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ENGAGING THE SPIRIT: THE CURATIVE CURATORIAL CHALLENGE TO THE CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM

Upon arriving in the gallery at Triton Museum of Art, Celia Herrera Rodríguez lays out her materials and proceeds to burn copal, a natural resin used to cleanse the space, in preparation for installation of her work *Mitote* for the group exhibition *Xicana: Spiritual Reflections/Reflexiones Espirituales*.¹

A small plume of white smoke rises up from the copal as the flame is placed at its center. Copal is a tree resin sourced from the sap of a torchwood tree, and is widely used throughout Mexico and the Americas. Predominantly used to cleanse, copal smudging is understood as preventative and curative, and its use dates back to pre-Columbian time. For Herrera Rodríguez, this is a fixed process that she replicates regardless of the work being constructed or the environment in which it is being activated. In this instance, the copal smudging is not part of a performance for an audience or community ceremony, but rather a private ritual to aid in the creation of this work. At the museum, it is a cleansing of the institutional space in preparation for the installation.

The curative function of the copal and its use by Herrera Rodríguez for cleansing underscores the fraught history of Indigenous artists and their representation in the contemporary art museum. My attempt is not to present the museum as a monolith, but to speak to the continued underrepresentation and misrepresentation of communities of color, be they artists or the viewing public.² There is a need for more curators of color, but more importantly for a critical look at current modes of curation so that we might develop practices that mitigate this inequity within the contemporary art museum. It is in working with artists who deploy decolonial practices, such as Celia Herrera Rodríguez, that I am able to glean how museum curatorial

1. *Xicana: Spiritual Reflections/Reflexiones Espirituales* was held at Triton Museum of Art from March 20 to June 13, 2010. I curated this exhibition, which featured six Chicana artists, all exploring spirituality in one form or another.

2. There is a large body of research and critique on the inequity in American museums, the need for greater representation of people of color among museum staff, and failed attempts toward inclusion, diversity, and multiculturalism. See *Willful Neglect: The Smithsonian Institution and U.S. Latinos*, a report of the Smithsonian Institution Task Force on Latino Issues (1994); and Ivan Karp, et al., in the *Museums and Communities* publication, one of two that were published for conferences sponsored by

the Smithsonian Institution in 1988 and 1991. In addition, see Bridget Cooks in *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum*; and Karen Kosasa in "Pedagogical Sights/Sites: Producing Colonialism and Practicing Art in the Pacific," in which she looks at how Western culture predominates in museums that employ specific strategies that obscure structures of power and construct space as empty of ideology.

practices perpetuate misrepresentation. Her work disrupts how the contemporary art museum exhibits, collects, and constructs the art object, requiring curators to consider new methods of interpretation that decenter colonial perspectives and incorporate memory and Indigenous spiritual traditions as sources of knowledge production.

Celia Herrera Rodríguez's artistic practice is a rigorous remapping of Indigenous thought for diasporic, de-tribalized Xicanx people.³ It is a realigning of contemporary art practice with the spiritual to reframe social, historical, political, and economic narratives that have shaped identity in the social consciousness of the Xicanx community. This remapping of a more complex understanding of identity formation harnesses memory through the incorporation of traditions that are functional, serving a specific purpose, intention, and prayer. Herrera Rodríguez explains that although Indigenous spiritual practices have changed over time due to the invasion of the Americas and the subsequent fragmentation of cultures, the materials have remained the same.⁴ Her work is a "looking through the rubble," remapping the Indigenous thinking that has endured.⁵ Her conceptual practice explores the philosophical underpinnings of ceremonial practices through the use of objects that have remained, divorcing them from their anthropological contextualization by Western institutions in an effort to elicit the thought behind their creation. This is a useful framework that can model how to unpack Western constructions of Indigeneity that are embedded and perpetuated in curatorial practices.

Memory plays a key role in Herrera Rodríguez's practice. She activates objects through functional acts, such as copal smudging, and harnesses embodied memory. M. Jacqui Alexander argues that practices of (re)membering function as transformative spiritual labor and as forms of knowing that empower the individual to break free from the boundaries placed upon them by institutions. This allows for the creation of historically grounded and specific frameworks that are intersectional, relational, and that look beyond the material to the metaphysical.⁶ Her practice reaffirms Indigenous spiritual traditions, presenting ceremony as a legitimate form of political resistance that provides communities with a new framework through which to understand systemic oppression. While Alexander's broader application of spirit knowing is focused on the impact of the sacred on the self and their daily interaction with institutions, Laura Pérez's reading

3. I define *Xicanx* as an identity centered on a recovery of Indigenous spiritual tradition rooted in a queer, feminist framework.

