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The revelatory art of Minerva Cuevas
Herrera, Jack
CJR, 2021

Showing Up

The revelatory art of Minerva Cuevas

BY JACK HERRERA

A few years ago I was reporting in Mexico, traveling from shelter to shelter along the United States border. In a refuge in central Tijuana, a group of children played on a dusty concrete porch. The shelter, built for asylum seekers coming from the southern part of the country and Central America, had been running at almost twice its capacity; a single room hosted some three dozen people. At the door, I interviewed a father from Nicaragua who said he'd spent close to a year there with his daughter. As he spoke, my eyes wandered to the children. It was afternoon; leaves from a laurel tree fell into a long shadow and a breeze carried the clean, cool smell of the Pacific Ocean. Almost all of the children had chicken pox. After the man finished, I thanked him; went home, to San Francisco; submitted my article, in English, to an American publication; and felt a pang of dissatisfaction with what I had not been able to convey in my dispatch. There were some things, it seemed, that one could not carry out of a place, like the force that puts people in motion to migrate over barbed wire and between iron beams, through illness and discomfort. Then I went to the Museum of Modern Art in downtown San Francisco and, for the first time, stood in a room with the work of Minerva Cuevas.

The piece was called *Río Bravo Crossing*. On a wall, a projector showed images of a woman standing in a large river. As gray-blue water lapped at the shore, the woman moved across the length of the river, painting a white streak across stones in the current. She left behind a single line, broken up by the water, that appeared to stretch out over the rocks and, eventually, the length of the river. The paint appeared so natural in the desert landscape that it could have been a geological occurrence. When she reached the far end of the river, the woman—Cuevas—had walked southward from the United States into Mexico and back. *Río Bravo* is the Mexican term for the Rio Grande, the river that marks the border.

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Coexisting with the awful immensity of the border—with its hundred-and-seventy-five-year history of violence and bloodshed—was an undeniable, inexorable beauty.

Opening image: Artist Minerva Cuevas. Production still from the Art21 Art in the Twenty-First Century Season 8 episode "Mexico City," 2016. © Art21 Inc. 2016

Top left and bottom right: Minerva Cuevas, *Crossing the Rio Bravo*, 2010. Photographs from the artist's action. Courtesy of Minerva Cuevas and kurimanzutto Mexico City / New York

Top right: Minerva Cuevas, *Crossing the Rio Bravo*, 2010. Objects from the artist's action. Courtesy of Minerva Cuevas and Ballroom Marfa, San Antonio. Photo credit: Fredrik Nielsen, 2010

Cuevas had brought something into the gallery that I did not think was possible to translocate. Her installation came with historical documents and other ephemera: antique maps; a thick glass jug filled with water from the river; stones from the bank; a compass; wildflowers preserved under glass hemispheres; and a bucket of the white paint that she used for her line. As I walked through the exhibit, I thought of a Salvadoran father named Óscar Martínez and his daughter, Valeria, who earlier that year had drowned in the Río Bravo, arm in arm, as they sought refuge in the United States. And yet coexisting with the awful immensity of the border—with its hundred-and-seventy-five-year history of violence and bloodshed—was an undeniable, inexorable beauty.

Río Bravo is also the name that was used for the Rio Grande long ago, back when the border was hundreds of miles north. Cuevas had learned this—and developed the idea for the piece—over a period of deep research: she'd spent time at the border, studying migration and the desert; she'd ingratiated herself with locals. "When I arrived on the border, in 2010, I was surprised to see that not all the area was marked—there were kilometers and kilometers without any signs saying that this was the limit," she told me recently. "You were free from the political imaginary, but, at the same time, you bring it with you. The people who were with me understood that the river was a borderline, and that made it dangerous."

If my work, as a journalist, often felt like a process of extraction (identifying a story, mining its details, leaving with them), Cuevas's work felt like a process of distillation, bringing herself to a place of compassion and understanding in order to create. I asked if she had any relationship to reporting. "My research is a responsibility," she replied. "It's very right that you compare it to what a journalist does, because what I do involves talking to people I trust about context and issues, and often I make contact with local activists." But she pointed out an important difference: "I don't only work through subjects or themes," she said. "I work through a very close personal connection to something, or some place." The result, in the case of *Río Bravo Crossing*, could also be found in reality—that is, on the land and river that a person can walk on and over was the line, the work of art.

Since the nineties, Cuevas, born in Mexico City in 1975, has earned international renown for her sculptures, video pieces, and "social interventions" that confront starvation, ecological decline, neoliberalism, and borders. Cuevas often works on a grand scale: She's produced provocative billboards that satirize brands, painted bumper cars with the logos of oil corporations, and hijacked an amusement park ride. She founded a mock corporation, through which she engaged in a campaign of "culture hacking." In 2007, working on a project in Finland, she created a cellphone network based around autonomous transmissions. The project traveled to Germany, and eventually to Oaxaca, where it led to the establishment of the first phone lines in a small Indigenous village.

A reporter's place is often on the periphery, producing a story for people who may be distant from its subjects. As I continued to study Cuevas's work, I found that it has much in common with the process and purpose of journalism but that her way of doing things pursues, above all, intimacy. For *Río Bravo Crossing*, she went so far as to stand in the river at its deepest point, feeling its weight on her body. "I start my research from a place of doubt, a recognition of my ignorance," she told me. "I know that I need to enter with a good will to understand others in that context, and that's why it's so important for me to exchange with local people." When it comes time to produce art, her choices of form are boundless, immersive. She meets her audience where they are, wherever that may be.

In her late teens, Cuevas started carrying a deer skull onto the Mexico City subway. It was the early nineties; she'd go at rush hour, during what Carlos Monsiváis, the Mexican writer, has described as "a critical battle for oxygen and millimeters." Cuevas had no awareness of critical theory, no project or campaign in mind; she did not consider what she was doing to be art at all. "Did you take pictures of it? Or look for people's reactions?" I wondered, when she told me. "No," Cuevas replied. She laughed. "I did this just for me." The deer skull had come from her grandfather, who lived in a rural village of Mixtec people in the verdant mountains of Oaxaca; it represented a bucolic contrast to the crush of Mexico City. "I wanted to display this object in different situations, and so I cruised around the city with it," she said. One day, as workers tore up pavement to lay a telephone cable, she placed the skull in the dust and stood, staring at it. The scene thrilled her: an impossible archaeological site.

Cuevas's parents—both primary school teachers who had moved to the city for work—liked to drive her and her sister out to Oaxaca to see their grandfather. She remembers the green hills and valleys, the rivers, the viny plants, the sounds of spoken Mixtec. The trips were "like camping," she said: the town did not have phone lines or radio; electricity was still making its way to the pueblo. From an early age, on those breaks from the city, Cuevas observed vast disparities of development and class. She was also awakened to the instability—the artifice, really—of "Mexican" identity; in the Indigenous regions of Oaxaca, people referred to Mexico as a foreign state. "To them, 'Mexico' means Mexico City," she said.

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national university, and she had plenty of opportunities to ride and observe: in those years, she lived in the opposite corner of the city from ENAP. She had a lengthy commute.

By her third year, however, Cuevas was ready to move on. She'd grown alienated from the institution, which, with its focus on technical practice, felt frustratingly removed from the politics of the moment. Mexico City has long been a world capital for art—picture the detailed populist murals and the surrealist films of the early twentieth century—but things were changing: Mexico's most controversial modern president, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, had just left office, having auctioned off the country in a neoliberal revolution. The nation's telephone lines were sold to his friend Carlos Slim, kicking off the empire of one of the richest men on earth. The country's agrarian communal land holdings, the pride of the Mexican Revolution, were privatized. By 1994, Mexico had signed on to NAFTA, the monumental free trade agreement; multinational corporations were sweeping in. At ENAP, Cuevas was offered no theoretical means by which to address these changes, nor was there instruction in experimental forms like video or performance art. "It was a very traditional education and bureaucratic," Cuevas said. With less than a year to go, she dropped out.

Free of school, Cuevas was ready to live the untethered existence of an artist in a city undergoing upheaval. She found odd jobs—including graphic design, for both commercial clients and bootleggers—and began conceiving of a defiant project, something that would satisfy her urge to create "aesthetic conditions," as she put it, and connect her to the transformations taking place in Mexico. She settled on a decidedly ironic scheme: in 1998, she founded a company, which she called Mejor Vida Corp. (Better Life Corporation), to spoof the multinationals upending her country.

To establish the headquarters of MVC, as it became known, Cuevas rented out office space in the Torre Latinoamericana, an iconic structure of glass and steel that was often featured on Mexico City postcards, yet poorly maintained. The building housed an eclectic combination of businesses—from international firms to cheap jewelers—and a public housing office. The most popular attraction, by Cuevas's estimation, was a collective of shamans from Colombia who welcomed hundreds of visitors a day for cleansings and healings. Rent was cheap, and she managed to pay it in part by moving in, a squatter in her own office. Guards harassed her, knocking on the door late at night as she was trying to sleep, but she stayed for four years.

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Cuevas did not consider the MVC a charity; the "interventions" provided aid out of a desire to create art that reflected on—and lived within—the mass consumerism spreading through Mexico's bloodstream.

Left: Minerva Cuevas, *Mejor Vida Corp discounted code bar*, 2000. Courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City / New York

Right: Minerva Cuevas, *Mejor Vida Corp student ID*, 2004. Courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City / New York

From the Latinoamericana, Cuevas unveiled a line of MVC "products," all distributed for free, all forms of civil disobedience: There were barcode stickers, which she brought to supermarkets and placed on random items that, when scanned, would result in lower prices for shoppers. (Cheese, nuts, a package of zucchini became cheaper.) She designed ersatz student ID cards that provided discounted entry at museums and movie theaters. Cuevas found "customers" by meeting people outside the office of public housing assistance, her neighbor in the tower. Word got around; soon, the same guards who had knocked on her door at night were arriving during the day, with their families, requesting IDs. Cuevas happily printed them cards.

The MVC also took her back into the STC, where she cleaned subway stations (a photo from the time shows Cuevas, in a white blouse, pushing a mop at rush hour) and distributed free tickets to passengers. The tickets received mixed reactions from people underground: sometimes, they'd refuse to take one, or they'd flash a confused glance, accept, then hurry off. In these interactions, Cuevas never identified herself as an artist, or as anything else. "Sometimes it's better to camouflage," she said. "To just be there." She felt it was a fair exchange: a free ride for a look of surprise and wonder. "For me, generating these first interventions in Mexico City represented a kind of *strategy*," she explained. "And it started from my desire to merge my interest in art formation with my interest in social change." Though the MVC functioned as a nonprofit corporation, Cuevas did not consider it a charity; the "interventions" provided aid, yes, but out of a desire to create art that reflected on—and lived within—the mass consumerism spreading through Mexico's bloodstream.

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Though she'd left school, Cuevas had remained part of the Mexico City art scene, and the MVC began to attract attention. "It really expanded my idea of art," José Kuri, a prominent Mexican gallerist, told me recently. "What I liked about it was how she was infiltrating into these preexisting systems." Even if her "customers" didn't know what was going on, "it would ignite a little spark inside them." Kuri received an MVC student ID, which he used for years. "Her work dealt with this moment of consciousness that suddenly arose," he said, "that new awareness of how civil society can create something, or change something."

As acclaim for the MVC spread, Cuevas set up the project in the form of a gallery exhibition using photographs, ID cards, and grocery items with barcodes; it was shown in Mexico City and Seattle, as well as in Germany and France. Her profile as an artist grew; she was invited to residencies everywhere from the United States to Lebanon. But praise from critics came with a burden with which she has since lived uncomfortably: the art world called her work "activism" and Cuevas "an activist artist."

For more than twenty years, Cuevas has lived in the historic center of Mexico City: "It's probably the border between the touristic side and the dark side," as she described it to me, "the neighborhood with the worst reputation." Her home is a block away from the former printing house of Ricardo Flores Magón, a Mexican anarchist who has been a major influence on her work. Two streets in another direction are the Diego Rivera murals that adorn the Ministry of Public Education's headquarters. Also nearby is the Tepito market, a commercial area that has existed since before Spaniards arrived in Mexico. Cuevas is placed, too, at the center of modern resistance in Mexico City: all around her, protesters march through the streets.

To weather the coronavirus pandemic, Cuevas traveled to be close to her sister, renting a small Airbnb on Baja California Sur. For the past year, she's worked with limited art supplies, mainly her computer; her only domestic companions have been her cat, Sid Vicious, and her dog, Chia. She has taken a break from hosting annual pozole cookouts. Now forty-six, Cuevas is at once petite, shy, and soft-spoken while possessing, as her friend Francis McKee, an Irish writer and curator, put it to me, the power of a "nuclear bomb." People who know her well call her determined, hardcore. She is a voracious viewer of films and an avid reader, in possession of an impressive collection of comic books. She also remains enamored of Mexico City. "Minerva reads the city like a person reads a book," McKee said. "She just looks at the city and goes, 'This happened *here*, this happened *there*; that's why this is important, and this is how they connect.'"

In my conversations with Cuevas, I had the feeling of talking with a professor: confident in her knowledge, she spoke slowly and precisely, whether in English or in Spanish. She tended to be restrained in her manner, though she would bristle at one thing: being labeled an "activist." The term stung, she said, because it denied her position as an artist. "I separate activism from art production," Cuevas explained. "For me, there is a very clear separation between both things. With activism, you can have a very specific goal, and it's measurable. But with art, part of the freedom is that you cannot measure the result."

That distinction, in practice, is subtle. "What she's really doing is revealing a system at work," McKee said, "revealing the infrastructure underneath." As the Mejor Vida Corp. grew, it had an opening in Paris, at the Chantal Crousel; Cuevas expanded upon her social interventions by stipulating that the gallery provide unemployed Parisians with letters of recommendation for jobs nearby. At exhibitions in other cities, she negotiated identical agreements; when Hartware MedienKunstVerein, in Dortmund, Germany, hosted the MVC, the gallery promoted the exhibit with a question: *ARBEITSLOS? IHRE ZUKUNFT GEHT UNS AN; WIR VERTRAUEN IHNEN VERTRAUEN SIE UNS.* (Unemployed? Your future matters to us; we trust you, you trust us.)

Through the aughts, Cuevas continued traveling around the world, seeking out opportunities for socially conscious research. She visited favelas in Brazil; met with Zapatistas—Indigenous revolutionaries—in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas; and ventured into the Hambach Forest, in Germany, where environmentalists lived in treehouses, fighting to prevent their ancient woods from being consumed by an open-pit coal mine. With activists, Cuevas always maintained a sense of reportorial distance, and yet—perhaps precisely because she does not conduct formal interviews—she had a remarkable ability to elicit honesty, information, and good stories. "Especially as an artist, I never have to declare myself the way journalists do," she told me. "It makes it more natural for people to welcome you." She'd present no particular agenda, only a desire to develop a mental cartography of global resistance against capitalism, consumerism, and ecological devastation.

EXPLORE
Joshua Hunt on reporting methodology and slippery ethics

Sometimes, art emerged. In New York, she saw posters for a campaign discouraging riders from sleeping on the subway: AWAKE IS AWARE. The signs inspired a new MVC product, "safety pills"—caffeine tablets that Cuevas placed in dime bags and distributed to commuters in the MTA and STC. In Slovenia, she encountered activists protesting the country's entry into NATO; she created a series of more than a hundred billboards, which drivers would see on their commute: HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO GET TO NATO? The work was classic Cuevas: both confusing and familiar. Rather than present artistic ideas in the expected places, her approach was to disorient people in their own context, disrupting the normal flow and sense of things. She asked rushed commuters to think about an area of concern (overtime, NATO) and about where they were—on a road, trying to get to work or home, bombarded by capitalist messaging.

Cuevas's allergy to the "activist" label felt familiar to me as a journalist; in my world, it's a word typically leveled as an insult, a way of saying that one has failed at the job—which, at its simplest, is to tell the whole truth. But to the extent that a reporter would be hindered by fear of aligning too closely with activists, Cuevas sees in that anxiety an artificial, and deleterious, barrier. "I don't think we should socially classify people who are caring about things socially, or caring for communities, as activists," she said. "It should be a more general understanding of our ethical relation with the world."

What Cuevas had done was at once surgical and immense; a single letter connected Del Monte to some of the worst horrors in the history of the continent.

Both images: Minerva Cuevas, *Del Monte*, 2003. Courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City / New York

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One of Cuevas's most important works took an assertive social stand, with the investigative enterprise of the best accountability journalism: through her "Del Montte—Bananeras" campaign, she cast light on the unrighteous history of Del Monte, the produce company, in Guatemala. For more than a century, multinational corporations have waged a bloody assault on Latin America, characterized by corruption scandals, labor abuse, and land dispossession. United Fruit is the most notorious—a 1928 massacre of its workers in Colombia was immortalized in Gabriel Garcia Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and, eventually, the company's name became so tainted that it rebranded, to Chiquita Brands International. In the seventies, United Fruit sold off all its banana plantations in Guatemala to Del Monte, based in Walnut Creek, California; at the time, it was reported that the deal was secured with a five-hundred-thousand-dollar bribe to a businessman with political clout, and it was widely believed that he shared his "fee" with Guatemala's president. The farms remained the same, the managers had remained the same, only now the bananas bore a new sticker.

Unlike United Fruit, Del Monte kept a low profile, even as it carried on the same dreadful labor practices. That continued through 2001, when a group of former Del Monte employees from Guatemala sought asylum in the United States and filed a lawsuit against the company. The workers, seven union leaders, claimed that they were held in their office at gunpoint by armed security forces working in coordination with Del Monte executives. With a strike underway, they said in court documents, they were kept for eight hours and told they had to announce an end to the protest and resign from their union leadership positions. The case, *Aldana v. Fresh Del Monte Produce*, dragged on for more than a decade as executives fought to have it dismissed. In the end, judges decided that the workers did not have standing to bring a suit against Del Monte in the United States. The proceedings received little coverage from American outlets.

With the case tied up in court, a group of Cuevas's friends traveled to Guatemala as human rights observers, to investigate land and natural resources being sold out from under local and Indigenous people to Del Monte. As part of a campaign to publicize the company's operations, they asked Cuevas if she would create a logo. What she produced was simple—a faithful rendering of the Del Monte trademark symbol, except for an added *t*, to make it "Del Montte." It was a subtle change that proved deeply affecting for Guatemalans: In 1982, Efraín Ríos Montt, a right-wing military general, had risen to power in a coup d'état. During his short reign (and with support from the United States) Montt oversaw a brutal genocide against the country's rural Indigenous population. What Cuevas had done was at once surgical and immense; a single letter connected Del Monte to some of the worst horrors in the history of the continent.

Soon, Cuevas began a series that expanded on the idea, what became the "Del Montte Campaign"—billboards and products hijacking Del Monte's branding to tell an alternative story. Following her standard process, she conducted research, pulling archival documents on Del Monte's history in the country. Eventually, she came across a treasure: a 1976 edition of the *Latin America and Empire Report*, an independent journal from the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), that included a series of case studies on fruit companies' exploitation in the region. One article, "Guatemala: Del Monte's 'Banana Republic,'" was particularly sharp. "It still operates as though it were above the law," the report read, "it is allied with the most reactionary elements within the Guatemalan bourgeoisie; it manipulates its workers to avoid labor unrest; and along with the other banana companies, it has tried to torpedo efforts by Central American governments to gain greater control over their natural resources."

Cuevas's Del Montte campaign sought to bring the company's legacy of violent subjugation to the places where it had been ignored. Drawing from her work on the MVC, she developed a set of new labels for Del Monte foods that went further than adding a *t*: a can of tomatoes read PURE MURDER and featured two skulls in the guts of cut tomato; where the product's weight would normally appear, she wrote, "100 yrs. suffice." Working with art students and sign painters, she turned the tomato can label into a massive mural.

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The Del Montte campaign appeared in galleries around the world. When it reached the Guggenheim in New York, in 2014, the show included more than a hundred cans of tomatoes—a hundred cans of pure murder. The effect was journalistic: while few news outlets had covered Del Monte's labor and land practices (with a feature in *The Guardian* a notable exception), Cuevas drove attention to the story—in the arts pages, on gallery walls, in grocery aisles. (Del Monte did not respond to my requests for comment.) Once I'd been exposed to Del Montte, I began seeing the label everywhere—in the Central American market where I did most of my shopping at the time; in Safeway and Mollie Stone's. I found canned Del Monte tomatoes in my pantry; I would have never given them a thought, if not for Cuevas.

The conceptual art that Cuevas produces can be ambitious and absurd and is frequently ambitiously absurd. Her work infiltrates and provokes, compelling people to stop, look, and think. "In all these situations—Del Montte in Guatemala, the billboards in Slovenia—it's a way to spread the perspective of the people who have been repressed," she said. Then she added: "The international newspapers don't pay that much attention to those kinds of cases. Art, in public, becomes a way to reach the public."

Her observation conveyed a sense of frustration—with what goes unreported, and also with what doesn't land where it needs to make impact. Reporters tend to feel the same way, whenever they cover an important story that seems to gain no traction. Confined to exposition and reflection, while competing against misinformation and distraction, we too often fail to reach people. Cuevas has worked through this problem as an artist by breaking form and convention; the physical presence of her projects eludes the pitfall of so much news coverage: unlike dour headlines, her interventions are impossible to ignore. I began to wonder what it would be like if service journalism involved direct impact on people's lives—even if they didn't know who had done it or why, exactly. The result, I imagined, might look something like a Cuevas project: caffeine pills taped to an MTA sign to highlight the exhaustion of the overworked and underpaid; an op-ed in situ.

Cuevas admires journalists who experiment. When we spoke, she cited Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, who pushed vital national security information into the public eye. "I don't think it's about *him*," Cuevas said. "It's more about a totally different culture for journalism and the way it's released." And, she continued, WikiLeaks set a precedent for how alternative sources are used. "Beyond collecting the data, he worked outside the institutional digital culture—the TV, the newspapers, the magazines, the traditional mediums," she said. "They are still very much in control of information, and that is power." And if it was hard to picture Assange, an unscrupulous character reliant on encrypted leaks, as a model of news coverage in the Cuevas style, she also saluted Andalusia Knoll Soloff, an independent multimedia journalist based in Mexico City. Best known for her investigation into the disappearance of forty-three teaching students in the Mexican state of Guerrero—an instance of kidnapping and violence that shook the country—last year Soloff produced *Vivos se los llevaron* (They Were Taken Alive), a graphic novel about the search for their bodies. "She was very involved, very close to the families," Cuevas said. "I guess my mode of journalism would be very similar: just going and becoming very familiar with the people, with the community."

EXPLORE

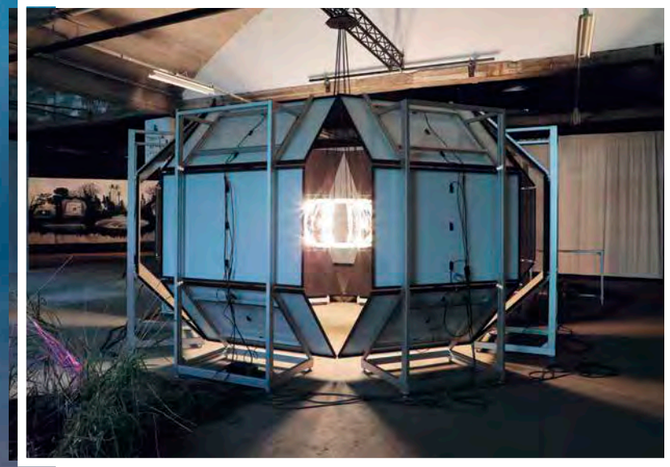
> Atlanta's Canopy project invites the community in

Where the press tends to make complicated truths simple, Cuevas is inclined toward abstraction and uncertainty. "I try to connect with open questions and let the public use their own filters to finish the project," she told me. "And I think that's the difference with journalism—if you're posing as the authority, reporting and evaluating a context, or making moral statements about a situation." She is interested in challenge and expansion.

