprehend themselves as subjects in a way that was intrinsically foreign. According to Gruzinski, confession posed a problem because it was based on an imported concept of sin and repentance, but also because on a more fundamental level, it required an unfamiliar sense of subjectivity. Both the new religious ideology and the delineation of the individual subject worked against traditional communal relationships and undermined precolonial social frameworks.<sup>6</sup>

One of the key ways this occurred was the insistence on individual culpability. Gruzinski refers to a number of manuals that instruct penitent Aztecs to place blame for their actions entirely on themselves, without alluding to the influence of their neighbors or environmental circumstance.<sup>7</sup> Catholic belief also imposed a new set of sexual mores and laws regarding marriage. Sexual thoughts or actions involving any party other than the man's lawful wife were sins that, according to the Church, required confession.<sup>8</sup>

The required confession of unclean thoughts in particular is an indication of the level of control confessors sought. However, Gruzinski also notes that in confessing thoughts, indigenous people appeared to assimilate and alter the expectations of the Church, not only adopting the idea that a thought could be a sin, but creating even stricter injunctions for themselves, going so far as to confess to dreaming as if it were a sin as

---

<sup>5</sup> Gruzinski, "Individualization and Acculturation: Confession," in *The Church in Colonial*, 107.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 105

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 107-108



well.<sup>9</sup> Gruzinski argues that this kind of small alteration, though it appeared to many religious writers of the time to be a failure to understand on the part of the Aztec, was in reality a means of resistance.<sup>10</sup> His descriptions of confessional deviation suggest creative, and highly intentional, disruptions of the function of confession as confessants wove elaborate explanations and even invented sins that they had not possibly committed.<sup>11</sup> Through inventive confessions, the Aztec were able to reshape the practice as part of their culture and to maintain a level of control in the confessional booth. While the peoples subjected to Spanish colonization were unable to resist conversion to Catholicism or to change it on an institutional scale, they succeeded in altering their own experience of its practices, and they did so by making small adjustments to their own actions, which left the outward structure of the system intact, but altered the meanings of the rituals.

Gruzinski argues that the changes made by the Aztec to the process of confession might have allowed confession to become a more positive experience, one that was sorely needed amid the stress of deculturation. Gruzinski speculates that confession might have allowed individuals the opportunity to express their distress and to make meaning that helped explain the changes that were occurring in their culture.<sup>12</sup> Participating in their own way, they might have managed to achieve the potentially cathartic effect of unburdening guilt without subjecting themselves to the priest or surrendering their social moorings. This customization and personalization of Catholicism is perhaps part of the

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 113

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 116-117

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 112

<sup>12</sup> Gruzinski, "Individualization and Acculturation: Confession," in *The Church in Colonial*, 112.

reason that Mexico has remained popularly Catholic, even as the political power of the Church to insist on conversion has faded.

*Bordadora* encourages a similar kind of customization by altering the conditions in which confession is offered. *Bordadora* unquestionably provides an altered experience of confession by recreating the space of confession within the context of an art space where there is no religious compunction to participate, nor is there a human confessor to hear the confessed sins. Outside the strictures of the formal religious ritual of confession, participants are free to confess selectively or to invent. The artistic reenactment of confession in *Bordadora* allows participants to unburden guilt and express concerns without judgement and to understand that they are not alone in their shortcomings because they are able to view the confessions of others embroidered on the tapestry. The confessions that have been recorded by *Bordadora* are often simple and relatable. Some, like “I confess that I desire the life of others,” and, “Sometimes I wish I had a lot of money,” could fall under the category of a conventional confession of envy, but they also express sentiments that are generally sympathetic. Others like, “I confess I have a fear of clowns,” are admissions a person might make to a friend rather than acknowledgements of religious transgression.<sup>13</sup> These confessions might be used in a conversational context to connect to another person over shared feelings and experiences. Consequently, the form of confession in *Bordadora* is social and expressive rather than surveilling.

