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THE ROLE OF AUTHORSHIP IN FERNANDO PALMA'S *METEOROLOGICAL
SERPENT*

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The Role of Authorship in Fernando Palma's *Meteorological Serpent*

The *Meteorological Serpent* is located in the central plaza in Milpa Alta. The viper, as Fernando Palma has called the structure on numerous occasions, is made of stone, cement, metal, and resin.¹ It stands vertically, body inverted, with its white head resting on a concrete base and its tail reaching to the sky. (Figure 1) At the tail's end, a three-dimensional triangular metal web, the snake's rattle, sits within a series of metal trapezoids divided into four uneven sections.



Figure 1. *Xiuhcoatl* (serpiente de fuego), 2013, Photograph taken by Fernando Palma.

The *Meteorological Serpent* is a representation of *Xiuhcoatl*, however the artist refers to the sculpture as a *Xiuhcoatl* and a *Quetzalcoatl* interchangeably.² In

¹ All information on the piece is taken from, Fernando Palma, Interview with Nika Chilewich, personal interview, San Pedro de Atocpan, July 10, 2016; Palma, Interview with Nika Chilewich, personal interview, San Pedro de Atocpan, August 2, 2016; Palma, Interview with Nika Chilewich, personal interview, San Pedro de Atocpan, August 23, 2016.

² *Xiuhcoatl*, the embodiment of fire, is a deity in the Nahuatl tradition whose name can be translated as “turquoise serpent” or “fire serpent” or as the constellation “serpent of the year”. In Nahuatl cosmologies, *Xiuhcoatl* was regarded as a spirit manifestation of the god of fire *Xiuhtecuhtli*, as well as

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Palma's *Meteorological Serpent*, the *Xiuhcoatl-Quetzalcoatl* in Milpa Alta, the artist creates a symbolic division of the viper's body into what he describes as numerous bodies used to signal the number of skies and infra-worlds in Nahua, Mayan, and Mexica cosmologies, and to invoke the gods that reign over each cosmic strata.³ These narratives that make up the divided mythological world of human existence simultaneously serve as explanations of basic geographical and agrarian concepts, and of astronomical successions, such as the solar and Venusian cycles and the cardinal directions.⁴ The complex, varied, and often-painful manifestations of point-counterpoint, or of the duality of human existence, is a central component of Palma's serpent, and is repeated in various levels within the work's geometrical and technological language.

The serpent's rattle, or the *Xiuhmolpilli*, is designed by the artist as a cage to hold electronic sensors that react to the wind, to the very life force that *Quetzalcoatl* represents. (Figure 2) Aside from the structure's purely functional purpose, which is to house the serpent's mechanism for data gathering, the rattle itself is what Palma

a representation of the fiery weapon wielded by the god *Huitzilopochtli*, the god of war and the god symbolic of each daily solar procession. *Xiuhcoatl* is used within the Nahua calendar to denote the passing of the sun in its daily and yearly procession. *Quetzalcoatl*, the feathered serpent, is used by Palma as an iconographic mode of production, a style of representation that transcends historical periods and distinct indigenous groups. Information taken from Fernando Palma, Interview with author, August 23, 2016; Juan Ávalos Guzman, "La astronomía náhuatl", *Historia Mexicana*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Jul.-Sep., 1960), pp. 102-109, accessed March 31, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25135042>.; Laurette Séjourné, *Pensamiento y religion en el México antiguo*, (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1964).; H.S. Darlington, "'The Fire-Snakes' of the Aztec Calendar Stone," *Anthropos* 26, no. 5/6 (1931): 637-46, accessed March 31, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40446309>.

³ This information is from Palma's explanation of the thematic influences of the piece in Palma, Interview with Nika Chilewich, July 10, 2016.; Darlington, "'The Fire-Snakes' of the Aztec Calendar Stone,."; Juan Ávalos Guzman, "La astronomía náhuatl".

⁴ Palma is interested in reproducing the communicative aspects of pre-Columbian sculpture, in which representation often incorporated precise astronomical predictions within a more metaphorical expression of the natural world and its patterns. In the case of Palma's *Xiuhcoatl*, the artist uses this trend to argue for the continued value of indigenous scientific and agronomical practices, and to remind the viewer that these cognitive systems remain in use. His use of pre-Columbian astrological predictions, particularly those found in the Mayan and Nahua calendar, is a mode of artistic resistance and a plea for the return to a more symbiotic relationship with Mexico's natural landscape.

refers to as a three dimensional hieroglyph.⁵ The sensors that sit inside of the *Xiuhmolpilli* capture the change in wind velocity, the direction of the wind, the change in temperature, fluctuations in atmospheric pressure, and general air quality.⁶



Figure 2. *Xiuhcoatl* (serpiente de fuego, detalle), 2013, photograph taken from: cord. Esteban King Álvaro Fernando Palma. *no relampagueó para anunciar que llovería tu hermosa...* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Museo Universitario del Chop, 2015).

As a whole Palma sees the serpent as a warning, and a call to implement measures to protect the biodiversity of Milpa Alta by preserving the region's terraced

⁵ Certain visual aspects of the rattle are taken from the original *Xiuhcoatl* sculpture at the British Museum. These are a three dimensional triangle with a turquoise drawing at its end (said to denote the *Xiuhcoatl's* tail), which sits within two trapezoids. Together these two symbols denote the “atado de años” or *Xiuhmolpilli*, the meeting point between the 260-day calendar “*Tzolkin*” that tracks Venus’ rotation around the earth, and the 365-day orbital pattern of the earth around the sun. This meeting happens roughly ever 52 years. Palma, Interview with Nika Chilewich, July 10, 2016.; Victoria R. Bricker and Susan Milbrath, “Thematic and Chronological Ties Between the Borgia and Madrid Codices Based on Records of Agricultural Pests in the Planting Almanacs,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 67, no. 4 (2011): 497-531, accessed March 31, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41303361>, p. 499-501.

⁶ Information taken from Palma, Interview with Nika Chilewich, July 10, 2016.; Palma, Interview with Nika Chilewich, August 23, 2016; Regina Tattersfield, “Primero el espacio. El valle de Milpa Alta; el artista Fernando Palma y la organización Calpulli Tecalco”(unpublished essay). Fernando Palma, Interview with author, personal interview, San Pedro de Atocpan, August 2, 2016.

landscape and its corresponding agronomical practices.⁷ The *Meteorological Serpent* is also a creation in protest, an object meant to challenge the viewer and disrupt her continuity of self in relation to the indigenous art object.⁸ In the first and only time the sensors were activated, the information was used to animate a robotic landscape at the Museo Universitario Del Chopo. However Palma's ultimate goal for the sculpture is for the information it captures to serve the local community of Milpa Alta.⁹

In its inaugural form, the sculpture was part of a two-part installation, in which the sensors placed in the serpent's rattle activated four pieces in a robotic landscape erected in the in the El Chopo Museum in center of Mexico City.¹⁰ This bi-positional

⁷ The autochthonous agronomical practice in Milpa Alta is the *Milpa* cultivation system, a multi-crop growing pattern in which corn is cultivated amongst a variety of other plant species in order to create a self-sustaining farming cycle, due to the fact that each plant species helps to fertilize the soil and protect its neighboring crops. Lev Jardón Barbolla, "Más allá del pensamiento tipológico y la cosificación: las variedades locales de cultivos como proceso biosocial," *Interdisciplina* 4, n. 9 (May-August 2016), p. 29-49, 31.

⁸ This is a trend that can be seen throughout Palma's artistic production. The artist has worked for years with mechatronic engineering, creating active pre-Columbian ritual landscapes using obsolete technology as well as other wasted man-made materials, such as plastic, cardboard, scrap metals, and wood. In doing so the artist draws a connection between his environmental concerns and indigenous identity by activating pre-Columbian deities as symbols of alternative modes of relating to nature. For more critical insight into Palma's practice see Helena Chávez Mac Gregor and Esteban King Álvarez, *Fernando Palma. ...amotla otlacualacac oncan tlanahuatiz quename ye huitz quiahuitl...mocualnezcayotl" ...no relampagueó para anunciar que llovería...tu hermosura*, (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2015).; Víctor Muñoz and Cuauhtémoc Medina, *Mechatronic Circus*, (London: 198 Gallery, 2000).; as well as the press release and install images of Palma's most recent show *Totalhuan, Mictlantecuhtli, Chak-ek, Kan*, at House of Gaga in Mexico City, Contemporary art Daily, "Fernando Palma at House of Gaga," December 1, 2016, accessed March 31, 2017, <http://www.contemporaryartdaily.com/2016/12/fernando-palma-at-house-of-gaga/>.

⁹ Palma, Interview with Nika Chilewich, July 10, 2016.

¹⁰ The Exhibit was part of a residency program started by curator Daniel Garza Usabiaga at the El Chopo museum. Palma, as the program's first resident, held an open studio at the museum, and worked with engineering students from UNAM in order to put together the robotic landscape of the show. The *Meteorological Serpent* in Milpa Alta in part activated this landscape, determining the movements of one unit of robotic structures that were programmed to reflect the fluctuations in air quality captured in Milpa Alta. The final show was open to the public from December 7th, 2013 to March 2, 2014. Basic information can be found on the museum's website, and a more detailed description of the works in the small catalogue published after the exhibit closed. Museo Universitario del Chopo, "*...amotla otlacualacac oncan tlanahuatiz quename ye huitz quiahuitl...mocualnezcayotl" ...no relampagueó para anunciar que llovería...tu hermosura*," accessed 5

assembly places the *Quetzalcoatl-Xiuhcoatl* in Milpa Alta within a greater mythological setting that reflects the diametrical complexity of the Nahuatl universe. The title of the original installation “...*amotla otlacualacac oncan tlanahuatiz quename ye huitz quiahuitl...mocualnezacayotl...*” or “nunca llovió para anunciar qué llovería tu hermosura,” a phrase taken from the Nahuatl origin myth, is reflective of the divine pain experienced in an often incongruous universe filled with painful contradictions. By incorporating a plurality of cosmological narrations within and around the serpent, Palma achieves a layered symbolic and metaphorical representation that captures for the artist the diverse, pluralistic nature of Mexico’s pre-Cortesian mythology. The work focuses on the dual nature of existence –on the fact that both terrestrial and celestial space are based on multiple, often irreconcilable attributes, and that redemptive beauty can be found in the capacity to hold as truth these seemingly incoherent qualities together, all at once.

After the show, the technological aspects of the sculpture ceased to function, meaning the sensors have never served their intended local community. In fact, the information the sculpture was designed to provide never made it outside of the galleries in the heart of Mexico City and beyond the museum’s audience. Three years later it is virtually unknown within Mexico City’s art institutions. Having never functioned as the artist intended, one could ask if the sculpture ever truly existed? Or worse, does its dormancy make it garbage, another forgotten piece of urban infrastructure left to decay?

The phantom serpent is, in many ways, a culminating moment in Palma’s particular enunciation as an indigenous artist. It reflects a coming together of the different levels of his varied creative and investigative practices: Palma as mechanical

January 20, 2017, <http://www.chopo.unam.mx/exposiciones/FernandoPalma.html>; Esteban King Álvarez and Helena Chávez Mac Gregor, *Fernando Palma. ...amotla otlacualacac oncan tlanahuatiz quename ye huitz quiahuitl...mocualnezacayotl* “...no relampagueó para anunciar que llovería...tu hermosura”, (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2015).

engineer, as art historian, as contemporary artist, as indigenous individual, and as active community member. Palma's confrontation via public sculpture of both the institutional languages of power from which the work is born, and the local reality to which it is in opposition, is layered and grasps at heterogeneous communities often in opposition to one another. Its inability to unify through its transgression suggests a dissonance between how the artist perceives his role as indigenous author and how the work is ultimately received. The serpent's invisibility makes the work ripe for detecting power structures that dictate the signs of 'Indianness' accepted today within Mexico City's cultural institutions, as well as within the lived indigenous experience of the work's local public.¹¹

The signs of 'Indianness' Palma's *Xiuhcoatl* fall short of can be observed by outlining the history of the indigenous object within languages of power, in order to observe the migration of indigenous creation from its status within native communities, to its later role as primary and secondary material for various external groups, and for the creation of an imposed cultural discourse. The specifics of this transformation are the redefinition of the native devotional object within society, first as 'idol' then as 'artifact', and later as creative material in modern cultural expression. The institutional practices of narrating indigenous subjectivity from within academic discourse, including the rhetoric of anthropology, sociology, cultural criticism, and art history, constitute a persistent reduction of the native object's complexity, and the alienation of the indigenous subject both as author and spectator.¹² The reduction of indigenous identity and native artistic production within languages of scholarship complicates the way Palma establishes himself as an indigenous author with the *Meteorological Serpent*, and results in the complex and contradictory status the piece ultimately ends up occupying.

¹¹ The term "signs of Indianness" is taken from Jean Fisher, "In Search of the 'Inauthentic'", p. 241.

¹² Fisher, "In Search of the 'Inauthentic'", 241.

In her book *Zonas de Disturbio. Espectros del México indígena en la modernidad*, Mariana Botey's exploration of indigenous traditions as a modern cultural phenomenon offers insight into the critical potential inherent in understanding practices such as that of Palma's public sculpture. Analyzing works such as the *Meteorological Serpent* can serve to strengthen scholarly efforts that seek what Botey describes as an, "...excavación estratégica en la subterritorialidad de la historiografía autorizada, en el entendimiento de que en su movimiento de pliegue y despliegue, en su doblamiento y en sus excesos es donde llegamos a una ubicación para dislocar la lógica de dominación narrativizada como historia: reificada y fetichizada como historia."¹³

What follows is a similar attempt at a "strategic excavation" of official historical narratives from within the "underground of official historiography" in order to understand Palma's attempt at indigenous resistance via public sculpture. Its aim is to use an art historical and cultural analysis in opposition to the supposed transparency of both disciplines, and to in turn interrogate the epistemological short-circuits at play in the *Meteorological Serpent*. A work such as Palma's serpent allows for a rethinking of site-specific, public creative practices in Mexico City, and their relationship to the fictive landscape of history's narration of indigenous cultures. By examining some of the relational histories ignited by Palma's serpent, this text seeks to form part of a growing body of work that posits new ways for understanding indigenous subjectivity within artistic practices in the twenty-first century.