Ultimately, what gives her art its impact is where she delivers it. Much of her work has wound up in galleries—she has an exhibition in the upcoming Korean biennial, a mural; and a collection of posters called "Utopista / quiauitl," which opened in March, in Mexico City. But many, if not most, people who have seen Cuevas's work do not realize they've seen an art piece. There is a cost to that choice, of course, in terms of both money and prestige, but it's a trade-off that delivers on a key premise of her approach, which is that art—and journalism, too, she believes—should be a means of "articulating resistance." McKee told me about a piece Cuevas did outside of Warsaw: The area was known for UFO sightings and, playing with conspiracy and spectacle, she invited locals to release hundreds of paper lanterns into the night sky. They floated up and eventually out of sight. "People loved that, but many of them had no idea that it was an art project," McKee said. "They just really enjoyed it." CJR

Artists put energy in a new light

A new movement is questioning our use of fossil fuels, writes **Alice Audouin**



Left: Stone Circle, 2018 by Haroon Mirza, 9 stones, LEDs, speakers, solar panel. Dimensions variable. Photo: Emma Rogers
© Haroon Mirza. Courtesy of Ballroom Marfa and Lisson Gallery

Above: Dyson Sphere by Haroon Mirza. Exhibition view, Novacène, curated by Alice Audouin and Jean-Max Colard, Gare Saint Sauveur, Lille
Photo: Jerome Mizar

What place does energy have as a theme in contemporary art? Nuclear energy has influenced artists ever since the bombings of the second world war, but fossil fuels and renewable energy have been much less present. Since the 2000s – over 10 years after the first IPCC report on climate change – the visibility of environmental issues, in particular global heating, has changed this. The exploitation of fossil fuels, oil above all, is increasingly a target of criticism, with artists pointing to its immense political, environmental and social consequences. The theme also allows space for the investigation of 'deep time' in a geological perspective, which stands in contrast to our own relatively short time on Earth. As for renewable energy sources, these open new ethical debates as well as new mythologies. Solar energy, for instance, brings the relationship between humans and the sun into a new light.

Solar

Haroon Mirza studied design at Goldsmiths, University of London, before switching to fine art at Chelsea and then beginning a career as a sound artist, winning the Silver Lion for the most promising young artist at the Venice Biennale in 2011. Solar energy entered his practice by accident, as an improvised solution following the absence of an electrical outlet in an exhibition space. This experience had a profound influence on his work, through the use of solar panels both as an energy source and as a sculptural element. In 2018, in Ballroom Marfa, Texas, his solar-powered sound and light installation *Stone Circle* was accompanied by full moon rituals and the promotion of renewable energy among the local population. The title of the installation refers to prehistoric monuments such as Stonehenge and invites us to invent a new relationship with the cosmos at a time when solar energy puts our star in the spotlight. Aware of the major role the sun will play in the post-carbon future, Mirza not only investigates its place in the collective unconscious, but also raises ethical questions associated with its use as energy. His latest work, *Dyson Sphere* (2022) is inspired by the scientist Freeman Dyson's proposal, imagined in the 1960s, of a megastructure capable of surrounding the sun or another star in order to harness its energy. Mirza interprets this idea by creating a sun surrounded by solar panels, which are themselves surrounded by musical and organic works in space. The piece is both spectacular and philosophical, questioning humanity's obsession with technological progress and its hubris. Are we a parasitic species that will absorb all a planet's resources, Mirza asks, or can we live in symbiosis with the rest of Nature and the biosphere? For Mirza, this question is at the forefront of many climate and energy issues. The dystopian threat invites us to choose his utopia, a world where solar energy becomes a source of both conviviality and sobriety.

Oil

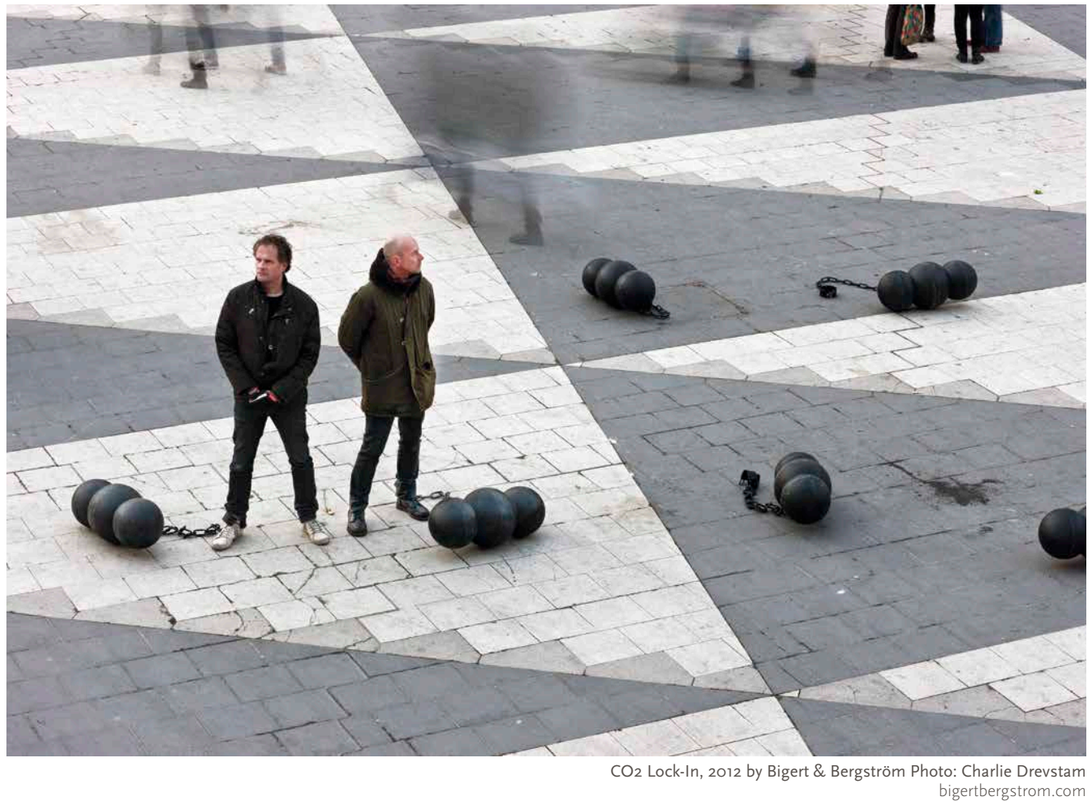
Whilst contemporary artists who work on the theme of the environment often deny being activists, this is not the case for the Mexican artist Minerva Cuevas, who does not draw a line between her life and her work. Oil occupies a major place for her, and she examines it through its devastating social and environmental effects. She chooses to confront the world of art history and classical landscape painting with that of oil in a decidedly kitsch way, dipping her oil-painted canvases into *chapopote*, the Nahuatl term for tar, commonly found in Mexico in petroleum by-products such as tarmac. Her beautiful landscape paintings are immersed just a few centimetres into the tar in order to still be able to distinguish the rest of the image, and the bottom of the frame drips. The final image offers a metaphor of the invasion of fossil fuels into the landscape, hidden in the subsoil. Cuevas's numerous investigations, including

Top: Overseas, 2015 by Minerva Cuevas
Above: From the series *Hidrocarburos*, 2007 by Minerva Cuevas
Both images courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto
www.kurimanzutto.com

the series *Hidrocarburos* (Hydrocarbons), are focused on oil exploitation in the Yucatán region and major accidents such as the oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico. Here she chooses everyday objects such as a cell phone, a packet of string, and a block of pavement, and this time she covers them almost entirely with tar. By engulfing consumer items, most often made from petroleum derivatives, in tar, the artist calls for a public awakening to this climate and social injustice.

Tipping point

Pioneers in the field of art and climate breakdown Mats Bigert and Lars Bergström have collaborated since 1986, when they were students at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm. In their 1994 work *Climate Chambers*, the audience experiences different kinds of extreme weather conditions, the chambers becoming platforms for discussion, in which global heating has been central. In 2015, with their installation *The Freeze: Rescue Blanket for Kebnekaise*, Bigert & Bergström climbed to the top of a snow-capped Swedish mountain to roll out a reflective blanket that would delay its melting. In 2012, they installed a piece, *CO2 Lock-In*, in various locations in Stockholm. The visitor locks themself into a 300kg iron ball and chain, representing an average Swede's CO2 emissions over 10 days, so that they can no longer move and cannot harm the environment any more. The use of humour is integral to Bigert & Bergström's approach. "The Earth machine is broken and we are trying to fix it with art, using a kind of absurdist humour," explains Bigert. In June 2022, they exhibited a monumental kinetic sculpture, *Tipping Point,* in Stockholm during Stockholm+50, an event that marked the 50-year anniversary of the 1972 Stockholm Conference. The installation comprises various rotating arms on which platforms and counterweights are hung. The platforms are then occupied by actors, whose movements set the mobile rocking. Their



CO2 Lock-In, 2012 by Bigert & Bergström Photo: Charlie Drevstam
bigertbergstrom.com

"I think art can help to embody abstract quantities related to climate change and make people really feel these in new and different ways"

bodily energy drives the sculpture – electricity provides energy for some other parts of the installation – and determines whether CO2 is emitted and how much ice in one of the counterweights is melted. "I think art can help to embody abstract quantities related to climate change and make people really feel these in new and different ways," says Bigert. "We wanted the visitor to get into the debate and to dive into climate justice."

Materials

A key question arises about the production process of the artworks: can an artist create and exhibit a work that denounces fossil fuels without using them? The materials used all have an energetic weight: acrylic paint is a derivative of petroleum, digital works or certain installations consume energy, and when the works have value or must travel far, they are often transported by plane. If zero CO2 is utopian, reducing its impact is now part of the approach of several artists. The not-for-profit organisation Julie's Bicycle accompanied Studio Olafur Eliasson to measure and reduce as much as possible the carbon impact of the famous *Ice Watch* installation in Copenhagen, Paris and London between 2014 and 2018 (featured in Issue 317). The artist Tomás Saraceno is experimenting with a new mode of 'zero fossil fuels' transportation that he has named Aerocene, which intends to supplant our current thermo-industrial civilisation. An environmental awareness linked to energy is finally infusing the art market itself, with movements such as Gallery Climate Coalition and Galleries Commit, and announces a new artistic movement that is to be more organic and less petrochemical. R

Alice Audouin is a specialist in the link between contemporary art and the environment. She is the founding president of the organisation Art of Change 21, supported by Olafur Eliasson. A former director of sustainable development, she is also an art adviser, consultant and lecturer.
www.artofchange21.com

MINERVA CUEVAS | 'UTOPISTA / QUIAUITL' AT 'SIEMBRA 18'
Mcclain, Audra
FLAUNT, March 24, 2021

FLAUNT
(/)

MARCH 24, 2021

MINERVA CUEVAS | 'UTOPISTA / QUIAUITL' AT 'SIEMBRA 18'

BY AUDRA MCCLAIN (/CONTENT?AUTHOR=5EFD26107CF5813EE9993667)

Assembled together for the first is a collection of 22 posters created by artist Minerva Cuevas. Titled *Utopista / quiauitl*, the exhibtion is currently on display at the Kurimanzutto Gallery in Mexico City. Some of the collection's pieces were created to be

viewed in exhibitions, others were created to be seen in the street and some of the pieces are being viewed by the public for the first time.

Concepts of contemporary colonial relations, exploitation, nationalism, social ecology, militarism, and equality are explored throughout the collection. The posters play on advertising, slogans, logos and popular references and in turn provokes questions and reflect Cuevas intent to 'construct new realities grounded in collective resistance.'

"A poster is the thin surface that supports the weight of an intention, it is that minimal support loaded with history and context that is in turn an access point to memory and to our personal visual archive," Cuevas remarks.

The Story of a Mountain, The History of a Country: An Interview with Minerva Cuevas
Morrell, Lara
My Art Guides, February 1, 2020

Interviews

The Story of a Mountain, The History of a Country: An Interview with Minerva Cuevas

My Art Guides had a chat with Minerva Cuevas ahead of her participation in the exhibition 'Siembra/Sowing', set to open next Saturday February 8th at Kurimanzutto Gallery in Mexico City, during Zona Maco Art Week. For the exhibition Minerva will present 'The Story of a Mountain, The History of a Country'. For this new piece the artist uses Tezontle stone (A volcanic rock found in the Mexico Valley) in order to work with considerations surrounding the geography of Mexico City and its volcanoes.

by Lara Morrell

The Story of a Mountain, The History of a Country: An Interview with Minerva Cuevas
Morrell, Lara
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Lara Morrell
Minerva Cuevas

> Could you tell me a little about the work *The Story of a Mountain, The History* of a country, the ideas behind it and the significance of the use of Tezontle as a material?

The material Tezontle (*a volcanic rock used extensively in the construction of colonial buildings, in Mexico*) is important as a connection between the prehispánic and colonial histories of Mexico. In prehispánic times, Tezontle was used for the construction of the House of the Eagles in México-Tenochtitlán, known today as the Templo Mayor, structures such as these were taken apart and the material used for colonial architecture. Tezontle is a material linked both to volcanic eruptions and the element of fire. I am also interested in the cultural aspects of fire, in regards to the destruction of libraries or book burning but also fire as an element necessary in the generation many natural processes, some seeds, for example, require the need of fire to germinate. So the starting point of my research was initiated by fire, from there I began to explore the volcanoes around the city which connects to my research of the oil industry in Mexico and the writings of Ezequiel Ordoñez. Ordoñez was a geologist who in 1901 participated in the first survey of the oil regions in Mexico, along with a Mexican commission who after inspecting decided there was no oil and nowhere to drill, Ordoñez thought otherwise and separated from the group. Eventually, thanks to his profound knowledge of the surrounding geography, he made the first

commercial extraction of oil possible. Ordoñez wrote numerous articles and essays on archeology and the history of oil in Mexico which informed a great part of my initial research.
Through this next exhibition and the use of this specific material, I want to pose the question of how we think about the connection between human and land. What is the place that concepts like subject, power, alterity and ecology occupy? And is there a possibility for a social space that is linked to nature.

How will your research manifest itself for the exhibition?

I am bringing a two tonne boulder of Tezontle, it is basically a monolith which is rare to find as Tezontle is usually broken down as sand or small fragments for construction, so an entire monolith is rare. These areas resemble Mars landscapes, and they can be found just on the outskirts of the city.

sand or small fragments for construction, so an entire monolith is rare. These areas resemble Mars landscapes, and they can be found just on the outskirts of the city.
Flanking the boulder of Tezontle there will be two glass panels paintings depicting slogans I created. I reference a poem by the Peruvian poet Blanca Varela who was better known in the 50s'. Her poetry is dense with meaning and precise in her choice of words and expresses the world from inner space's point of view, this was something I wanted to draw on and refer to in this project. The other panel is connected to migration with the slogan – 'Migration is Natural', which is very general but connects both with the animal world and the current crisis we have in the southern border. For the glass paintings I draw the typography as I have done in other artworks.

The Story of a Mountain, The History of a Country: An Interview with Minerva Cuevas

Morrell, Lara

My Art Guides, February 1, 2020

Your work is underpinned by a socially and politically engaged research. What are your thoughts on the notion of artist as activist?

Nowadays there are elements shared between art and activism, but I disagree with that particular notion in connection with my work, I don't think it is useful to generate categories that marginalise certain kind of practices. I think it is necessary to make a clear distinction, as I am familiar with both areas – contemporary art production and social and ecological activism. With activism you have the ability to evaluate and measure the results of campaigns or have very specific objectives. On the other hand, the most important and enjoyable aspect of art production is the freedom to generate projects and artworks using endless formal solutions without the need to measure any results. There are no parameters for that. That's part of the freedom. It doesn't mean that art is not capable of being linked to social change, it totally is.

Did your work take on a political slant from the very beginning of your career?
If I'm correct, you studied visual arts but then quit – why was that?

I started interventions and performative work quite early on, without realising at the time that that was what it was. So really, throughout my career I have had this connection to intervention strategies. Initially I was mainly interested in developing video projections and video sculpture, there were not any classes in video production or contemporary art and perhaps that was part of my disappointment at the time with the art school. The bureaucracy of the whole educational system didn't work for me and I just started developing my own work, so that made art school secondary and not worth it.

The Story of a Mountain, The History of a Country: An Interview with Minerva Cuevas

Morrell, Lara

My Art Guides, February 1, 2020

You founded The Better Life Corporation in 1998 as a means of exploring the politics of contemporary hope and with the goal of achieving public good by means of art practice. Is it still running? If so how has it evolved over the years?

It is still running and has become somehow an autonomous entity, independent of me as the author. Mejor Vida Corp. started as a response to the urban context of Mexico City, distributing anonymously free things around the city, like seeds or subway tickets. It provides everyone with ways of exercising agency and subverting the system through acts of 'micro-sabotage'. Then I started producing student ID cards, to give everyone the benefit of a regular student discount. I also lowered the price of some basic products at the supermarkets by changing the barcodes on the labels. In general it was response to the institutional and economic elements around the city in order to find gaps.

The Story of a Mountain, The History of a Country: An Interview with Minerva Cuevas

Morrell, Lara
My Art Guides, February 1, 2020

Both your work and your background is very much rooted in Mexico. What is it about the city that inspires you and what is about it that frustrates you most?

I am not usually led by inspiration, my work begins by developing strategies and research depending on the context I find myself in, but of course Mexico City has been a big point of departure for me, both for its past and the social mix. The city is centralised within the country, so a layer of rurality pervades the city, this is one of the main attractions for me. It is also the political stage for the whole country, everything has to go through Mexico City. I am also very familiar with the south of the country and the rural areas there, such as Oaxaca and Chiapas.
What frustrates me about the city? The increasing number of cars and some noise pollution.

Where is your research taking you next?

I am developing work for Mediacity Bienniale in South Korea, the research I am doing at the moment is mainly connected to natural resources and I'm specifically looking into mushrooms, the ecological importance and the social structures connected to them.

Could you give our readers some insider tips as to where they can get a taste for true street culture and community life in Mexico, away from the usual beaten contemporary art track?

The Story of a Mountain, The History of a Country: An Interview with Minerva Cuevas

Morrell, Lara

My Art Guides, February 1, 2020

My studio is in the historic centre so around there I would recommend the Abelardo L. Rodríguez market where there is one of Mexico City's most interesting mural collections, rarely visited by tourists. Enormous mural works are part of the bustle of daily market life. There you can find works by some of the students of Rivera: Ramón Alva, Pablo O'Higgins, Antonio Pujol, Ángel Bracho, Pedro Rendón, Raúl Gamboa, Miguel Tzab and American artist like Isamu Noguchi and Grace Greenwood.

Art and dissidence. Interview with Minerva Cuevas
Negro,Virginia
Artribune, May 8, 2020

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Art and dissidence. Interview with Minerva Cuevas

By **Virginia Negro** - 8 May 2020

VIRGINIA NEGRO INTERVIEWED ARTIST MINERVA CUEVAS AFTER JOINING HER IN HER STUDIO IN MEXICO CITY. A REFLECTION ON MAN, ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES.

Art and dissidence. Interview with Minerva Cuevas
Negro,Virginia
Artribune, May 8, 2020

On the corner of Calle Bolivar and Calle Republic of Uruguay stands out from the white plaster a golden grid, the anthropomorphic face of a dark creature. I look out at the wrought-iron gate and look inside: blue azulejos. I go up the stairs, look up, endless ceilings, and see Minerva opening her gray door. This building is exceptionally beautiful, precious, and inside this Mexican artist's studio the light is such that we have to close some dark ones in order to see the computer screen.

Minerva immediately shows me some of his work, without a chronological order, but after this couple of hours spent together I will be able to see clearly the direction of his journey. One premise: **Minerva Cuevas** (Mexico City, 1945) is a Mexican ecologist. The recurring theme, always politicizing, never declined in the same language, is that of the environment, of human intervention on the environment and of the change that the latter imposes, with all the consequences of the case. Another obvious characteristic is the passion for the semiotic-historical reference: being a spectator of Minerva's work is a feat that requires attention, will to activate the sign rizoma and a certain reference encyclopedia in order to do it effectively. It's not an art for extinct brains: it's an interpretive art.

A contemporary artist, Mexican, of Oaxaca, the land of Francisco Toledo, internationally recognized: there are not many.

Art and dissidence. Interview with Minerva Cuevas
Negro,Virginia
Artribune, May 8, 2020

His exhibition *Disidencia* arrived at the Mishkin Gallery in New York with a series of videos that directly dialogue with the consequences of dominant economic ideologies and global, ecological and social problems. Minerva tackles issues such as the decline of the Mesoamerican system, passing through the reef, corporate globalization of the United States, and a video mapping of protests and resistance. Minerva Cuevas uses the full range of media for painting, video, photography, sculpture and installation to investigate the political and power relationships that permeate social and economic ties.

THE INTERVIEW WITH MINERVA CUEVAS

What does it mean to be a female artist today in a country like Mexico?
I think it's natural to keep a dissident aspect rooted in me, as a Mexican, artist and woman, although in my works it doesn't always appear in an obvious way, for example in one of my first video performance, *Drunken* (1995), in which I film for a few hours drinking tequila. I use the body and its limitations and the consequences of its modifications, alterations: being a woman obviously transforms the work.

Art and dissidence. Interview with Minerva Cuevas
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Where do your works come from?
I feel that they are always linked to my land: Mexico, in one way or another, is where my archaeological explorations are born. An example: after studying the function of cocoa as a currency in the pre-Hispanic era, I began to investigate the current situation of chocolate in Mexico. During the production process, I found several conflicts and business interests in the cocoa industry, discovering that plantations cover from southern Mexico to Venezuela: an area that turned out to be oil-rich and where economic pressures forced workers to abandon cocoa fields to devote themselves to wells and pipelines. Since then, oil has been my leitmotif, embodying the apocalyptic transformation of the world.

In 2015, your work on display in the Kurimanzutto gallery revolved around chocolate, with sculptures of human bones coated in cocoa. The body is central to your work.
Yes, I do. I wanted to link cocoa as a natural resource to colonialism and cannibalism, a concept exploited by European settlers. Anyone who was ugly or different was considered a cannibal and deserved to be conquered. I chose the ears because they had a symbolic connotation in the pre-Hispanic era, the ears were connected to the person and to the sacrifice. Today, as yesterday, the severed ear is part of the equation of torture and violence, still present in our post-colonial era.
I used Mexican chocolate, which is very difficult to find now because everything is exported to Belgium and Switzerland; the Mexican chocolate industry uses African chocolate for domestic use because it is much cheaper: demonstrating how colonialism continues in other subtle forms.

Returning to oil, he is also the protagonist of the works exhibited at the Jeu de Paume in Paris.
The series in its entirety is called *Chapopote,*photographs and objects soaked in black gold, a *nahuatl* word of common use in Mexico, where it has been used since antiquity to refer to crude oil, sometimes specifically pointing to oil spills in the ocean, such as the terrible Deepwater Horizon oil disaster in 2010. I investigated the use of oil by maya, for waterproofing and dental fillings. The two works selected for the exhibition that ended at the end of February belong to the *miniseries Hydrocarboni.* Shell is the largest multinational distributor of oil lubricants and by-products in Mexico. With a metaphorical and ironic approach, I immersed a can with the Shell logo and one in the tar, as in the reality of oil disasters.