---

<sup>13</sup> Tania Candiani, "Re: Last minute Thesis," e-mail message to author. "Confieso que deseo la vida de otros." "Siempre he querido tener mucho dinero." "Confieso que le tengo miedo a los payasos."



Figure 11. Installation view of the confessional booths from *Bordadora*

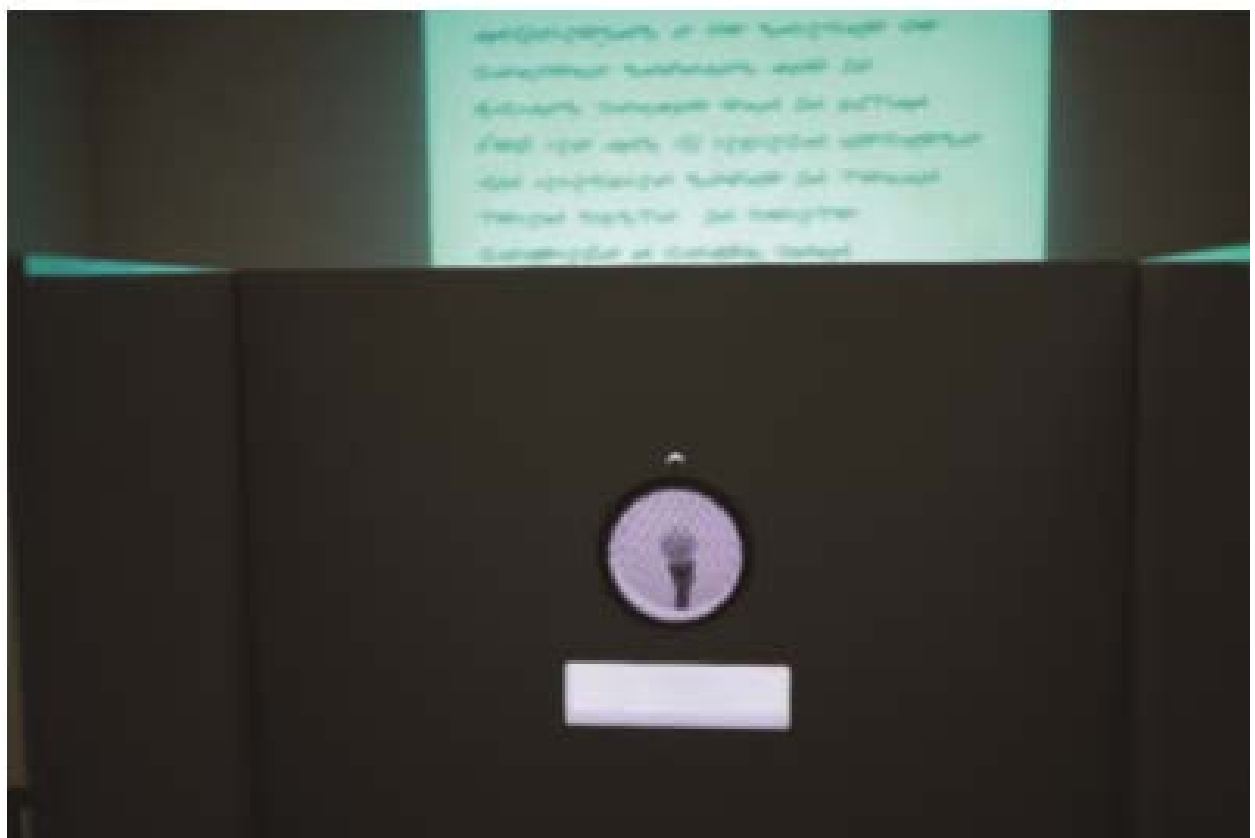


Figure 12. Interior view of a confessional booth from *Bordadora*



Figure 13. Details of confessional microphone from *Bordadora*

## CONFESSION AS CATHARSIS

*Bordadora* goes further in its exploration of confession as an emotionally and socially positive practice, not only modeling adaptations of the process that are less isolating than that of a religious confession, but also using material symbols to represent the psychological and linguistic processes of effective confession according to religious theory developed during the Second Vatican Council. The Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II, was an effort to modernize the Catholic Church. Confession was a special area of concern because, while it was intended as a tool for guidance and correction, there were reports of abuse of the practice and it was increasingly perceived as a tool for control by a religious organization and participation in the ritual was declining.<sup>1</sup> Vatican II attempted to reframe confession as a psychohygienic act, meaning that the act would be conceived of as a process by which an individual could unburden their own soul from guilt through the act of describing their sins out loud to an appropriate individual, rather than being granted relief by the authority of the priest.<sup>2</sup>

A series of liturgical reforms in 1973 reduced the role of the priest confessor in the Sacrament of penance.<sup>3</sup> Rules governing the structure of the confessional booth were

---

<sup>1</sup> E. Summerson Carr, "'Signs of the Times': Confession and the semiotic production of inner truth," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 1 (March 2013): 46

<sup>2</sup> Ibid,

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 34.

relaxed as well, allowing the penitent to sit back in a chair rather than kneeling on a bench.<sup>1</sup> The effect of the formal changes to the booths was not only to make the penitent more comfortable, but also to increase the distance between the penitent and the priest confessor, making the role of the priest less immediate. It is worth noting that *Bordadora* maintains the more traditional model of confession, using the kneeler, perhaps increasing the sense of intimacy and emotional vulnerability of the otherwise sterile booths. As a microphone replaces the priest in *Bordadora*, the overall effect is similar to increasing the physical distance between the confessant and the priest. The penitent is proclaiming their actions out loud, but the effect of imparting private knowledge to a single individual is disrupted.