Layered Narrations of Indigineity

Fernando Palma identifies as an indigenous artist. That is to say, he identifies as an

¹³ Fisher, "In Search of", 38.

indigenous person whose artistic practice is in large part dedicated to the study and preservation of his Nahua heritage. Although Palma's understanding of his own artistic work is not exclusively linked to the contemporary art world, it is his success in that world that has allowed the artist to pursue his creative practice full time. It has also connected Palma to an international network of curators, artists, and other scholars whose work deal with issues of indigenous identity within art institutions.¹⁴

These two factors, the artist's dedication to his indigenous heritage and his development as an institutionally regarded contemporary artist, can be seen in Palma's work within an integration of pre-Columbian mythological and expressive conventions in Palma's artistic production that demonstrates a profound sense of creative unity between the work and the artist as an indigenous maker. His reinterpretation of classical pre-Columbian aesthetics is, for the artist, a critical survey of a culture Palma feels belongs to his own personal heritage and sense of identity. Palma has spent a good part of his career diligently studying the gestural patterns in different codices, accumulating a methodology for understanding the pictorial conventions within hieroglyphic Nahuatl.¹⁵ The deeply personal nature of his artistic research is apparent in the *Meteorological Serpent* in the freedom with which Palma approaches traditional pre-Columbian sculpture, inferring a sense of belonging or authorization that stems from his understanding of his own indigenous identity as part of his creative development and artistic style. For Palma, pre-Columbian sculpture is not merely a metaphorical tool for his artistic authorship,

¹⁴ Palma's inclusion in this network is, in large part, due to his long-term relationship with the curator and writer Jean Fisher. For one example see Nottingham Contemporary, *Rights of Nature Conference*, (Conference held in London on January 24, 2015), accessed March 31, 2017, <http://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/event/rights-nature-conference.>; Jean Fisher, mod. "Decolonising Indigenous Epistemologies, Conference with Mabe Bethonico, Eduardo Abaroa, and Fernando Palma Rodríguez" Jan 25, 2015, YouTube video, 1:38:35, posted Feb 6, 2015, accessed March 31, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LhG20EzvKw>.

¹⁵ Palma, Interview with Nika Chilewich, July 10, 2016. Palma, Interview with Nika Chilewich, August 23, 2016.

but rather a means for rectifying an estrangement the artist feels from his native heritage, and a tool for redeeming value systems he has felt deprived of.

The deeply personal nature of the pre-Columbian subject matter Palma incorporates in his work is coupled with the fact that the artist is a skilled researcher, a result of the access he has had to premier academic institutions throughout the world.¹⁶ Palma's proximity to first-hand historical documents and his training with some of Mexico's and later Europe's most prominent academics, factor heavily into the expression of the artist's more personal poetics, all of which benefit from the technical, historical, and theoretical languages of academia.

One area where the artist's educational history is evident is in Palma's conceptual understanding of himself as artist. In the crafting of his artistic identity, Palma emulates an idealization of the artist in pre-Columbian culture, who existed not as an autonomous creative figure, but as part of a collective entity, and whose work served communal religious, agrarian, and social practices.¹⁷ In this sense Palma

¹⁶ Fernando moved to London from San Pedro de Atocpan towards the end of the 1980's, after completing his undergraduate degree in Mechanical Engineering at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, UNAM. There he pursued masters in Art and Art History at Goldsmiths College, UCL (1998-1991), and another in Sculpture at the Slade School of Fine Art, UCL (1991-1993). Through his studies Palma met Phyllida Barlow, an artist within the Povera movement under whom Palma studied and with whom he maintained a close, collaborative relationship that would influence his production. He was later a resident at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Holland (1994-1996) where he developed a mechatronic, robotic sculptural practice. He obtained a specialized Higher National Certificate or HNC degree in electronics at Twickenham College (1997-1999). The artist returned to San Pedro de Atocpan in 2015 after nearly 20 years in Europe, where he began actively collaborating in the non-profit organization Calpulli Tecalco A.C., which the artist started with his family to promote the study and documentation of the Nahuatl language of the region, the protection of the local environment, the conservation of the region's indigenous cultures. All information is taken from the unpublished text, Regina Tattersfield, "Primero el espacio. El valle de Milpa Alta; el artista Fernando Palma y la organización Calpulli Tecalco"(unpublished essay); and Palma, Interview with Nika Chilewich, August 2, 2016.

¹⁷ For more on the role of the artist within pre-Columbian Nahua society see Clara Millon, "Painting, Writing, and Polity in Teotihuacan, Mexico," *American Antiquity* 38 (3), 1973, p. 294-314.; and Margaret H. Turner, "Style in Lapidary Technology: Identifying the Teotihuacan Lapidary Industry," *Art, Ideology, and the City of Teotihuacan* (Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, October 8-9, 1988), (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1988), p. 89-113.

attempts to move away from a pattern of artistic output in which the artist is a specialized poetic voice. Unfortunately, the historical and theoretical languages that have allowed him to formulate this particular enunciation of indigenous artistic identity are the very languages that distance Palma's work from a popular indigenous audience. The *Meteorological Serpent* serves as a harsh demonstration of how the theoretical underpinnings of Palma's work, although rooted in local history and cooperative creation, remain confined to the academic and contemporary art institution.

In the case of the *Meteorological Serpent* the tension between the work's local indigenous public and Palma's art practice is compounded by the explicitly communal aspirations of the sculpture. The political overtones of the sculpture as a public work invoke another facet of Palma's indigenous identity that demonstrates the artist's understanding of indigeneity as shared, forming part of greater networks of regional resistance. In Palma's recounting of his relationship to his indigenous identity, he sites his mother's renunciation of her catholic upbringing during his childhood as a decisive, political return to their family's Nahua ancestry.¹⁸ This assumption of an indigenous identity as a refusal of dominant social norms remains central to the Palma family's indigenous experience. Palma's mother, Doña Carmen Rodríguez, has dedicated her life to educating her local community in Nahua culture, to preserving the language, and to participating in political networks fighting for indigenous autonomy throughout the country.¹⁹

Together with his mother and sister 17 years ago, the artist began Calpulli Tecalco A.C. a non-profit organization committed to the preservation of the Nahuatl

¹⁸ Palma, Interview with Nika Chilewich, July 10, 2016.

¹⁹ Carmen Rodríguez has run the libroclub Fernando Benítez/ Incualli Ohtli, in San Pedro de Atocpan for the past 18 years. The libroclub is a public and free weekly class dedicated to teaching written and spoken Nahuatl. For more information on the libroclub see Calpulli Tecalco's website, Calpulli Tecalco A.C. "Educación," accessed March 31, 2017, <https://calpullitecalco.wordpress.com/educacion/>.

language and culture, and to promoting local environmental conservation by protecting autochthonous farming techniques in Milpa Alta's terraced landscape.²⁰ Calpulli Tecalco's activities are varied, but primarily consist of community-based actions to celebrate and promote the cultivation of the *Milpa*, to preserve local forms of folklore and mythology, and to support the traditional visual languages that accompany these local histories.²¹ As part of his involvement in the organization, Palma illustrates all of Calpulli Tecalco's publications, a practice which allows him to apply his personal research and conception of the role of the indigenous artist to his lived surroundings, sharing his knowledge with his community.²² Because of Palma's success in the institutional art world, Calpulli Tecalco also has a particular relationship with the museum institution. The organization is recognized and celebrated by museums throughout Mexico City, and many of its members are artists, art historians, and other professionals from the art world.²³

This link between personal indigenous artistic identity, political activism, and local acts of community organizing is another factor in Palma's work, and decisive in the *Meteorological Serpent*, the artist's first piece of public artwork in his local community. It connects the artist to a network comprised of many indigenous and mestizo backgrounds, whose use of pre-Columbian symbolism are not rooted in academic accuracy, but rather in political networks of protest.²⁴ In the

²⁰ Calpulli Tecalco A.C., "Quienes Somos; Nuestro Trabajo; Trayectoria; Actividades Culturales," accessed February 15, 2017, <https://calpullitecalco.wordpress.com/nuestro-trabajo/>.

²¹ Calpulli Tecalco A.C., "Quienes Somos; Nuestro".

²² Illustrations done by Palma for Calpulli Tecalco A.C. can be seen in the organization's publications, a full list of which can be found on the organization's website, Calpulli Tecalco A.C., "Publicaciones," accessed March 31, 2017, <https://calpullitecalco.wordpress.com/publicaciones/>.

²³ The relationship between Calpulli Tecalco and the institutional museum world in Mexico City deserves further exploration, but will not be done in this text. For one example of this relationship see Amanda de la Garza, Alejandra Labastida, and Ignacio Plá, *Conquistando y construyendo lo común*, (México: MUAC-UNAM, 2013).; and Museo Universitario arte Contemporáneo "Conquistando y construyendo lo común: Andreja Kuluncic," accessed March 31, 2017, <http://muac.unam.mx/expo-detalle-27-conquistando-y-construyendo-lo-comun->.

²⁴ In her essay "Clues for Rethinking Indigeniety in Mexico", Paula López Caballero describes the term "indigenous" as a porous categorization that has been used in a myriad of ways to differentiate

Meteorological Serpent, Palma's personal artistic identity is confronted by the shared expression of indigeneity the artist also participates in, and the more didactic use of indigenous culture Palma employs in his artistic narrations for Calpulli Tecalco. The ethnic component to Palma's identity is similarly layered as far as the personal, the communal, and the political aspects of Palma's indigenous artistic identity are concerned. The artist identifies specifically with his Nahuatl heritage, however his work pulls from the traditions of various pre-Columbian ethnic groups. Palma expresses a sense of stylistic and expressive freedom that reflects a more expansive understanding of indigeneity, which gestures towards a creative, social and political solidarity around indigenous identity as a shared and malleable concept.²⁵

Authorship and Shared Identity in the *Meteorological Serpent*

The failure of the work to be considered or interpreted how the artist intended demonstrates the fragility of expressions of indigenous subjectivity, like that of Palma's, that attempt to speak across cultural institutions. As an artistic proposal that seeks to move beyond the museum, the *Meteorological Serpent* ends up trapped

diverse social groups with both positive and negative overtones. She states, "La especificidad de este 'ser' remite, principalmente, a una diferencia respecto de un 'nosotros', sujeto que usualmente tampoco se explicita. Dicha diferencia puede valorarse positivamente, por ejemplo como parte del patrimonio y riqueza cultural del país o como el derecho a la autodeterminación política o cultura; o bien, puede ser valorada negativamente, como un lastre o un 'problema'. Pero en ambos casos dicha diferencia suele estar asociada con una herencia específica, con un origen o a un pasado particular que permanece, que se conserva, o que, para existir plenamente, no ha cambiado o no debe cambiar." Paula López Caballero, "Pistas para pensar la indigeneidad en México," *Interdisciplina* 4, n. 9 (May-August, 2016), p. 9-29, 10-11.

²⁵ Palma's work often melds representational histories and astrological conventions of distinct pre-Columbian groups, and historical periods. In the case of the *Meteorological Serpent*, the *Xiuhcoatl/Quetzalcoatl* hybrid, Fernando's adaptation melds elements of a classic *Xiuhcoatl*, but bears a closer stylistic relationship with the descending serpents of Chichen Itza, a sculptural form invented by the Toltecs. Taken from Palma, Interview with Nika Chilewich, July 10, 2016, and from Ana Díaz, e-mail message to author, December 11, 2016; and William H. Holmes, "Archeological Studies among the Ancient Cities of Mexico: Part I, Monuments of Yucatan," *Publications of the Field Columbian Museum. Anthropological Series*, 1(1), 1-137. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29782002>.

between the different networks of power the artist moves between, unsuccessful in its attempt to transcend the contemporary arts and academic communities from which it is created.²⁶ Its invisibility implies an incompatibility between the distinct modes of cultural communication that Palma inhabits, and gestures towards the fragmented genealogy of indigenous culture, and the exclusion of the indigenous subject from institutionalized expression.

Using this understanding of Palma's sculpture, we can critically examine the *Meteorological Serpent* as a relational piece of public art that disturbs the myth of transparency within Mexico's cultural practices.²⁷ Palma as author seeks to upend languages of power, attempting to subvert categorical boundaries between contemporary and public art, indigenous art, and public infrastructure. The crisis of authorship present in the forgotten sculpture demonstrates the seeming impossibility for artistic expression outside of mainstream cultural narratives.²⁸

A theoretical parallel to the crisis of authorship within Palma's piece can be found in

²⁶ Here I am referring specifically to Mariana Botey's project of outlining the "zonas de disturbio". To this end she states, "Más bien, un proyecto como el que estamos proponiendo aquí primero y necesariamente pasaría por un gesto que empuje a la historiografía hegemónica a una crisis." Mariana Botey, *Zonas de disturbio. Espectros del México indígena en la modernidad*, 38.

²⁷ Mariana Botey in her book *Zonas de disturbio. Espectros del México indígena en la modernidad* coins the term "zonas de disturbio" to describe a method of using indigenous practices that confronts hegemonic historical narratives. While the practices Botey singles out are not always self proclaimed as subversive, the author describes them as forming part of a disparate network that when acknowledged together can be seen as oppositional to the epistemic violence of Mexico's historical narrative. She states, "el fenómeno aquí es semejante a una implosión, eso es, al ocurrir desde adentro, desde las entrañas del eje de dominación discurso-poder-conocimiento, más que una figura de inversión o la figura alternativa de un 'afuera', lo que provoca es una producción fantasmática que parasite y duplica los protocolos, regímenes y gramáticas de representación: los desmantela y deconstruye generando, precisamente, la zona de disturbio." Mariana Botey, *Zonas de disturbio. Espectros del México indígena en la modernidad*, (México: Siglo XXI Editores: UNAM, Instituto de investigación Estéticas: UNAM, Dirección General de Artes Visuales: Universidad Metropolitana: Palabra de Clío, 2014), 41.

²⁸ For a better understanding of how this paper views Fernando Palma's *Meteorological Serpent*, Botey states "Estos fragmentos, a su vez, pueden ser usados otra vez en su no organicidad, a saberse a sí mismos como artefactos, construcciones provisionales, astillas rebeldes contra la idea pura de una totalidad para ser expresada." Mariana Botey, *Zonas de disturbio*, 40.