Art and dissidence. Interview with Minerva Cuevas
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Your red thread seems to be activism and critical art: what future for this dissident production?
That's right! *Disidencia* is my biggest project: a permanent and itinerant project, which began in 1994 with Francis Alos and Melanie Smith during the *Extramuros*exhibition, up to the gigantography of Del Monte's modified logo, "playing" with the homophony with Efra'n Roos Montt, the Guatemalan dictator, where the U.S. agri-food company owned 40% of the national territory, and then crossed the Rio Bravo on Mexico's northern border with the United States. Where the river narrows and where, to pass on the other bank, people move the rocks, rocks that I painted white. *Rio Bravo Crossing* is a work about an impossible wall. Just look at the frontier, a desert of thousands of kilometres, almost as wide as the whole of Europe, how can you think of walling it? This is how the series of videos and images of *Rio Bravo Crossing*was born, celebrating the dissident act of walking and the impossibility of baring the natural immensity.

What are the next steps?
Starting from this series presented in 2010 in San Francisco, I am now interested in animal migration, which precisely does not accept walls, an extremely dissident ecosystem. I am beginning an exploration for the next Korean biennial on the world of mold and fungi, on their special parasitic and at the same time generating function, an extraordinary power and at the same time so trivial and daily in our eyes. As we are experiencing right now, when nature reminds us of our irrelevance in this world system.

Virginia Negro

www.kurimanzutto.com/en/artists/minerva-cuevas

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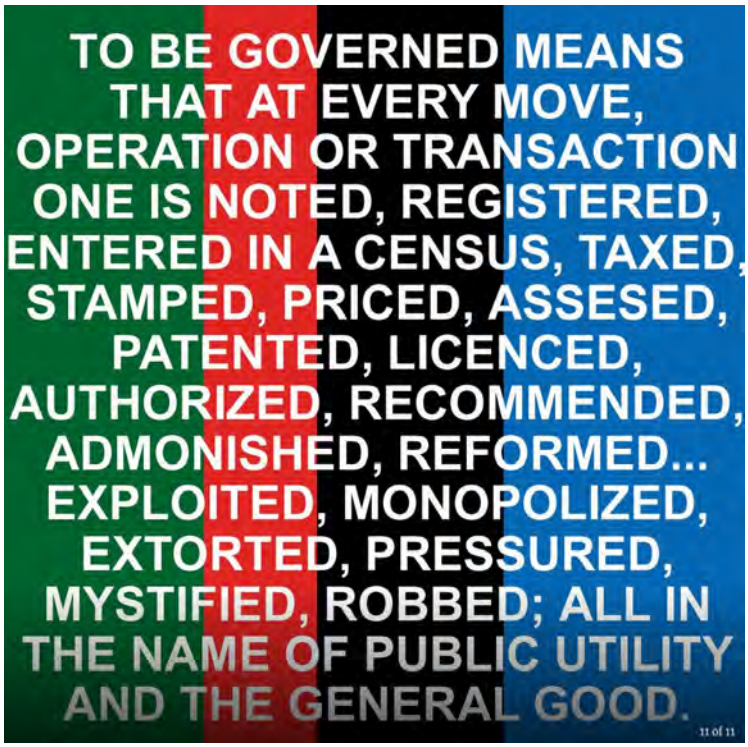

Cuevas focuses on politics and environment in new exhibit
Larsen, Sven
The Ticker, September 30, 2019

The Ticker
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Sep 30 Cuevas focuses on politics and environment in new exhibit

Sven Larsen

Cuevas focuses on politics and environment in new exhibit

Larsen, Sven

The Ticker, September 30, 2019

The Mishkin Gallery, located in Baruch College's Administrative Building on 22nd Street, held a gallery talk on Sept. 25 to continue the discussions Mexican artist Minerva Cuevas started in her exhbit *Minerva Cuevas: DISIDENCIA*.

Clayton Press, an art advisor and Forbes contributing writer, guided visitors through *DISEDENCIA*'s complexities with a short tour through Cuevas' works.

Press began with a reading from Greta Thunberg's speech at the U.N.'s climate session. "The eyes of all future generations are upon you," quoted Press, who continued that, "I feel in a sense kind of a nice coincidence, a bit of a gift, to have this in mind for Minerva and how she looks to view the children and the people who are thoroughly engaged in expressing themselves."

Pieces tackle environmental issues, workers' rights, racism, political turmoil, worries for the children's future and much more. Despite varying topics and media, *DISIDENCIA* does grapple with each opportunity for expression with a heightened and nuanced focus on ideas.

Communication trumps purely subjective commentary, trusting audiences to assemble meanings from the context and perspective Cuevas provides.

"Minerva is not that one type of artists that the art market likes," explained Press. "She's not one thing. She doesn't just do x, she doesn't just do y."

Cuevas focuses on politics and environment in new exhibit

Larsen, Sven

The Ticker, September 30, 2019

DISIDENCIA. As many artists have, she accepts video and audio work as effective media, especially for a growing social media-focused and online world.

The Mishkin Gallery's intimate space creates a looping atmosphere of Cuevas' work. Soundscapes from one-piece bleed over their adjacent walls, providing a constant unity when laced together with other audio in the exhibit. There is a lack of walls themselves; when entering, *DISIDENCIA* introduces itself with open candor, displaying five of the eight works as a greeting.

The exhibit says *Not Impressed by Civilization* in its titular video at the center of the gallery. The video performance piece captures Cuevas sleeping outdoors in western Canada. She says "we value human life more than life," priming the dissent into what has defined us that the gallery continues to analyze.

Despite being her first-ever solo show in New York City, *DISIDENCIA* remains void of Cuevas. Even when she appears in *Not Impressed by Civilization*, she remains non-focal and camouflaged.

This sense of detachment from her work runs only on the surface. Beyond the video projected on walls, Cuevas projects herself forth as her own curator choosing how to capture her ideas and present them in the most alluring ways.

Cuevas speaks through *Donald McRonald*, an effigy of McDonald's mascot that asks actual customers of the restaurant, "Do you want diabetes?" As one of the more overt pieces, she comments directly on the vast issues modern capitalism, only to be represented by her video and a red wig on display.

Cuevas often layers on allegories like painting over what has previously been thought or said. She matures the child-like vehicle of storytelling with a magic lantern in *La venganza del elefante* to fully realize the racist and power corruptive themes lurking behind the story.

DISIDENCIA's ocular breadth spans across and through continents and themes, posing as both parochial and global. In the culmination piece, *Disidencia*, Cuevas returns to Mexico to film over decade's worth of various resistance in its capital. The disturbance of protest and ideological baggage it carries flood Cueva's intricate filming, settling on shorter shots of protests jabbed together over two classical music

Cuevas focuses on politics and environment in new exhibit

Larsen, Sven
The Ticker, September 30, 2019

zeitgeist of a generation is enough to express the issues suffocating modern people.

The gallery pays passionate attention to not just Cuevas' work, but also in catering to one the most allusive audiences in art; busy college students. Talks like these often are given from Baruch College professors and various community-based events take place in the gallery's space just for students, such as open art time.

Balancing the space as a New York City art gallery and a student space has been an ongoing initiative for the gallery's newest director, Alaina Claire Feldman who also seeks out amplifying artists' voices that haven't been heard due to race, gender, sexuality or age.

By mirroring Baruch College's own diversity and strides in expanding what institutions can be, the Mishkin Gallery continues the growth of the arts in such a business-minded environment.

Minerva Cuevas: DISIDENCIA runs until Nov. 1.

Arts (/ticker/category/Arts)

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Dissident Visions With a Dose of Play

Minerva Cuevas exposes the contradictions of the socioeconomic systems that rule our daily life in her first solo show in New York.

Leticia Gutiérrez October 25, 2019

Minerva Cuevas: DISIDENCIA installation view, Mishkin Gallery, 2019 (all images courtesy Mishkin Gallery and photographed by Isabel Asha Penzlien)

For this first time in New York, Mexican artist Minerva Cuevas has a solo show, on view in an enticing habitat at the Mishkin Gallery. Originally curated by Gabriel Bogossian and Solange Farkas for Videobrasil in 2018, *DISIDENCIA*, take its name from the artist's eponymous work, which anchors eight multi-media components that collectively unveil questions about the theorization of knowledge, capitalist notions of value and exchange, and politics.

Part of Baruch College of The City University of New York, the public university system, the Mishkin Gallery rightly takes the term "public" seriously, and consequently, has assumed a civic responsibility towards supporting the work of artists that call into question power structures and confront the realities of daily life. Showcasing the work of Minerva Cuevas exemplifies the gallery's interest in accountability and studies of the communal.

Minerva Cuevas: DISIDENCIA installation view, Mishkin Gallery, 2019

Cuevas' *No Room for Play*, a rear projection video work displayed on a hanging screen, typifies this focus and depicts images of abandoned playgrounds in Berlin after the Second World War. Its narrative alludes to the motto of the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin: "Faster, Higher, Stronger," while the voice of a young girl states in German: "There was a time when we were flowers on our heads ...wishing it would never get dark so we could continue to play."

Fittingly, the work is installed in an area of the gallery that faces Gramercy Park, a small fenced-in green space and one of the only truly private parks in New York City. Through this placement, the curation echoes

critiques of urban development embedded in the work itself, which suggests the ways in which economic resources and city planning decisions can be exploited for corporate and private benefit.

Minerva Cuevas: DISIDENCIA installation view, Mishkin Gallery, 2019

Disidencia (2007–ongoing) offers another instance of Cuevas' research into the political negotiation of public space. It is a growing archive formatted as a video and accompanied by the music of Mexican composer Pablo Salazar and US musicians The Kronos Quartet. The footage from Mexico City includes protests taking place, with picket signs, street advertisements, outdoor markets, and fragments of monuments, among other public demonstrations. Cuevas makes visible the forms in which citizens are dissident, protesting and asserting their agency in actions that are shared and collective.

Particularly relevant within a US context, the earliest work included, *Donald McRonald* (2003) is displayed through video documentation and the inclusion of the costume from the performance piece, in which a performer dressed up like Ronald McDonald stands in front of a McDonald's near the Parisian contemporary art center, Palais de Tokyo. In a humorous tone, the clown discusses the diseases you can get from eating a hamburger at the fast-food chain, and details the low paid labor of its employees. Through its performative nature, the work reveals the grotesque side of consumption, making passersby and diners accomplices of an oppressive and unjust capitalist economy.


Minerva Cuevas: DISIDENCIA installation view, Mishkin Gallery, 2019

Minerva Cuevas: DISIDENCIA gathers a body of work that criticizes institutions, revealing layers of criticality and globally minded research. Cuevas exposes the contradictions of the socio-economic systems that rule our daily life, turning the Mishkin into a place of public investigation. Through her artistic practice, Minerva Cuevas calls for political action that could change reality.

Minerva Cuevas: DISIDENCIA *continues at the Mishkin Gallery (135 East 22 Street, Gramercy, Manhattan) through November 1, 2019. The exhibition was originally curated by Gabriel Bogossian and Solange Farkas, and the Mishkin presentation was organized by Alaina Claire Feldman.*

ARTFORUM

Minerva Cuevas, *A Draught of the Blue*, 2013, video, color, sound, 9 minutes 48 seconds.

NEW YORK

Minerva Cuevas

MISHKIN GALLERY AT BARUCH COLLEGE (CUNY)
135 East 22nd Street
August 29–November 1, 2019

Omnia sunt communia: "All things are held in common." The artist Minerva Cuevas, who lives and works in Mexico City (where she was also born), asserts this notion time and time again with "*Disidencia*" (Dissent), her first exhibition in New York. Cuevas's far-reaching "cartography of resistance," as some have called it, includes the food sovereignty protests on the streets of her birthplace, a staged intervention in a Paris McDonald's, and her own underwater demonstration, which seems to reference a strategy used by anti-Exxon climate activists in 2016.

In the video *A Draught of the Blue*, 2013, the aforementioned Latin phrase appears on a banner held up by two scuba divers above the endangered coral of the Great Mayan Reef. Other signs in this work read "IN TROUBLE," "1%" (a reference to wealth disparity and the total amount of coral left on the planet), and "25%" (an estimate of the worldwide deaths caused by human environmental damage and the percentage of marine life reliant upon coral, according to the United Nations). Cuevas puts economic narcissism in close proximity to ecological collapse—or, as Naomi Klein characterizes it, "climate barbarism."

The parodic *Donald McRonald*, 2003, extends the horror to corporate overreach. In the video, a McDonald's mascot look-alike parades in the restaurant chain, incriminating the fast-food monstrosity for its lack of unions, low wages, and employees' minimal vacation time, while proceeding to order and devour a Big Mac. The slideshow *La venganza del elefante* (The Revenge of the Elephant), 2007, is a reordering of the German illustrator Wilhelm Busch's nineteenth-century drawings of human dominance over nature—in it, Cuevas shows an elephant actively pursuing its hunter. For the artist, humor is a weapon, a salve, and an invitation to do better for all. As a young boy reminds us in a different video piece, "we have much, very much to do with our neighbors."

— *Sophie Kovel*

Minerva Cuevas, Égalité | PEACE - SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

The word “égalité” is displayed in red letters on the wall of the exhibition room. In terms of the design and the choice of colors for her large-format mural work, Minerva Cuevas imitates the soft blue, pink and white tones that prevail in the advertising logo for the mineral water brand Evian. Above the dominant lettering is the blue-shaded outline of a mountain chain in the heart of the French Alps where, in the secluded town of Évian-les-Bains, this still mineral water has been bottled since 1826. In spite of the substitution of the writing, the reference to the globally familiar bottled water is immediately recognizable. In her manipulation of the text – “evian” becomes “égalité”, whilst the words below, “Eau Minérale Naturelle” become “Une Condition Naturelle” – she fills the product logo of the multinational food giant Danone with new content. By breaking away from the familiar context of this visual symbol, a new layer of meaning and information becomes apparent behind the façade of the image of everyday consumption.

Over 700 million people worldwide have no access to clean drinking water, and 90% of them live in the Global South, in low-income countries with high levels of poverty. At the same time, in most high-income countries water has long been more than just a basic ingredient for life; rather, as a luxury product, as “blue or liquid gold”, it has become a matter of taste or a statement – in those very places where extremely high-quality water apparently flows limitlessly from the tap. With some imported products, the price of water far exceeds that of champagne. Although many suppliers, like Evian, advertise their sustainable use of water, the PET bottles are an ecological disaster and pollute oceans the world over. Water expert Dr. Peter Gleick summarizes the hidden costs and the use of resources in the filling of bottled water as follows: “To bottle one liter of water, you need three or four liters of tap water. And if you take into account the material, the production, the transport and the cooling of the bottles altogether, up to a quarter of a liter of crude oil is required to fill one liter of mineral water. ”[1]

Sources of water pollution include the extraction of sand and crude oil as well as contamination by waste water or dirty water from agriculture and industry. The figures about the state of water are alarming the world over, as is clear from the current report by UN Water. Two thirds of the world's population experience a water shortage for at least one month a year, and it is the already disadvantaged who overwhelmingly suffer most. Hence water consumption per head in Mexico City, where Cuevas comes from, is one of the highest worldwide. Yet the supply of the undoubtedly scarce resource is inefficient and unequal; there is a "two-tier water society", as the taz provocatively puts it,[2] and 1.25 million Mexicans have to get by without running water. The increasing scarcity of water and the pollution of lakes, rivers and oceans is favorable to the sales of drinking water in bottles, and the purchasing and privatization of water sources are lucrative investments.[3] More bottles of water are sold than soft drinks.[4] Just a few particular big companies have long shared the global market, which is continually growing, with prices rising.[5] In Germany, for example, the price of Evian rose by almost 50% in 2016.[6]

The theme of the installation "égalité", which was first presented in 2004, has lost none of its relevance – in fact, it is more topical than ever and transposes the question of social justice, which determines Cuevas' political thinking and interest, into the exhibition context. Starting with a specific social or urban situation or a condition of daily life, in her conceptual work the artist examines the organization of social coexistence and shines a light on the political and economic power structures and interconnections. She is primarily interested in the distribution of resources, in property relationships and values in a neoliberal, capitalist social order and in "survival" in the urban context. Here Cuevas, whose artistic practice makes use of painting, video, sculpture, photography and installations, uses images and objects from everyday consumption and life, which she deliberately changes through critical interventions and actions in the public space.

In 1998, Cuevas founded the Mejor Vida Corporation, which was based in the Latin American Tower in downtown Mexico City up until 2003, but still exists online and opens up pop-up shops, as it did at "Playing the City 3" in Frankfurt in 2011, for example. The aim in starting this company was to propose solutions to fundamental problems facing the world's poorest people and thus to make their lives easier. At the time, Mexico was in the grip of the turbulent events and radical changes of the 1990s: politically motivated assassinations, the Zapatista rebellion, the signing of the NAFTA treaties, which went hand in hand with the neoliberal

economic reorientation of Mexico and with a catastrophic economic crisis, as well as the defeat of the PRI (Institutional Revolution Party) after 70 years of domination. The consequences were social unrest, an enduring inequality in the distribution of property, unemployment, crime, political intrigue, corruption and a rise in poverty among the continually growing population. Currently around 45% of Mexico's residents are considered poor.7

The guiding principle of Cuevas' company is to give out money instead of making profits, whereby various products and services are offered for free, such as manipulated barcode stickers to enable people to buy foods more cheaply in the supermarket, or "Safty Pills", with which they can avoid falling asleep and therefore being robbed on the train. In the way the artist dismantles the company mechanism of acting for profit and sets herself against the principle of economic utility, she shifts attention towards the "losers" of capitalism.

Cuevas makes use of the language and the vocabulary of advertising, and by substituting "evian" with "égalité", she changes the image of the luxury brand, which is associated with the keywords of purity, relaxation and detox. The complex global interconnectedness and the role of the multinational corporation in relation to the problem of distribution, which also arises from the economic cycle of water as a product, is highlighted and questioned. For Cuevas, however, it's not about a new utopia or changing the system overall, but rather about highlighting the gaps within the structures and offering alternatives. "My intention is not to create a perfect world", Cuevas says. "I don't believe that's possible, but I do believe we can improve small things."8 Here she uses the possibility and the freedom offered by art institutions in order to link her actions or artistic works to the social reality, to highlight tensions and to create openness.

The insistence "égalité – une condition naturelle", "equality – a natural condition", which is anchored in the French constitution, has shifted out of the institutional context and has been transformed into a tool for action. The "égalité" mural is presented in the exhibition space of the Schirn Kunsthalle together with posters showing the same motif. However, it can also be exhibited with small water bottles with the same logo. Students from France used the posters in a demonstration as a criticism of Marine Le Pen's right-wing populist politics, and visitors to the Schirn can take them home with them from the exhibition space. As the artist states in an interview, it is our choice how we react to our social reality and how we want to

(help) shape it. And it's in this regard that art has the potential even to change society.

Gislind Köhler (b. 1984 in Haarlem, NL) writes and creates exhibitions. She co-founded the artist-run space Jenifer Nails, is supporting the establishment of a foundation in project management and is working on a new exhibition project in public space in Berlin.

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http://www.schirn-peace.org/en/post/minerva-cuevas-egalite/

Cheaper barcode stickers for the taking at Mejor Vida Corp.

Minerva Cuevas Wants to Make Your Life Easier

Mejor Vida Corp, an exhibition at Hedreen Gallery, offers products and services for free.

By **Minh Nguyen**
Wednesday, Apr 26, 2017 1:30am | ARTS & CULTURE

Above the receptionist the words "Mejor Vida Corp" are arched over a handshake graphic, emblazoned in silver vinyl on the wall. The receptionist asks if I would like a student ID card. She takes my photo with a Polaroid Instax, then meticulously crops it with scissors, affixes it to a card with craft glue, stamps it in numerous places, and pushes it through a laminator. The card, she explains, is useful anywhere student discounts are offered. There's my photo, next to the words *Extensión Universitaria* and *estudiante t. completo*—"full-time student." I'm not a full-time student anywhere.

Mejor Vida Corp ("Better Life Corporation"), a project by artist Minerva Cuevas, distributes products for cheap or free, such as cleaning services, self-stamped envelopes, and subway tickets. At the

current exhibition at Seattle University's Hedreen Gallery, you can get a student ID card, QFC barcode labels for cheaper prices, or a personalized letter of recommendation. The receptionist, Hedreen gallery assistant Kelsey Siegert, writes me a letter on SU letterhead. Generic and pre-signed by Hedreen's curator Amanda Donnan, whom I have never met, it reads that she has "been witness to [my] intelligence and competence."

Minerva Cuevas is a conceptual social-practice artist who lives in Mexico City. Several of her works appropriate the language of branding and advertising for anti-consumerism purposes as a form of culture jamming. Donnan, who initiated MVC's Seattle headquarters, tells me she was drawn to the project because "it offers everyone small ways to exercise agency and subvert the system through acts of micro-sabotage." Since its start in 1998, MVC has issued thousands of student ID cards, subway tickets, and other services. Participants, of course, assume full responsibility for the use of these services. I ask Donnan about the potential risk to participants, and she says "there has not been any blowback in the 20 years MVC has been operating."

Minerva Cuevas Wants to Make Your Life Easier
Nguyen, Minh
Seattle Weekly, April 26, 2017

Customized student ID card from Mejor Vida Corp.

To reach out to those who could benefit most from these services, Donnan advertised the show on Craigslist and for the opening hired a sign-spinner, who swirled a cardboard arrow outside the gallery: "Yes It's FREE." Donnan even worked with Moises Himmelfarb, cultural

attaché at the Mexican Consulate in Seattle, who sent an announcement through its networks. "Himmelfarb said that the undocumented immigrants who come to the Consulate seeking assistance could benefit from MVC's student IDs. Apparently many people want any form of photo ID they can get, and the Consulate can't process them all."

Social-practice art often blurs the lines between performance, activism, and community organizing, where artists often assume the role of social-service providers. MVC is reminiscent of Rirkrit Tiravanija's seminal 1992 exhibition *Untitled (Free)* at 303 Gallery in New York, where he served visitors rice and Thai curry. The genre is hotly debated: While some praise its de-emphasis of art objects in favor of direct responses to social and political issues, others criticize it for putting an aestheticized spin on nonprofit work and reducing political organizing to a symbolic gesture.

Whether you agree that MVC meaningfully disrupts the transactional exchange, the exhibition is here if you want to save a bit on food or need a letter of recommendation for a job. And maybe that's enough. The project, for Cuevas, is about the "latent possibility of revolt implicit in the everyday." Her revolt involves devising ways to make our lives easier, in a society where people rarely give without expecting something in return.

Hedreen Gallery, 901 12th Ave. Ends May 20.