These changes not only alter the balance of power in confession, they also shift the responsibility for effective confession to the penitent and their proper adherence to the ritual proscriptions of the confessional rite. The specific steps and words spoken are important because are designed to guide the penitent through a process that is more mental than physical, structuring their thoughts through outward acts, the end goal of which is to remove sins from the soul and to heal spiritual wounds caused by wrong behavior.<sup>2</sup> A return to Foucault's analysis of confession is helpful in understanding how this works.

---

<sup>1</sup> John J. Coughlin, OFM, "The Perennial Value of the Traditional Confessional," *Sacred Architecture Journal*, accessed December 21, 2014, [http://www.sacredarchitecture.org/articles/the\\_perennial\\_value\\_of\\_the\\_traditional\\_confessional/](http://www.sacredarchitecture.org/articles/the_perennial_value_of_the_traditional_confessional/).

<sup>2</sup> Saint Charles Borromeo Parish, Mississippi, USA, ed., "Part Two: The Celebration of the Christian Mystery," *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, accessed January 25, 2016, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c2a4.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c2a4.htm).

In order for sin to be removed from the soul, it must first be understood as something discrete that can be labeled and isolated in the mind. Modern explanations of confession suggest that most of the act of confession should already be completed before the penitent even enters the confessional.<sup>3</sup> A list of sins should be accounted and organized in the mind of the sinner on a daily basis so that the individual is prepared in advance of their formal confession. The memories of sin are framed as indexes, traces on the mind of the actual actions that can be gathered and therefore transferred and unburdened from the mind.<sup>4</sup> The spoken confession is the vehicle through which the sin is transferred. The priest, standing in for Jesus Christ, is able to accept the sin and then absolve it, leaving the penitent free from guilt.<sup>5</sup>

*Bordadora* parallels this process in a visual way, materializing the steps of a psychohygenic confession. Reenacting religious confession, participants in the work organize their thoughts, step into an isolated booth, and verbalize their emotional burdens. The text on the empty cloth seems to represent a symbolic transfer of the pain or dirtiness of sin from the speaker onto another (purer) body, a kind of mechanical atonement. The graffiti lettering not only obscures the text, its sharp edges enact a visual violence on the cloth, echoing the repeated stabbing of the embroidery needle and evoking, in a formal sense, the idea that the secrets that have been whispered are painful wounds (Figure 4).