Jean Fisher's exploration of inauthenticity characteristic of contemporary Native American art. The contemporary Native American art object, as she describes, exists within a liminal cultural space, one where it cannot be explained by categories of contemporary art, or by the lived indigenous experience it seeks to represent.²⁹ To this end she states:

When the Native artist speaks as the author rather than the bearer of (an other's) meaning, she or he precipitates an epistemological crisis, which exposes the fundamental instability of those knowledges that circumscribe the social and political place of colonized peoples.³⁰

Fisher's text is particularly insightful when looking at Palma's work, due in part, to the fact that the curator and critic played an influential role in developing Palma's artistic practice.³¹ Palma, like Fisher states, attempts to speak as author in the *Meteorological Serpent* instead of as intermediary. His personal form of indigenous artistic expression as an expression of contemporary art is singular – a unique attempt at performing a lost creative connection with indigenous cognizance and cosmological order in defiance of the colonial structures that dictate indigenous identity. Unfortunately, the precariousness of the “knowledges that circumscribe the social and political place of colonized peoples”, which Palma's work exposes, traps both artist and work in the very same instability they reveal. His inability to dismantle the institutional networks from which the sculpture is made, is due to the fact that the artist does not, as Walter Mignolo states in his analysis of the possibility for institutional artistic practices to decolonize the networks from which they are

²⁹ Fisher, “In Search of the ‘Inauthentic’”, 240.

³⁰ Fisher, “In Search of the Inauthentic”, 240.

³¹ Palma and Fisher's creative relationship began during the artist's time in London. He sites Fisher as a central motivating factor in his decision to unite his studies of pre-Columbian art with his own artistic practice. Fernando Palma, Personal Interview, August 2, 2016. Also see “Decolonizing Indigenous Epistemologies” a lecture series held in conjunction with the exhibit *Rights of Nature. Art and Ecology in the Americas*, January 24-March 15, 2015, Nottingham Gallery.

created, “work in the entanglement and differential of power”.³²

In his role as artistic author, Palma does not publicly address the abstract languages of power that circumscribe indigenous identity, and his failure to do so silences his public creative statement, short circuiting its potential to unify. As Mignolo states:

For identification to be framed decolonially it would necessarily have to be articulated clearly in relation to coloniality. If, for example, coloniality describes the hidden process of erasure, devaluation, and disavowing of certain human beings, ways of thinking, ways of living, and of doing in the world –that is, coloniality as a process of inventing identifications– then for identification to be decolonial it needs to be articulated as ‘des-identification’ and ‘re-identification,’ which means it is a process of delinking.³³

In its expression of indigenous subjectivity, the *Meteorological Serpent* attempts to subvert the “colonial text” that both Fisher and Mignolo identify, and to dismantle it. However, Palma’s aspirations to create a contemporary monument of indigenous cognizance and represent a pre-Columbian relationship to the natural world, do not address the processes of identification that exist for his local public. By failing to recognize the power differential between his work and his local community, Palma’s gesture remains within its own creative language and personal networks of identification, and both artist and work end up as an external cultural emissary - the work a representation of Palma’s artistic thesis rather than an enunciation of a unifying contestatory creative process. The lack of institutional support for Palma’s goals further exposes the debility surrounding expressions of alterity from within the contemporary art world, and the challenges that face attempts to decolonize its

³² Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, “Decolonial options and artistic/aesthetic entanglements: An interview with Walter Mignolo,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* Vol. 3, No.1, 2014, pp. 196-212, accessed on March 31, 2017, <http://decolonization.org/index.php/des/article/view/21310>, 196.

³³ Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, “Decolonial options”, 198.

networks.³⁴ The fundamental silence of the work suggests the continued need to create methods that allow distinct social groups to identify with and participate in institutional creative expression. As for the *Meteorological Serpent*, the work exposes the incompatibility between the specialized languages of institutional disciplines and communal processes of solidarity through symbols of indigeneity.

The Idol Endeavor

Doscientos años después de las guerras de Independencia, el paradigma colonial, lejos de haber desaparecido, prefigura en ciclos de retorno, repetición, intensificación y expansión. La máquina de Guerra colonial organiza mediante su lógica dispersa y migratoria los múltiples planos de dominación y crisis contenidos en el proceso de formación de la modernidad capitalista como un sistema global –y, en el caso específico de la intersección latinoamericana, de un modo reflexivo y refractario a través de otras múltiples cartografías.³⁵

The history of Mexico's autochthonous visual culture is built on a fundamental displacement of creative agency begun with the conquest. The violent insertion of one cultural order, that of imperialist Spain, over another, that of the country's

³⁴ An investigation of the *Meteorological Serpent* as a possible attempt at decolonial artistic practice is an area that deserves its own separate analysis. In this text, the writings of Gerardo Mosquera on colonial structures within global art production, and that of Joaquín Barriendos on the term popular within postcolonial scholarship "la colonialidad del ver", provide a critical framework from which to articulate the possible shortcomings of the work's decolonial text, which in this body of research is understood as its ability to create a collective process of what Walter Mignolo calls 'dis-identification' or 're-identification'. For sources on decolonial practices within the arts see Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepentla: Views From the South*, 1, no.3 (2000): p. 533-580.; Walter Mignolo, "The de-colonial option and the meaning of identity In politics," *Anales* Vol. 9, no. 10, Instituto Iberoamericano, Universidad de Gotemburgo, 2007.; Leanne Simpson, *Islands of Decolonial Love*, <http://leannesimpson.ca/2013/10/25/islands-of-decolonial-love-songs-by-leanne-simpson-friends/>.; Luam Kidane, "Contentious art: disruption and decolonial aesthetics" *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* Vol. 3, No. 1, 2014, pp. 189-192, <http://decolonization.org/index.php/des/article/download/20631/17333>.; Javier Reynaldo Romero Flores "Posibilidades descolonizadoras en/desde Bolivia. Entre colores y melodías" *Revista Calle14*, Vol. 9 Num. 13 (May-August 2011) p. 70-85.

³⁵ Serge Gruzinsky, *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to Blade Runner (1492-2019)*, translated by Heather MacLean, (United States: Duke University Press, 2001), 36.

native communities, relied heavily on a destruction of the native devotional object in public spaces and a stripping of its power.³⁶ As early as the third Spanish expedition to Mexico, led by Hernán Cortés in 1519 on the island of Cozumel, the conquistadores would establish a mechanism for eradicating native authority through their understanding of images as central to their mission.³⁷ Images of native faith were manipulated, destroyed and replaced by images of Christian faith, and the new role of the image was imposed on the native communities through the ritual of Christian liturgy.³⁸

The conquistadors established a method of annihilation and substitution by enforcing a moral dichotomy in which autochthonous representation was understood as idolatrous. The fundamental disinterest the Spanish soldiers had for native culture beyond their militaristic goals of conquest, created a reductive understanding of indigenous creation, and a purposefully distorted narration of native culture. For the Spanish conquistadores, the native image was only worth considering inasmuch as it adhered to European rules of representation, that is, a pedagogical understanding of the image as an illustrative model of signifier and signified.³⁹

Foreign to the figurative conventions of European images, native visual culture was set against the European cultural ideal as a tradition in need of conversion by any means necessary, empowering violent conquest through a pursuit of its erasure.⁴⁰

³⁶ Gruzinsky, *Images at War*, 30-31.

³⁷ Gruzinsky, *Images at War*, 31.

³⁸ Gruzinsky, *Images at War*, 46.

³⁹ In Gruzinsky's words, "Subjected to the reductive game of signifier and signified –a distinction that continues, for the most part, to govern our approach to the figurative object– the idol was inevitably destined to lose its mystery, its aura, and to undergo annihilation. For did the idol not hide within itself its own potential negation?" Gruzinsky, *Images at War*, 44. You must use italics, you are quoting a book, not an article

⁴⁰ Gruzinsky, *Images at War*, 45.

The autonomous indigenous object, cast out of all political and social structures, was placed within what Serge Gruzinsky in his book *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to Blade Runner 1492-2019* describes as, “The Cortesian dichotomy of the celestial model and the terrestrial copy” which “posited a relationship of similarity (‘así está’) between the archetype and the image.”⁴¹ Figurative or descriptive representations of native life could therefore be appropriated to affirm a European tradition of representation, based then on religion, and to affirm the developing disciplines of modern culture that included world history, primitivism, and the autonomous art object.⁴²

Without a language for self-determination and cultural recognition, the native subject assumed a subaltern position, an ‘other’ within the newly restructured epistemic order of the colonial world.⁴³ As Gayatri Spivak explains in her seminal text, “Can the Subaltern Speak”, the colonial structure became a paradigmatic example of epistemic violence enacted on the subaltern subject, designed to eradicate any “trace of that Other in its precarious Subject-ivity.”⁴⁴ She explains:

Perhaps it is no more than to ask that the subtext of the palimpsestic narrative of imperialism be recognized as ‘subjugated knowledge,’ ‘a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.’⁴⁵

⁴¹ Gruzinsky, *Images at War*, 46.

⁴² Gruzinsky, *Images at War*, 48, 49.

⁴³ Writings that look at the colonial other include, among others: Santiago Castro-Gómez and Ramón Grosfoguel (eds.) *El giro decolonial. Reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global*, (Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana-Instituto Pensar, 2007).; Enrique Dussel, *El encubrimiento del Otro. Hacia el origen del mito de la modernidad*, (Quito: Abya-Yala, 1994).; Walter Dignolo, *Historias locales/diseños globales. Colonialidad, conocimientos subalternos y pensamiento fronterizo*, (Madrid: Akal, 2003).

⁴⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak” in *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, edited by Rosalind C. Morris, (United States: Columbia University Press, 2010), 31.

⁴⁵ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak”, 16.

Today these histories exist within what Mariana Botey calls, “el límite absoluto del lugar donde la historia es narrativizada como lógica”.⁴⁶ Indigenous subjectivity is nullified within historical narratives, and given none of the privileges of unity of voice, freedom of expression, or cultural authority. Its location at the periphery of official history means that autonomous networks of indigenous expression are by nature incompatible with institutionalized languages of power.

In the case of the contemporary cultural institution and indigenous Native American art, Fisher describes a similar process of subjugated expression as Spivak outlines. The “colonial text” to which she refers, is directly related to the exhibit history of native culture and in turn the native subject. Fisher formulates her analysis in relation to the art object, and to the violent categorical distinctions to which native art has been subject: that of the ethnographic spectacle. She states:

The persistent refusal of Native American voice outside the acceptable signs of ‘Indianity’ –a voice that would indeed contaminate the aesthetic with the political– ensures that the ‘explorer’ secures the coherence of his own boundaries and maintains mastery of the narrative.⁴⁷

Behind the singularity of the ‘explorer’ narrative, the consumption of the Indian within a European representational structure – begun with the initial vilification of the indigenous devotional object– creates a layered and seemingly impenetrable task of articulating cultural difference from the viewpoint of indigenous subjectivity.

⁴⁶In her writing, Botey uses Spivak’s analysis of the subaltern in order to situate the forms of knowledges her research seeks to document and unify. By using Spivak’s description of subaltern consciousness Botey foregrounds her exploration of indigenous subjectivity within a history marked by structures of sociopolitical and cultural violence where native identity is concerned. By appropriating the ahistorical term of subaltern identity, her argument acknowledges certain cognitive failures inherent in an academic approximation to indigenous identity, while simultaneously subverting a traditional linear, historical structure within academic research and writing. Botey, *Zonas de Disturbio*, 35.

⁴⁷ Fisher, “In Search of the ‘Inauthentic’”, 241.

Palma's work is contradictory when considered in relation to the reductive history Fisher describes above. On the one hand both artist and work subvert the colonial histories of the indigenous object as part of investigative scholarship, by taking the artifact out of the museum and returning it to public communal space. However, most of the structural, conceptual, and technological decisions are made from within institutionally determined 'signs of Indianicity', and the work does not acknowledge the lived realities of its local indigenous publics, cast out of these institutional structures, and with little frame of reference to engage or appreciate them. By disregarding his local context, the artist reproduces the explorer's narrative, or the "centered subject of modernism".⁴⁸

With this in mind it is not surprising that Palma's ambitious reproduction of formal and conceptual techniques of native creation would fall short in the local communities he attempts to engage. The work pulls from the depth and range of graphic expression within traditional pre-Cortesian visual culture – "When the Indians painted they designed shapes that were both illustration and writing, graphism and iconicity."⁴⁹ However, this pre-colonial form of knowledge no longer belongs to the communities from which it came, but has instead become the intellectual property of scholarly institutions. Furthermore, in relation to his local public, Palma's decontextualized pursuit of authenticity within indigenous art reinforces a latent narrative of institutional oppression, in which the ethnographic, or in this case the artistic explorer seeks to discover cultural norms or external ethnic or racial experiences without acknowledging the lived subject and her possible relationship to and use of the materials the artist engages.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Fisher, "In search of the Inauthentic", 241.

⁴⁹ Gruzinsky, *Images at War*, 50.

⁵⁰ To this end Mosquera's description of the dangers of pursuing authenticity within artistic attempts to decolonize Eurocentric creative networks provides insight. He states "La lucha contra el eurocentrismo no debe llevar en el arte a un mito de la autenticidad que, por paradoja, puede añadirse a la discriminación que sufre la plástica actual del Tercer Mundo en los circuitos internacionales. Este mito impide apreciarla como reacción viva a las contradicciones postcoloniales

One area that best demonstrates the serpent's paradoxical attempt at indigenous authorship can be seen in the sculpture's technological features. For Palma, the sculpture's functionality is two fold. First it serves as a technological coming together of the more psychosocial and mythological themes embodied in the serpent, such as duality, deformation, and the will to live, with the more scientific agronomic knowledge imbued in indigenous cosmology. By locating a sensor within the sculpture, Palma gives this cultural connection between cosmological order and agronomical traditions a real value, a series of numbers meant to aid in the protection of agronomical traditions endemic to the region. The fact that the sensors never serve their local public demonstrates the latent colonial structures within the city's centralized institutions of power. The total disinterest shown by UNAM and the local government for the sculpture to function as anything more than a poetic symbol within a conceptual artistic metaphor, as Fisher suggests, ensures that the institution continue the "coherence of its own boundaries and maintains mastery of the narrative."⁵¹

Second is the sculpture's intent to link public artwork and public information. By making the sculpture and the data it captures public, Palma hopes the serpent will provide the local community access to real pollution levels, something Mexico City's government keeps purposefully under wraps. Palma's wish is that the serpent serves as a tool for the local community, creating awareness of increased pollution levels due to informal urban expansion, and due to the rejection of an autochthonous agronomical relationship to the land.