Seven Years Ago, A Mexican Artist Turned The U.S.-Mexico Border Into A Bridge
Brooks, Katherine
The Huffington Post, March 24, 2017

EDITION MX
HUFFPOST

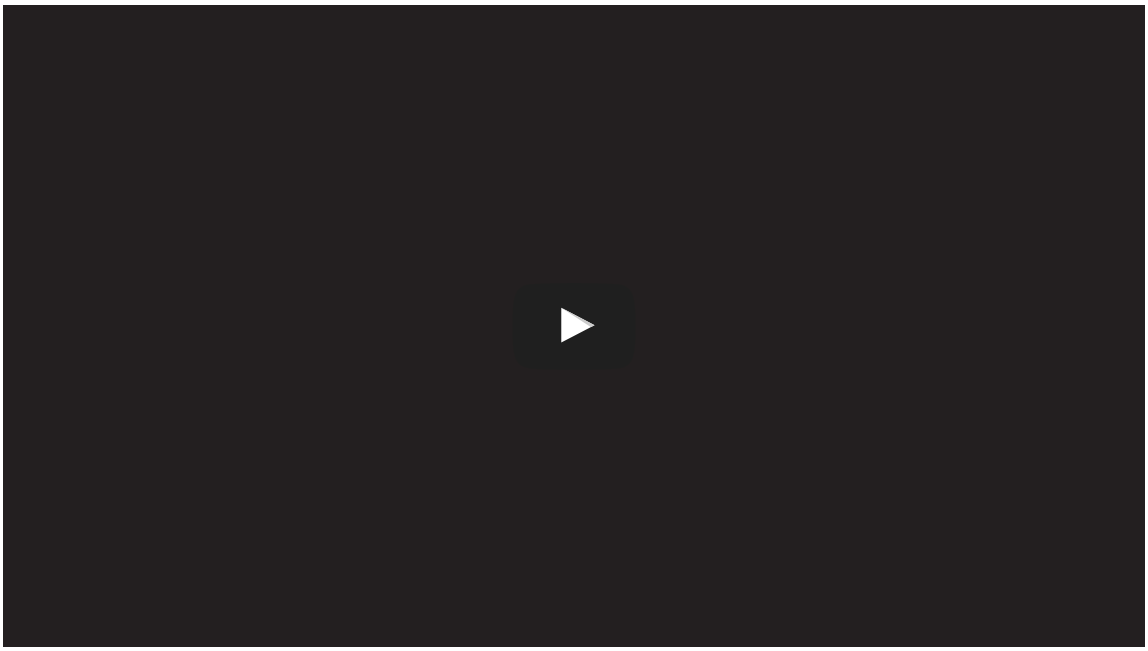
ARTS & CULTURE

Seven Years Ago, A Mexican Artist Turned The U.S.-Mexico Border Into A Bridge

Walking from south to north, she says, is “the most political act you could do.”

24/03/2017 10:01 AM CST | **Actualizado** 18/04/2017 6:39 AM CDT

Katherine Brooks
Senior Arts & Culture Editor, HuffPost



“The term ‘political activist’ is problematic,” Mexican artist Minerva Cuevas proclaims in a video for Art 21, premiering on The Huffington Post on Friday. “I think the challenge is to

stop using the references to activism, because everyone has this agency to react to daily life and therefore generate political action."

In 2010, Cuevas created "Crossing of the Rio Bravo," a project that took place near the U.S.-Mexico border. For the work, she operated on a simple premise: "If there is a border, there could be a bridge." She used rocks found in the riverbed to create a passageway that allowed her to cross from the U.S. to Mexico and back. She marked the rocks with a kind of limestone paint, creating a visibly dotted line across the Rio Bravo.

Walking from south to north, she described, is "the most political act you could do."

Near this portion of the Rio Bravo, there were no signs or fences delineating one country from another. Cuevas could spot border patrols in the area, but never once saw an act of violence or conflict like the ones you might see on the evening news.

Several years after the imagination of "Crossing," President Donald Trump announced his plans to construct a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, a project that has been estimated to cost around $22 billion. The executive order tied to the initiative describes the wall as a measure "to prevent illegal immigration, drug and human trafficking, and acts of terrorism."

"You learn about the border through media," Cuevas explains in the Art 21 video, a part of the organization's "Exclusive" series, available on YouTube. "Violence is a very strong element in this perception of what's the border."

"The wall wouldn't stop immigration," she adds. "The wall only reinforces this original [idea] that's connecting the border with violence. In fact, it would empower human trafficking."

Cuevas is one of many artists who've engaged in artworks along the U.S.-Mexico border, offering a different kind of lens through which citizens of both countries can view this vital region. Watch "Bridging Borders" above to hear more about the artist's vision for political action of the future.

Igniting the Archive
Simblist, Noah
Art in America, November, 2017

Igniting the Archive
Simblist, Noah
Art in America, November, 2017

IGNITING THE ARCHIVE

From billboard ads to one-person corporations, Mexican artist Minerva Cuevas creates site-specific interventions that critique socioeconomic structures.

by Noah Simblist

Minerva Cuevas: *Del Montte* (detail), 2003, acrylic on wall and 100 tomato cans with altered labels, approx. 16 by 20 feet. Photo Michel Zabé/ Omar Luis Olguín.

All images courtesy kurimanzutto, Mexico City.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
A mural by Minerva Cuevas, at the Dallas Museum of Art, through Feb. 11, 2018.

COMING SOON
Cuevas works in Prospect.4, New Orleans, Nov. 18, 2017–Feb. 25, 2018.

NOAH SIMBLIST is an associate professor of art at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond. See Contributors page.

THE MEXICO CITY–BASED conceptual artist Minerva Cuevas explores the ways in which seemingly banal items like fruit, chocolate, and water reflect the practices and ideology of global capitalism. She employs a wide range of forms, such as rebranding campaigns that subvert a corporation's logo to reveal power dynamics and histories of colonialism, and artist-run organizations that emulate various real-world entities.

Cuevas has regularly exhibited in Europe and Mexico for some twenty years, but, aside from appearances in a handful of group shows over the last decade, her work has not been seen extensively in the United States. However, this fall, US audiences have an opportunity to look more closely at her practice. The artist is participating in the two-year, research-based initiative "Public Knowledge," launched by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the San Francisco Public Library this past April. Cuevas was also invited to create a mural at the Dallas Museum of Art, where it will be on view from September 2, 2017, to February 11, 2018, and she is included in Prospect.4 in New Orleans. In addition, she has a two-week residency this September at the Kadist Art Foundation in San Francisco, which will lead to a show there in 2018.

Cuevas's multipart "Del Montte Campaign" (2003–) responds to the corporate exploitation of natural resources in Central and South America. In exhibitions, the project has consisted of sculptural elements (grocery-store-style stacks of canned tomatoes with labels that read PURE MURDER) and billboardlike murals. She alters the name of Del Monte Foods to "Del Montte," a reference to José Efraín Ríos Montt, the president of Guatemala from 1982 to '83, who used military strikes against the Ixil people, an Indigenous Maya eth-

Igniting the Archive
Simblist, Noah
Art in America, November, 2017

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Art in America, November, 2017

Égalité (detail), 2004, acrylic on wall and 1,080 water bottles with altered labels, approx. 8½ by 13 feet.

nic group. Montt was staunchly anti-Communist and, as a result, received support from the US, which shipped millions of dollars of military equipment to fuel a conflict that the UN has called genocide. One distinct strategy that he used to control the Guatemalan rural population was the social program Frijoles y Fusiles (Beans and Rifles). Those villages that the military deemed to be allied with the government received food while resisters were massacred. When we consider Guatemala's history as a banana republic and US interventions into Guatemalan politics on behalf of the United Fruit Company in the 1950s, Cuevas's "Del Montte Campaign" highlights the geopolitical intersections of food, state actors, and corporations, as well as the racist violence perpetrated against Indigenous communities for both profit and political power.

Cuevas established the Mejor Vida Corp. (Better Life Corporation) in 1998 in Mexico City as a kind of umbrella organization for projects like the "Del Montte Campaign." Initially renting an office on the fourteenth floor of the Latin American Tower, a modernist architectural icon that is one of the tallest buildings in the city, Cuevas offered free services, such as sweeping up debris in public spaces, and products, like subway tickets and barcode stickers to reduce the prices on goods from grocery stores.[1] She drew her first clients from the people who came in and out of the building to conduct business. Art world iterations of the Mejor Vida Corp. have appeared at the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City, Z33 in Belgium, and the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt. In those contexts, the participants were

Front and back of a student identification card produced by Cuevas's Mejor Vida Corp., 1998–2012.

Igniting the Archive
Simblist, Noah
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Bitter Sweet-Hershey's, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 85 by 160 inches; in "Feast and Famine" at kurimanzutto. Photo Omar Luis Olguín.

For Cuevas's Mejor Vida Corp., collaboration starts with the participant asking for a student ID card and continues through its every use.

museum visitors. In the case of the Museo Tamayo, Cuevas requested that the museum allow free admission. Institutional officials refused, but one of the Mejor Vida Corp.'s services is to print student ID cards, enabling visitors to get free entry to the museum.[2] Another campaign listed on the organization's website critiques Mexico's national lottery for serving private interests. In posters and murals, Cuevas disrupts the red heart of the lottery logo with bloodlike drips and the text EN MÉXICO 46,000,000 DE PERSONAS VIVEN EN POBREZA (In Mexico 46,000,000 people live in poverty).

Does the Mejor Vida Corp. intervene in everyday life or is it a conceptual gesture that has no practical application?[3] Cuevas has insisted that it is not ideologically motivated activism. For one reason, she intends the website to emulate for-profit businesses. It also has a very limited capacity, and it does not advocate for an explicit set of ideals. Artist Tania Bruguera, however, includes the project in her online archive Arte Útil (Useful Art) because of its practical effects for the user.[4] At the same time the Mejor Vida Corp. functions like Walid Raad's Atlas Group, in that it exists through the labor of one person but implies a collective effort, turning the organization into a representation of collectivity.

Particular qualities of collectivism and collaboration differ from one artist-run organization to another, but these entities are in many ways predicated on resisting the traditional dynamic of the artist as an active creator and the viewer as a passive consumer.[5] For the collectivist work to exist, there must be some sort of social interaction between at least two people. In Cuevas's case the collaboration starts with the participant asking for a student ID card and continues through its every use.

Unlike the Mejor Vida Corp., Cuevas's International Understanding Foundation (IUF), structured like an institution mandated to serve the public good, features a mission statement and a board of trustees. It began in 2016 as her contribution to a group exhibition at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, where it consisted of an architectural space resembling a three-dimensional Mondrian grid painting arrayed with various items. There were archival photographs of a 1980s punk-band performance in which the backdrop was a 1920s social-protest graphic depicting workers in blocky black-and-white shapes with the text TAG DER FREIHEIT (day of freedom).[6] She paired Warhol's disaster painting *129 Die in Jet!* (1962) with its source, the front page of the June 4, 1962, *New York Mirror*, thus underscoring how an artwork can traverse the border between the real and

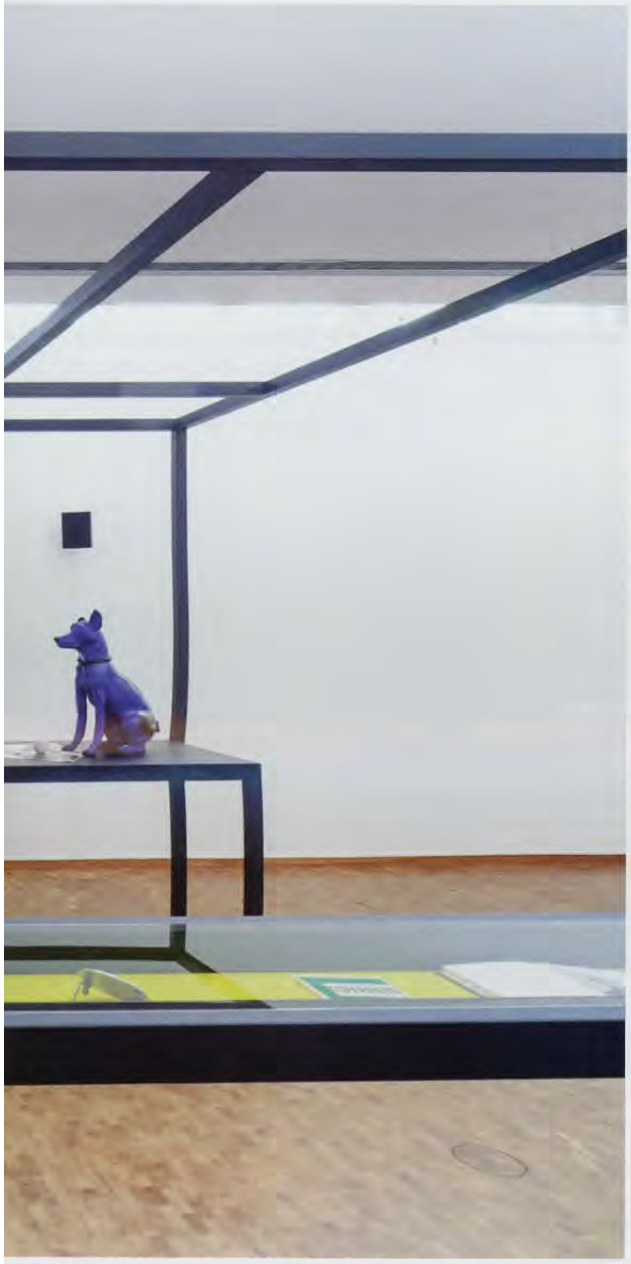
Igniting the Archive
Simblist, Noah
Art in America, November, 2017

View of the installation *International Understanding Foundation (IUF)*, 2016, mixed mediums, at Museum Ludwig, Cologne.

the symbolic. Cuevas also included a rock she was given by Jimmie Durham as a gift and a Mickey Mouse figurine holding a piece of white paper bearing a quote from Bertolt Brecht: WHAT HAPPENS TO THE HOLE WHEN THE CHEESE IS GONE? She collaborated with a composer in Cologne to write an IUF hymn, which was performed by a choir made up of administrators at the Museum Ludwig. Together, the installation wove a tapestry of social and political narratives that moved in and out of popular and more rarefied forms of culture.

The IUF can fit into different contexts, and Cuevas plans a presentation of it for her exhibition with the Kadist Foundation in 2018. This show will also draw on her research for "Public Knowledge." Organized by SFMOMA's Deena Chalabi, Dominic Willsdon, and Stella Lochman, "Public Knowledge" addresses

Igniting the Archive
Simblist, Noah
Art in America, November, 2017



recent shifts in the Bay Area resulting from the technology industry boom and how those changes affect cultural memory.[7] The boom has led to rising socioeconomic inequality, pushing families from their traditional communities and pricing out cultural spaces.

For "Public Knowledge," Cuevas has undertaken a residency at the San Francisco Public Library. Her work there is both an investigation into an archive and an engagement with the civic structure that maintains the archive. The primary theme of her research is fire, which is a paradoxical element, given its threats and benefits.[8] She considers it a metaphor for revolution, flames being one visible manifestation of social protest. But fire poses a threat to libraries, notoriously destroying the ancient Library of Alexandria in Egypt in several blazes between the first century BCE and the seventh century CE. On the other hand, the technology to start and control fire contributed to the natural and cultural evolution of the earliest human communities. Cuevas is also interested in the idea that fire, like information, spreads, and the spread of information is what underlies San Francisco's technology boom. In this sense, there is an inverse relationship between the destructive characteristics of fires in the Bay Area—the 1851 fire that destroyed almost a quarter of the city or, more recently, the 2016 Ghost Ship fire in Oakland—and the ways that technology has metaphorically ignited economic development.

Cuevas examines how various social forces use images, leveraging and activating them to achieve their goals. For instance, the "Del Montte" project riffs on the way that advertising communicates visually with a consumer. But activism, the dissemination of countercultural resistance, also depends on images, which are put forth in rallies, marches, mass mailings, and the media. Cuevas knows this well since she has been documenting these forms of activism with her long-term project *Disidencia* (2008–), a video archive of protests in Mexico City. Protests often rely on performativity and visuality and thus are forms of representation. In this sense, Cuevas both reveals and implements the political power of images. ○

1. To my mind, these documents are acts of civil disobedience, pushing up against the limits of legality. I have never heard of Cuevas or any of her clients being arrested for using her items.
2. Interview with Minerva Cuevas by Hans Ulrich Obrist, July 24, 2001, nettime.org/archives.php.
3. The notion of political efficacy is hotly contested regarding socially engaged art practices. One example of this debate was sparked by Ben Davis's essay "A Critique of Social Practice Art: What Does It Mean to Be a Political Artist" in the *International Socialist Review*, July 2013. The response, which started on social media and then was facilitated by the nonprofit Blade of Grass through a series of blog posts (to which I was a contributor), was published in *Public Servants: Art and the Crisis of the Common Good*, ed. Johanna Burton, New York and Cambridge, New Museum and MIT Press, 2016.
4. For more on Arte Útil, see www.arte-util.org. According to the website: "The notion of what constitutes Arte Útil has been arrived at via a set of criteria that was formulated by Tania Bruguera and curators at the Queens Museum, New York, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, and Grizedale Arts, Coniston, UK. Arte Útil projects should: propose new uses for art within society, use artistic thinking to challenge the field within which it operates, respond to current urgencies, operate on a 1:1 scale, replace authors with initiators and spectators with users, have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users, pursue sustainability, and re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation."
5. Among noteworthy artist-run institutions that engage the politics of everyday life are e-flux's Time/Bank (2009–), which proposes an alternative economic model based on the exchange of time and skills; Women on Waves (1999–), an organization founded by activist physician Rebecca Gomperts that provides abortions in international waters, outside the jurisdiction of countries in which the practice is outlawed; Tania Bruguera's Immigrant Movement International (2010–), an advocacy organization for immigrant rights; Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses (1993–), which offers art, education, and social services to Houston's Third Ward; and Theaster Gates's Rebuild Foundation (2010–), a platform for neighborhood transformation on Chicago's South Side.
6. Interview with the artist, Dallas, May 2017.
7. In addition to Cuevas, artists Burak Arikan, Bik Van der Pol, Josh Kun, and Stephanie Syjuco are participating, as are scholars Julia Bryan-Wilson, Jon Christensen, Teddy Cruz, Fonna Forman, Jennifer A. González, Shannon Jackson, and Fred Turner.
8. Interview with the artist, Dallas, May 2017.

Subvert the System
Slenske, Michael
Blouin Modern Painters, May 2016

Subvert the System
Slenske, Michael
Blouin Modern Painters, May 2016

Subvert the System
Slenske, Michael
Blouin Modern Painters, May 2016

the System

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

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE

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

It's this dizzying milieu that continues to inspire the work of Minerva Cuevas, an artist whose unconventional projects have taken many forms, from political posters to modified water-bottle labels and video performances—like 1995's *Drunker*, for which she downed half a liter of tequila in 40 minutes while writing seven pages of conditional sentences, in Spanish and English, about her reasons for drinking. Cuevas's spartan work space close to Tepito is likewise eclectic, filled with sociology texts, postcards examining the extinction of public services (like the privatization of postal systems, a phenomenon she explored in a 2010 exhibition), and walking sticks ("I have learned to perceive walking as a political act," Cuevas affirms). A library-like side room holds trays of tar, in which the artist dips landscapes found in thrift stores for an ongoing series meant to skewer Mexico's land rape at the hands of oil companies, while also referencing the way Olmec and Mayan artisans covered sculptures with tar.

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

OMAR LUIS OLGUIN. MINERVA CUEVAS, AND KURIMANZUTTO, MEXICO CITY

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

Subvert the System
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Del Montte, 2003, in mid-installation at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris.

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

Often, Cuevas's work has a more directly political implication. For a 2012 survey at the Museo de la Ciudad de México, she installed a white flag, *The Way*, on the building's exterior (the work was an oblique reference to a quote attributed to Gandhi: "There is no way to peace—peace is the way"). Meanwhile, for the past 15 years, she has handed out posters around the Zócalo, reading *Contra lo prohibido, las calles de lo posible* (Against the Forbidden, the Streets of the Possible) or *Para qué infierno si tenemos patria* (What Do We Need Hell For If We Have the Nation). These posters are often used in teacher, student, and union strikes, and subsequently immortalized in newspaper and television reports without any direct attribution to the artist. Something similar happened with a 2001 show at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, for which Cuevas altered the labels on 5,000 bottles of Evian water, rebranding them as Égalité; students in Rennes later repurposed the graphics for protest banners. Corporate iconography also played a role in her first exhibition with Kurimanzutto, a 2002 pop-up installation called *Dodgem*—a rink of electric bumper cars fitted with logos for oil companies; the piece was meant to operate for a few weeks but ultimately ran for eight years in local fairgrounds at the intersection of Avenida Revolución and Avenida Patriotismo.

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

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

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

MINERVA CUEVAS AND KURIMANZUTTO

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

Minerva Cuevas, 2016.

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

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

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

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

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

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"Pure Murder: Minerva Cuevas' Culture Jamming Logo Art"
Sargent, Antwaun
The Creators Project
December 14, 2015

Pure Murder: Minerva Cuevas' Culture Jamming Logo Art

By Antwaun Sargent — Dec 14 2015

Minerva Cuevas (1975), Del Montte, 2003,Acrylic paint on wall and a black and white research scheme on paper and 100 relabeled tomato cans, Scheme: 90 x 60 cm (35.43 x 23.62 inches),Mural: 500 x 600 cm (196.85 x 236.22 inches)

Logos can signify many things at once. They can conjure up brand identity, evoke self-congratulatory histories of advertisements, and point to personal associations with products. All three are at play in artist Minerva Cuevas' logo installation, *Del Montte—Bananeras*, on view at the *Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today* exhibition at the Museo Jumex in Mexico City as part of The Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative.

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Installation view: Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today, Museo Jumex, Mexico City, November 19, 2015–February 16, 2016. Courtesy: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and Museo Jumex, Mexico City

The large-scale work appropriates the Fresh Del Monte Produce Inc. logo to call out the fraught political and commercial industries histories of Latin America. "I work altering and playing with logos and in general with branding," says Cuevas of her social justice-oriented artworks. "For this specific campaign some friends, who were human rights observers, were going to Guatemala, and they asked me to do a visual campaign about the land struggle in Guatemala that is connected to the regional exploitation of natural resources in the area," says Cuevas. "I developed the main logo as a part of their campaign."

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Minerva Cuevas (1975), Del Montte-La Boite de l'Imperialisme, 2004, Acrylic paint on wall and 120 relabeled red tomato sauce cans 400 x 280 cm (157.48 x 110.24 inches)

By altering the Del Monte logo to read "Del Montte" and superimposing the logo on a black and white drawing of bananas, the artist loads the logo with the violent history of José Efraín Ríos Montt's dictatorship in Guatemala in the early 80s. In tampering with institutional and corporate identities, the logo, allows for new narratives to be considered. *Del Montte—Bananeras* is part of a much larger body of work entitled, *The Del Monte Campaign*, which includes relabeled tomato cans, murals, stickers for fruit, and other installations, rethinks the relationships between local politics, labor, and consumerism. In the large wall installation *Del Montte*, Minerva expands on the main logo so that it includes the words "criminal" and "pure murder" underneath the original Del Montte logo and overlaided the sign on top of bloody red tomatoes. In this way, Cuevas' larger campaign also reexamines how capitalism, aided by authoritarianism, has impacted not just Guatemala, but Latin American broadly over the last several decades.

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Minerva Cuevas (1975), Del Montte-Bananeras, 2003, Paint on wall, silkscreen, two plastic palm trees, four plastic bananas bunches, straw, Variable dimensions (minimum size of the mural: 500 cm wide).Silkscreen: 116 x 147.5 cm (45.67 x 58.07 inches)

The general use of graphic images by the artist is connected to a strategy of advertising that make the aesthetic side of her political work more popular. "These are images that we are, through the media, very familiar with," explains Cuevas who has continued her art campaign since 2003 because the companies are still active in Latin America. "I use these [images] as a channel to shock and provoke a different kind of intellectual exercise. Most of the research I do is already public but it doesn't have a public face and this work balances that."

Under the Same Sun: Art From Latin America Today continues through February 16 at Museo Jumex. For more information, click here.

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Free phone calls and other subversive art
Los Angeles Times
Hernández, Daniel.
22 de julio del 2012

TRACY WILKINSON Los Angeles Times

MINERVA CUEVAS' installation featuring a free pay phone is a new work included in a retrospective of her art presented by the Museum of Mexico City.

FOREIGN EXCHANGE

Free phone calls and other subversive art

A Mexican artist targets a society in which the rich often get all the shortcuts and giveaways

By Daniel Hernandez
Reporting from Mexico City

The pay phone is tucked into a colonial-era doorway facing a busy sidewalk downtown. It only happens to draw attention because the phone is bright red. "Free calls," reads a plain sign taped inside, along with instructions on how to dial any number in Mexico or in the world.