Despite its potential emotional benefits, sociocultural and linguistic

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 39-40.

<sup>5</sup> Saint Charles Borromeo Parish, Mississippi, USA, "Part Two: The Celebration," Catechism of the Catholic Church.

anthropologist E. Summerson Carr, drawing on Foucault, insists that because of its linguistic processes, confession has remained an individualistic experience that does not address wrongs committed by institutions or societies.<sup>6</sup> Analyzing writings on confession in the last fifty years, Carr points to three conditions that must be accomplished in order for effective confession to be achieved and argues that they require the penitent to separate themselves from a larger social context. First, memories of actions must be effectively conflated with the actions themselves and they exist as discrete objects that can be specifically located in the mind of a single individual.<sup>7</sup> Second is, “the management of ritual time into discrete stages of ‘private’ meaning-making and ‘public’ pronouncement.”<sup>8</sup> Private meaning-making relies, again, on the acceptance of guilt by an individual and collective discussion or recognition of systemic problems because it happens in isolation. Even the ‘public pronouncement’ is limited to a dialogue with a single priest, who is bound by institutional codes to keep confession private. The guilt is vocalized, but not connected to larger issues. Finally, confession must not be motivated by social pressures, nor should sins be qualified by context or circumstance. Furthermore, the confession needs to be understood as a sacrament instituted by heavenly power rather than a practice invented by humanity as part of a global organization with immense social and political power.<sup>9</sup>

These conditions, as understood by Carr, promote personal salvation and catharsis over systemic change. However, confession can be used to reflect on larger issues when

---

<sup>6</sup> Carr, "Signs of the Times," 36.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 37

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



it is revealed as a social construct and used symbolically and narratively in the context of art. Used as a formal device in a fictional scenario, adherence to ritual becomes a matter of choice, opening up the practice to analysis and scrutiny. The ways in which an artwork follows or deviates from the conventional practice can highlight certain aspects of the ritual, reveal something about the nature of a character, or point to larger themes in the narrative. Having established that *Bordadora* follows many of the rules for an expressive, emotionally beneficial confession, the next project is to understand how this type of confession functions symbolically in conjunction with the other themes in the artwork.

## INTERCONNECTIONS: EMBROIDERY, CONFESSION, AND GRAFFITI

A renewed analysis of *Bordadora* must consider how the confessional booths are related to Laboratorio Arte Alameda, factory labor, and graffiti. Each of these components is connected to a history of social injustice that has been openly acknowledged by Candiani in *Cinco variaciones* or addressed directly in her previous works. Taken together and linked to confession, these various threads become a meditation on the continuum between the private and the public and a reminder that societal wrongs lead to struggles on an individual level.

Beginning with the confessionals and moving outward, it is possible to see how privacy and surveillance in *Bordadora* are deeply entangled. Rather than confessing to a priest, those who whisper their secrets into *Bordadora* are heard by a microphone connected to a computer. There is not a person behind the screen to hear the confession, making the act initially more private, but the confession is subsequently embroidered onto a tapestry, making it much more public. Those standing on the balcony up above can clearly read the confessions, enabling surveillance. However, because the confessionals are located on the balcony, the privileged viewing position is coupled with the invitation to confess and to have your own admissions added to the tapestry. The surveillance becomes more empathetic. Rather than one group's actions being made public while another enjoys privacy, the confessionals embroider a community dialogue.

This type of protected public confession offers a sharp contrast to the public

confessions that might once have been offered when the building that now houses Laboratorio was a convent and the *quemadero* for the Spanish Inquisition in Mexico. Those accused of practicing Judaism or other religions deemed heretical by the Catholic Church were often compelled to confess to heresy in front of a crowd before being sentenced to penance or publicly burned at the stake in the space across from the convent.<sup>1</sup> The confessionals are a reminder of an historical institutional wrong, where individuals were shamed and killed for privately held beliefs.