Palma describes the piece's technological features as a contemporary attempt at

y demanda una "originalidad" propia de la tradición y las antiguas culturas que corresponde a una situación desaparecida." Gerardo Mosquera, "El síndrome de Marco Polo" in *Caminar con el diablo. Textos sobre arte, internacionalismo y culturas*, (Spain: Exit Publications) 20.

⁵¹ Fischer, "In Search of the 'Inauthentic,'" 241.

traditional indigenous creation, which demonstrate his aspirations that the work function simultaneously as a piece of modern technology and as a symbol for local identity. While this gesture is a subversion of the colonial text of indigenous art within the museum institution, and attempts to link a reimagined pre-Columbian sculpture to existing forms of communal knowledge from Milpa Alta, Palma's proximity to the pre-Columbian visual language his work references, as well as his mastery of the piece's technology, are a direct result of his privilege, and it sets him apart from his local audience. The traditional forms of pre-Cortesian creative expression the work incorporates no longer exist in the communities the serpent seeks to engage in the way Palma's work presupposes. Palma's explorations of traditional native culture are done through languages of academia, and the artist does not consider the ways in which these forms of expression exist today, disguised from their initial pre-Cortesian iterations, but nonetheless alive within his local community. The fact that Palma's process of artistic research subverts traditional power relationships within institutional epistemologies is of little interest to his local public, the majority of whom are either disinterested in, distrusting of, or lack the references needed for engaging the institutional ontologies of art history and contemporary art.

Milpa Alta, or *Malacachtepec Momoxco* in Nahuatl, is one of four rural *delegaciones* on the periphery of Mexico City.⁵² It is one of the few rural, or non-industrial agricultural areas in Mexico that has seen little exodus of its local population, while simultaneously receiving large numbers of immigrants from throughout the country who come in search of work.⁵³ Its agrarian history has also allowed the area to avoid rapid urbanization albeit its proximity to the city's center.⁵⁴ Milpa Alta's population,

⁵² Paula López Caballero, "The effect of Othering: The historical dialectic of local and national identity among the *originarios* of Milpa Alta, Mexico (1950-2000)," *Anthropological Theory* Vol. 9 Num. 2 P. 171-187, 171.

⁵³ Caballero, "The effect of Othering", 173.

⁵⁴ Caballero, "The effect of Othering", 173.

now made up of various indigenous groups due to increased levels of migration to the area, is primarily and historically of Nahua descent, with families that have been in the area for generations, Palma's included.⁵⁵ The region's indigenous roots once intricately linked the agrarian practices of *Malacachtepec Momoxco* with the *Milpa* farming system, a technique employed in the terraced landscapes or *terrazas* constructed during what the Spanish conquistadores incorrectly referred to as the Aztec empire.⁵⁶ In the past century the region has undergone an informal process of rural urbanization as part of the region's tenuous economies of survival, and more recently due to the influx of poor immigrants, sometimes referred to by locals as *avecindados*, who come from throughout the country.⁵⁷ The development within the region has been accompanied by a shift away from the communal processes of cultivating the *Milpa*, a result of the introduction of informal industrial agriculture, primarily the cultivation of nopal, and the growth of the food processing industry in the region, its two main exports being mole and barbacoa.⁵⁸ Local citizens increasingly view their land as an instrument for accumulating wealth, and agrarian practices as a form of labor.⁵⁹

The protection of agrarian labor as a means of communal interaction and an expression of indigenous identity has been an important political and social issue in the past few decades amongst indigenous communities throughout the country. In

⁵⁵ Caballero, "The effect of Othering", 173.

⁵⁶ Caballero, "The effect of Othering", 205.

⁵⁷ Economies of survival are a form of economic existence in which a population generates the conditions needed to ensure their continued existence. This is in contrast to an environment in which gains in wealth and capital are pursued. Roberto Bonilla Rodríguez "Urbanización rural y economía agrícola de sobrevivencia en la delegación Milpa Alta," *Argumentos: UAM-Xochimilco (Méx)*, vol. 27, no. 74 (January-April, 2014): 198, accessed December 15, 2016, http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0187-57952014000100008. The *avecindados* movement is the growth of informal urban development due to poor families settling on available plots of land due to illegal real estate transactions. Paula López Caballero, "The effect of Othering: The historical dialectic of local and national identity among the *originarios*, 1950-2000," *Anthropological Theory* Vol. 9 Num. 2, p. 171-187, 173.

⁵⁸ Paula López Caballero, "The effect of Othering," 171.

⁵⁹ Roberto Bonilla Rodríguez, "Urbanización rural," 205.

2014 the Congreso Nacional Indígena and the EZLN organized a meeting with members from 36 indigenous communities within Mexico to discuss the risk to biodiversity in their communities, due to the deterioration of autochthonous farming traditions and techniques, a result of the agricultural industry's introduction of single-cultivated crops and transgenic seeds.⁶⁰ However, Milpa Alta's proximity to Mexico City and to its urban economic and social value systems has made these forms of agrarian socialization and cultural patrimony difficult to maintain.⁶¹ Today farming has become a means of rural economic subsistence within Mexico City's urban economic structure. A relationship to the environment is largely unprotected, disconnected from traditional pre-Columbian farming techniques and their mythological or cultural histories.

According to the country's census data, in 2010, four percent of the population ages 15 and over was illiterate, a drop from eight percent in 1990. This puts Milpa Alta statistically at double the illiteracy rate of Mexico City, which registered a two percent illiteracy rate in 2010, and 4 in 1990. This information, however, is hard to believe, considering that 53.9% of the population ages twelve and up said they worked full time.⁶² Also, as of 2009 Milpa Alta was the district in Mexico City with the highest levels of poverty and food scarcity.⁶³

⁶⁰ Barbolla, "Más allá del pensamiento tipológico y la cosificación," 45.

⁶¹ I had the chance to interview one of the few remaining farmers in San Pedro de Atocpan that have preserved the *Milpa* farming practice. Daniel, a 19-year old boy who has helped his father in the *Milpa* since he was a child, says he is one of the only people his age in the area who have chosen to farm instead of finding work in Mexico City or in the local Mole industry. Daniel's farming traditions have been passed down from generation to generation, but neither he nor his family maintains a relationship to indigenous cosmogony. Daniel, Interview with Nika Chilewich, San Pedro de Atocpan, July 10, 2016.

⁶² Milpa Alta municipal Government, "Atlas de Riesgos naturales de la Delegación Milpa Alta 2011," Work Number 109009PP042204, File number PP11/09009/AE/1/056, 36, accessed January 17, 2017, http://www.normateca.sedesol.gob.mx/work/models/SEDESOL/Resource/2612/Atlas_Estados/09009_MILPA_ALTA/ATLAS_RIESGOS_MILPA_ALTA.pdf.

⁶³ José Luis Cabrera, "Milpa Alta y su administración," published by Mexicanos en Movimiento in

The tenuous rural economy in the region, coupled with the general disinterest by Mexico City's authorities as to traditional agrarian traditions, as well as its gross negligence on issues of environmental regulation, has transformed the vibrant connection between agrarian practice and autochthonous cultural expression once used to monitor seasonal and astrological changes in the *Milpa*. The biosocial function of cosmological archetypes such as *Quetzalcoatl*, *Tlaloc*, *Tezcatlípoca*, *Coyolxauhqui*, *Ehacatl*, and *Huitzilopochtli*, to name a few, do not represent protected knowledge within the community. Individual families such as Palma's continue to practice certain hermetic rituals linked to a pre-Cortesian history, but these practices are not publicly linked to the community's indigenous religious history in a communal or institutional manner.⁶⁴ Knowledge of the region's history and its lost indigenous past is left entirely up to informal, fragmented efforts to piece together the varied forms of unofficial knowledge that still permeate the area.⁶⁵

This is not to say that symbols of indigenous identity do not form part of the region's cultural landscape. They can be found on street names, schools, local businesses, and in the festivals that abound in Milpa Alta that celebrate local traditions tied, although often loosely, to indigenous identity in the area.⁶⁶ The region has also had

February 2010, accessed on February 3, 2016, <http://mexicanos-en-movimiento.blogspot.mx/2010/02/milpa-alta-y-su-administracion.html>.

⁶⁴ Founding members of Calpulli Tecalco A.C. including Angélica Palma, Doña Carmen Rodríguez, and Gonzalo Cabello, view this reality as one of the most challenging problems facing contemporary indigenous communities today. Combating the fragmented and unofficial nature of pre-Columbian traditions and the Nahuatl language in the region lies at the heart of what the organization seeks to accomplish. For more information on the organization's activities see <https://calpullitecalco.wordpress.com/>.

⁶⁵ This is evidenced in the informal and precarious nature of alternative forms of organizing the region's history and community. Outside from the municipal government, efforts by non-profits are largely marginal, and rarely receive government support or press coverage. Two notable efforts similar to that of Calpulli Tecalco A.C. are the non-profit "Consejo de la crónica de Milpa Alta", and the blog Teuhtli// Un Lugar en Milpa Alta, <http://teuhtli.blogspot.mx/p/introduccion.html>.

⁶⁶ This is in part due to the government's use of indigenous culture as a means of promoting tourism to the region. An example of this can be found in the "Guía turística" published by the government of Milpa Alta in 2015, which includes routes throughout the 12 different towns in the region that

a particular relationship to academia, the arts, and to a nationalist cultural rhetoric, which has linked Milpa Alta to certain reproductions of indigenous identity and created a general sense of pride in the community for its Nahuatl heritage.⁶⁷ However, most of the imagery that circulates within these forms of cultural expression was solidified within the state-sponsored narratives borne from post-revolutionary nationalism, and today constitutes the varied and idiosyncratic understanding of local heritage, often linked to institutionally sanctioned forms of recognition.⁶⁸

When considered in relation to the individually authored *Meteorological Serpent*, a work of contemporary sculpture whose function and meaning would not be immediately recognizable to any viewer without some form of explanation, the sculpture's invisibility is compounded by the unfortunate fact that the neither Palma nor the institutions involved in producing the work focused on the serpent's immediate community at the time of its inauguration. According to the artist, many of the final structural decisions were made with the understanding that the serpent's purpose was to activate the exhibit at the Museo Universitario Del Chopo, and Palma forfeited certain details that, given the opportunity, he would have liked to include.⁶⁹ The gravest oversight is undoubtedly the fact that no funds were allocated to include a description on the piece itself. The division of time and

promote the area's nature, its agronomical history, its indigenous past, and its involvement in the Mexican revolution. The guide includes a "ruta del nopal", a "ruta del mole", a Zapatista tour through the area, a calendar of the more than 700 festivals celebrated in the region annually –part of the "ruta de la fe"– and a "ruta de la salud", which promotes thermal baths and other health treatments in what is depicted as the area's traditional spiritual relationship between personal well being and nature. Notimex, "Presentan Guía turística de Milpa Alta," *Excélsior*, August, 7, 2015, accessed February 3, 2017. <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/comunidad/2015/08/07/1039021>.

⁶⁷ See Paula López Caballero "Artist's, Models, and Scientists in the Production of Indigeneity: Milpa Alta, 20th and 21st Centuries," *Ixiptla (Revista de la Bienal de Berlín)*, Vol. 1, June, p. 112-127, https://www.academia.edu/29328613/Artists_models_and_scientist_in_the_production_of_indigeneity_Milpa_Alta_20th_and_21st_Centuries.

⁶⁸ For more on this phenomenon in Milpa Alta see Caballero, Paula López, "Artist's, Models, and Scientists in the Production of Indigeneity: Milpa Alta, 20th and 21st Centuries," *Ixiptla (Revista de la Bienal de Berlín)*, Vol. 1, June, p. 112-127.

⁶⁹ Palma, Interview with Nika Chilewich, August 2, 2016.

resources enacted both by Palma, the El Chopo Museum, and by extension UNAM, were indicative of a mode of production that holds the museum at the center of its practice.⁷⁰

If one examines Palma's work from this perspective, the technological component of the piece – that is Palma's desire for the weather station to provide locals with information on pollution levels – exacerbates the work's already problematic assumptions as to the "centered subject of modernism".⁷¹ Palma's connection between pre-Cortesian tradition and modern technology imposes a value system foreign to his local audience, and assumes a level of technological literacy incompatible with Milpa Alta's general population.⁷² His attempt to displace technical languages of power and deliver the knowledge implicit in technological literacy to the rural, indigenous context of Milpa Alta, is in the end merely symbolic – its subversion only legible within mainstream institutions. In order for the weather station to actually function as a public tool, government officials or UNAM's institutional networks would have to install a platform to exhibit the data captured by the serpent and teach the public to interpret that data. Even if finances were allocated to create the infrastructure needed for the public sculpture to function as a weather tower, local officials would still need to take on the task of educating the public on the weather station as a means for monitoring air pollution and protecting biodiversity. And although these processes of instructional education could prove beneficial to the local community, they reproduce colonial structures of imposing

⁷⁰ The lack of signage on the work demonstrates the total disregard for the sculpture's existence beyond the museum's walls and the contemporary art institution, and a complete refusal to entertain the possibility of its continued purpose.

⁷¹ Fisher, "In Search of the 'Inauthentic'", 241.

⁷² Milpa Alta Municipal Government, "Atlas de Riesgos naturales de la Delegación Milpa Alta 2011," Work Number 109009PP042204, File number PP11/09009/AE/1/056, 36, accessed January 17, 2017, http://www.normateca.sedesol.gob.mx/work/models/SEDESOL/Resource/2612/Atlas_Estados/09009_MILPA_ALTA/ATLAS_RIESGOS_MILPA_ALTA.pdf.

systems of knowledge foreign to local indigenous forms of thought.

Simultaneously, the fact that an external institution from Mexico City would need to be involved in order for the *Meteorological Serpent* to serve its function suggests the underlying problem of who has access to specialized forms of knowledge and technology, and how these resources are distributed. The total and complete dependency of Milpa Alta, one of many marginalized suburban zones on the periphery of Mexico City, on the centralized urban networks of power for basic educational, economic, and technological resources, demonstrates the singularity of the colonial structures still in place.