An installation conceived by artist Minerva Cuevas, the phone also features a photograph of a chimpanzee picking up an old rotary phone, like an open invitation. One recent day, this reporter stumbled upon the phone and did what millions of others might do when faced with a free call. I called my mother.

"Hey, Mom! I'm calling you for an art piece!"

"Oh, that's great, *mi'jo*," she replied, before launching into the latest local gossip.

Few artists in the world challenge the penny-for-penny profits of global capitalism as bluntly as Mexico City native Cuevas. She puts revolutionary slogans inside mass-produced fortune cookies and hands out bottles of water labeled "Egalite" instead of "Evian," because shouldn't water always be free?

Her free pay phone is a new work produced for an exhibit at the Museum of Mexico City. The show, on view through Aug. 5, covers a career defined by Cuevas' knack at turning art into giveaways for ordinary people hustling to make ends meet in a tough city. They are particularly subversive gestures for Mexico, the artist says, a society in which the very wealthy and connected usually get all the shortcuts and giveaways they might wish.

Cuevas' Mejor Vida Corp. is perhaps her most well-known conceptual project. This "Better Life Corp." distributed subway tickets in underground stations, handed out low-price bar codes to secretly affix to items in stores and produced fake student ID cards (for transit and entertainment discounts) by request from strangers.

As might be expected, the public responded approvingly. Mejor Vida Corp. went on to become an icon of contemporary Mexican art in the 1990s.

The Cuevas exhibit also highlights works that are surprising for their almost formal expressions in painting and performance. In a 1995 video, the earliest piece in the exhibit, Cuevas films herself through the process of drinking an entire bottle of tequila.

She does so mostly in silence. In person, Cuevas is similarly soft-spoken yet precise, deliberately measured with her words. She would describe the tequila video only as "sculptural."

The free pay phone is a powerful piece, the equivalent of an art-world bomb aimed at the web of private financial structures that profit from our 21st century need for telecommunicating with loved ones. It is especially potent in the financial nerve center of Mexico City, where telecom magnate Carlos Slim bases the Telmex and Telcel empires that make him the world's richest man.

"It was one of the most difficult pieces to get installed," Cuevas acknowledged on a recent bright day outside the museum. "Obviously, in Mexico, we have the reference of the monopolies, of Telmex, but it's also about creating this oasis in the city."

Cuevas said she was paying for calls made at the installation herself. She is keeping a registry of the calls made, but in keeping with the strategy behind Mejor Vida Corp., the data will remain private. (The artist said that calls from Mexico City to Cuba are the most expensive.)

On Wednesday, free-admission day at the museum, the phone doorway was closed because the museum's phone and Internet connections were inexplicably down, a spokeswoman said. It was a cold reminder for any would-be caller of the unreliable nature of telephone service here, even in today's wired world.

Hernandez is a news assistant in The Times' Mexico City bureau.

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"The Year in Review--Mexico"
Cuevas, Tatiana
Frieze
Issue 151
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Tatiana Cuevas

If the Mexican contemporary art scene – particularly in Mexico City – has been marked by a peculiar dynamism over the last decade, some of its institutions have seemed to flounder due to a lack of continuity and a missing sense of purpose. Recently, however, a number of spaces have succeeded in establishing clear identities and bold programming, aided by renewed approaches to how these venues can relate to a wider cultural landscape.

This was particularly evident over the last year, marked as it was by the reopening of the Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo after 12 months of renovations and the addition of new exhibition spaces that add up to almost 2,000 square metres. With specially commissioned projects by Ryan Gander, Pierre Huyghe and Michael Stevenson, as well as a new hang of the museum's collection (overseen by chief curator Julieta Gonzalez), the Tamayo is set to become an essential part in the formation of new publics for contemporary art, while continuing to nurture different artistic practices and institutional discourses.

On the other side of town, the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo has initiated a new programme, under head curator María Inés Rodríguez, which contemplates a more active integration of the academic and educational programmes with the exhibitions in progress, setting special emphasis on practices that weave the artistic into pedagogical research and working processes. On the other hand, besides a new programme focused on younger generations of artists and curators, the museum's oversize spaces continue to be used for challenging projects. In one recent case, Teresa Margolles's *La Promesa* (The Promise, 2012) consists of a house from the suburbs of Ciudad Juárez – a city that has become synonymous with senseless violence and forced emigration – that has been pulverized and transported to the venue to be painstakingly dispersed to cover the floor of the exhibition space over the course of three months by a group of volunteers. The mute, grieving character of the installation produces a most eloquent memento of the lost lives and broken dreams brought by the multinational war on drugs.

Situated in the historic centre of town, the Museo de la Ciudad de México, under the directorship of Cristina Faesler until early September, continued to present a programme that strives to integrate the institution with its immediate context. A good example of this was their survey of the work of Minerva Cuevas presented over the spring and curated by Patrick Charpenel. Cuevas's socially engaged projects question the hegemony of the global economy by exploiting small loopholes in the system, enabling the circulation of new meanings and values. Her work seemed most at home surrounded by the unflagging and chaotic activity in the nearby streets, where all sorts of local and global commerce and cultural interchanges collide.

A particular case in the annals of continuity is that of Museo Experimental El Eco, built in 1953 by German architect, painter and sculptor Mathias Goeritz, only to be shut down after a just few events in the same year. El Eco reopened in 2005 after being restored to its original function by the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Under newly appointed director Paola Santoscoy, the space continues to focus on experimentation and interdisciplinarity. The 2012 programme opened with *Intemperie* (In the Open), an enigmatic installation by Pablo Vargas Lugo, which consisted of a Turkmenian rug meticulously reproduced in coloured sand, lying on the floor of the main gallery. The glass panes from the window and door leading to the courtyard were removed, allowing the wind to erode the piece slowly over the course of the exhibition, while underscoring the continuity between both architectural spaces. This intervention also allowed for some unusual interactions such as an improvisation by musicians Alexander Bruck and Misha Marks featuring two alpine horns issuing their calls from inside and outside the exhibition space.

The Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros has also earned a solid reputation as a venue committed to experimentation and the commissioning of daring projects. This year's collaboration with Tate Modern, under the title 'The Redeeming Institution', offered a fresh take on the role of the institution *vis á vis* social conflict, with works by Colectivo Tercerunquinto, Cinthia Marcelle, Teresa Margolles and David Zink Yi. The asymmetry between both institutions highlights a new dynamic pervading contemporary art practices, where dialogue is enabled by emphasizing difference rather than homogeneity.

Political changes often spell bad news for art institutions in Mexico, since most of them depend on government funding – even if private support has increased significantly in recent years. It could be that some of these efforts become thwarted by political squabbles or reductions in funding; however one could argue that the vitality of Mexico City's art scene has permeated these institutions rather than the other way around and they should therefore no longer be forced to yield as easily to the whims of functionaries and political parties.

Independent curator based in Mexico City.

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1
Teresa Margolles
La Promesa (The Promise), 2012, installation view at the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City

2
Minerva Cuevas
Égalité (Equality), 2012, installation view at Museo de la Ciudad de México, Mexico City

3
Cinthia Marcelle
Marco Zero (Zero Landmark), 2007, installation view at 'The Redeeming Institution', Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, Mexico City, 2012

4
Pablo Vargas Lugo, *Intemperie* (In the Open), 2012, installation view at Museo Experimental El Eco, Mexico City

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A mexican wave of protest

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The Art Newspaper, 17-19 June, 2011

Art Unlimited

All interviews by Anny Shaw

A Mexican wave of protest

Minerva Cuevas, *Disidencia*, 2008-10, Kurimanzutto, U2

Once considered tricky for dealers to show and sell at fairs, video art is proving popular at this year's Art Unlimited, with no fewer than 18 video works on show. Mexican gallery Kurimanzutto is showing Minerva Cuevas' *Disidencia*, 2008-10 (edition of five, $35,000 each), a video depicting scenes of resistance and demonstration in Mexico, which Cuevas has filmed over the past few years. Dealer José Kuri, who has represented Cuevas since Kurimanzutto opened in 1999, said it was not a conscious decision to bring video, just to bring a "very good work of art", although he concedes that the work is not the most market-friendly. "Minerva's work is not so commercial, but it is important to support it," he said.

Disidencia, which was shown last year at the sixth Berlin Biennale, features footage of political protests, but also a meeting of computer hackers, a punk music festival and an alternative fair where people sell organically grown food. "The video is not just about political demonstrations," said Kuri. "Minerva's work is about ethics, but obviously politics falls under ethics. It's also about proposing alternative strategies to the mainstream economy." Indeed, in 1998, Cuevas founded Mejor Vida Corp (Better Life Corporation), a socially engaged project that distributes free subway tickets, student passes and barcode stickers for cheaper food to the residents of Mexico City. ■

All images © David Owens

Another brick in the wall

Just hanging around

Nari Ward, *CarouSoul*, 2011, Lehmann Maupin, Galleria Continua, U41

Nari Ward's large-scale installation *CarouSoul*, 2011 (price range $150,000 to $200,000), at Art Unlimited is full of contradictions. The 18ft-high work, which has tyres hanging from it like swings, resembles a fairground carousel. The idea of movement is also alluded to in the Jamaican-born, New York-based artist's use of shoes found in his local neighbourhood of Harlem: the tips of the shoes protrude from the outer edges of the tyres, while the tongues of the shoes—bearing recognisable brands such as Adidas and Puma—line the tyres' insides. Shoelaces are also looped over the ropes that hold the tyres, creating a kind of dangling canopy. "The whole piece is about movement; the reference to the shoes and the tyres, even the laces, become this vertical movement," said Ward. "There's a lot of contradiction in the work: there's this sense of movement but the piece is supposed to be still."

The work also refers to the

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"Minerva Cuevas and the Art of Para-sitic Intervention"
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Aferall
No. 27
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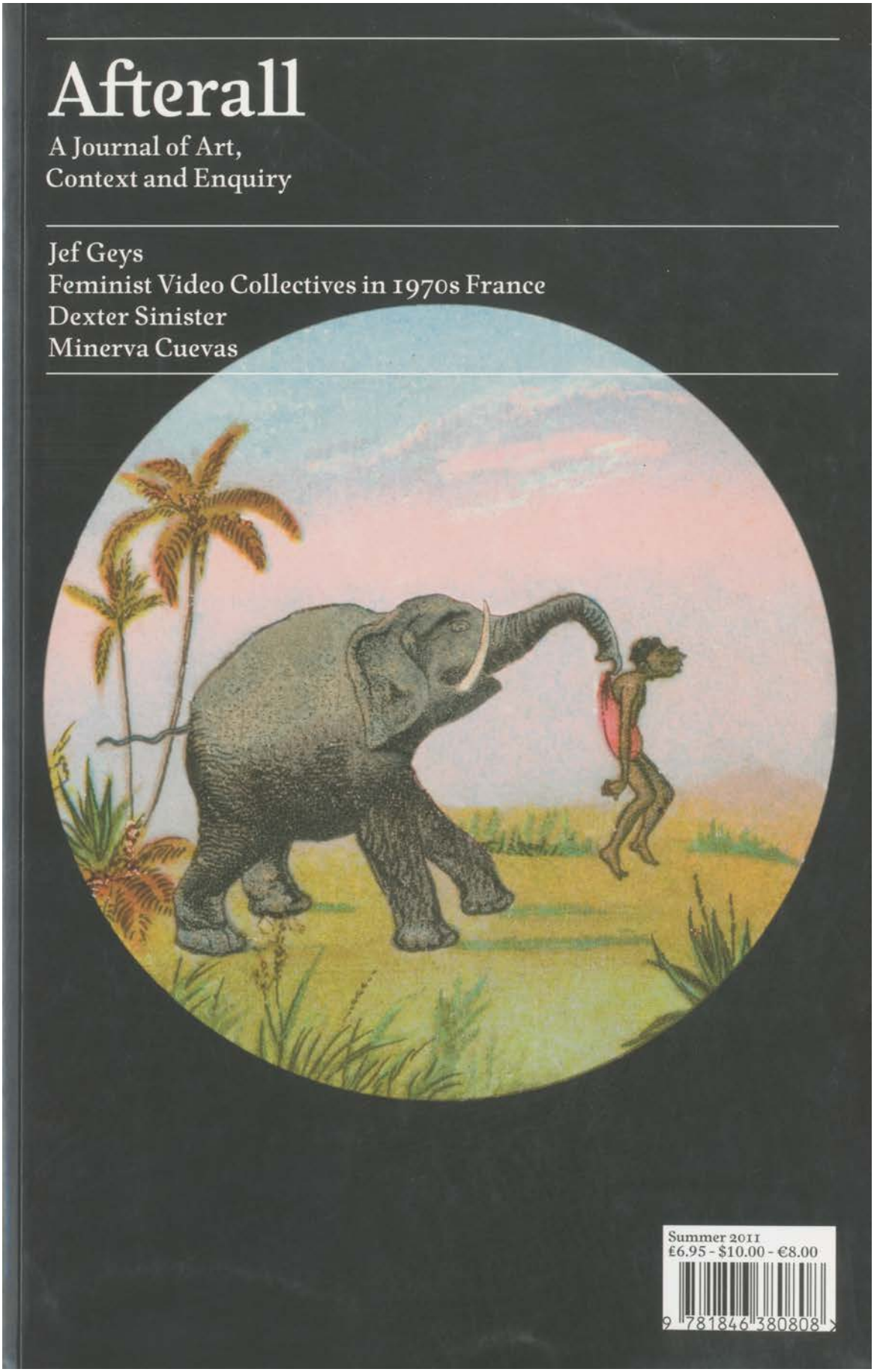

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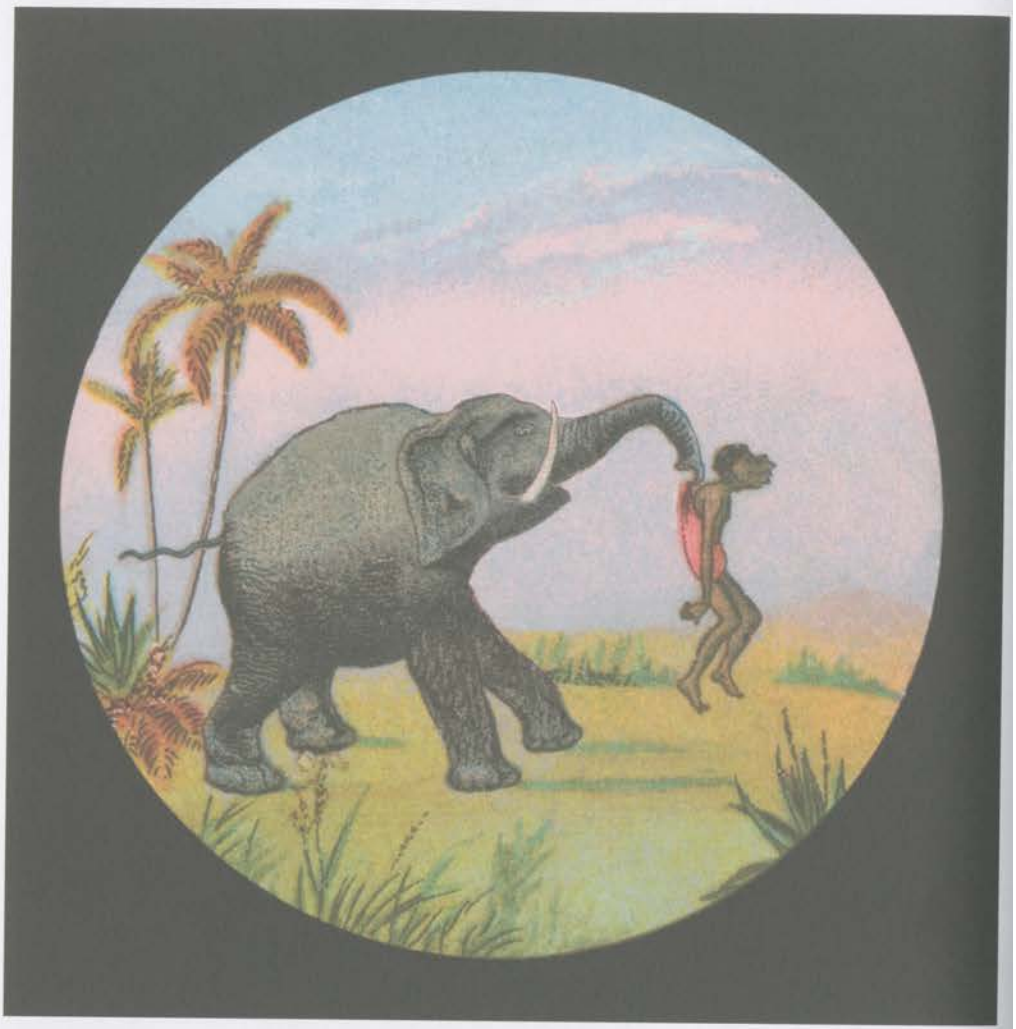

Previous spread: Minerva Cuevas, *Causa y efecto* (*Cause and Effect*), part of *La venganza del elefante* (*The Elephant's Vengeance*), 2007, acrylic paint on wall, dimensions variable

Above: From *The Elephant's Vengeance*, 2007, 12 slides from the nineteenth century, illustrations projected on wall, slide projector model Rollei 66, Dual P Projector, installation dimensions variable, slides 7 × 7cm each. Both images courtesy the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico City

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Minerva Cuevas: Anarchy in the Hive

– Francis McKee

Francis McKee sketches out a short history of the interaction between animals and man – in zoological gardens, scientific study and folkloric fables – within which to view Minerva Cuevas's socially critical films and installations.

Social Entomology (2007) occupies a key place in the work of Minerva Cuevas. It draws together many of the implications of the work that precedes it, and it lays a foundation for the pieces that Cuevas planned beyond it. Moreover, it represents the culmination of a long period of collecting and research, extending her work far into new modes of display and subject matter. The installation itself could be considered in three parts: a sound piece, *Insect Concert*, which permeates the entire space; a set of six tables, onto which ephemera and objects are placed, and which forms a circle in the room; and a series of floor-based projection microscopes, which cast images onto the surrounding walls. Amid the collections on the tables lies a handwritten quotation on cellular theory as expounded by the nineteenth-century German scientist Rudolph Virchow:

> *In 1858, pathologist Rudolph Virchow declared that 'the composition of the major organism, the so-called individual, must be likened to a kind of social arrangement or society, in which a number of separate existences are dependent upon one another, in such a way, however, that each element possesses its own peculiar activity and carries out its own task by its own powers.' A creature like you and me, said Virchow, is actually a society of separate cells. The reasoning also works in reverse — a society acts like an organism.*[1]

The quotation clearly binds the emerging theory of cells to a view of human society, and thereby joins the long tradition of using animals to metaphorically describe human behaviour.

It is important, from the outset, to understand how that tradition of animal metaphor functions actively within the real world, and to acknowledge that a subject as apparently arcane as cellular biology can have a direct impact on politics and society. An oblique example of this can be seen in the book *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding* (1987), by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. The two scientists, who had developed a new biological theory of cognition, were asked to present a series of lectures on the subject to social workers and managers in the Chilean government in the early 1980s. The publication begins:

> *This book came into being as a consequence of very particular circumstances. In 1980 the Organization of American States (OAS) was actively seeking ways to understand the many difficulties confronted in social communication and knowledge transfer. Aware of this need, Rolf Behncke, then with ODEPLAN (the Ministry of Planning of the Chilean government), immediately thought it would be beneficial to expose the OAS to our approach to those issues, in the form of a coherent formulation of the foundations of communication as the biological being of man.*[2]

1 Howard Bloom, *The Lucifer Principle: A Scientific Expedition into The Forces of History*, New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995, p.102.
2 Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, 'Preface', *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding* (1987, trans. Robert Paolucci), Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1992, p.11.

Given that Varela, a supporter of Salvador Allende, had fled the country in the wake of General Pinochet's coup in 1973, the lectures were a minor form of subversion in a political structure that allowed little dissent. Not surprisingly, Varela left Chile for a second time in 1986, for good.

More pointedly, in 1994, the Zapatista Subcomandante Marcos responded to a drawing sent to him by a ten-year-old girl by writing the first of many political fables based around the character of Don Durito, a pipe-smoking beetle from the Lacandon jungle. The fables directly address current political issues within the limits of the traditional genre; *Durito III: Neoliberalism and the Labor Movement* (1994), for instance, honours the storytelling genre in its description of a natural setting before moving into the harder politics:

> *The moon is a pale almond. Silver sheets reshape trees and plants. Dedicated crickets nail white leaves to the tree trunks as irregular as the shadows of the night below. Gusts of grey wind agitate the trees and the uneasiness. Durito makes a bed in my beard. The sneeze he provokes makes the armed gentleman roll on the floor. Durito gathers himself deliberately. To his already impotent body armour, Durito adds half a shell of COLOLTE (which is a species of hazelnut native to the Lacandon jungle) on his head in addition to holding a medicine cap like a shield. Excalibur is sheathed and a lance (which is suspiciously similar to a paper clip) completes his attire.*
>
> *'Now what?' I say as I try to, somewhat pointlessly, help Durito with my finger. Durito rearranges his body, I mean, his armour. He unsheathes Excalibur, clears his throat twice, and says in a deep-throated voice.*
>
> *'It is dawn, my battered shield-bearer! It is the hour to arrange our garments, and march and the day sharpens the spiny mane of Apollo as he peers at the world! It is the hour when nomadic knights ride in search of adventure which will increase their prestige before the absent eyes of the maiden, which prevent them from, even for an instant, close [sic] their eyes looking for oblivion or rest!'*
>
> *I yawn and let my eyelids bring me oblivion and rest. This irritates Durito and he raises his voice: 'We must go out to wrong maidens, straighten widows out, give refuge to bandits and jail the destitute.'*
>
> *'Sounds to me like a government program,' I say to him with my eyes closed...*[3]

Minerva Cuevas, *Social Entomology*, 2007. Installation view, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2008. Photograph: Peter Cox. Courtesy the artist and the Van Abbemuseum

The Durito fables are not simply pleasant stories. Their pointed political themes are deliberately devised to educate and inform, and so to transform political consciousness. In England, the tradition of animal fables has performed in a similar way since at least the mid-seventeenth century, when the Civil War destroyed the certainties of monarchical governments and the rule of divine right. This eruption of civil discord was accompanied by an explosion of animal fables, each politically partisan and designed to discredit the opposition. Despite the restoration of monarchy in Britain, the fables continued, digging ever further into the question of what constituted a society and what held it together. Bernard Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees* (1714) challenged any sense of human benevolence at the root of a wealthy society. Instead, the prosperous hive he describes in his story flourished on vice:

> *These Insects lived like Men, and all*
> *Our Actions they perform'd in small: [...]*
> *Thus every Part was full of Vice,*
> *Yet the whole Mass a Paradice;*
> *Flatter'd in Peace, and fear'd in Wars*
> *They were th'Esteem of Foreigners,*
> *And lavish of their Wealth and Lives,*
> *The Ballance of all other Hives.*
> *Such were the Blessings of that State;*
> *Their Crimes conspired to make 'em*
> *Great;*
> *And Vertue, who from Politicks*
> *Had learn'd a Thousand cunning*
> *Tricks,*
> *Was, by their happy Influence,*
> *Made Friends with Vice: And*
> *ever since*
> *The worst of all the Multitude*
> *Did something for the common Good.*[4]

3 Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, *Ya Basta! Ten Years of the Zapatista Uprising* (ed. Ziga Vodovnik, trans. anonymous), Oakland: AK Press, 2004, p.127.
4 Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1924, pp.18–24.