4. Celia Herrera Rodríguez, interview by María Esther Fernández, November 5, 2017.

5. Herrera Rodríguez, interview by María Esther Fernández, November 5, 2017.

6. M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 253–254.

of the spiritual in Xicanx art practice implies that it has agency in redressing neocolonialism in a direct assault on capitalist institutions. Pérez explains specifically how Xicanx art "is politically and historically operative...returning to our field of vision a politically engaged spiritual consciousness."⁷ She argues that capitalism and imperialism are challenged by Xicanx artists who engage with the spiritual in a restorative effort to heal historical trauma, providing a much-needed intervention against cultural imperialism and its devastating effects on the individual, the community, and the planet.⁸ This construction of the spiritual as a political framework for community underscores how Herrera Rodríguez's reconstitution of Xicanx spiritual practices within her artistic work can have the potential to disrupt contemporary art-museum practice by exposing the limitations that museum professionals place on alternate ways of knowing and being.

Herrera Rodríguez's installation *Mitote*, at Triton Museum of Art in 2010, was inspired by the mini ceremonial structures, or "god houses," located in the mountains of Mexico (fig. 1). *Mitote* is the name of a dance that is practiced by various Indigenous communities across the Americas. It brings community together to envision and manifest a communal understanding of how they want to live. This installation was an exploration of the structures inhabited for prayer and, in the spirit of the *Mitote* dance, a testament to an Indigenous Xicanx futurity in diaspora. The "god house" was erected using willow branches held together with fabric, twigs, and prayer ties (fig. 2). Prayer ties are small pieces of paper tied with string, each holding an individual prayer of the maker that is burned in offering. The prayer ties now hold tobacco, but in Mexica culture they once held blood. Herrera Rodríguez explains that "upon burning the prayer tie with your blood, it releases a smoke that is an essence or literal representation of one's own spirit."⁹ She explains that it was understood that our blood holds the spirit, so then ritual becomes a conversation with one's past, a conversation with the ancestors. Her creative practice is a way of conversing with the spirit, and through the incorporation of materials used in ceremony, Herrera Rodríguez is harnessing spiritual knowledge. In the interior of the god house was a mesa, an altar-like arrangement on the ground used for healing and prayer (fig. 3). The assortment of items on the mesa represents, holds, and embodies the elements of water, fire, and earth assembled to "feed the spirit." This is the function of the mesa in prayer. An assortment of bottles, tins,

7. Laura E. Pérez, *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 46–47.

8. Pérez, 21 & 23. Pérez explains that historical trauma, or *cultural susto*, is the "frightening" of spirit from one's body-mind in the colonial and neocolonial ordeals, the

result of which is the 'in-between' state of *nepantla*, the postconquest condition of cultural fragmentation and social determinacy."

9. Celia Herrera Rodríguez, interview by María Esther Fernández, April 7, 2017.



Figure 1: Celia Herrera Rodríguez, *Mitote*, 2010, mixed-media installation.



Figure 2: Celia Herrera Rodríguez, *Mitote* (detail), 2010, mixed-media installation.

paper, and other mundane items rested along the side of the installation's mesa, representing its function in everyday life. The remaining installation was not intended to be used in prayer, but ceremony and prayer were invoked during its installation. *Mitote* was constructed in a prayer of remembrance of how one carries life and light within them. Several Indigenous concepts inform Herrera Rodríguez's practice, giving insight as to the creation and function of her installation: the Tree of Life, Axis Mundi, and el Ojo de Dios.¹⁰ These concepts, or philosophical ideas, inform many spiritual, religious, and cultural traditions around the world. Although regional differences result in varied interpretations and applications, the common belief is that there is an enduring connection between the physical and spiritual realms.

Mitote is a reclamation of space within the contemporary art museum: a visual intervention remapping ways of knowing and being in the creation of work that engages the spirit. Herrera Rodríguez's remapping of Indigenous thought complicates Chicana identity in that it strips back the veil of colonialism that has obstructed Indigenous ways of knowing and being in diaspora.¹¹ Remapping redresses the colonial delimitations around identity, giving a sense of place to individuals and community. In discussing the importance of presence through "strategic acts of visual representation," Margo Machida asserts that the visual arts are an "expressive capital" toward the building of a collective social imaginary that allows for a powerful reclamation of space for the marginalized.¹² The implications of her reconstituting Xicana within an Indigenous worldview extend far beyond individual or collective identity formation. She is putting forth a model for reclaiming alternative ways of knowing and being that upends neo-colonial practices and has powerful implications for institutions.¹³