Although Palma is not physically visible as author of the sculpture, the oversights in his artistic gesture results in an artistic expression that borders on that of an outside emissary, problematic in a piece whose goal is to subvert hierarchical relational histories concerning native creation. Palma's work assumes that local agronomical producers of Milpa Alta are ignorant of issues of pollution and biodiversity, which lends the piece a didactic quality antithetical to its supposed goals. The institutional networks invoked by the pieces' technological requirements enforce colonial power structures that continue to marginalize Milpa Alta's public, which the piece seeks to empower. Instead of listening and incorporating local forms of agrarian knowledge and systems for documenting shifts in the environment, Palma's serpent ends up equating an idealized past with a contemporary assumption of the primacy of technology, and the inextricable, central role of the institution as bearer of knowledge and unequivocal expert. This rhetorical maneuver, although physically situated within Milpa Alta, remains directed at communities of educational privilege and institutional power.

The Artifact as Commodity

“In order to awaken the dead, the antiquarian must first manage to kill them.”⁷³

The historical artifact plays both a stylistic and conceptual role within the *Meteorological Serpent*. By appropriating the artifact in his work, Palma both interrogates the role indigenous art has played in forming the modern colonial psyche, and gestures towards the complex articulation of the indigenous subject as a site of cultural consumption. The histories the *Meteorological Serpent* contest are those embedded in cultural institutions and their evolving attempts at narrating native culture through an accumulation and display of its objects.

For the *Meteorological Serpent*, the artifact can be seen as both the work’s inspiration and its point of creative resistance. By comparing the *Meteorological Xiuhcoatl* in Milpa Alta to the *Xiuhcoatl* upon which the work is based, one can begin to see how Palma’s serpent upends the languages of power associated with the artifact, and disturbs their myth of transparency.

The sculptural representation of the *Xiuhcoatl* Palma references as his inspiration is held at the British Museum. According to the Museum’s online catalogue, the piece is an Aztec god taken from Texcoco, dated by the institution between 1300-1521, which would make it part of the post-classical period that extends from 900 to the arrival of Cortés.⁷⁴ As to the work’s context of origin and history, the museum’s website states:

“This piece was probably used to decorate a building. According to Guillermo Dupaix, a collector of Mexican antiquities, it came from Texcoco, a city on the east

⁷³ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993),143.

⁷⁴ British Museum “Stone Figure of *Xiuhcoatl* 1300-1521: Description,” accessed January 17 2017, <http://culturalinstitute.britishmuseum.org/asset-viewer/stone-figure-of-xiuhcoatl/8gGLbiPoLfaKjw?hl=en>.

side of the lake on which the Mexica capital, Tenochtitlan, was founded. William Bullock, also a famous collector, acquired it in 1823 during his trip to Mexico and exhibited [it] in London, at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly.”⁷⁵

Aside from being alarmingly vague, the information provided by the museum places an equally lazy emphasis on the object’s original context as it does on its life as artifact. Factual information is reserved for the object’s existence in a colonial context, and is used to explain the object’s relationship to the history of the museum. The text is suggestive of the narrative space of the collection, which Susan Stewart explores in her essay *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic*. According to Stewart, the collection is a highly controlled, “...complex interplay of exposure and hiding, organization and the chaos of infinity”.⁷⁶ It is a manipulation of the native subject to uphold first and foremost the aspirations of the European explorer, established during the rise of European universalism and modern cultural institutions, all of which is central to the narratives within the contemporary museum institution and the role played by indigenous art.⁷⁷

The uprooting of indigenous objects to Europe and the practice of collecting the world’s cultures followed early characterizations of native culture, and would transform certain methods for public recognition of indigenous subjects. Doctored versions of native culture were incorporated into modern rhetoric as poetic tools, and the artifact became abstract material, a vessel for new ontological pursuits that could support the colonial gaze.⁷⁸ The native subject was forced into an increasingly mediated relationship to her cultural traditions, shaped by their new value within a colonial global structure, dictated by modern European cultural norms, and

⁷⁵ British Museum “Stone Figure of *Xiuhcoatl*”.

⁷⁶ Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, 145.

⁷⁷ The colonial ‘explorer’ sees the other only in so much as her difference affirms the seeker’s status. These concepts are explored separately by Barriendos and Fisher.

⁷⁸ Barriendos “La colonialidad del ver,” 18.

increasingly dispersed within the emergence of a public sphere.⁷⁹

The collection as a modern phenomenon developed alongside the invention of the native artifact, and matured as a discursive tool simultaneous with the consolidation of scholarly fields such as natural history, antiquarianism, archeology, and anthropology.⁸⁰ Joaquin Barriendos in his text “La colonialidad del ver. Hacia un Nuevo diálogo visual interepistémico,” describes these cultural constructs as founded on an epistemic racism hidden within the myth of transparency of the modern cultural institution, and multiplied by the onset of modern and late capitalism into a polyphony of pseudo-autonomous voices with seemingly equal claim to public enunciation.⁸¹ The disempowered state of indigenous identity within the modes of cognizance formed by this modern globalized cultural gaze are, according to Barriendos, perpetuated by racialized visual tropes and symbolic representations of indigenous identity within a seemingly democratic international network of cultural exchange. They constitute the current state of the colonial gaze, within a heterarchical power structure that must be understood as a series of agreements made between empowered and disempowered peoples.⁸²

In order to touch upon and attempt to unravel the colonial structures implicit in the contemporary consumption of cultural difference, Barriendos argues that one must acknowledge the epistemological power structures endowed on distinct communities in their participation within contemporary society. He states:

⁷⁹ Here I cite Barriendo’s description of the colonial gaze as a constantly regenerative phenomenon within the public sphere, or, “la permanente permutación de aquellos regímenes visuales racializantes producidos tras la ‘invención’ del ‘Nuevo Mundo,” activated by “la matriz heterárquica de poder a partir de la cual operan en la actualidad la colonialidad del ver y el racismo epistemológico.” Barriendos “La colonialidad del ver,” 15.

⁸⁰ Colin Wallace, “Reconnecting Thomas Gann with British Interest in the Archeology of Mesoamerica: An aspect of the Development of Archaeology as a University Subject,” *Bulletin of the History of Archeology* 21 (3) 23-36, DOI: <http://www.archaeologybulletin.org/articles/10.5334/bha.2113/>.

⁸¹ Barriendos “La colonialidad del ver”, 15.

⁸² Barriendos “La colonialidad del ver”, 14.

El reconocimiento de la actualidad de la colonialidad del ver no apunta, sin embargo, al fortalecimiento de la interculturalidad como diálogo universal abstracto entre iguales, ni hacia la restitución de ningún tipo de imaginario visual global compartido, sino más bien, hacia una mayor comprensión de los problemas epistemológicos y ontológicos derivados de la pretensión de establecer un diálogo visual transparente entre saberes y culturas diferentes: es decir, avanza hacia la problematización de los acuerdos y desacuerdos que se establecen entre grupos culturales y subjetividades diferenciales, los cuales, a pesar de pertenecer a tradiciones epistémicas e imaginarios visuales distintos, están circunscritos a la misma lógica universalizante de la modernidad/colonialidad.⁸³

These moments of uneven agreement or disagreement between distinct communities comprise the colonial text Palma's serpent as artifact seeks to disturb. Palma's contemporary reinterpretation of the indigenous artifact invokes a history of negotiation and compromise made by indigenous subjects in a colonial world structure. By drawing his inspiration from the museumified artifact, Palma engages the fictional world of narrating distant cultures through an organization of their objects in a contained space. It plays on the collection's reinvention of temporality and history.⁸⁴ He subverts the artifact's role as creative material for the collection's proposed narrative, which is primarily a narrative of itself.⁸⁵

His displacement of the artifact displaces the collection as, "...a model and a projection of self-fashioning," for the colonial subject, as Susan Stewart explains. "Not simply a consumer of the objects that fill the décor, the self generates a fantasy in which it becomes producer of those objects, a producer by arrangement and manipulation...within the narrative of the collection."⁸⁶

⁸³ Barriendos "La colonialidad del ver", 14.

⁸⁴ Stewart, *On Longing*, 144.

⁸⁵ Stewart, *On Longing*, 143.

⁸⁶ Stewart, *On Longing*, 158.

As Stewart's description suggests, native culture within exhibit space conjures a history of authored 'explorations' through a supposed 'discovery' of the artifact that disguises the explorer's latent cultural and ideological motives. The artifact within the cultured space of the exhibit, invokes the native subject as a means of narrating discrete languages of power, informing public opinion, and educating the gaze of the masses. By dislocating the artifact from its history (as constructed by the museum's narrative), Palma's gesture demonstrates the colonial gaze implicit in our institutional approach to indigenous creation, and the centrality of the museum as the mediator for communicating native identity. His gesture invokes the unanchored history of the artifact in relation to the lived indigenous subject, using the anesthetized native object and its centuries-old existence as a vessel for colonial desires within numerous and evolving narratives.

Fernando Palma's Serpent and the Artifact Narrative

The latent narrative of the collection and its relationship to the artifact is the *Meteorological Serpent's* primary inspiration, as well as the conceptual underpinning Palma uses when describing the sculpture. His appropriation and artistic redefinition of the artifact is one of the work's central moments of creative subversion and an artistic challenge to the "colonial text" of the museumified indigenous object. However, the serpent's ability to restructure boundaries between institutional languages of power, or even to communicate those boundaries are tenuous at best.

As stated in the British Museum's website, the *Xiuhcoatl* that the *Meteorological Serpent* was inspired by, was acquired by William Bullock on a trip taken by the famous antiquarian to Mexico in 1823 to collect material for what would be the first exhibition of Latin American antiquities in Britain, at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly,

which Bullock owned.⁸⁷ At the time of Bullock's trip, British interest in the archaeology of Mesoamerica was just developing within the country's academic institutions. It was tied to the growth of archeology and to the emergence of the ethnographic collection as an institutional practice.⁸⁸

Bullock eventually donated his collection to what was at the time the British Museum's singular "Department of Antiquities", a collection largely made up of private donations of 'curiosities' from wealthy individuals.⁸⁹ These collections were reflective of geographical exploration done during the early colonial enterprise. Ethnography at that point was not yet a discipline in the museum's studies, and the pursuit of cultural history was reserved for British and Medieval Antiquities.⁹⁰ In 1845 the museum would open a new gallery "for the reception of the ethnographical collections", which was followed by the donation of what was at the time, the world's largest collection of prehistoric and ethnographic objects, that of Henry Christy.⁹¹ Christy's collection was part of his pursuit to instrumentally use the existing cultures of primitive peoples to recount gaps in European prehistory, and his donation to the museum made ethnography a major component of the institution's activities.⁹² His objects would enter the museum as a replacement for the institution's natural history collections, which were subsequently moved.⁹³

When Christy's collection was made available to the public on April 12, 1886, it would constitute a transformation in the exhibitivite strategies of the museum,

⁸⁷ Wallace "Reconnecting Thomas Gann", <http://www.archaeologybulletin.org/articles/10.5334/bha.2113/>

⁸⁸ Wallace "Reconnecting Thomas Gann",

⁸⁹ H.J Brauhnoltz, "History of Ethnography in the British Museum after 1753 (Pt 1)," *British Museum Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1953): 90-93, DOI:10.2307/4422442, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4422442>, 90.

⁹⁰ H.J Brauhnoltz, "History of Ethnography", 91-92.

⁹¹ Henry Christy donated his collection to the British Museum in 1865. Brauhnoltz, "History of Ethnography", 91-92.

⁹² H.J Brauhnoltz, "History of Ethnography 92.

⁹³ Brauhnoltz, "History of Ethnography", 91.

reconfigured to attend to a growing public interest in colonized peoples, and mark a shift in the museum's exhibition space to reflect the science of anthropology and the discipline of evolutionary theory.⁹⁴ It is interesting that the current description of the *Xiuhcoatl* by the British Museum has made minimal effort to amend the essential disinterest in the native object that served the museum's operative agenda formed in the nineteenth century.

In terms of the piece's stylistic origins, the museum states that this particular *Xiuhcoatl* was probably an adornment on the side of a building, and recognizes the piece as *Xiuhcoatl* by explaining that it contains the features of a classical depiction of the fire deity. For the museum these features include the head of a serpent, short legs finishing in claws, a curved snout, and a tail, "...formed by the conventional Mexican year symbol (xihuitl): a triangle, like the solar ray sign, and two entwined trapezes."⁹⁵

The tail of the *Xiuhcoatl* is a central component in Palma's piece, however while both Palma's and the British Museum's description incorporate a basic connection between the fire god and the solar cycle, their nomenclature and their description of this distinctive characteristic are inconsistent. As Palma sees the *Meteorological Serpent* as an act of creative redemption, it is not surprising that he would not align with what the museum institution expects from Pre-Columbian deities. Palma's use of the artifact is in fact an affirmative gesture of native resistance to its objectification and consumption within the exhibit institution.

Palma's description of the *Meteorological Serpent* as a *Xiuhcoatl* and *Quetzalcoatl*

⁹⁴ H.J. Brauholtz, "History of Ethnography, 92 and H.J. Brauholtz, "History of Ethnography in the Museum 1753-1938 (Pt. II)," *The British Museum Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (1953): 109-20, DOI:10.2307/4422452. 109.

⁹⁵ British Museum, "Stone Figure of Xiuhcoatl," <http://culturalinstitute.britishmuseum.org/asset-viewer/stone-figure-of-xiuhcoatl/8gGLbiPoLfaKjw?hl=en>.

interchangeably, he explains, is because he sees the sculpture as part of what the artist refers to as the genre *Quetzalcoatl*. In this invented genre, Palma includes all representations of the serpent within Mesoamerican creation. His stylistic influences include depictions of the serpent both drawn and sculptural, both monolithic and intimate, the intent being to include all possible representations of the serpent within pre-Columbian subjectivity.⁹⁶

In order to create in the so-called *Quetzalcoatl* tradition, Palma turns to the artifact to inform his conceptual and structural decisions. His use of the *Xiuhcoatl* from the British Museum is not merely stylistic, but focuses instead on the deity's history as a symbol for the aerial path of the sun in the sky.⁹⁷ For Palma, *Xiuhcoatl* is a marker for the passing of time.⁹⁸ By placing the electronic sensors within the *Xiuhcoatl's* rattle, the artist gestures towards what he explains as the scientific nature of indigenous cosmology, and the particular way in which it informed the structural makeup of the *Quetzalcoatl* or serpent tradition.⁹⁹

For Palma, “los conceptos en náhuatl son de corte científico. Se traslapan, se confunden el uno con el otro.” This, he states is what makes traditional expression such a powerful creative vehicle, “...muy apto para filosofar y muy apto para hacer arte.”¹⁰⁰ He pulls from certain technical and conceptual characteristics of the *Xiuhcoatl* in order to emulate the more general pre-Columbian tradition of sculptural expression that speaks to the nature of existence and the role of the individual through a visual language informed by calculated astrological predictions and their relationship to the earth's anatomy.