The connection to the loom also historicizes the work, linking confession to problems caused by the industrialization of Mexico in the nineteenth-century. As Candiani suggests in works like *La constancia dormida*, skilled craft has been replaced by machine production as an increasing portion of the population (especially among women) has been prompted to work in factories and *maquiladoras*. Before industrial textile factories, fabric and clothing were produced in a domestic setting, or in the relative privacy of a community workshop. Factories shifted production to a public setting, bringing more people to large cities and more women out of their homes. Religious anxiety over women in public spaces generated practices of workplace surveillance as well as close scrutiny of the private lives of women workers. Trade policies, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, have permitted foreign companies to establish factories in Mexico in order to obtain cheap labor, and consequently, factories have sprung up across Mexico, especially near the borders. A desire to attract companies to their countries with lower costs has prompted a race to the bottom of the wage scale

---

<sup>1</sup> John F. Chuchiak, *The Inquisition in New Spain, 1536-1820: A Documentary History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 150-185.

between Mexico and China.<sup>2</sup> This has generated huge economic disparities in Mexico, creating poverty conditions for many, while factory owners make enormous profit.<sup>3</sup> As long as there are no regulations and people desperate for work, factory supervisors can continue to treat their workers as disposable.

The use of embroidery and textile machines in Candiani's previous works makes clear that the use of a factory embroidery machine in *Bordadora* is a reflection on labor practices, but connections to *La constancia dormida* in particular help clarify the reasons for connecting the embroidery machine to confessional booths. In *La constancia dormida*, Candiani embroidered her own confessions in an actual factory space. The confessions in each work invest labor with narrative meaning, personalizing the output and allowing the factory space to serve an expressive function. The public space of the factory is reinvigorated as people are able to use the space to tell their stories.

The use of wildstyle graffiti lettering in the embroidery on the tapestry further enforces the expressiveness of the embroidered text and adds additional complexity to the interplay of private and public within *Bordadora*. While confession is a private act, performed in the confines of a church, graffiti is enacted in public. It was developed for public displays, often transgressively written on the exterior walls of buildings or on

---

<sup>2</sup> Wright, *Disposable Women and Other*, 6-12.

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed description of the effects of industrialization in Mexico, see, Mangalan Srinivasan, "Impact of Selected Industrial Technologies on Women in Mexico," in *Women and Technological Change in Developing Countries*, ed. Roslyn Dauber and Melinda L. Cain (Boulder, CO.: Westview Press for American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1981) and Laura Randall, *Changing Structure of Mexico: Political, Social, and Economic Prospects* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996) and Rosemary Hennessy, *Fires on the Border: The Passionate Politics of Labor Organizing on the Mexican Frontera* (Minneapolis: Univ of Minnesota Press, 2013) and Rafael E. De Hoyos, "Female Labor Participation and Occupation Decisions in Post-NAFTA Mexico," in *Research in Labor Economics*, ed. S.W. Polachek, et al. (Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2011), 33.

trains. While the graffiti in *Bordadora* aesthetically evokes a kind of violence on the cloth, historically, graffiti is political, expressive, and coded. Candiani describes the graffiti in the work specifically as a kind of code, or a privileged form of communication.<sup>4</sup> Wildstyle was designed by taggers as a way of demonstrating their creative and artistic ability and was intentionally difficult to read, especially for those outside the graffiti culture.<sup>5</sup> The interlacing, compressed, and embellished letters prioritize expression over legibility. Within art, graffiti has been used as a signal for expressing identity and cultural history

Graffiti does operate as a secret language, but its origins are in public spaces, often as a means of claiming ownership or occupying a space. This is another idea that has been explored in multiple works by Candiani. In 2008, she collaborated with a group of taggers on *Habita intervenido* (Figure 14).<sup>6</sup> Over the course of several months, they covered an exclusive Mexico City hotel with tags in greyscale, symbolically inhabiting a space that they could not actually afford to stay in. This work quotes ASCO's 1972 *Spray Paint LACMA*, in which the Chicano artists, recognizing a lack of Chicano representation within the walls of the museum, asserted their presence by tagging the outside of the museum (Figure 15).<sup>7</sup>