Mitote disrupts the status quo at the contemporary art museum. Herrera Rodríguez's copal smudging in the museum indicates that the institution needs to be prepared to receive the work in a ceremonial effort to rid the gallery, if only for this exhibition, of the fraught ideological imposition of museums on Indigenous artists. This is a direct

10. The Tree of Life, with roots in the underworld and branches that stretch up into the sky, is symbolic of the central tree. It is featured in many world cultures, and in Mexico/Native cultures represents the sacred four directions (either north, south, east, and west, or the summer, fall, winter, and spring). Axis Mundi is the mythical cave where the underworld and the sky meet, typically represented on a mountaintop, also understood as the center or Ojo de Dios.

11. I use "Chicana" as distinct from "Xicana," which is used by those who have openly reclaimed an Indigenous way of life. Colonialism resulted in varied manifestations of indigeneity and mestizaje.

12. Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 48.

13. Celia Herrera Rodríguez's educational work has informed the artistic, educational, and political practices of countless artists and scholars for over 30 years. Cherrie Moraga, La Red Xicana Indígena, Mujeres de Miaz, and countless others have been influenced by Herrera Rodríguez's work constructing a Xicana methodology that is applicable across disciplines.



Figures 3–5: Celia Herrera Rodríguez, *Mitote* (detail), 2010, mixed-media installation.



challenge to the Western construction of the museum and is the first indication that two opposing epistemes are converging. Herrera Rodríguez's artistic practice is an epistemological break from the institution and is best understood in the philosophical underpinnings that inform how she thinks of and works with the art object. Jesus Barraza explains that through the use of Indigenous aesthetics, artists are creating a "site of intervention...an indigenous understanding of site that destabilizes the history of colonialism and displacement."¹⁴ Her creative process incorporates Indigenous ways of knowing and being that challenge the contemporary art museum's understanding of the art object and its function. In looking at this epistemological difference, we can begin to understand how the museum marginalizes Indigenous artistic practices. Herrera Rodríguez's practice, installation process, and resulting art object have the potential to disrupt contemporary art-museum practice because they require a new understanding of the art object and its function, which has implications for the curation and visual analysis of this work.

It is important to understand how intangible concepts like spirit and memory function as material, because it is in their activation during Herrera Rodríguez's art pieces that the epistemic differences between her practice and the contemporary art museum are made clear. Herrera Rodríguez's practice accesses the forgotten or the unknown through ceremonial acts, which activate the mundane cultural objects that have endured and remained in the present; Cherríe Moraga describes these objects as sacred because they carry knowledge and retain memory.¹⁵ Herrera Rodríguez's use of them in her installations activates the spirit through memory, which is a sacred act. *Mitote* disrupts museum practice, not through the use of "unconventional" materials, but in how she activates them. This esoteric quality of the sacred act becomes material to her artistic practice, which requires it to be so in the curatorial process as well.

Her use of the copal—the introduction of water, earth, and fire into the gallery—is heavily policed by museum practice. In allowing new ways of knowing and being to inform curatorial practice, new lines of interpretation and inquiry emerge, expanding the visual landscape. It is important to understand how the spiritual is made material in artistic practice so that the visual analysis can be extended beyond the anthropological crutch often used by curators in their misreadings of this work. Curators' inability to read these acts is

14. Jesus Barraza, thesis, *Looking Back, Seeing Forward: Indigenous Tactics and the Development of Decolonial Aesthetic*, 2016, California College of the Arts Library.

15. Cherríe L. Moraga, *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000–2010* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 204.

what subjects this work to narrow dialogues around authenticity and essentializing themes of race and identity that fail to present the historically grounded complexity of the Chicax community. Herrera Rodríguez employs the spiritual as material, and that is crucial to understanding the work and the ceremonial functions necessary for its installation and interpretation.