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While still assembling the material for *Social Entomology*, Cuevas addressed the fable tradition directly in a film titled *El pobre, el rico y el mosquito* (*The Poor Man, the Rich Man and the Mosquito*, 2007), shown as part of her exhibition 'On Society' at MC Gallery in Los Angeles. The film documents a young boy reading aloud a fable by the socialist writer Tomás Meabe:

> *A poor man once lived opposite a rich man. Everyday, through his window, he saw how poor he really was.*
> *He said to himself:*
> *'What have I in common with this man?'*
> *And the rich man across the way who saw him every day said to himself:*
> *'What have I in common with this man?'*
> *And the poor man was dying. Dying [...]*
> *He was dying, alone as can be.*
>
> *And the rich man across the way saw him every day from his window and, stingy, he once again said to himself, 'What have I in common with this man?'*
> *But then that same night one of the millions of mosquitoes that lived in a swamp bit the dying man.*
> *Later, flying at the mercy of the shadows, it gained entrance to the home of the rich man, who was sleeping, and bit him too.*
> *As the mosquito bit him, it passed on the disease of which the poor man was dying.*
> *And the rich man was no longer able to see the poor man from across the way from his window [...]*
> *Both men died of the same affliction, both died practically at the same time, unaware of what the one had in common with the other.*[5]

Cuevas placed a copy of this fable alongside a microscope projection of a mosquito and an old handpump insecticide sprayer. The conjunction of these elements is telling. The fable describes a world in which man and animal coexist. It is a view into the traditional folk world where there are rich men, poor men and unwitting insects that unite them. The microscope, however, with its finely dissected sliver of mosquito, and the insecticide sprayer both point to the modern, industrialised world in which the balance between man and animal no longer holds.

In his 1980 essay 'Why Look at Animals?', John Berger succinctly describes just such a juxtaposition of two worlds and of two ways of seeing, particularly as an embodiment of the rupture between humans and the natural world:

> *The nineteenth century, in Western Europe and North America, saw the beginning of a process, today being completed by twentieth-century corporate capitalism, by which every tradition which has previously mediated between man and nature was broken [...]*
>
> *Until the nineteenth century, however, anthropomorphism was integral to the relation between man and animal and was an expression of their proximity. Anthropomorphism was the residue of the continuous use of animal metaphor. In the last two centuries, animals have gradually disappeared. Today we live without them. And in this new solitude, anthropomorphism makes us doubly uneasy [...]*
>
> *Later, in the so-called post-industrial societies, they are treated as raw material. Animals required for food are processed like manufactured commodities.*[6]

This rupture was paralleled in history by the establishment in the nineteenth century of the zoo and the natural history museum – two science-based enterprises that codified our newly emerging relationship to animals. In both these institutions animals are situated as the 'objects of our ever-extending knowledge'.[7] Menageries or private collections of animals had been owned by kings for centuries, but it was the rise of scientific classification in the eighteenth century that led to the formation of zoos as we know them today. After the

5 Tomás Meabe, 'The Poor Man, the Rich Man and the Mosquito' (1920), available at http://www.braskart.com/?p=689 (last accessed on 10 March 2011).
6 John Berger, 'Why Look at Animals?', *About Looking*, London: Writers and Readers, 1980, pp.1, 9 and 11.
7 *Ibid.*, p.14.

publication of Linnaeus's classification of plants and animals in 1735, the systematic collection and display of animals as embodiments of research and knowledge began on a vast scale. Zoological gardens presented their visitors with a contrived and neutered version of nature and landscape. Animals were displayed with little opportunity to hide, their behaviour determined by opening hours and commerce and their presence justified as scientific specimens. Divided into sections reflecting their classification as reptile, mammal, bird, insect, etc., the display and scrutiny of the creatures underlined the gap between modern man and nature. All of this was couched in the trappings of a day out, an educational excursion for children and an exotic meeting point for adults.[8]

If the zoo offered some element of entertainment in its presentation, the natural history museum strove more determinedly to classify, categorise, instruct and demonstrate. The collections were housed in imposing, vaulted buildings

The eruption of civil discord after the English Cival War was accompanied by an explosion of animal fables, each politically partisan and designed to discredit the opposition.

in which the scale of God's work and the enterprise of science could be equally surveyed. Like the zoo, the natural history museum had its roots in more spectacular collections – the cabinet of curiosities and *Wunderkammer* of the seventeenth and eighteenth century that were governed by the personal tastes of their owners. Such collections had given priority to the sensual pleasures of looking, highlighting the eccentricities and visual delights of the assembled objects. While scientific exploration certainly fuelled these displays, it was allied to an irrepressible desire on the part of the collectors to leapfrog across scholarly borders, to make surprising connections between various items and to categorise along more arbitrary lines. The cabinet of curiosities acknowledged the physical pleasure of looking and the intellectual wonder experienced when confronting the exotic. By contrast, the natural history museum suppressed these elements in favour of scientific rigour and austere categorisation. As the nineteenth century progressed there was an added urgency to this process as curators began to understand how classifications and linear displays could demonstrate Darwin's controversial new theories of evolution.

Despite this, the tension between sensuous spectacle and intellectual demonstration has persisted in these institutions and still creates dilemmas for curators today. Cuevas highlights this schism in *Social Entomology*, presenting us with an installation that is at once playful and visually seductive while, at the same time, alluding to taxonomies, evolution and the scientific study of animals.

The array of books, pinned insects, luminous slides and intriguing microscopes draws us into a world of wonder. Miguel Covarrubias's brightly coloured illustration for the cover of the children's book *John and Juan in the Jungle* (1953) transports us back to a paradisiacal vision of the natural world, while various cigarette cards, those old little billets of factual delight, provide both biological information and beautifully detailed scenes from insect life. The slides and microscope have all of the fascination of finely honed antiques and the breath-taking precision of instrument-making in the early industrial age, and the insects displayed in sunken table cases have the beguiling aura of jewellery or precious artefacts. Given the low light of the whole installation, the sharp anatomical detail of insects projected onto the walls also summons up the awe produced by scientific discovery and the magic of shadows.

All of these elements suggest just how embedded the promotion of natural history is as a discipline is in our society. The ranked series of insects point to the importance of classification; the instruments highlight the technological probing of the world; the Covarubbias illustration emphasises the way in which the scientific gaze is built into children's education; even the cigarette cards reveal how the Enlightenment project permeates the commodities of everyday life. And surrounding these elements, in the outer circle of the installation, the series of microscope projections cast images of real, anatomised, insects. These glowing,

8 *See ibid.*, pp.21–26.

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unbelievably fine slices of specimens fascinate us even as they present dissections for study.

Projections play a crucial role in *Social Entomology*, as they do in several other works Cuevas made around this time. In 'On Society' the magnified image of a real mosquito illuminated the science of disease transmission implicit in the accompanying fable, while the fable lent poetry to the projected image. And, in the installation *Phenomena* (2007), antique magic lanterns are used to present microscopic cells and images of animals in zoos, such as a monkey dressed in a man's jacket. These images deliberately question the boundaries between nature and civilisation, between animal and human. At the same time, the quaint lantern technology utilises the space between the long tradition of the camera obscura and the accelerating industrialisation of the image. The images they display capture that moment, described by John Berger, when our relationship with animals shifted from anthropomorphism to commodity transaction.

There is a near forgotten political dimension to early magic lantern displays that also informs these projections. In *Artful Science* (1996), Barbara Maria Stafford points to the history of the medium in educating the broader masses in England and France:

> *Unskilled labourers and peasants in the two countries generally lacked the means and the interest to enter secondary schools. And, until much later in the century, they also lacked the English coffeehouse 'penny universities', whose popular lectures were audited by printers, drapers and weavers. Like the bored* externes *of the Jesuit* collège, *the largest portion of the populace, then, was 'educated' through popular spectacles. They gaped at apparitions produced by magicians working the annual cycle of fairs and manning the optical cabinets spreading throughout Europe. A political print published in Nuremberg,* The Tea-Tax Tempest or the Anglo-American Revolution, *provides a rare glimpse into the cinematic interior of such an alternative space for education. Standing in for the carnival conjuror, Father Time projects slides showing the destructive consequences of the British tax on tea to a horrified audience seated in a camera obscura. Rapt personifications of America, Europe and Asia watch a phantasmagoric succession of scenes enacting the successful struggle against tyranny.*[9]

Stafford's example underlines the subversive power of the magic lantern and camera obscura, their ability to highlight political issues and to stimulate dissent. More subtly, but just as pointedly, Cuevas's projections do prompt questions as we view animals in the 'civilised' setting of the zoo or admire the dissected limbs of insects in *Social Entomology*. In *La venganza del elefante* (*The Elephant's Revenge*, 2007), a work made shortly after that installation for an exhibition in Mexico City, Cuevas revels in the defiance of a poorly treated animal. The piece appropriates a series of early lantern slides in which a much goaded elephant exacts its revenge. Its graphic, colourful, line drawings anticipate cartoon films and animations where animals would thrive as protean and anarchic characters.

This subversive spirit carries through to Cuevas's video works made in the same period. In *Phenomena*, found footage of Fidel Castro speaking to a rapt audience in a rainstorm celebrates the utopian impulse in the Cuban Revolution. The installation is dreamlike, with the projection floating above the viewer and sounds of the rainstorm permeating the dark gallery space.

Conversely, in an accompanying gallery, found footage of babies in a scientific experiment document another kind of utopian vision for society, one in which human behaviour is examined and tested. As in the Castro projection, these films are surreal. Babies are observed crawling slowly across large building blocks in a laboratory or scaling obstacles placed in their path. They seem to move beyond scientific documentation when the children attempt dangerous climbs, shift large pedestals or manoeuvre under water. The babies, in these precarious situations, evoke visions of Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), a blueprint for the libertarian right in which children undergo trials

9 Barbara Maria Stafford, *Enlightenment Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1996, pp.226–27.

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Minerva Cuevas, *Dreamlike I* and *Dreamlike II*, 2007, video, and *Cardinal Points*, 2007, wall painting. Installation view, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2008. Photograph: Peter Cox. Courtesy the artist and the Van Abbemuseum

for enterprise, architectural genius and Darwinian survival skills.

Accompanying *Social Entomology*, *Insect Concert* hinges on a musical metaphor that extends this exploration of social structures and, in particular, the relationship of the individual to the group or state. The concert, a sound piece, edits and shapes the noise of crickets to create a complex sustained pattern. The crickets ostensibly chirp or sing as individuals, free from authority; the concert, however, is composed and structured, and so a dichotomy is acknowledged between the separate entity and the structures of human culture. The music here is constructed and electronically modified. What we hear at first sounds natural, but, spending time with the rest of the installation, it becomes clear, almost subliminally, that the crickets are orchestrated and that the apparent randomness has been composed, timed and modulated.

Musical harmony and orchestration have often functioned as metaphors for social harmony. In the film *Prova d'orchestra* (*Orchestra Rehearsal*, 1978), for instance, Frederico Fellini explored social unrest through the schisms and fractures of an orchestra in rehearsal. Cuevas goes further in *Insect Concert*. The individual subsumed in the larger collective is certainly one element of the carefully orchestrated cricket concert. Here the artist has dictated the form and structure of the concert, which, although crafted to sound organic, is in fact artificial. The seductive, natural sound of the concert conceals a determining agent, just as natural history conceals the matrix of Enlightenment power mechanisms. As with all the elements of *Social Entomology*, there is a double edge that must be acknowledged. Much of the strength and complexity of this installation depends on that dynamic articulated in the quotation from Rudolph Virchow, according to which the individual can be seen as a 'kind of social arrangement or society', while 'society acts like an organism'. The contrariness of the predicament implied in these formulations undermines the clear positions often demanded by activists and agents of social change. This dizzying paradox is both celebrated and dissected in *Social Entomology*, a work that wrestles with the perennial issue of nature versus culture.

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Minerva Cuevas, *Del Monte*, 2003, acrylic paint on wall and black-and-white research scheme on paper, mural 500 × 600cm minimum, scheme 90 × 60cm. Courtesy the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico City

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– Jean Fisher

To speak means to come forward and to locate oneself in one's sphere of existence; it means to claim a modest quantum of agency.
– Michel de Certeau [1]

Jean Fisher considers what she calls Minerva Cuevas's parasitic economy: interventionary tactics that mimic, whilst undermining, the technologies of power.

My introduction to the work of Minerva Cuevas was *Drunker* (1995), a videotaped action in real time of the artist sitting alone and writing at a school desk whilst drinking her way through a bottle of tequila. Exhibited alongside the video were the sheets of writing paper, inscribed with such self-reflective statements as 'I drink not to feel... I'm not drunk... I drink to talk... I'm not drunk... I drink to forget... I drink to remember...', which traced the descent into incoherence and, according to the artist, total amnesia. On the face of it *Drunker* seems like a purely personal act with little political resonance. Cuevas's written statements, however, point to a different narrative, one in which substance abuse is a means to 'obliterate' the anguish of trauma, where the sufferer is caught between the compulsion to bear witness to the catastrophe and the impossibility of articulating it. Alone at her desk, the drinker has no witness but the mute, voyeuristic gaze of the camera – and ultimately the empty bottle, which, given the trajectory of Cuevas's subsequent work, we may retrospectively suggest figures the anaesthetic effect of capitalist consumerism. The problem for the witness to trauma is in finding a language capable of transmitting empathetic recognition of the experience in the receiver. It is tempting, therefore, to regard *Drunker* as the 'ground zero' from which, through experiments in colonising public space and communications systems, including street interventions, gallery installations and her website, Cuevas's work forges a space of critical agency in the field of social activism.

But, firstly, what exactly is the 'trauma' that Cuevas's work appears to address? Jonathan Crary succinctly points out that

> *modernisation is a process by which capitalism uproots and makes mobile that which is grounded, clears away or obliterates that which impedes circulation and makes exchangeable that which is singular. This applies as much to bodies, signs, images, languages, kinship relations, religious practices and nationalities as it does to commodities, wealth and labour power.*[2]

In recent decades, we have experienced a global intensification of Western neoliberal democracy supported by deregulated, protectionist capitalism. Founded on the privilege of the individual over the social sphere, privatisation over collective responsibility, neoliberalism banishes the political as the sphere of human exchange: money mediates all. As Chantal Mouffe argues, the belief of this system that, barring a few glitches, we have reached a global consensus in which partisan identities and affiliations are now out of date and redundant is fatally misguided. She posits: 'The need for collective identifications will never disappear since it is constitutive of the mode of existence of human beings'.[3] If these are not taken into account, differences become polarised

1 Michel de Certeau, *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings* (trans. Tom Conley), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p.98.
2 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1992, p.10.
3 Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005, p.28.

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into violent antagonisms, a point borne out by both the breakdown of social cohesion in urban centres and the rise in local resistance to the homogenising demands of global capitalism. The neoliberal capitalist system cannot countenance other ways of life, or even other forms of democracy. Hence it works to suppress difference and dissent in tandem with the commodification and spectacularisation of life wrought by mass media, alienating us from the language and social communication circuits that once constituted our collective identities and sense of cultural belonging. In short, the explicit condition of the subject under colonial rule – exploitation, dispossession of ancestral identities, deprivation of political representation – has become an implicit condition of contemporary life, *tout court*.

This dissociation of the self from itself and from others was Guy Debord's complaint against the 'society of the spectacle'. He contended that in consumer societies structured around the commodity, social relations were no longer constructed through dialogue and exchange but mediated through images, such that reality becomes displaced by the prefabricated illusions of the spectacle: all social life is dissolved, becoming mere appearance in a triumphant negation of life. Where an individual's gestures are no longer their own but are formed and interpreted from the outside, the self becomes alienated not only from others but from its own historical being: 'This individual experience of separate daily life remains without language, without concept, without critical access to its own past which has been recorded nowhere. It is not communicated. It is not understood and is forgotten to the profit of the false spectacular memory of the unmemorable.'[4] It is in this loss of a communicable language of everyday life and the memory that once inhabited gestures and speech that contemporary life may be said to be 'traumatic'.

Michel de Certeau nominates communication as the paradoxical myth of contemporary societies, 'split between the development of circulation and atomisation': 'As the information that is distributed throughout social spaces increases, the relations among the practitioners of this space tend to decrease.'[5] The point is not to indulge in nostalgia for some illusory past utopia, but to find a way of countering the impoverishment of social relations wrought by the collusion between the technocratic apparatuses of state management and multinational corporate interests. This means understanding the way communication forges a link between the multiplication of economic exchanges and social relations. Strictly speaking, however, communication is not equivalent to information transmission (the domain of mass media), which requires only repetition and passive reception, but is an operation that activates intersubjective relations. The problem lies less in technologies themselves than in the uses to which they are put, which have ethical, aesthetic and political dimensions. It is towards interrogating the ethical and political aspects of capitalism's economic exchange mechanisms – the exploitation of primitive capital accumulation to produce a socially excluded economic underclass and coercive consumerism – that Cuevas's near-illegal interventions in urban advertising and marketing messages are directed, largely under the umbrella of Mejor Vida Corp's counterfeit corporate processes.

Cuevas launched Mejor Vida Corp (Better Life Corporation) in 1998, designing a logo of clasped hands; a slogan ('for a human interface') and an international activist website (irational.org); and renting an office in Mexico City's iconic skyscraper, the Torre Latinoamericana. MVC's aim was to subvert the conventions of corporate trading, and by extension art as commodity form, by providing free services, products and publicity campaigns. These gestures of hospitality have included sweeping the Mexico City Metro, distributing free lottery tickets, handing out free travel tickets among rush-hour queues, issuing student identity cards for free entry to museums or for discounted goods and the production of bar codes and stickers to reduce the price of supermarket produce. Alongside philanthropic interventions in the spaces of daily life, MVC has produced street and gallery versions of publicity campaigns that manipulate well-known corporate logos in juxtaposition with graphics or statements that expose the corrupt underside of company operations or the illusions projected by advertising.

4 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967, trans. Fredy Perlman and John Supak), Detroit: Black and Red, 1983, paragraphs 160 and 157.
5 M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (trans. Steven F. Randall), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, pp.91–92.

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Minerva Cuevas, *Drunker*, 1995, video transferred to DVD, 1h 5min. Courtesy the artist and Kurimanzutto, Mexico City

Melate (2000) consisted of posters and painted signs in local neighbourhoods, depicting a bleeding version of the Mexican lottery's heart logo alongside the statement 'En México 46,000,000.00 de personas viven en la pobreza' ('In Mexico 46 million people live in poverty'). The lottery's profits are supposed to support public services, but are reputedly diverted to private interests. Another sign, based on the advertisement for the 2000 Mexican census, pointed out that homeless people are not counted in national statistics. Amongst the most damning of this body of interventions was the *Pure Murder* (2003) campaign, made up of canned food labels, street murals and gallery installations that parasitised the logo of the Del Monte fruit and juice agribusiness. Cuevas drew historical links between the monopolistic control this corporation enjoys in the impoverished countries of Central America and the Caribbean, especially Guatemala, and its association with US economic interests in the region supported by the CIA and Guatemala's former dictator José Efrain Rios Montt, all of which colluded in the systematic murder and land dispossession of indigenous people. One might say that MVC's counterfeit corporation parasitises the parasitic counterfeiters – the corporate peddlers of unrealisable dreams and fake utopias of equality that mask the real inequities and iniquities of the capitalist system. Thus, the operation of *Pure Murder* intercepts the message between the corporate producer and the consumer to expose the concealed reality of the exploited first level of production – land and human labour.

Cuevas's form of social activism is clearly distinct from oppositional political art activism. 'Oppositionality' is typically the 're-actionary' partner in a binary system in which the language of power remains the privileged term. Thus, oppositional critique risks being absorbed into the very system it seeks to challenge insofar as it helps to redefine the boundaries of the system itself, leaving infrastructure and power relations intact. Moreover, the subject cannot stand wholly outside of the dominant reality that formed him or her. Therefore, he or she either refuses to participate in its forms of exchange – along the lines of Herman Melville's character Bartleby, who responds to every request with the words 'I would prefer not to' (a disengagement or *suspension* of communication insofar as there is no possible answer to this statement); or, in an equal refusal of hegemonic truth claims, he or she hijacks the system's channels of communication and diverts them to other pathways. Cuevas's interventions take no 'position' as such; rather, they operate through more subtle diversionary tactics, trespassing onto the territory of the other whilst camouflaged in the insignia of its own livery.

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Clearly, MVC's primary targets are the communications media and information networks through which power exercises and sustains itself, and in which we are all implicated as consumers. According to de Certeau, however, we do not need to regard this situation as wholly disempowering, but rather as a ground from which other relations between self and world can be forged. De Certeau is concerned not with representational structures as such, but with how consumers use them in everyday life. Arguing that consumerism may not be as passive as is commonly thought, he suggests that consumers opportunistically select mediated codes and reuse them for their own purposes, often subverting those intended by producers. That is, consumption is also a form of *production*. Creative reinvention and re-empowerment through subterfuge are tactics of survival by the weak and oppressed, and familiar from the narratives of dispossessed peoples under colonial rule: the colonised were unable overtly to oppose the language of colonial authority, but they could subtly insinuate its codes to disclose the inconsistencies and fallacies behind its projected certainties. De Certeau calls such subterfuges 'camouflaged transgressions', through which, as in Cuevas's work, 'to acknowledge the authority of rules is the exact opposite of applying them'.[6]

MVC's 'camouflaged transgressions' are operations that also engage what de Certeau calls a 'subterranean economy': parallel networks of social relations — barter, hospitality, the exchange of non-remunerative services and so forth — that are regarded by capitalist technocracy as worthless, discarded or useless exchanges that cannot (yet) be reduced to its law, but whose role 'is decisive for the survival of groups or individuals'.[7] As de Certeau points out, central to the relay of communication in such social networks are itinerant intermediaries, or *shifters*, with the capacity to put goods and discourses into circulation: 'they select, diffuse and dynamise information; they make it desirable and assimilable, and are the active agents of its appropriation and its transformation'.[8] In this sense, MVC's tactics are similar to those of the shifter, who disarticulates the language of power towards collective change.

Cuevas's tactics recall a further model that we might describe — following Michel Serres — as a 'parasitic economy':[9] MVC is neither inside nor outside the dominant system of exchange but *para-sitic* to it. Serres notes that what is important in communication is not only the points of emission and reception, but also the pathways that link (or bypass) them. The two points must be both 'same' and 'different', where difference lies in *perspective*. It is this difference operating in the transmission pathway that creates 'noise' or interference in the message depending on where one is standing, and without which there would be nothing to communicate. Serres names this mediation the logic of the parasite. For instance, in the relation between the host and the parasite, the latter exchanges a meal for nothing (like the 'translator', another parasite, who intervenes and exchanges a primary text for another text), but this eccentric presence irrevocably transfigures the situation. Without the parasite there would be no relation, no transformation: the creation and communication of a new perception can only take place through the interference of vectors of change, similar to de Certeau's shifters. This parasitic economy is essentially intersubjective, but is not one of equal exchange insofar as exchange implies stability and equilibrium, whereas the movement here is towards a rupture in the law of exchange that exposes the concealed imbalance in the system. MVC's interventions are likewise directed towards change conceived in this way — the precipitation of disequilibrium — an interruption or swerve in the messages relayed by corporate capitalism.

Cuevas's parasitic economy takes on various aspects in her major multifaceted installations, *La venganza del elefante* (*The Revenge of the Elephant*) and *Phenomena* (both 2007), which primarily play with the potential isomorphism between our representations of human social relations and human relations to the natural world. We admit at the outset that the latter relation is parasitic in its less edifying meaning insofar as humans take but give nothing productive back, with perhaps the exception of some indigenous peoples, who at least give thanks through

6 *Ibid.*, pp.54—55.
7 M. de Certeau, *The Capture of Speech*, *op. cit.*, p.93.
8 *Ibid.*, p.97.
9 Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy* (ed. Josué V. Harı and David F. Bell), Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982, pp.xxv—xxvi and 66—67.