If *Habita intervenido* references ASCO, Candiani's 2009 *Kaunas graffiti* responds to them. In *Kaunas graffiti*, Candiani copied the tags from the outside of the M. K. Ciurlionis National Museum of Art in Lithuania, embroidered them, framed them, and

---

<sup>4</sup> Candiani, "Bordadora," Tania Candiani Studio.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Candiani, "Habita intervendio," Tania Candiani Studio.

<sup>7</sup> Chon Noriega, "'Your Art Disgusts Me': Early Asco, 1971-75," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*, 2008, accessed September 14, 2015, [https://www.academia.edu/5203805/\\_Your\\_Art\\_Disgusts\\_Me\\_Early\\_Asco\\_1971-75](https://www.academia.edu/5203805/_Your_Art_Disgusts_Me_Early_Asco_1971-75).

displayed them inside the museum (Figure 16).<sup>8</sup> Through this action, she invited the anonymous taggers into the museum, which they had originally claimed access to with their exterior tags.

In *Bordadora*, the graffiti adheres to the roles Candiani has established for it in other works. It records in code and claims space. Used to record confessions, it keeps the spoken words private through the use of coded language while allowing them to exist in a social space. The graffiti's location on the tapestry makes a claim to an industrial space and makes it personal and artistic. It also grounds the work in a contemporary artistic and social context.

*Bordadora* draws associations and brings up patterns, connecting the old and the new as a reminder of the continuity of history. Candiani has written that she is interested in "a type of imaginary associated with machines."<sup>9</sup> The use of well-known technologies asks the audience to imagine other times and other places where these machines could have been used, to reflect on those histories and the ways they intersect. The machines in *Bordadora* are not only interactive components, but carriers of meaning and it is through the combined analysis of the symbolic meanings of the machines and the ways they are interacted with by the viewer that *Bordadora* can best be understood.

---

<sup>8</sup> Candiani, "Kaunas graffiti," Tania Candiani Studio.

<sup>9</sup> Candiani, "Cinco variaciones," Tania Candiani Studio.



Figure 14. Installation of *Habita intervenido*



Figure 15. ASCO's *Spray Paint LACMA*



Figure 16. Installation view of *Kaunas graffiti*



## CONCLUSION

The two primary components used in *Bordadora*, confession and embroidery, are historically interwoven. Gendered assignments of labor, textile production in particular, have been connected to religion in Mexico, both in pre-Columbian civilizations where weaving was associated with powerful goddesses, as well as in the Industrial era, as women have been closely monitored in the public sphere. Historically, the meaning and value of textile production in Mexico has varied, shifting from an expressive and socially important hand craft to a menial form of labor within the exploitative system of global capitalism. Confession has likewise been employed in oppressive ways but also, and even simultaneously, as a cathartic and creative ritual. First used as a tool for surveillance and acculturation by Spanish colonizers, it was subverted by indigenous peoples who used storytelling and invention to reconfigure confession as a communal act. In contemporary theory, it has been reconceived as a means of removing the burden of guilt from the mind and the soul. Similarly, Candiani's use of religious iconography in *Bordadora*, and throughout *Cinco variaciones*, engages the duality between repression and expression, by acknowledging the history of Laboratorio Arte Alameda, which started as a place for devotion, became a place of intolerance, and was eventually recovered as a public venue for art.

The formal implementation of confession and industrial textile technology in *Bordadora* reflects both the positive and negative functions of each. In *Bordadora*, the

worker has been replaced by a machine and the organization and noise of the factory space are recreated. The confessionals are placed in a position that aligns them visually with surveillance. This installation reflects the repressive uses of each of these technologies, serving as a reminder of present and historical wrongs. However, the writing on the tapestry resembles tagging, indicating a reclamation of the industrial space and of embroidery as a personal and coded act that resists easy surveillance. Further, from up above, participants are able to see not only the secrets of others, but how their own secrets fit within a discourse, encouraging empathy and community rather than judgement.