⁹⁶ Palma, Conversation with the author, August 23, 2016.

⁹⁷ Palma, Conversation with the author, August 23, 2016.

⁹⁸ Palma, Interview with Nika Chilewich, July 10, 2016.

⁹⁹ Palma, Interview with Nika Chilewich, August 23, 2016.

¹⁰⁰ Palma, Interview with Nika Chilewich, July 10, 2016.

Palma characterizes the genre *Quetzalcoatl* as forming part of the general trend within traditional, autochthonous production - to use a work's natural surroundings as both structural and conceptual material. For Palma the serpent is an anatomic representation of philosophical ideals, a mode of expression that has taken on innumerable iterations within different indigenous traditions over the course of millennia. While the *Xiuhcoatl* rattle in Palma's serpent incorporates the more general meeting point between the orbital pattern of the sun, the earth, and Venus, the *Meteorological* sculpture of *Quetzalcoatl* also pays homage to the construction of the Kukulcan pyramids in Chichén Itzá, and the ability for their architects to predict the time in which the galaxy's center, the sun, and the earth would be aligned.

(Figure 6)

Lo calcularon de tal forma que predijeron el momento en que se alinea el sol con el centro galáctico, considerando el punto geográfico de la pirámide Kukulcan en Chichén Itzá, para que la sombra bajara de la cara de las serpientes en sus pirámides.¹⁰¹

In Palma's opinion this structural feat was meant to function as a, "un reloj despertador. Entonces la pregunta es, ¿para qué?"¹⁰²

The answer to this question is less important than Palma's appropriation of the interrogative through the use of the serpent. The water designed to fall down the *Meteorological* *Quetzalcoatl* that sits in Milpa Alta mirrors the descending shadows at Kukulcan. For Palma this allows his *Xiuhcoatl* to function as a monument commemorating the feat of the Kukulcan pyramids, and establishing a continuation of the pre-Cortesian tradition of immortalizing moments of great importance.¹⁰³

By actualizing the *Quetzalcoatl* tradition, the artist disregards centuries of

¹⁰¹ Palma, Conversation with the author, August 23, 2016.

¹⁰² Palma, Conversation with the author, August 23, 2016.

¹⁰³ Palma, Conversation with the author, July 10, 2016.

ideological flattening of native culture within institutional languages of power. He uses the artifact to signify a restoration of the object's autonomy. With the *Meteorological Serpent*, Palma listens across scholarly distinctions between historical, geographical and cultural periods, in order to discern overarching methods of creation. In doing so, he places the original authors of these traditions first. Also, by prioritizing his own fictional narrative over historical accuracy, his creation of the Quetzalcoatl creative genre exposes historical narratives as equally fictitious, their claim to authenticity circumstantial. By establishing the narrative authority of his own indigenous subjectivity within the piece, Palma unearths the notion of accuracy as a construct, gesturing to the systems of power that hold it in place.

In Palma's structure, indigenous subjectivity is constitutive not illustrative. In this gesture Palma subverts what Barriendos calls the, "discurso de la objetividad y la verdad visuales arraigadas en la óptica de invisibilidad de la etnografía eurocentrada..."¹⁰⁴ By reinstating his indigenous subjectivity within the artifact, Palma's serpent disturbs the myth of transparency and the colonial structures implicit in the artifact as museumified object, and the invisibility of the lived native subject that affirms the metaphysical narcissism of the colonial gaze.¹⁰⁵

This mode of creation can be seen throughout Palma's practice. The artist has spent twenty years studying the gestural movements of the illustrators of the codex Mendoza and Borges, which Palma then appropriates into his own digital paintings, or stories, as the artist calls them.¹⁰⁶ With the *Meteorological Serpent*, Palma positions himself as a contemporary manifestation of traditional indigenous

¹⁰⁴ Barriendos, "La colonialidad del ver", 24.

¹⁰⁵ Here I am referencing what Barriendos calls the "metafísica occidental" that "gire en círculos sobre sí misma a la hora de desmontar la dualidad entre el sujeto que observa y el sujeto que es motivo de la observación...", Barriendos, "La colonialidad del ver", 21.

¹⁰⁶ Palma, Conversation with the author, August 23, 2016.

production, denying centuries of silencing of indigenous creative voices.

When understood from this angle, his mode of creation can be seen less as a form of representation than as a mode of expression, a search for autonomous realization within a visual economy dictated by the colonial other. This form of “aesthetic utterance” is akin to the contemporary Native American artistic expression described by Fisher as, “less a statement or a representation in the western sense than a performative act –a ‘speaking’ body continuously retracing the boundaries of the self in the world.”¹⁰⁷ In the “utterances” explored by Fisher, “the art *object* is not necessarily privileged over the *gesture* that informs it or the communal space it addresses.”¹⁰⁸ In the case of the *Meteorological Serpent*, the act of creation and the appropriation and reactivation of the artifact gives Palma’s “speaking body” precedence. Unfortunately, that speaking body is only legible to institutions of contemporary art and academia, and little is done to support the methodology the artist creates in order to communicate it to the public. As a result, in the lived experience of the *Meteorological Serpent*, the final sculptural object takes precedence.

If one considers that the communal space Palma’s work is addressing is the museum institution, as is the case with the works Fisher explores in her text, the *Meteorological Serpent* achieves the institutional confrontation it seeks. However, the museumified provocations Palma achieves in his creative methodology do not, in the case of the public sculpture, move far enough from the institutional languages he attempts to subvert. The reasons for this are varied. One could suggest that the outcome may have been different if more resources were allocated to try and integrate the sculpture into its local community. In speaking with passers-by about the sculpture, one native of Milpa Alta who makes a living farming nopal lamented

¹⁰⁷ Fisher, “In Search of the ‘Inauthentic’”, 247.

¹⁰⁸ Fisher, “In Search of the ‘Inauthentic’”, 247.

the fact that neither she nor her friends or family felt any affiliation with the sculpture.¹⁰⁹ Others echoed her complaint, which suggests that there is at least a portion of the local community that would welcome a concentrated effort to find solutions for integrating the sculpture into its surroundings.

Perhaps the efforts made by the artist to reach his local audience were lacking, but the leap required for the *Meteorological Serpent* to be translatable in its conceptual complexity to a local audience is suggestive of the cognitive and epistemological dissonance caused by the persistent colonial nature of Mexico City's cultural institutions, and the exclusion of its many marginalized subjects.¹¹⁰ The power structures at play here can be understood through Gerardo Mosquera's description of the Eurocentric cultural networks that continue to influence contemporary creative expression. He states, "La metacultura occidental se estableció por la colonización, el dominio y aun la necesidad de 'hablarla' para poder oponerse a la nueva situación dentro de ella."¹¹¹

That the history of the artifact as a cultural phenomenon would need to be taught to its local indigenous audiences in order to understand Palma's appropriation of the category, demonstrates the continued dependence on colonial institutional networks that necessarily exclude those left out of the institution. Both Palma and his audience, it would seem, are trapped in a mode of expression in which the indigenous subject is perpetually tied to the colonial 'other' for public enunciation. This, Fisher describes as the, "familial pathology that casts the state in the role of the (benevolent) father and Indians as children."¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Resident of Milpa Alta, Conversation with the author, December 21, 2016. "Es una lástima que tenemos tanta cultura y historia aquí pero no la sabemos."

¹¹⁰ Here I use the term marginalized instead of indigenous to include a community of people with varying histories with relation to indigenous identity, to instead underline a series of socioeconomic and cultural systems of oppression that affect a greater group of people within Mexico City.

¹¹¹ Mosquera, "El síndrome de marco polo", 17.

¹¹² Fisher, "In Search of the 'Inauthentic'", 243.

The entrapment of both artist and work within languages of power can be seen in the institutional relationships that made the *Meteorological Serpent* possible. Its very existence was assured only to the extent to which the serpent functioned as part of Mexico City's network of cultural institutions, and was therefore dependent on Fernando Palma's position within institutional networks of power.

Does the work, as Barriendos describes, decolonize an institutional system founded on European universalism by forging a pluralistic perspective, sensitive to the "geopolítica del conocimiento"?¹¹³ Or does it prolong what Mosquera calls "el defecto de la perspectiva única y desde circuitos de poder,"¹¹⁴ by narrating contemporary indigenous resistance through languages of scholarship, upholding the authority of the colonial gaze? With this in mind, one must ask to what extent Palma's rhetoric of community-based indigenous art is largely a theoretical characterization functional only within the museum institution and the rhetoric of contemporary art.

Palma's ability to make the sculpture was achieved not through a conversation with the local community, but instead through the intellectual and practical time the artist has dedicated to showcasing his work within exhibitive institutions and creating value around his creative practice. His reputation as an artist, due to his years of professional development in Europe, precede the institutional interest of UNAM that allowed the artist to approach his local government and lobby for the sculpture's production. Therefore, it could be said that although the work is conceived of as a public piece of relational art, both artist and work find value within the museum institution.

¹¹³ Barriendos, "La colonialidad del ver", 16.

¹¹⁴ Mosquera "El síndrome de marco polo", 18.

The contemporary archeological object in Milpa Alta is in harsh contrast to the lack of cultural patrimony in the suburban region, which has been stripped of its own material history for the development of institutional archeological and ethnographic discourse. Just as the European explorers removed devotional objects from Mexico's indigenous communities, the current system of cultural patrimony has located the majority of the country's artifacts in state-sponsored cultural institutions, run primarily out of the country's extensive museum network based in urban centers. Displaced from the communities from which these objects came, their presence today is a result of negotiation between populations with uneven socioeconomic and political power. Indigenous communities in proximity to urban centers, as is the case with Milpa Alta, have been separated from the museumified discourse of the archeological object as part of their cultural narrative. However, the power of the museum construct as a means of narrating local history does pervade local sensibilities.

The Museo Regional Altepepialcalli that sits only a few hundred feet from Palma's serpent is a sobering example of both the scarcity of pre-Columbian objects that have been allowed to remain in the area, and of the pervasiveness of the museum institution as a rhetorical device. The collection of pre-Columbian artifacts within the two-room museum consists of an assortment of obsidian arrowheads organized on top of tissue paper, and a *metate* that is an example of a native object still in use. (Figures 3, 4, and 5) The rest of the museum is filled with a decaying butterfly collection from around the world – one can assume it was donated by a particular individual, although the exhibit does not say – a photo series publicizing Mexico City's government, and a singular vitrine at the museum's entrance with a small assortment of plastic toys organized in a procession around a doll house.



Figure 3. Museum Gallery at Museo Regional Altepepialcalli, photograph taken by author, December 18, 2016.



Figure 4. Display case at Museo Regional Altepepialcalli, photograph taken by author, December 18, 2016.



Figure 5. Metate at Museo Regional Altepepialcalli, photograph taken by author, December 18, 2016.

Just outside the museum, the plaza is filled with local vendors selling their pottery, weavings, and locally grown crops. They move around the sculpture selling their wares to passers-by, unaware of the call for unity the sculpture represents and the histories it contests.

Architects of the Indian

If Palma's serpent reflects a fundamental inability for the lived indigenous communities of Milpa Alta to relate to the form of indigenous expression the artist reproduces, then the question still remains as to what forms of artistic expression exist within Milpa Alta's cultural landscape.

The answer can be found, in part, by analyzing the role native culture has played as a metaphorical tool in the country's process of modernization. The counterpoint to the anesthetized, museumified Indian is the indigenous subject whose alterity has served Mexico's political and economic discourse both on a national and

international stage.¹¹⁵ With the onset of the twentieth century, the Indian would undergo a transformation within the Mexican psyche as a metaphorical tool employed to maintain sociopolitical and economic hierarchies. This redefined native 'other' constitutes the conceptual and stylistic framework still active within Milpa Alta, just outside Mexico City's centralized cultural networks.

After Mexico's independence, engineers of the country's modern narrative directed their attention towards designing a history of Mexico as a modern nation-state rooted in the country's autonomy.¹¹⁶ The task of building a cultural and political genealogy that told a coherent story of Mexico's past in order to affirm its present and look to the future, inevitably included a discussion of how to place Mexico's native history. This constructed history was set against the reality of indigenous existence, and the extreme poverty of indigenous peoples under the Porfirian administration.¹¹⁷ For Mexico's architects of progress at the turn of the twentieth century, native populations presented a structural challenge for the creation of a contemporary landscape, especially within Mexico City, the country's political hub and the center of its cosmopolitan aspirations.¹¹⁸

What would be set in motion during the first years of the twentieth century was a treatment of native culture in which a delicate balance was enacted between symbolic inclusion and structural oppression, creating a dissonance between visual metaphor and lived realities of the underprivileged communities on the margins of

¹¹⁵ This idea I am pulling from Barriendos' description of the cyclical cannibalization of the Indian under the colonial gaze. To this end he states: "Para nosotros resulta claro que, como si de una espiral ontológica se tratara, aquellas formas antropófagas de observación y (di)gestión de la alteridad aparecidas en el siglo XVI persisten en nuestros imaginarios económicos y culturales globales, en la actual retórica sobre la interdependencia geopolítica y en las negociaciones comerciales, corporativas y patrimoniales de la 'era poscolonial'" p. 23

¹¹⁶ Mauricio Tenorio Trillo, "1910 Mexico City: Space and Nation in the City of the Centenario," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Feb., 1996), pp. 75-104, 75.

¹¹⁷ Shifra Goldman, *Contemporary Mexican Painting in a Time of Change*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 4.

¹¹⁸ Tenorio Trillo "1910 Mexico City", 86.

the country's educational, cultural, and political networks. As the country was redefined after the revolution, indigenous culture would play a symbolic role in creating national pride, and the Indian would be equated with revolutionary ideals and political reform.¹¹⁹ The political restructuring of the country after the Mexican revolution would also transform the artist into a state-sponsored ideological architect.¹²⁰

At the time of the Mexican revolution, certain paradigms had already been established between public space, cultural identity, and native peoples. Within the hundred years after Mexico's war of independence in 1810, the country's elite had envisioned and laid down the groundwork for Mexico's modern cosmopolitan identity, achieved, in part, by ridding urban space of the Indian. This form of urban conquest, Mauricio Tenorio Trillo explains in his article "1910 Mexico City: Space and Nation in the City of the *Centenario*", was, at the time of the country's centennial celebrations, based on an understanding of the Indian as embodying traditional ideals antithetical to progress.