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rites and careful husbandry — 'Nada con exceso todo con medida' ('Nothing with excess, everything with measure'), as one of MVC's posters of 2000 insisted. Many of the works included under the umbrella title *The Revenge of the Elephant* prompt a soliloquy on the destruction of the natural world through corporate exploitation of resources, or through toxic pesticides and pollutants, with oil as a primary suspect. An exterior mural, *Causa y efecto* (*Cause and Effect*), depicted a version of the Pemex (Mexico's state oil company) eagle logo juxtaposed with a penguin and chick mired in a sea of oil; whilst an installation inside the gallery presented, amongst other items, photographs of oil-distressed seabirds, and an array of corporate oil products and other objects partially or wholly coated in *chapopote*.[10] The theme

One might say that MVC's counterfeit corporation parasitises the parasitic counterfeiters — the corporate peddlers of unrealisable dreams and fake utopias of equality that mask the real inequities and iniquities of the capitalist system.

of raptor and prey was extended further into human social relations in *Numismática-Arqueología del capital* (*Numismatic-Archaeology of Capital*), a sad little collection of magnifying glasses, photographs and pre-revolutionary Mexican coins representing the currency of individual haciendas. As with the relation between the manufacturer and the industrial poor in Europe, the haciendas operated a system of slavery in which wages could only be exchanged for goods at inflated prices in hacienda shops, so that in practice the workers were in perpetual debt to the masters.

The hostage of the body to the operations of social power becomes more explicit in *Phenomena*, which brought together a number of individual works and installations that feature contemporary video projection alongside antique or obsolete scientific magnifying and projection devices (microscopes and magic lanterns) adapted with fibre-optic technology. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these devices were the tools of empirical science's methods of observation, collection, taxonomy and demonstration, as well as being phantasmagoric, pre-animation forms of mass entertainment, as the term 'magic lantern' indicates. From a scientific perspective they were intended to render the invisible visible and legible by artificially enhancing the forensic gaze of an observer in a position that was supposedly detached from that of the observed, but Cuevas's juxtaposition of often bizarre imagery exposes the ambivalence in this distinction.

Similarly, the collection of objects and images that constitute *Social Entomology* (2007) makes direct reference to scientific method: a hexagonal table displaying, amongst other items, brass magnifying instruments; old wooden slide trays; books on histology and nature (often how to kill it); microscope slides and insect specimens; and references to social bees and cricket songs, in which, together with the microscope projections, external parasites like fleas, bedbugs and ticks figure prominently. The best one can say about these creatures is that they do not discriminate according to class, gender or race. At the same time, a text accompanying the installation reminds us of the common analogy empirical science made — also drawing on observations of insect colonies — between the human body as an organism of separate cells and the social body as organism. Any distinction between the human and 'nature' becomes further blurred in the magic lantern projections *Ape with Jacket* (2007), which depicts a chimpanzee wearing a blazer and sitting in a tree like an errant schoolboy, and *Like me* (2007), in which a zookeeper holds a baby chimpanzee in a paternal grasp. If these two works comically point to the way we anthropomorphise nature — or, rather, reduce it to our own measure — the set of videos *Dreamlike I, II* and *III* (2007), shown simultaneously on three monitors, opens a disturbing window onto how, by contrast, the human becomes the object of scientific scrutiny. The three projections show film footage, perhaps dating from the 1950s, recording behavioural studies on motor functions in naked human infants whilst they are crawling, swimming and climbing. The babies are induced to move with the lure of a toy on a string (thereby

10 Mexico's native asphalt used since Olmec times (c.1500—400 BCE) as a waterproofing agent, commonly applied to clay figures.

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Previous spread: Minerva Cuevas, *The Battle of Calliope*, 2004. Installation view, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2008. Photograph: Peter Cox

Like me, 2007, magic lantern projection, magic lantern and glass slide, c.1900, lit with fibre optic. Installation view, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2008. Photograph: Peter Cox. Both images courtesy the artist and the Van Abbemuseum

fulfilling the purpose of the study), which, in the clinical context of the scene, seems less a game than torture.

The technology of Cuevas's devices predates the emergence of the 'society of the spectacle' (though they are consistent with what Michel Foucault, in his discussion of the panopticon, described as the 'society of surveillance'): they still linked vision to the position of a human observer in the perceptible world, to 'phenomena' that were apprehended by sight and touch, unlike the digitalised media of contemporary 'spectacularised' life, capable of producing a fictitious pictorialism independent of reference to an observer's body. This is not to say that there was ever an 'innocent' eye to which the world was rendered transparent. As Crary has shown, changing technologies of vision, techniques of the observer and visual representations are all bound to larger assemblages of social forces and fields of knowledge and practice: 'The same knowledge that allowed the increasing rationalisation and control of the human subject in terms of new institutional and economic requirements was also a condition for new experiments in visual representation.'[11] But although Cuevas's devices belong to an era in which there was still a referential relationship between the body and the perceptible world, it was also the modernising era that released the forces from which spectacularised life was to emerge. Foucault spoke at length of how, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, modernity's uprooting of the masses from rural life to urban manufacturing centres drove the need for control and the invention of disciplinary techniques that would ensure the smooth circulation of goods, money and services. In turn, the management of populations through rationalisation and standardisation depended on the accumulation of knowledge of human behaviour across the spectrum of bodily functions and social relations, whereby the subject as such became *visible*, but to a now disembodied observer. As Edward Said once said, the human being became a *specimen*. Nowhere is this more acutely demonstrated than in colonialism and slavery, the exogenous twins of Western modernity — in fact, its motor. The bodies of the colonised and enslaved were not only the objects of economic exchange, but also subjected to forensic, panoptical scrutiny by all manner of measuring and recording devices engaged by the agents of the newly instituted human sciences and their colonial authorities. In this respect, Cuevas's hacienda coins function as a synecdoche of the colonised body and the abuse-value that precedes any use-value in the parasitic origin of primitive capital accumulation.

11 J. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, *op. cit.*, p.9.

As we move into the twentieth century, photography and cinema join money as homologous forms of social power; as Crary states, 'they are equally totalising systems for binding and unifying all subjects within a single global network of valuation and desire [in which] the social world is represented and constituted exclusively as signs'.[12] Despite its later date, the film footage projected in Cuevas's 16mm-film installation *I have never been a believer* (2007) is consistent with the technological and ideological turn that produced the 'society of the spectacle', which Crary dates from the 1920s, concurrent with the technological and institutional origins of television, the beginning of synchronised sound in movies and the use of mass media techniques by the Nazi party in Germany.[13] The latter, of course, was symptomatic of the way cinema could manipulate and unify desire and identification in quasi-religious terms. Cuevas's projection shows Fidel Castro giving a public speech in the rain, and counter-shots of close-ups of an attentive (white male) crowd that recall the cinematic techniques of the Russian Constructivists, which also influenced post-revolutionary Cuban cinema. The fragment of footage therefore has the feel of a propaganda film, not unlike that of the Nazis, in which, through mass media manipulation, the political leader becomes a semi-divine figure to which the social body is encouraged to cohere (much like worker bees around their queen). And yet, is that one fellow in the crowd attending more to his hair than to Castro?

The sense that all is not as it seems is carried over into *The Battle of Calliope* (2004), comprised of an open music box containing one of several displayed steel discs, the sonic contents of which remain a mystery and, on the inside lid, an elegiac view of a cabin nestled amongst mountains.[14] Alongside this is a rather enigmatic photograph depicting Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and a gaggle of military personnel presiding over a large cake iced with US insignia. Cheney is holding a ceremonial rapier but is sucking his finger: has he cut himself, or is he sucking sugar? Our perspective takes a different turn when we learn that the accompanying soundtrack is a mix of the melody 'Ich weiss ein Herz für das Ich bete' ('I know a heart for which I pray') with Ghanaian vodun drum rhythms performing a ritual curse on the US political administration. In popular Hollywood mythology, vodun has the dubious status of black magic, a curse to which Cheney now appears to have succumbed; however, vodun is more properly a religious expression of West African and Caribbean cosmogony that is occasionally drawn on in instances of political resistance, the most famous being the use of drums to transmit the call to insurrection to the slaves of Santo Domingo (now Haiti). In any case, by magic or drum, we are confronted with antagonistic forms of power and communication, of manipulation and resistance.

The affect of any artistic practice depends on how it draws the viewer into its field of action and possible meanings. As Jacques Rancière says, 'artistic practices are "ways of doing and making" that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility'.[15] Minerva Cuevas's para-sitic interventions are analogous to the performance of what indigenous North Americans call 'coyote giving': a theft by trickery of someone's property from which the thief does not necessarily benefit, but by violating the circuit of exchange the old order is undermined and a new communication is made available for the transformation of collective understanding. Such 'camouflaged transgressions' may not produce political emancipation, but they represent a modest quantum of agency, little psychic freedoms from the traumatic effects of daily life, the circulation of subterranean economies vital for cultural survival and, perhaps, a latent source of insurrection.

12 *Ibid.*, p.13.
13 *Ibid.*, p.18, note 26.
14 Cuevas's *The Battle of Calliope* comprises a music box manufactured in Germany by Kalliope and dated c.1900, a C-print, a percussion score by Gordon Odametey, steel discs and an electronic circuit. In Greek mythology, Calliope ('the beautiful-voiced') was the daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne, and the muse of epic poetry commonly represented by a stylus and waxed tablet. In Germany Kalliope is the name adopted by the Staatsbibliothek of Berlin for its online project of an networked information system, which is especially focused on their collection of autograph manuscripts.
15 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (trans. Gabriel Rockhill), London and New York: Continuum, 2004, p.13.

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Minerva Cuevas
Berlanga Taylor, Jessica
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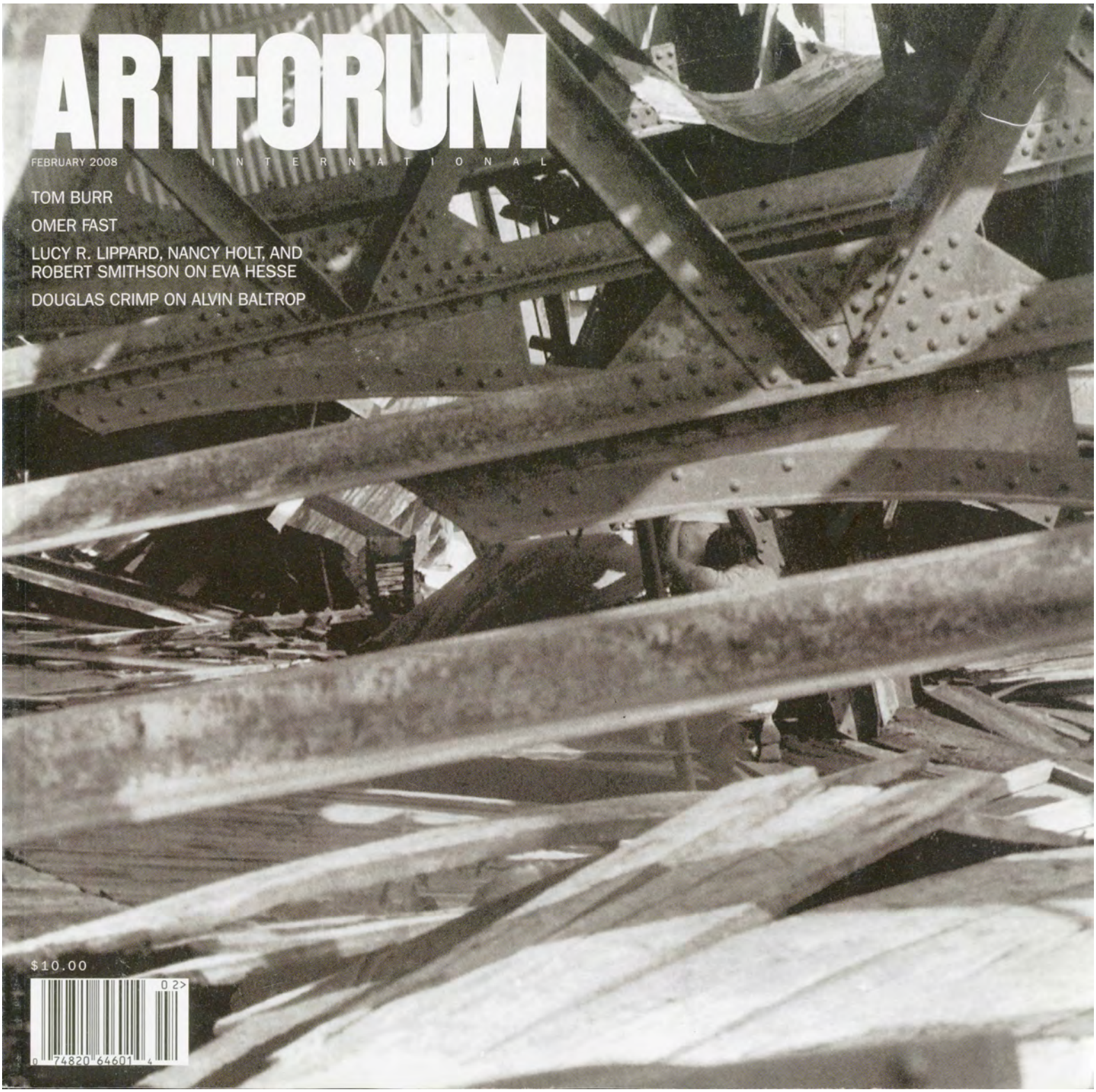

feature captions indicating locations and other data, which, like Bennett's titles, at least suggests a certain procedural rigor.

Despite the Conceptualist references, Bennett also makes allusions to modernism. Of special interest are Russian Futurist works that combine seasonal subject matter and geometric patterning, such as Mikhail Larionov's painting *Spring*, 1912, or the nature-inspired poetry of his compatriot Velimir Khlebnikov, who invented a mystical cult of geometry that proclaimed history to be an illusion. Featuring the vertical spray of a fountain reflected in water, *Static Image Painting/Blue/Fountain/Moose Jaw*, 2005–2007, is reminiscent of James McNeil Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*, ca. 1874, a work that similarly relies on the compositional competition between abstract surface pattern and the image of an outdoor spectacle that is equal parts natural setting and man-made contrivance. This competition—expressed in a manner that represses, but never dismisses, conventional painterly pleasures—provides Bennett's project with formidable value, both critical and contemplative.

—Dan Adler

MEXICO CITY

Minerva Cuevas

KURIMANZUTTO

For her most recent exhibition in her hometown, "*La venganza del elefante*" (The Elephant's Revenge), Minerva Cuevas took on the role of a nineteenth-century explorer; she sought out and presented objects and images, some from that period, that possess an aesthetic dictated by their political and social contents—history's material production. Cuevas considers herself an activist, and her art deals with issues such as ecological disaster, unfair trade and globalization, and humankind's desire to dominate nature. The body of work that she presented in Kurimanzutto's warehouse space was diverse and included video and animation, projected stills, objects, and a sound installation.

Serie hidrocarburos (Hydrocarbon Series), 2007, which features a tabletop array of objects, newspaper clippings, and photographs, evolved out of a stay in southeastern Mexico. Moved by her interest in social ecology, she visited the oil wells and refineries of the region. A recent tragedy at an oil platform, in which twenty-one people died and petroleum spilled into the sea, made Cuevas's work even more poignant. Combining photographs taken by workers on an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico with newspaper cuttings, torn-out book pages, and everyday objects such as a mobile phone, a packet of string, and a piece of sidewalk, all covered with tar, she documents an urgent global issue. She also uses tar to create aesthetically striking sculptural forms by covering readymades such as a Mickey Mouse figurine and an old scuba-diving mask. Cuevas may be beautifying a dangerous substance, but the work's polemical force is patent.

Minerva Cuevas, *Serie hidrocarburos* (Hydrocarbon Series) (detail), 2007, mixed media, dimensions variable.

Cuevas conveys the need to confront these worldwide ecological and social disasters, for which no one wants to admit responsibility. In an interview she explains, "The formal result comes second to the idea or the content. To produce an aesthetic object is my own way of making politics, of getting through to people, of creating projects that sometimes become cultural experiments. These are aesthetic exercises where I become deeply involved." *Zoo*, 2007, is a projection of five early-twentieth-century magic-lantern slides whose beauty painfully contrasts with the lost freedom of captive wild animals, among them an elephant with a proud European man, presumably his captor, standing next to him. The idea that man is the measure of all things has turned into human domination of nature. A 2007 work with the same title as the exhibition—a series of color slides of illustrations from a nineteenth-century book, digitalized and projected on a wall—tells the story of an African hunter and an elephant. The moral of the original story—what you do not want done to yourself do not do unto others—is simple, though its expression in this instance may be racist. Cuevas has rearranged the images in order to create a more complex reading of our relationship with nature, one which has been oversimplified and has become trendy owing to the treatment the media has given it.

Elephant's Revenge is a conceptually challenging show that points out our materialistic idiosyncrasies. By ignoring the media, political propaganda, capitalism, and other such notions of progress, Cuevas silences the noise and addresses each one of us directly, appealing to our intelligence and to what also constitutes our humanness: our ability and desire for invention and change.

—Jessica Berlanga Taylor

LONDON

William Daniels

VILMA GOLD

You might think that what makes William Daniels's small, almost colorless paintings so exceptional is their extreme technical proficiency, but they're more intellectually ambitious than that. Three years ago Daniels gained attention for canvases based on his own torn-cardboard tableaux of famous paintings: Cheap, homey material stood in for Mont Sainte Victoire or Caravaggio's *David with the Head of Goliath*, painstakingly reproduced, with Vija Celmins–esque levels of detail, in small brownish-gray paintings. For his recent show, Daniels covered his cardboard models in aluminum foil, and the resulting paintings are even more wondrous than his earlier works.

In these new paintings, the sources are less immediately recognizable. The subject emerges slowly out of the riot of silvers, browns, blues, and whites that form an almost cubist mosaic of paint. With some effort, Baselitz's inverted trees gradually take shape before our eyes (*Forest on Its Head*, all works 2007); or we decipher an aluminum-foil curtain pulled back to reveal a rococo arrangement of metallic dahlias and roses, based on a collaborative painting by Adriaen van der Spelt and Frans van Mieris (*Still Life with Flowers and Curtain*); or Giorgio Morandi's humble jars slowly assemble across the meticulously painted surface (*Still Life*). To achieve the complicated effects of light falling on aluminum, Daniels summons a range of painterly techniques: Richter-esque blurs of blue-black; minutely drawn slivers of white, painted along the edges of creases; curious flat areas of unmodulated gray—all to re-create, quite unmistakably, this dazzling, if common, household material. One could never paint directly on aluminum

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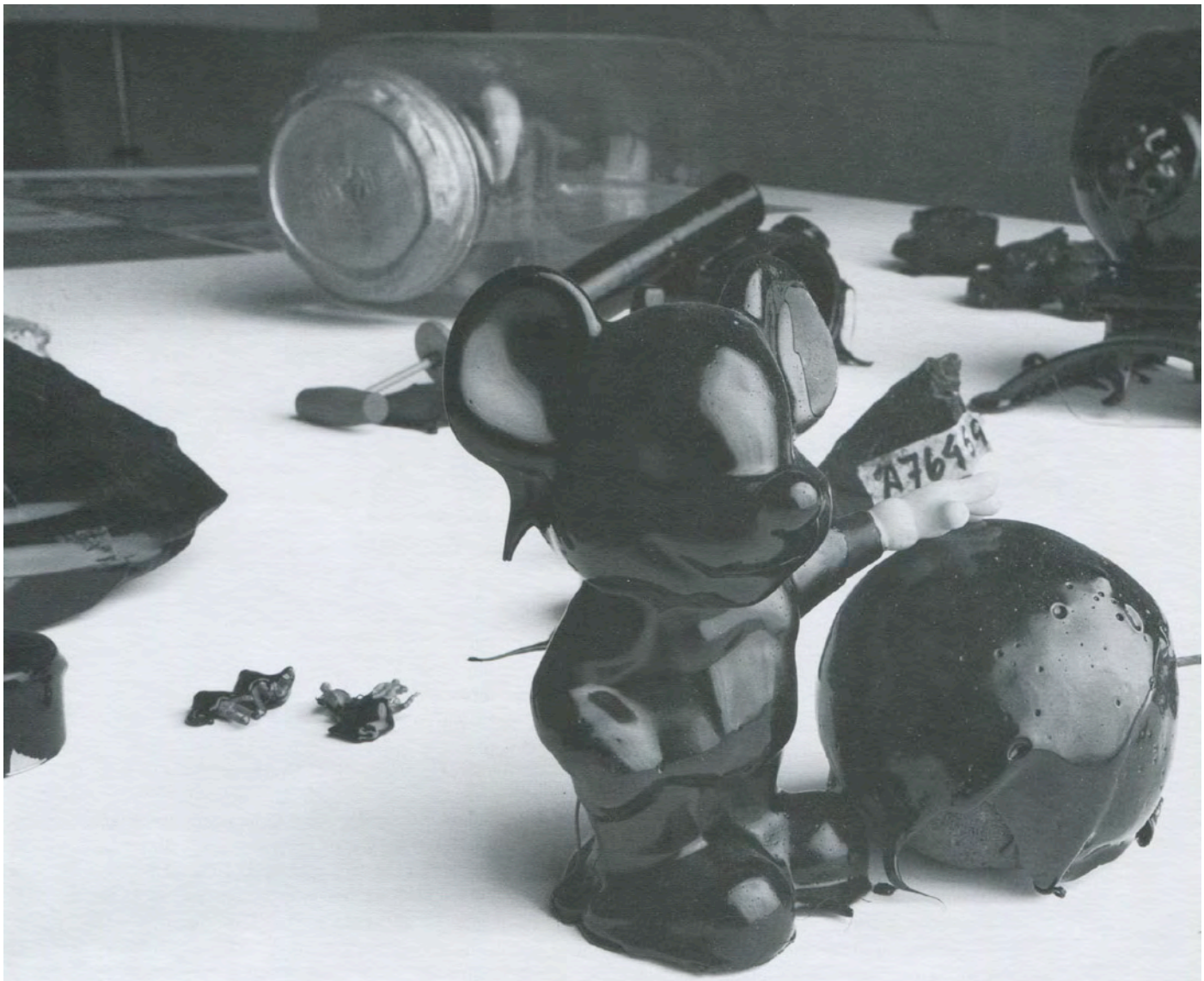

PIRATE SUPERHERO

the art of
MINERVA CUEVAS

★

by **ROEWAN CROWE**

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PIRATE SUPERHERO

the art of
MINERVA CUEVAS

MINERVA CUEVAS. **Mejor Vida Corporation.**
Free Student Identification, 1998.

Mexican artist Minerva Cuevas's extraordinarily prolific and international artistic practice is grounded in conceptually and socially engaged actions. Her site-specific interventions take place in a range of settings from the Internet to museums to the cultural commons. She creates political and social interventions, produces compelling videos and photographic work, co-opts various means of distribution to get out her message, irreverently and cleverly tampers with corporate and government identities, and makes bold political-creative work that disrupts political and visual economies.

Minerva Cuevas lives and works in Mexico City and started practicing as an artist in 1994. In 1998 she founded the non-profit Mejor Vida Corporation (M.V.C.), also known as Better Life Corporation. M.V.C. does not discriminate against any person on the basis of gender, race, religion, sexual preference, or economic status. The corporation, operating within a gift economy, had a physical presence in the Latin American Tower in central Mexico City between 1998 and 2003, and continues to exist on the Internet at www.irational.org/mvc.