The histories invoked by *Bordadora* are a reminder that the effects of technologies are a product of their implementation. Technologies are put to political use, intentionally or in consequence of existing systems, but they are also subverted and reconfigured through small deviations enacted on the individual level. In *Bordadora*, technologies with enormous import are employed simply and without explicit commentary or specific reference, allowing them to stand in for the entirety of a complex history. As signifiers, they allude to the injustices of the past and present, but through participation and play, *Bordadora* also liberates the machines from these histories by allowing past subversions to be referenced and reenacted.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alonso, Manuel Zavala, ed. "Laboratorio Arte Alameda: El Edificio." *Museos de Mexico*. Last modified 2015. Accessed February 2, 2016.  
<http://www.museosdemexico.org/museos/entradamuseo.php?idMuseo=79&idenu=4&Tipo=0>.
- Bantjes, Adrian A. "Mexican Revolutionary Anticlericalism: Concepts and Typologies." *The Americas* 65, no. 4 (April 2009): 467-80. Accessed April 5, 2014.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25488178>
- Bonansinga, Kate. "Tania Candiani: Battleground (2009)." In *Curating at the Edge: Artists Respond to the U.S./Mexico Border*, 141-59. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014.
- Candiani, Tania. "Prix Ars Electronica/Cinco variaciones." Tania Candiani Studio. Accessed April 8, 2014.  
<http://www.taniacandiani.com/Works/projects/2013/arselectronica.html>.
- Carr, E. Summerson. "'Signs of the Times': Confession and the semiotic production of inner truth." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 1 (March 2013): 34-51.
- Chuchiak, John F. *The Inquisition in New Spain, 1536-1820: A Documentary History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012.
- Conomos, John. "New Media, Culture, Identity." In *Complex Entanglements: Art, Globalisation and Cultural Difference*, by Nikos Papastergiadis, 122-34. London: Rivers Oram, 2003.
- Corona Cadena, Evangelina. *Contar Las Cosas Como Fueron*. México D.F.: DEMAC, 2007.
- Coughlin, John J., OFM. "The Perennial Value of the Traditional Confessional." *Sacred Architecture Journal*, 20 (Fall 2011). Accessed December 21, 2014.  
[http://www.sacredarchitecture.org/articles/the\\_perennial\\_value\\_of\\_the\\_traditional\\_confessional/](http://www.sacredarchitecture.org/articles/the_perennial_value_of_the_traditional_confessional/).
- de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkley and Los Angeles: Univ of

California Press, 2011.

- De Hoyos, Rafael E. "Female Labor Participation and Occupation Decisions in Post-NAFTA Mexico." In *Research in Labor Economics*, eds. S.W. Polachek, Constantinos Tatsiramos, Randall K.Q. Akee, and Eric V. Edmonds, 85-117. Vol. 33. Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2011.
- Flores, Alicia, and Reynaldo Carballido. *Voces vivas de la constancia*. Puebla, Pue.: Universidad Madero, 2012.
- Foucault, Michel. *An Introduction*. Reissue ed. Vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*. New York.: Vintage Press, 1990.
- . "Technologies of the Self." In *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, edited by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton, 16-49. Amherst. MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.
- Gauderman, Kimberly. "A Loom of Her Own: Women and Textiles in Seventeenth-Century Quito." *Colonial Latin American Review* 13, no. 1 (June 2004): 47-63. Accessed April 10, 2016. DOI:10.1080/1060916042000210819.
- González Villarruel, Alejandro, comp. *Cambio Y Continuidad En Las Organizaciones Indígenas Textiles Femeninas: Del Capital Social a La Tradición Textil*. Primera edición. ed. México, Distrito Federal: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2014.
- Greenleaf, Richard E. *The Mexican Inquisition of the Sixteenth Century*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969.
- Gruzinski, Serge. "Individualization and Acculturation: Confession Among the Nahuas of Mexico from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries." In *The Church in Colonial Latin America*, ed. John Frederick Schwaller, 103-20. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources Books, 2000.
- Hennessy, Rosemary. *Fires on the Border: The Passionate Politics of Labor Organizing on the Mexican Frontera*. Minneapolis: Univ of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- Kellogg, Susan. *Weaving the Past: A History of Latin America's Indigenous Women from the Prehispanic Period to the Present*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Keremitsis, Dawn. "Latin American Women Workers in Transition: Sexual Division of the Labor Force in Mexico and Colombia in the Textile Industry." *The Americas* 40, no. 4 (April 1984): 491-504. Accessed February 5, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/980858>.