Indeed, compared to Europe, where urban reform was considered a matter of social reform and internal security, or the product of 'catastrophic change', in Mexico it was a manner of frontier expansion. The ideal city, therefore, was conceived as a conquest not only over tradition, chaos and backwardness but also over nature.¹²¹

Tenorio Trillo's statement demonstrates how urban identity was constructed in complete opposition to and in exclusion of indigenous communities. By forcing the Indian out of urban space, authorities could erase the lived indigenous subject from a unified national history erected in the modern metropolis. Mexico City's urban landscape was transformed to celebrate the country's national independence

¹¹⁹ Goldman, *Contemporary Mexican Painting*, 8.

¹²⁰ Goldman, *Contemporary Mexican Painting*, 7-8.

¹²¹ Tenorio Trillo, "1910 Mexico City", 78.

through a three-part narrative in which pre-Colombian culture, conquest, and independence built on each other sequentially.¹²²

This operative understanding of civic space as both a tool for self-fashioning and a pedagogical platform would precede an awakened sensitivity towards indigenous identity as a narrative device borne from political revolution. Intellectual communities, and the artist in particular, would become intricately linked to radical political ideology, and a treatment of native identity would be institutionalized as part of the country's national identity.¹²³ This, coupled with federal educational programs for indigenous communities, has resulted in a particularly convoluted relationship between artist as pedagogical figure, and public space as an epistemological platform for shaping indigenous communities.¹²⁴

The return of the Indian within a twentieth century cultural landscape, however, merely reestablished the native subject within a re-defined narrative for the country's middle and upper classes. Artists formulated conceptual frameworks in which the pictorial plane was just one part in a greater architectural and sculptural understanding of the potentials of public space, which pulled indiscriminately from pre-Columbian traditions.¹²⁵ For many artists this practice included injecting a perceived understanding of how pre-Columbian cultures had constructed their ritualistic space.¹²⁶ At this time, institutionally supported artists also began to engage the structural and ideological space of the museum as a public pedagogical platform.¹²⁷

¹²² Tenorio Trillo, "1910 Mexico City", 87, 94.

¹²³ Goldman, "Contemporary Mexican Painting", 5.

¹²⁴ Goldman, "Contemporary Mexican Painting", 8.

¹²⁵ Daniel Usabiaga, *Mathías Goeritz y la Arquitectura Emocional. Una revisión crítica (1952-1968)*, (México: CONACULTA/Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2012), 60-63.

¹²⁶ Jesse Lerner, *The Maya of Modernism: Art, Architecture, and Film*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011) 37.

¹²⁷ Jesse Lerner, *The Maya of Modernism*, 38-42.

The centralized educational and cultural systems within Mexico City made it so that when visual iterations of progressive artistic ideologies tended increasingly towards a language of abstraction, contemporary artistic expression began to exist within increasingly specialized communities of privilege, and a privatizing art market.¹²⁸ Public works in Mexico City exacerbated the country's authoritarian political structure and the operative agendas of its institutional networks. A lack of transparency as to the allocation of public funding further aggravated suspicions of institutional corruption.

This complex ideological terrain –a tension between grandiose claims, centralized institutional control, and operative agendas– can be seen in the works of urban beautification, and the representations of indigenous culture one encounters throughout Mexico City.

Milpa Alta has developed on the periphery of Mexico City's cultural landscape, and remains the largest concentrated population of indigenous peoples in the metropolitan area.¹²⁹ The region, largely of Nahuatl descent, played a decisive role in the Mexican Revolution, and is a central part of the country's post-revolutionary mythology.¹³⁰ In fact, one of the few testimonies of indigenous subjectivity at the turn of the twentieth century comes from a resident of Milpa Alta, that of Doña Luz Jimenez, who recounts the arrival of the Porfirian educational policy and indigenous socialization, followed by years of violent conflict when Emiliano Zapata and his revolutionary forces used Milpa Alta as a strategic point along their way to the

¹²⁸ Daniel Montero, *El cubo de Rubik, arte mexicano en los años 90*, (México: Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo, 2013), 69-88.

¹²⁹ <http://www.unesco.org/library/PDF/IndigenousWorld2014.pdf>

¹³⁰ Paula López Caballero, "The effect of Othering,"; and "Artist's, Models, and Scientists".

capital, which displaced the area's residents for three years.¹³¹ After the Revolution, Luz Jimenez was used as a cultural archetype of indigeneity within Mexico's redefined cultural identity. She was a model for the Academia de San Carlos as well as at the outdoor art schools in Coyoacan, for artist Fernando Leal, appearing in his fresco "La fiesta del señor de Chalma", for French artist Jean Charlot, for José Clemente Orozco, and for photographers Edward Weston and Tina Modotti. She also appears in the works "La Creación" by Diego Rivera, and in his murals at the Secretaría de Educación.¹³²

Luz Jimenez's transformation into a post-revolutionary indigenous ideal, formed part of the particular position Milpa Alta obtained in Mexico's modern narration of its pre-Columbian past as part of its new national identity. Academics within the growing field of anthropology in Mexico and the United States, concluded that Milpa Alta's populations were direct descendants of the Aztecs of Tenochtitlan, and that the region had been a refuge for the ancient city's aristocracy after the conquest due to its proximity to the late pre-Columbian metropolis.¹³³ The area has consequently held a privileged position within twentieth century ideals of the Indian as part of the country's integrationist ethos of *mestizaje* – its descendants said to be the closest representation of classical indigenous culture, that of the Aztecs.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Luz Jimenez's story can be read in the translated publication, Fernando Horcasitas, comp. and trans. *De Porfirio Díaz a Zapata. Memoria Náhuatl de Milpa Alta*, (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, 2000). The text is largely considered the preeminent work of modern Nahuatl scholarship. Another account of Luz Jimenez and her importance after the revolution can be found in the exhibition catalogue, José Antonio Rodríguez, *Edward Weston, la mirada de la ruptura*, (México: Centro de la Imagen, 1994).

¹³² Caballero, "Artist's, Models, and Scientists," 118-199.

¹³³ Caballero, "The effect of Othering", 176-177.

¹³⁴ Caballero explains how Milpa Alta's indigenous community was constructed as having a unique and desirable otherness within state-sponsored rhetoric after the Mexican Revolution. She states. "Since Indians should be 'mixed' in order to have access to the modernized nation, the remarkable operation under way here consisted in making the *Milpaltense* difference correspond as closely as possible to the national identity, located in the only 'place' or 'sphere' where the Indian culture is valued: the roots of the nation –Aztec civilization." Caballero, "The effect of Othering", 177.

The region has also been an important link for indigenous activism, providing shelter and support for indigenous peoples throughout the country. In the 1970's, members of what was known as the *movimiento comunero* fought for the right for self-governance of Milpa Alta's land and the protection of the region's forests.¹³⁵ This battle, Paula López Caballero notes, was staged through a symbolic argument that used the state sponsored narrative of the region's supposed Aztec heritage and what they argued was an ancient right to their land.¹³⁶ Members of the community have also been active in the country's networks fighting for indigenous autonomy, such as the Zapatista liberation movement in Chiapas, and the more recent teacher protests of education reform.¹³⁷ These efforts have appropriated the symbolism of the Mexican revolution, redefining its imagery within a greater genealogy of political protest throughout Mexico and Latin America.¹³⁸

Increased migration to the region has diversified Milpa Alta's indigenous makeup, and informal urbanization –often a result of poor families who acquire land within illegal real estate networks– has created tension among the region's residents.¹³⁹ As a result, native identity in Milpa Alta has been transformed in recent decades to communicate a distinction between true *Milpaltenses*, of Nahuatl descent, and those known as *avencidados*, whose arrival has generated economic competition and social tensions. Members who have lived for generations in Milpa Alta, and define themselves as *originarios*, have begun to organize around a native identity via provenance of birth. In doing so, Paula López Caballero notes, local authorities have turned away from indigenous identity as a symbol of national pride and a beacon of inclusion by way of the *mestizaje* narrative, to a more protectionist idea of local identity through the concept of the 'pueblo originario'. This definition of indigenous

¹³⁵ Caballero, "The effect of Othering," 177.

¹³⁶ Caballero, "The effect of Othering," 177.

¹³⁷ Neil Harvey, "The New Agrarian Movement in Mexico 1979-1990," *ISA Research Papers* 23 (1990).

¹³⁸ Goldman "Contemporary Mexican Painting", 9

¹³⁹ Caballero "The effect of Othering," 173.

identity feeds on the multiculturalist ideals that have emerged since the early 2000's, and the Mexican government's formal recognition of indigenous forms of social organization and local governance.¹⁴⁰ Milpa Alta's local indigenous identity has no doubt also been informed by its local industry, and a form of branding in which authenticity or quality is communicated through symbols of the region's indigenous identity.

Currently, the largest public arts project in the delegation of Milpa Alta is the 2009 *Paseo Escultórico*¹⁴¹ The art walk consist of 13 cast bronze sculptures that depict indigenous identity through a narration of Milpa Alta's importance in the Mexican Revolution, and through the indigenous subject's noble acceptance of rural labor.¹⁴² The sculptures include two representations of Emiliano Zapata, one in which the revolutionary hero stands tall and one in which he lies dead, and one of Luz Jiménez. (Figures 6, 7) The walk also includes two depictions of indigenous men who, shoeless, re-enact daily scenes of agrarian labor. (Figure 8) One man stands tall, shovel and corn stalk in hand, and one sells his wares. Several robust indigenous women, shoeless and in various states of undress, complete tasks of rural femininity, which in the case of the *Paseo* include breastfeeding, tending to children, harvesting corn, cultivating nopal, and making mole. (Figure 9)

¹⁴⁰ Caballero "The effect of Othering," 173.

¹⁴¹ Jorge Álvaro Galicia, Jefe Delegacional, delegación Milpa Alta, phone conversation with Author, January 10, 2017.

¹⁴² Photos of the sculpture walk can be found on Teuhtli, Un lugar en la Milpa Alta, "Esculturas," Accessed February 15, 2017, <http://teuhtli.blogspot.mx/p/esculturas.html>.



Figure 6. Paseo Escultórico, 2009, photograph taken from Teuhtli, Un Lugar en la Milpa Alta, <http://teuhtli.blogspot.mx/p/esculturas.html>.



Figure 7. Paseo Escultórico, 2009, photograph taken from Teuhtli, Un Lugar en la Milpa Alta, <http://teuhtli.blogspot.mx/p/esculturas.html>.



Figure 8. Paseo Escultórico, 2009, photograph taken from Teuhtli, Un Lugar en la Milpa Alta, <http://teuhtli.blogspot.mx/p/esculturas.html>.



Figure 9. Paseo Escultórico, 2009, photograph taken from Teuhtli, Un Lugar en la Milpa Alta, <http://teuhtli.blogspot.mx/p/esculturas.html>.

Within these depictions of indigenous life, figures work passively, their gaze directed down towards their work, or wistfully off in the distance. They are withdrawn and stoic, accepting of their responsibilities but never celebratory. These

somber representations of indigenous heroism fall into what art historian Jesse Lerner has explained as Mexico's modern language of "savagery", in which native identity is once again entrapped within "a repertoire of images, characterizations, and scenarios that conspires to deprive them of the agency they so emphatically claimed for themselves in the first social revolution of the twentieth century."¹⁴³

The publicly funded sculptural project also includes a glorification of nopal and the manufacturing of mole, depicting the two commodities as a celebrated part of the region's history. Neither form part of Milpa Alta's pre-Columbian identity, but were introduced to the region in the past sixty years.¹⁴⁴ They are, in many ways, a direct result of Milpa Alta's integration into Mexico City's modern economic structure, and have been two of the most damaging threats to biodiversity in the area.¹⁴⁵

Particularly the growing popularity of mole processed in the region has resulted in a rapid destruction of the area's pre-Cortesian terraced landscape, as local farmers opt to sell their land to serve as storage or other operational facilities in the fabrication and distribution of the good, and to seek employment unrelated to agriculture.¹⁴⁶ According to community members of Calpulli Tecalco A.C., the growth of the mole industry has drastically changed the landscape of Milpa Alta in the past twenty years, and local farmers have increasingly abandoned the *Milpa* farming technique, viewing it as a poor economic option or as part of a provincial lifestyle, as is the case with the younger generations.

By memorializing these traditions, the sculptural *Paseo* serves as a testament to the

¹⁴³ Lerner, *The Maya of Modernism*, 52.

¹⁴⁴ Bonilla Rodríguez, "Urbanización rural y economía agrícola", 205.

¹⁴⁵ Lev Jardón Barbolla, "Más allá del pensamiento tipológico y la cosificación: las variedades locales de cultivos como proceso biosocial" Volumen 4 número 9 mayo-agosto 2016, 44

¹⁴⁶ Mexico City Municipal Government, "Programa parcial de desarrollo urbano Villa Milpa Alta del Programa delegacional de desarrollo urbano para la Delegación Milpa Alta", aprobado por la Asamblea Legislativa y publicado el 27 de agosto de 2002 en la *Gaceta Oficial del Distrito Federal*, 250-258.

integration of an essentialist depiction of indigenous identity and its continued persistence. The singularity of these forms of representation – which can also be found on store fronts, in the crafts sold by local artisans, and painted on public facades– is made all the more powerful by the fact that the majority of Milpa Alta’s citizens today have a minimal relationship to the centralized cultural institutions within Mexico City, demonstrated by the average age of employment and by the average educational level in the region.¹⁴⁷ The *Paseo*’s presence demonstrates the continued power of a reductive visual language in which art and indigenous identity are tied to representational economies founded in the country’s nationalist rhetoric.

It would be incorrect to assume that the entire local population passively accepts this form of representation or feels any great sense of identification with it. One local author notes that the sculptures incorrectly glorify the tradition of mole and nopal in the region, but ultimately praises the sculptures for their figurative qualities and technical prowess.¹⁴⁸ Upon its inauguration, the sculptural project generated some negative reactions, as the cost of the beautification project was enormous, a clear misallocation of funds that should have gone to remedying Milpa Alta’s serious problems of poverty, food shortage, lack of services and poor infrastructure.¹⁴⁹ According to one online writer, the sculptures cost a total of \$13,827,000 Mexican pesos of which \$4,000,000 pesos went missing and were not accounted for.¹⁵⁰ Unfortunately, the information on the *Paseo Escultórico* is sparse and informal, spread over a few separate blogs and Facebook pages. As for Palma’s

¹⁴⁷ Milpa Alta Municipal Government, “Atlas de Riesgos naturales de la Delegación Milpa Alta 2011,” Work Number 109009PP042204, File number PP11/09009/AE/1/056, 36, accessed January 17, 2017,

http://www.normateca.sedesol.gob.mx/work/models/SEDESOL/Resource/2612/Atlas_Estados/09009_MILPA_ALTA/ATLAS_RIESGOS_MILPA_ALTA.pdf.

