



# subvert

DRIVING INTO THE HEART of Mexico City's Centro Histórico, one has no choice but to undergo the overpowering audiovisual symphony of political demonstrations—a teacher's strike earlier this year meant a three-hour drive to the airport, 7 miles away—as well as hounding from countless street hawkers. While the former decry the inequities of power, the latter sell *lucha libre* masks, glittery *quinceañera* dresses, and a slew of bootlegged media in the makeshift *puestos* of Tepito, a barrio of tents in front of actual brick-and-mortar stores that now function mainly as storage spaces. The combination of political dissidence and capitalist abundance provides a perplexing snapshot of the effects that globalization and graft can have on a city of 20 million.

It's this dizzying milieu that continues to inspire the work of Minerva Cuevas, an artist whose unconventional projects have taken many forms, from political posters to modified water-bottle labels and video performances—like 1995's *Drunker*, for which she downed half a liter of tequila in 40 minutes while writing

seven pages of conditional sentences, in Spanish and English, about her reasons for drinking. Cuevas's spartan work space close to Tepito is likewise eclectic, filled with sociology texts, postcards examining the extinction of public services (like the privatization of postal systems, a phenomenon she explored in a 2010 exhibition), and walking sticks ("I have learned to perceive walking as a political act," Cuevas affirms). A library-like side room holds trays of tar, in which the artist dips landscapes found in thrift stores for an ongoing series meant to skewer Mexico's land rape at the hands of oil companies, while also referencing the way Olmec and Mayan artisans covered sculptures with tar.

Scattered about the apartment are cans of Del Monte tomatoes whose labels have been emblazoned with the words "Criminal" and "Pure Murder," not so coy callouts of the company's unsavory history in Latin America. Subtle, Cuevas is not: For her "Donald McDonald" series of interventions, she employed local actors around the globe to solicit passersby to eat at McDonald's—while

OPPOSITE:  
A chocolate ear  
in a cardboard  
box, part of *Like  
a Tzompantli* and  
*Oreja RX*, 2015.  
"It's a reference  
to measuring  
the human body,"  
Cuevas says.  
"Anthropologists  
on research trips  
would take pictures  
of such body parts,  
for comparison."

# the System

Minerva Cuevas shakes up the status quo  
(just don't call her an activist)

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE



*Del Monte*, 2003, in mid-installation at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris.

lecturing them on the chain's labor issues and use of chemical additives. Other work has had a more utilitarian focus. Cuevas started the *Mejor Vida Corp.*, a nonprofit entity that mimics capitalist structures for the public good, in 1998. She began giving out usable objects—Mexican subway tickets, student ID cards for free museum admission, and replacement bar code stickers to affix to produce, lowering its price—in public spaces around Mexico City.

Often, Cuevas's work has a more directly political implication. For a 2012 survey at the Museo de la Ciudad de México, she installed a white flag, *The Way*, on the building's exterior (the work was an oblique reference to a quote attributed to Gandhi: "There is no way to peace—peace is the way"). Meanwhile, for the past 15 years, she has handed out posters around the *Zócalo*, reading *Contra lo prohibido, las calles de lo posible* (Against the Forbidden, the Streets of the Possible) or *Para qué infierno si tenemos patria* (What Do We Need Hell For If We Have the Nation). These posters are often used in teacher, student, and

union strikes, and subsequently immortalized in newspaper and television reports without any direct attribution to the artist. Something similar happened with a 2001 show at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, for which Cuevas altered the labels on 5,000 bottles of Evian water, rebranding them as *Égalité*; students in Rennes later repurposed the graphics for protest banners. Corporate iconography also played a role in her first exhibition with Kurimanzutto, a 2002 pop-up installation called *Dodgem*—a rink of electric bumper cars fitted with logos for oil companies; the piece was meant to operate for a few weeks but ultimately ran for eight years in local fairgrounds at the intersection of Avenida Revolución and Avenida Patriotismo.

"With her critique of the structures of power and her historical research into them, she gives tools to the individual to subvert these structures," says Pablo León de la Barra, curator for the Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative, which showed the artist's *Del Monte—Bananas* installation, 2003/10, comprising archival Del Monte advertising, live banana trees, and a fake billboard advertisement that implicates Guatemalan general Efraín Ríos Montt in genocide as well as the food corporation's exploitation of the country. (The piece, which León de la Barra likens to an updated form of political mural in the vein of Diego Rivera or David Alfaro Siqueiros, will travel to the South London Gallery for a group show in June.)

While these works give some critics the impression that Cuevas is an activist artist along the lines of Tania Bruguera, she is quick to dismiss such an appraisal; she feels so strongly about this that she's considering writing a manifesto against activism. "The natural and political crises in the world are generated by humans, so we need to have all the world's population reacting to them," she says. "Activism appears to be some kind of religion for selected and dissociated groups, and that is hindering any general reaction to these crises."

In fact, one of her favorite works, *Concert for Lavapiés*, 2003, had nothing to do with activism per se. It was a public intervention in the titular Spanish town, a multicultural area home to many musicians, some of whom she hired to play together simultaneously in their own style (be it rock, samba, classical). Cuevas organized the collaborative performance in a public square, a cacophony of competing sounds, that ultimately harmonized during the hour-long performance. "Years later,



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Documentation photo of *Dodgem*, 2002, a public intervention for which the artist placed oil company logos on the bumper cars of a children's fair in Mexico City.

Minerva Cuevas, 2016.

Altered-label water bottles from the project *Egalité*, 2004.



musicians who met at this concert gathered to play together again,” the artist notes. “For me, that was political anarchy at work—the best example of what can be seen as cultural experiments.”

While Cuevas is certainly capable of choreographing such poetic moments, she often seems more comfortable courting controversy—whether making haunting acrylic paintings of rescues by the Animal Liberation Front; painting a white bridge between Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and Marfa, Texas, on a series of exposed river stones in the Rio Bravo (for a project for Ballroom Marfa); or confronting the tangled web of cacao production, colonialism, and cannibalism. The last was the focus of “Feast and Famine,” a 2015 solo show at Kurimanzutto. For that exhibition she covered the bones of a human skeleton in chocolate, near displays of archival texts and images that explored the ways in which Europeans labeled the population of indigenous cultures as cannibalistic savages in order to exploit their resources. A machine rigged to the ceiling was timed to release a drop of chocolate onto the floor every six seconds, the rate at which someone dies of hunger around the world.

Cuevas’s latest project, for a group show of 25 international artists responding to the collection of Cologne’s Museum Ludwig on the occasion of its 40th anniversary, is perhaps less confrontational, but it is equally nuanced. “It’s really impressive—they have the third-largest collection of Picassos in the world,” says Cuevas, who thinks she might use archival photos of previous Ludwig exhibitions to take a look at the museum’s relationship to its audience and context. As usual, the artist is thinking of the larger picture: “What’s the point of having such a big collection,” she wonders, “if it doesn’t have a public impact?” MP

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: TWO IMAGES: MINERVA CUEVAS AND KURIMANZUTTO; GONZALO MORALES PASANTES; MINERVA CUEVAS, AND KURIMANZUTTO