- Mariátegui, José Carlos, Sean Cubitt, and Gunalan Nadarajan. "Social Formations of Global Media Art." *Third Text* 23, no. 3 (2009): 217-28. Accessed May 2, 2014. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528820902954853>.
- McCafferty, Sharisse D., and Geoffrey G. McCafferty. "Spinning and Weaving as Female Gender Identity in Post-Classic Mexico." In *Textile Traditions of Mesoamerica and the Andes: An Anthology*, eds. Margot Schevill, Janet Catherine Berlo, and Edward Bridgman Dwyer, 19-44. New York: Garland, 1991.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Edited by Lewis H. Lapham. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994.
- Medina, Eden, Ivan da Costa Marques, Christina Holmes, and Marcos Cueto. *Beyond Imported Magic: Essays on Science, Technology, and Society in Latin America*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014.
- Noriega, Chon. "'Your Art Disgusts Me': Early Asco, 1971-75." *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*, 2008, 109-21. Accessed September 14, 2015. [https://www.academia.edu/5203805/\\_Your\\_Art\\_Disgusts\\_Me\\_Early\\_Asco\\_1971-75](https://www.academia.edu/5203805/_Your_Art_Disgusts_Me_Early_Asco_1971-75).
- Pew Research. "The Global Catholic Population." Pew Research: Religion and Public Life Project. Last modified February 13, 2013. Accessed December 21, 2014. <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/02/13/the-global-catholic-population/>.
- Porter, Susie S. *Working Women in Mexico City: Public Discourses and Material Conditions, 1879-1931*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003.
- Ramanathan, Geetha. *Locating Gender in Modernism: The Outsider Female*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Randall, Laura. *Changing Structure of Mexico: Political, Social, and Economic Prospects*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1996.
- Rivera, Luis N. "The Theological Juridical Debate." In *The Church in Colonial Latin America*, by John Frederick Schwaller, 3-26. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources Books, 2000.
- Saint Charles Borromeo Parish, Mississippi, USA, ed. "Part Two: The Celebration Of The Christian Mystery." Catechism of the Catholic Church. Accessed January 25, 2016. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c2a4.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c2a4.htm).
- Schaefer, Claudia. *Textured Lives: Women, Art, and Representation in Modern Mexico*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992.

Sistema de Información Cultural. "Museos Mexico: Laboratorio Arte Alameda." Secretaría de Cultura. Last modified May 2, 2013. Accessed May 2, 2014.  
[http://sic.conaculta.gob.mx/ficha.php?table=museo&table\\_id=427](http://sic.conaculta.gob.mx/ficha.php?table=museo&table_id=427).

Srinivasan, Mangalan. "Impact of Selected Industrial Technologies on Women in Mexico." In *Women and Technological Change in Developing Countries*, eds. Roslyn Dauber and Melinda L. Cain, 89-107. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press for American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1981.

Wade, Robert Hunter. "Bridging the Digital Divide: New Route to Development or New Form of Dependency." *Global Governance* 8 (2002): 443-66. PDF.

Wright, Melissa W. *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*. New York: Routledge, 2006.