¹⁴⁸ Teuhtli, Un lugar en la Milpa Alta, “Esculturas”, Accessed February 15, 2017, <http://teuhtli.blogspot.mx/p/esculturas.html>.

¹⁴⁹ Mexicanos en Movimiento, “Milpa Alta y su administración,” Feb. 2010, Accessed February 15, 2017, <http://mexicanos-en-movimiento.blogspot.mx/2010/02/milpa-alta-y-su-administracion.html>.

¹⁵⁰ Mexicanos en Movimiento, “Milpa Alta y su administración.”

sculpture, the work seems to have generated no local coverage.¹⁵¹

When considered in relation to the *Paseo Escultórico*, one can see how the colonial text of Palma's local community –that is the institutionally sanctioned artistic modes of expressing indigenous identity in Milpa Alta– is as much a result of structural dependency as it is an internalization of external values. Indigenous expression in this context is contained within a mechanism for economic survival linked to a controlled expression of native selfhood. Current racial tensions in the region between the *originarios* and *avecindados* could also factor into the rejection of new, unrecognizable artistic voices that are not first sanctioned by local community authorities. The precarious state of the majority of Milpa Alta's citizens means that in order for an artist to successfully incorporate local acts of resistance and their visual narrative structure into a public sculpture, she would have to begin first with the local community, which, Palma's sculpture proves, would by default make the project incompatible with the contemporary art institution. It would require the artist leave aside his creative self and sense of artistic authorship, to instead adopt a methodology based in critical self-reflection, and that he have the unconditional support of the museum institution with no guarantee as to the form or content of the final art object.

The *Meteorological Serpent* Within the Contemporary Art Context

The online museum text that accompanied Palma's exhibit focuses on the *Meteorological Serpent* as artistic commentary on the lack of environmental awareness in Mexico City, and describes the artist's use of Milpa Alta as an example of the destruction cause by informal urban expansion.¹⁵² The *Meteorological Serpent*

¹⁵¹ In my research I uncovered no local coverage. This, however, could be due to the lack of infrastructure available for archiving local press. My research also didn't take into account radio.

¹⁵² Museo Universitario del Chopo, "...*amotla otlacualacac oncan*".

is mentioned as one of three parts of the exhibit, but the text includes no indication that the sculpture would remain after the end of the show. The serpent, they state, “...funcionará a un tiempo como escultura pública y estación meteorológica y enviará vía internet información a las piezas ubicadas en el Chopo.”¹⁵³

“Con este proyecto” the museum text closes, “el artista busca llamar la atención sobre la destrucción sistemática que han sufrido las tradiciones de los pueblos originarios, los vestigios arqueológicos y el medio ambiente de la delegación Milpa Alta.”¹⁵⁴

A continuation of the text contains more detailed information on the work. In it, the exhibit's three structural components are explained separately. The *Meteorological Serpent* is referred to as a “Quiyahuacoatl (serpiente de lluvia). Estación meteorológica de manera de serpiente,” a discrepancy that suggests that the contemporary artifact is equally at odds with the museum institution, which funded its creation, as it is to the museum that houses the work's inspiration.¹⁵⁵

As to the conceptual goals of the serpent, the text goes on to state:

Utilizar los cambios atmosféricos como material escultórico es un primer paso para lograr una autonomía, puntualiza, que permite conocer los patrones de cambio que afectan esa región y su conservación. Patrones que afectan esa comunidad, aún rural, y cuyo cuidado ambiental afecta en su totalidad al DF.”

Asimismo, es interesante reconocer que los fenómenos ambientales a medir fueron conocidos de manera tradicional por generaciones pasadas de esta comunidad y permitieron una relación estrecha entre el medio ambiente y sus habitantes. Este reconocimiento ha sido

¹⁵³ Museo Universitario del Chopo, “...*amotla otlacualacac oncan*”.

¹⁵⁴ Museo Universitario del Chopo, “...*amotla otlacualacac oncan*”.

¹⁵⁵ See the description of the *Xiuhcoatl* housed at the British Museum in British Museum, “Stone Figure of *Xiuhcoatl*.”

reemplazado por la tecnología moderna, la cual en su mayoría ha ido en detrimento de la comunión humanidad-tierra.¹⁵⁶

This text provides a concise description of the installation as a conceptual coming together of current social and environmental issues, contemporary technology, and pre-Columbian mythology. However, this information is not used in a single one of the articles that covered the show, most of which consisted mainly of the first half of the museum's description in various iterations. The description also suggests that the value of the serpent is solely focused on how it serves as an artistic commentary for museum audiences on the environmental practices of Mexico City's citizens.¹⁵⁷

The curators at the El Chopo museum, Daniel Garza Usabiaga and Esteban King Álvarez, were involved with the project and in tune with Palma as an artist, evidenced in the small catalogue that was released by the museum almost a year after the show opened on December 7, 2013. It includes two pieces of academic writing, one by art historian Helena Chávez Mac Gregor, and the other by El Chopo curator King Álvarez. King Álvarez's text is possibly the most succinct piece of academic writing on Palma's work, although handfuls of art historians, curators, and critics in Mexico and abroad have sought a critical and theoretical engagement with Palma's practice.¹⁵⁸ In King Álvarez's text, he insightfully refers to the serpent as a "tecnoquetzalcoátl", but also repeats the serpent's name as "Quiyahuacoatl", even

¹⁵⁶ British Museum, "Stone Figure of *Xiuhcoatl*."

¹⁵⁷ A list of media coverage includes Revista Código, "Entrevista: Fernando Palma en el Museo Universitario del Chopo", Dec. 12, 2013, accessed February 15, 2017, <http://www.revistacodigo.com/entrevista-fernando-palma/>; Rebeca Torres del Castillo, "El arte ecológico de Fernando Palma," *Gastv*, accessed February 15, 2017, <http://gastv.mx/el-arte-ecologico-de-fernando-palma/>; Sonia Ávila, "Fernando Palma Rodríguez unirá el Museo del Chopo con Milpa Alta," *Excelsior*, January, 12, 2013, accessed February 15, 2017, <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/expresiones/2013/12/01/931471>.

¹⁵⁸ They include academic texts by Cuauhtémoc Medina, Victor Muñoz, and Jose Martin González in the exhibition catalogue *Mechatronic Circus: Fernando Palma Rodríguez*, (London: 198 Gallery and Oriol Mostyn Gallery, 2000).

though it is referred to as “*Xiuhcoatl*” in the catalogue’s images of the sculpture.

Palma has been a less well known, but persistent contributor in the international wave of cultural voices that in the 1990’s popularized a discourse on global cultural politics and their colonial histories. In particular, the artist credits his relationship with the late Jean Fisher, a friend and colleague of the artist’s in London, as motivating him to focus his contemporary practice on his research into pre-Columbian traditions.¹⁵⁹ His work has also been associated with that of Native American artist Jimmie Durham, who is both a friend and colleague of Palma’s, but who has not, as some have suggested, had a direct impact on Palma’s production.¹⁶⁰

Mexican curator Cuauhtémoc Medina has also been a supporter of Palma’s work, and was influential in facilitating the invitation from UNAM for the El Chopo residency.¹⁶¹ Medina, who is the chief curator of the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo of UNAM, has included both the artist and his family who participate in Calpulli Tecalco A.C., in public discussions and publications at the museum.¹⁶² Medina was also influential in the MUAC’s acquisition of one of Palma’s works, adding the artist to what is one of the world’s foremost collections of contemporary Mexican art.¹⁶³

Within contemporary scholarly pursuits to decolonize art institutions, Palma’s work, although highly regarded in certain communities, is mostly unknown. He was

¹⁵⁹ At the time that they met, Palma had been studying the codex Mendosa and Borjes for many years and creating his digital stories, but kept them private. The mechatronic artwork he was exploring was linked to themes of environmental issues, but not directly linked to issues of pre-Columbian identity. Palma, Conversation with Author, August 2, 2016.

¹⁶⁰ Palma, Conversation with Author, August 2, 2016.

¹⁶¹ Palma, Conversation with Author, August 2, 2016.

¹⁶² Palma was first invited to speak at the museum in 2011 as part of the public seminar, “Zonas de disturbio IV. Indigenismo” taught by Mariana Botey and Cuauhtémoc Medina, Palma, Conversation with Author, August 2, 2016.

¹⁶³ Palma, Conversation with Author, August 2, 2016. The piece acquired by the museum is *Greetings, Zapata Moles*, 1994.

not part of the canon of contemporary Mexican artists who in the 1990's received international institutional attention.¹⁶⁴ The lack of sustained institutional interest in the *Meteorological Serpent*, that is, its invisibility within the landscape of contemporary Mexican art, demonstrates the ways in which Palma as an artist is dependent on the commercial negotiations and institutional power structures of the contemporary art market, as well as the ambivalence of the contemporary art world towards projects of public art. Its invisibility after the exhibit's close suggests that even contemporary efforts to upend the colonial histories within art and other cultural histories, in the case of Mexico City's contemporary art world, remain trapped within the centralized structure of the country's institutions. It also suggests an aversion within contemporary arts practices towards public works projects, which could be seen as reflective of the deep distrust between artists and state-sponsored projects begun with the breaking of artists from the muralist tradition and the post-revolutionary ideologies of public art.¹⁶⁵

Practices of contemporary artistic dissent in Mexico have engaged the operative histories of indigenous identity and the pre-Columbian ruin, however these practices have been largely focused on appropriating languages of power to critique institutional practice. These works include, among others, a satirical adaptation of pseudo-archaeological discourse in the case of Jimmie Durham's work *Bedía's First Basement*, an appropriation of the language of the modern museum in the case of Gabriel Orozco's series *Photogravity*, and a parody of institutional rhetoric of the

¹⁶⁴ The reasons for this are varied and deserve further exploration. However, for the purposes of this piece of writing, I find it relevant to mention two possibilities that both relate to a geographical positioning of the artist outside of Mexico's institutional networks. First, Palma was out of the country in Europe during the international boom of Mexican artists in the 1990s, and therefore did not have the same interaction with local artists, curators, academics, and critics. Later, upon his return to Mexico City, the artist moved back to Milpa Alta, where he currently lives and spends the majority of his time and energy, again outside the networks of Mexico City's cultural institutions.

¹⁶⁵ For a more in depth exploration of Mexican art in the twentieth century see, Shifra Goldman, *Contemporary Mexican Painting in a Time of Change*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), and Lerner, Jesse, *The Maya of Modernism: Art, Architecture, and Film*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011).

state in the case of Eduardo Abaroa's work *Destrucción total del Museo de Antropología*. Practices have also looked at the ruin as an abstract symbol for a fragmented and displaced sense of identity, in the case of Sylvia Gruner's practice in Mexico in the 1990's in which the artist used an approximation of the ruin to express the artist's own feelings of alienation, or again in the case of Gruner's work *Don't fuck with the past because you might get pregnant* to express a misguided fetishization of pre-Columbian small sculptures, ritual and culture.¹⁶⁶

These practices, although critical, remained tied to an institutional rhetoric, and uphold the centrality of the museum institution, the point of dissension within the vast majority of confrontational contemporary art practices. The subversion within Palma's *Meteorological Serpent* can be seen as similarly framed in the context of institutional discourse; it fundamentally fails to transcend the museum institution. However, it's location forty kilometers south of the El Chopo Museum's walls, has rendered this work of contemporary indigenous resistance invisible to the very communities whose critical pursuits made it possible.

Some Final Thoughts

Palma's forgotten *Meteorological Serpent* illuminates a history of fragmented communication between artistic practice, institutional rhetoric, and public discourse in Mexico City. Forgotten and lifeless, it demonstrates a fundamental inability for the artist to successfully propose an alternative vocabulary for contemporary indigenous identity that extends beyond the boundaries of the institution.

¹⁶⁶ Olivier Debrouse "Puertos de entrada: el arte mexicano se globaliza 1987-1992" in Olivier Debrouse et al. *Era de la Discrepancia. Arte y cultura visual en México 1968-1997*, (México: Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo, 2014) p. 330-339.; Sylvia Gruner "Don't fuck with the past, you might get pregnant," accessed February 15, 2017, <http://v1.zonezero.com/magazine/essays/distant/ygruner2.html>; Jesse Lerner *The Maya of Modernism*, 53-70.

Palma's sculpture as a contemporary indigenous artifact in opposition to its own operative histories makes the work a valuable example of contemporary indigenous art that challenges the museum's colonial text. It provides us with a native perspective on themes of cultural difference within exhibitiv institutions, and offers a counterpoint to the desires implicit in the museum's colonial gaze. Its inability to translate the artist's exploration of cultural difference and autonomous indigenous expression to its intended audience, suggests that successfully posing questions of lived indigenous identity through artistic practice requires that the artist as author further unravel his own dependency on institutional languages of power.

The *Meteorological Serpent's* invisibility leaves us with a range of questions as to how the many different academic communities involved with the work might have used their own institutional networks to try and support this artistic endeavor outside of the institution. Their disinterest or inability to do so implies the level to which autonomous indigenous creation, that is, in the case of the *Meteorological Serpent*, indigenous creation outside of an institutional framework, still remains outside of even the most subversive systems of signification.

It is clear that where the *Meteorological Serpent* is concerned, all participants could have done more to ensure that the sculpture had the best chance of engaging its local community. It is not beyond suggesting that maybe the very idea that the serpent's visual language could be communal is a misjudgment on the artist's part. However, the structural and conceptual miscommunications between artist and institution demonstrate a preference by the museum institution to its own space of institutional authority. The serpent demonstrates that the artist himself, although critical of the history of the artistic community to which he belongs, prioritizes its language, and the freedom of his own artistic voice, over pursuing a practice that

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prioritizes communication with his local community. Palma's and UNAM's commitment to promoting integrated discourse between the Sur-Sur networks in Mexico, and in Latin America in general, would require the institution to turn to works that speak beyond the institution's history.

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