A key epistemological difference between Herrera Rodríguez and the museum is how their practices conceive of the art object. In the Nahuatl language, there is no direct translation for the word *object*.¹⁶ Herrera Rodríguez explains, “I don’t really think of [the material in my installations] as objects, I think of them as symbols, as part of a whole. Those things are not individual. So the meaning of them *is* of them together, not each thing that needs to be spoken about [as] a symptomatic list, which doesn’t indicate the whole relationship.”¹⁷ Contemporary art museums focus on materiality within the context of Western artistic practice. Although artists use unconventional materials in the museum, they are primarily understood as adding an aesthetic value, and their use is heavily monitored.¹⁸ Herrera Rodríguez selects material for its capacity to animate the spirit, for its ability to activate the space, which gives the art object a completely different function. For example, copal smudging, which is both a mundane and ceremonial practice, is used to cleanse the space. In addition, earth, mud, branches, and water are key materials in Herrera Rodríguez’s practice for their ability to represent and harness the spirit. The museum commodifies the art object and therefore thinks of materials in terms of their collectibility, value, and aesthetic function. Museums require, if they permit their use at all, that organic materials be secured in airtight containers over a certain period of time to sterilize them before they can be used for installation. The negotiation of material between the institution and Herrera Rodríguez exposes a fundamental difference in how they understand materiality. Museum practice requires organic materials to be mediated to preserve the sterile environment of the gallery, divorcing them from their ceremonial context and stripping them of their function. They dictate how these sacred materials can be used without regard to Herrera Rodríguez’s artistic practice. Her work requires that the museum reconsider its understanding of the art object’s materiality and function to prevent myopic policy from impacting cultural production. In addition, how she approaches these materials informs interpretation,

16. Nahuatl is the Mexica language predominantly spoken by the Aztecs, and there are many iterations of it spoken by Nahuatl people in central Mexico and El Salvador. Generally, Nahuatl is considered the native language of Xicanx people.

17. Celia Herrera Rodríguez, interview by María Esther Fernández, April 27, 2017.

18. Museums dictate what is conventional and deem some practices unconventional, leveraging policy to restrict the latter.



Figure 6: Celia Herrera Rodríguez, *Mitote* (detail), 2010, mixed-media installation.

so it is incumbent on the curator to understand opposing practices. The integrity of Herrera Rodríguez's spiritual artistic practice would fundamentally change should she have to adhere to strict policies in the creation of her installations. "If I can't create these pieces the way I make them in community, then I can't go to the gallery and make something different. That's fake. To remove its function means to take the spirit out of it. To take the heart out of it."¹⁹ The objects used in her installations are not selected solely for aesthetic purposes; they are used for their ability to harness memory and hold the spirit.

Herrera Rodríguez's use of the object for its ability to animate the spirit is unconventional when considering how museums commodify the art object. Many of her objects are reused and repurposed in the creation of other installations, defying museum collection practices. Herrera Rodríguez's motivation for creating these works is not for them to be permanently housed within the institution, sold, or reinstalled by a preparator in another exhibition. She creates these objects to provoke recognition in community, and to disrupt institutional practices that marginalize Indigenous ways of knowing and being. In Herrera Rodríguez's practice, the art object's importance is in its spiritual capacity, but for the contemporary art museum, it is a commodity.

For example, water is used in her installation, though not for its properties or aesthetic attributes; the physical form of the object is secondary to its spiritual function. It is used because it is a sacred element that embodies, represents, and holds the spirit. The ceremonial acts that inform her artistic practice not only reshape our understanding of the art object and its function, but also inform how the art piece holds space in the museum over the course of the exhibition. The importance of how she constructs the altar or conducts the copal smudging is not only in the materiality that results, but also in the energy that it produces. To engage her practice in terms of the spiritual requires that the museum suspend its conception of materiality and mediate an experience for the viewer that is less focused on the visual and more on the visceral.²⁰ This (re)understanding of material impacts the ways in which curators work with the object, and how the museum conditions the experience for the viewer.

Celia Herrera Rodríguez's artistic practice reconstitutes Indigenous spiritual practice for a diasporic Xicanx community, introducing alternative ways of knowing and being, bringing forth a new way for

19. Celia Herrera Rodríguez, interview by María Esther Fernández, November 6, 2017.

20. This can be mediated through curatorial choices in the selection of work, lighting, and informational text that can inform the viewer's experience.

curators and viewers to engage with the contemporary art object, and exposing how Western ideology is so deeply embedded in museum practice. Spiritual artistic practices create moments of disruption that intervene in existing curatorial practices, allowing for more equitable and curative models for exhibiting the work of marginalized communities. Herrera Rodríguez's practice is a call toward the spiritual in a decolonial effort that has the potential to hold institutions accountable in recognizing other ways of knowing and being so as to develop curative practices that redress this marginalization. Interpreting *Mitote* requires relational approaches to curation to remediate the shortcomings of contemporary art-museum practice in equitably representing this work. The call is not only for more curators of color, but for a particular brand of curation that decentralizes Western ideology and leaves room for multiple epistemologies to inform a more *curative* curatorial practice.