M.V.C. creates, promotes and distributes a wide range of products and services for free. Products like subway tickets, safety pills, self-stamped envelopes, barcode stickers that allow you to purchase fruit and vegetables for a lower price, a personal student I.D. card to enable you to receive student discounts, and 100-per-cent natural security tear gas are all available. Much-needed and far-reaching services offered by the company include: the administration of a violence questionnaire, a cleaning service, recommendation letters, public donations and security services. If requested to administer the violence questionnaire, an M.V.C. representative will administer it to passers-by in public spaces. At the end of the questionnaire people are asked to give some names of violent people they know, including their addresses or telephone numbers. A company representative will call or go to the homes of these violent people to administer the same questionnaire.

The company is also attempting to have one of its agents join the Policia Judicial Federal. Although there is an open call to the public to enter the Policía Federal Preventiva (PFP), an M.V.C. representative ultimately cannot be admitted because the call is exclusive to male applicants. The company also has launched various campaigns critical of government policies and corporations' practices. In one campaign it pro-

PREVIOUS PAGE:
MINERVA CUEVAS.
La venganza del elefante / The elephant's revenge.
Installation (detail), 2007.

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MINERVA CUEVAS. **Donald McRonald.** Public intervention, various cities; 2003, 2006.

duced and distributed posters that criticized the role of the National Lottery. *Melate* is a very popular lotto game and is officially intended to raise funds for "public assistance," but M.V.C. has revealed that the national lottery is used in Mexico for private interests. Posters show a modified logo and replace the money prize with statistics showing that 46 million people live in poverty in Mexico.

Interested in the idea of building an international network of people questioning capitalism and the hegemonic practices of multinational corporations, Cuevas' work also reveals the violence of capitalism. In keeping with her practice of altering corporate and government logos, she has rewritten the Del Monte canned-tomatoes label. In one instance she presents on the M.V.C. website a re-designed corporate logo that exposes the company's exploitative history in Guatemala. In another she draws from the Mexico's rich mural history and produces a wall-sized logo that reads "Del Monte, Pure Murder," offering a scathing critique of the company's exploitative and bloody history in Central America. Interventions in the corporate sphere are not limited to labels and logos. In an exhibition at Paris' Palais de Tokyo, Cuevas installed an actor dressed as Ronald McDonald outside a local McDonald's restaurant. The *faux* Ronald engaged with the patrons, informing them about the quality of the food and workers' rights.

In a recent project (2007) — her first U.S. solo exhibition — Cuevas presents "The Economy of the Imaginary: Pirates and Heroes." This five-channel video installation uses cinematic projections to play with the formal conventions of popular comics. Cuevas researched the history of the Hollywood film industry, particularly its superheroes and social heroism. She also explores the dynamics of piracy and the public domain. She sent out a call for auditions reading, "Se buscan superheroes" (looking for superheroes), which was published in newspaper ads and distributed in flyers throughout various parts of Mexico City. Five characters — Salvia, Capital, Imperio, Oscar and Liberdade — speak about Thomas Alva Edison, the economy, heroism, defeat and human fantasies.

Mentoring Artists for Women's Art (MAWA),

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MINERVA CUEVAS. **Terra Primitiva.** Mural, 2006. In this mural Cuevas's narrative focuses on a potbellied Indiana Jones — based on the martyred environmental activist Chico Mendez — as a survivor of a plane crash in an exotic jungle populated by snakes. A hanging light fixture in the star shape of the Varig logo refers to the troubled Brazilian airline. A much-publicized collision of two planes at 37,000 feet over the Amazon preceded her installation by a matter of days. Cuevas' design was rendered in collaboration with comic artist Maria Moreno of Ka-Boom Studio, Mexico City.

in collaboration with the University of Winnipeg Global College Institute for Women's and Gender Studies, is hosting Minerva Cuevas this spring. She will be commissioned to create new work for the symposium "Art Building Community" from May 9 to 11 in Winnipeg. The symposium will be a weekend of socially engaged art and dialogue. This interdisciplinary, multimedia weekend symposium will consist of critical and participatory discussions, workshops, video screenings, exhibitions and performances taking up the theme of "art building community."

The symposium will provide a dynamic and creative space for artists, activists, curators and cultural workers to gather to share new work and to reflect upon and discuss the ways in which art can be and is being mobilized to build different kinds of communities. What is the range of socially engaged art practices in community? What kinds of "communities" does art build? How does art address some of the most pressing issues of our times, like poverty, the impacts of colonization, gender and racial inequalities, and the need to develop compassionate and caring communities of belonging? How can art be used to engage the public in community issues and civic responsibilities? Sessions throughout the weekend will explore topics like: negotiating power dynamics in a community-

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MINERVA CUEVAS. **Dodgem.** Installation, Mexico City amusement park, 2002. Minerva cuevas intervenes in an amusement-park ride by pasting the logos of multinational oil corporations onto bumper cars. Here, she comments on recent energy politics characterized by a permanent war among the petroleum companies (referred to ironically by the artist through the aimless bumping of electric cars) seeking to control the international markets with the ultimate goal of private profit.

based practice, art and the law, interventionist work within art institutions, curating community, issues of process in community-engaged work and exploring the "materials" of a social practice, like relational skills and social analysis.

The Winnipeg Foundation and the Winnipeg Arts Council have joined this project by funding new work by nine Winnipeg artists: Pat Aylesworth, Liz Garlicki, Cheyenne Henry, Kristin Nelson, Suzi Smith, Kathryn MacKenzie, Kerri Lynn Reeves, Nicole Shimonek and Becky Thiessen. These artists will create work addressing a range of community, interventionist, cultural animation and new public-genre art practices. The critically acclaimed, dynamic performance duo, Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, will be performing at the symposium. Toronto artist, writer and activist Robin Pacific will be addressing the complications and challenges of community art practices. Her work includes community art, cultural animation and mapping, painting, multimedia, public art and installation.

Cuevas will also be mentoring artist-in-residence with MAWA for six weeks this spring. The symposium is being generously sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) through a partnership with the University of Winnipeg's Global College Institute For Women's and Gender Studies. Check www.mawa.ca for details.

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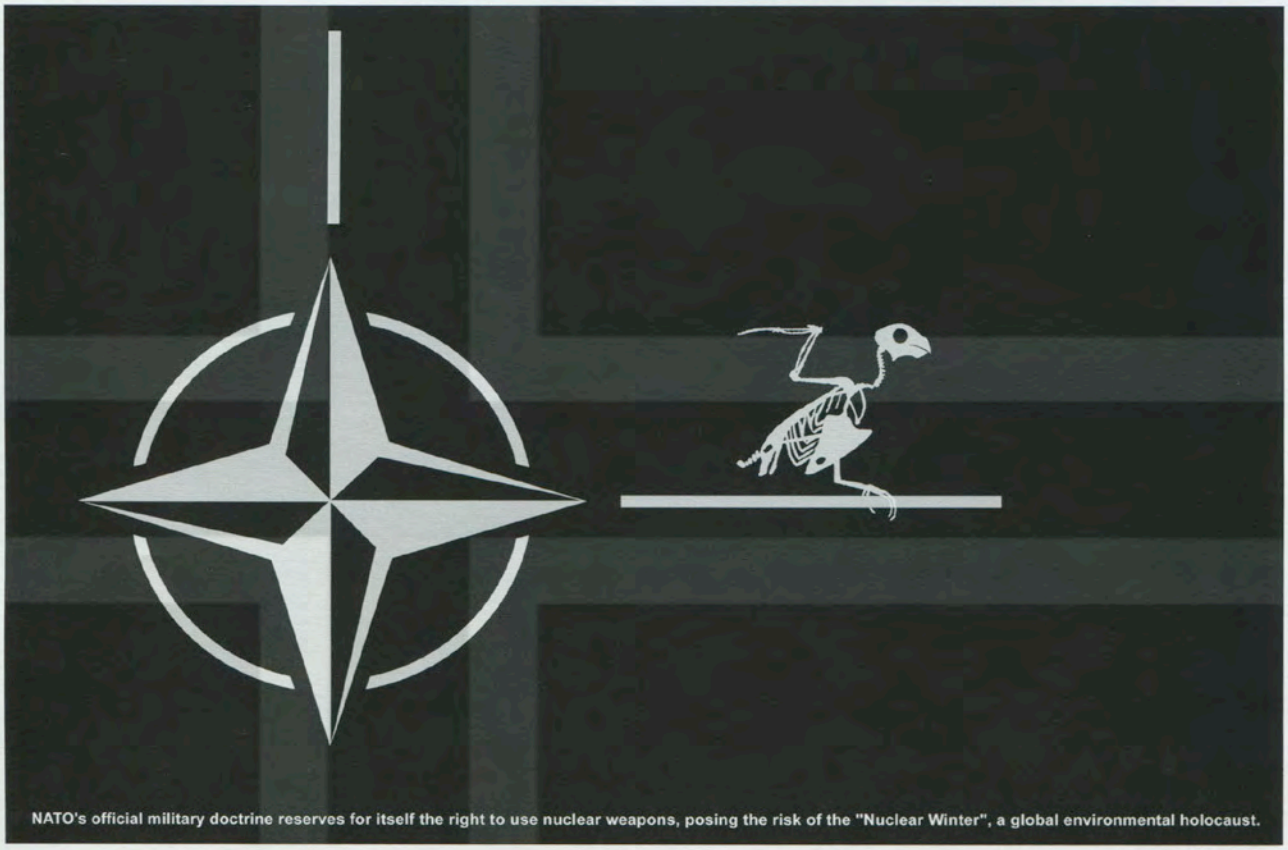

NATO's official military doctrine reserves for itself the right to use nuclear weapons, posing the risk of the "Nuclear Winter", a global environmental holocaust.

MINERVA CUEVAS
Nuclear Winter. Billboard, Norway, 2004.
In this intervention into public space, Cuevas reminds us that NATO's official military doctrine reserves the right to use nuclear weapons, posing the risk of the "nuclear winter," a global environmental holocaust.

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MINERVA CUEVAS. **Del Montte.** Acrylic paint on wall, 2003.

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"Pirate Superhero: the Art of Minerva Cuevas"
Crowe, Roewan
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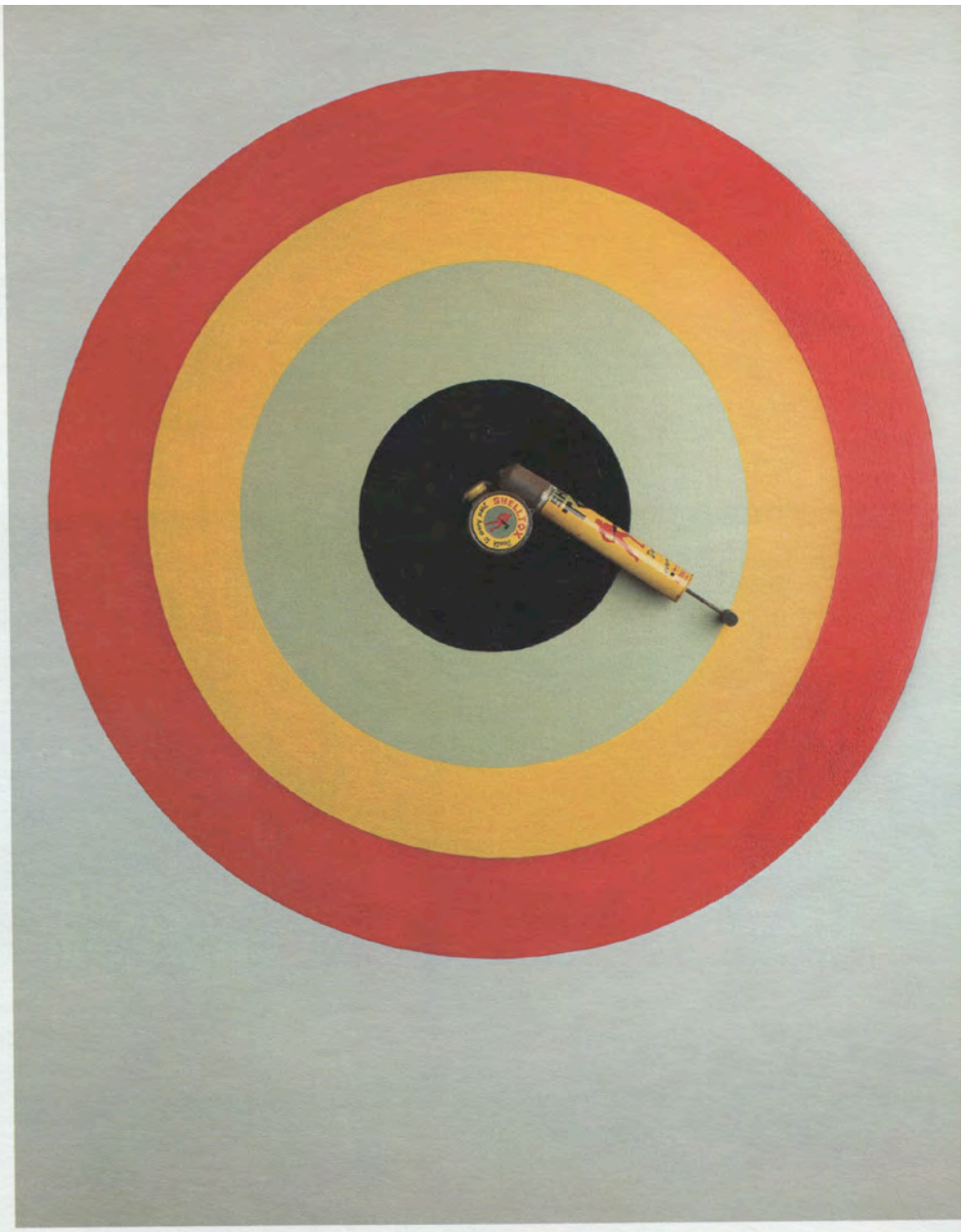
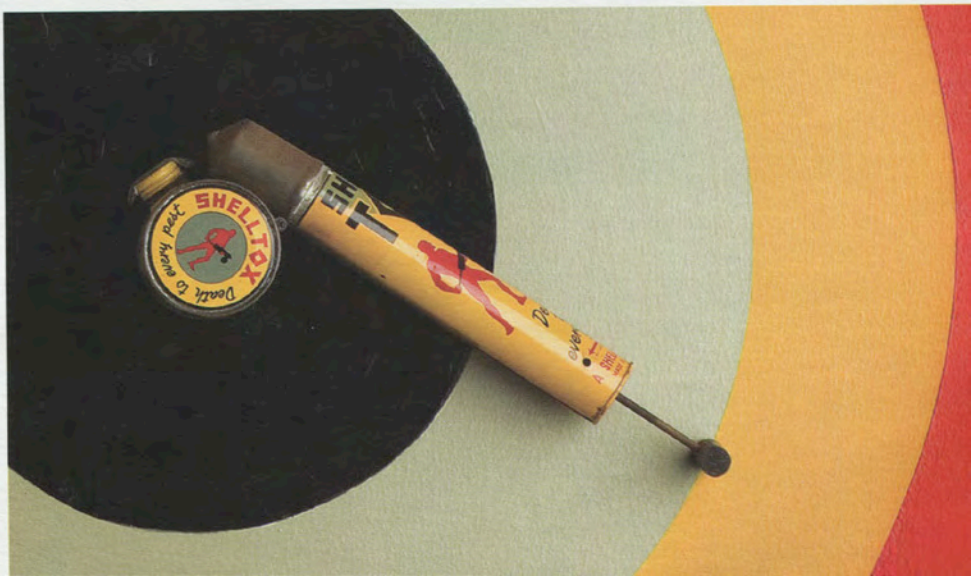
MINERVA CUEVAS
Target Shell II. Acrylic paint and lacquer on wall and antique metallic pump, 2007.





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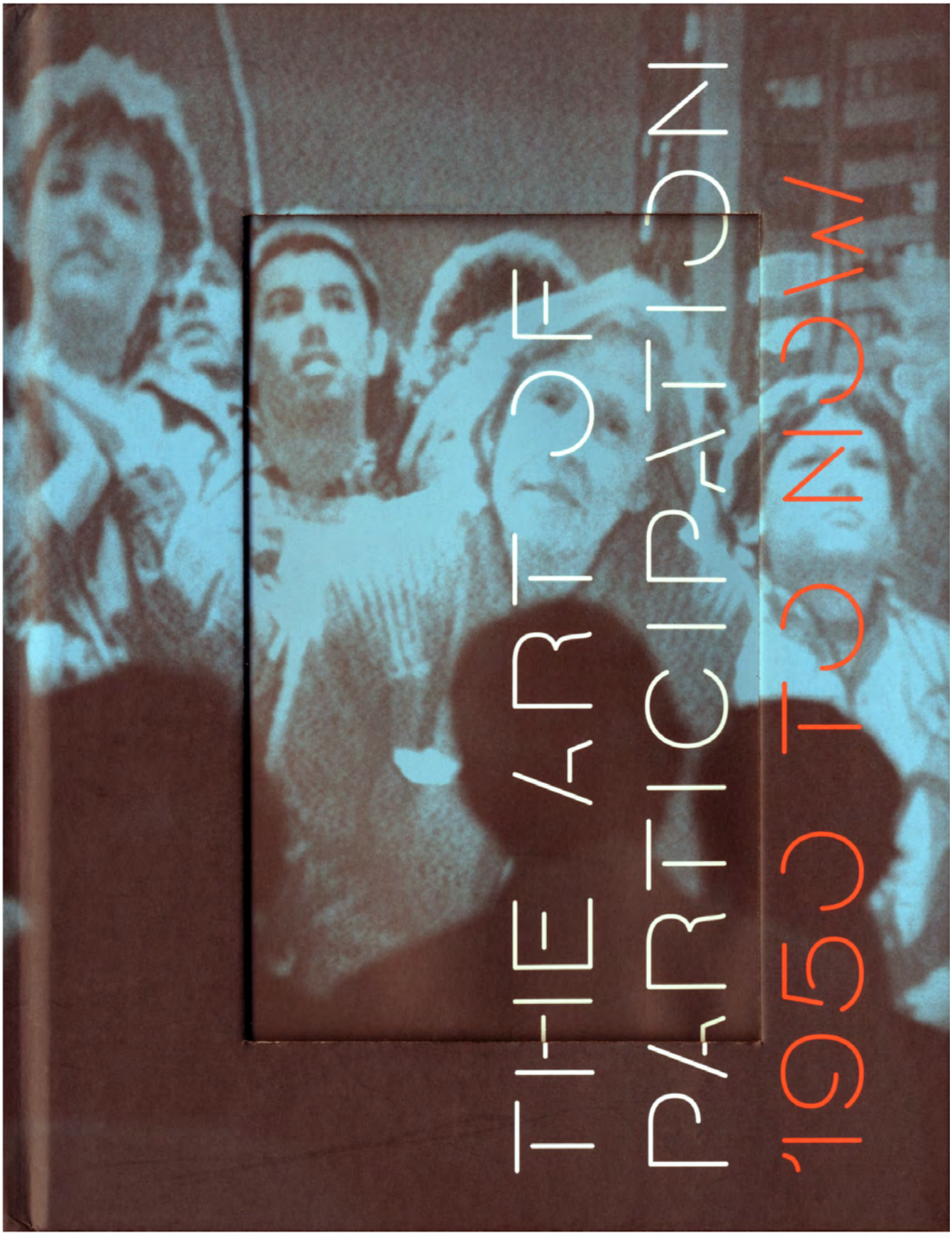
Minerva Cuevas
RF
The Art of Participation 1950 to Now, SFMoMA
2008



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MINERVA CUEVAS

Toward the end of the twentieth century many young artists voiced a critique of the effects of globalization, embracing in their work a political activism that previously had been held to be antiartistic. Appropriation and simulation were two formal strategies used in the service of this political agenda. Cuevas launched *Mejor Vida Corp.*, or *M.V.C.*, in 1998 as a series of public interventions in Mexico City, joining forces with artists and media activists such as Heath Bunting (see pl. 132), whose site irational.org hosts Cuevas's project. Striving to create an international network of people who question capitalism as a system, she addresses these far-flung individuals via *M.V.C.*, whose Spanish name translates literally as "Better Life Corp." *M.V.C.*'s mission statement announces that it "creates, promotes and distributes world wide products and services for free," adding that it does not discriminate according to gender, race, religion, sexual preference, or economic status. With a logo that promises "a human interface," the project ludicrously mimics the structure and vocabulary of a Mexican global corporation. Its website offers a typical roster of links to products, services, campaigns, information on shipping, and contact details.

M.V.C. not only provides its goods for free but also facilitates interventions in social spaces. One exemplary campaign targeted Melate, the national lottery of Mexico. Questioning the lottery's alleged financing of public assistance, Cuevas altered the lottery's identity and installed her revised logo on signs throughout Mexico City, adding statistical data that revealed how the system benefited private stakeholders. Another service offered the assistance of a security agent to help in dealings with the police. Cuevas's approach to social activism extends to products such as fake student ID cards providing complimentary access to museums, free subway tickets, stickers with barcodes that reduce the price of supermarket goods (pl. 130), posters advertising "safety pills" to raise awareness of potential violence on public transportation, prestamped envelopes (pl. 131), and lottery tickets. Until 2003 she occupied an office at the Latinoamerican Tower in Mexico City as a way to reach out to audiences beyond the artistic context. Deeply rooted in everyday life (and the specific social context of Mexico), and partaking in alternative financial systems such as the gift economy, Cuevas's work takes as its arena not the museum or art gallery but rather public spaces open to all individuals. —*RF*

130–31 ***Mejor Vida Corp.*** 1998–present / Barcode stickers (pl. 130) and shipment (pl. 131) / Online project (http://www.irational.org/mvc) / Courtesy the artist

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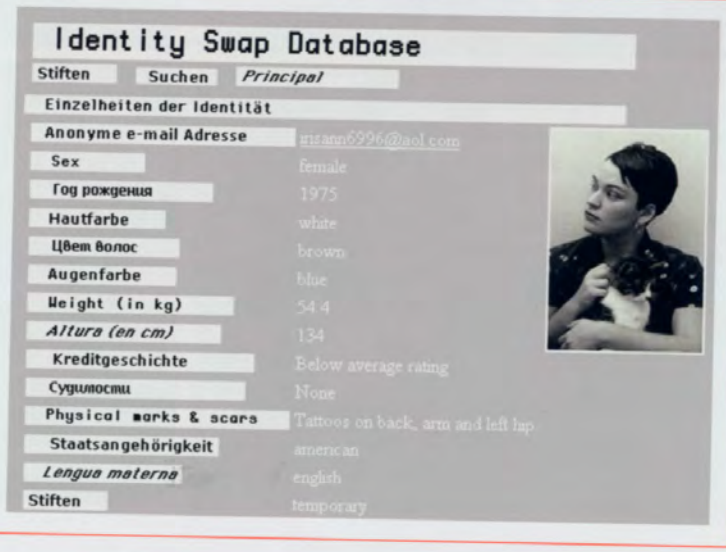
Minerva Cuevas
RF
The Art of Participation 1950 to Now, SFMoMA
2008

131

132 **Olia Lialina and Heath Bunting**
Identity Swap Database 1998–present / Online project (http://www.teleportacia.org/swap) / Courtesy the artists

Net art and net activism often went hand in hand in the formative period of the 1990s. Bunting's irational.org is a website hosting the British artist's own projects as well as those of friends and other activists. One such example, *Identity Swap Database*, produced by the Russian net artist Lialina in collaboration with Bunting, takes an ironic approach to the notion of identity at a time of search engines and global diaspora. Presented as a "service" for a global, multilingual community of migrants, the site's text flashes constantly in four languages: English, German, Spanish, and Russian. —*RF*



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"MC"
Frieze
Balaschak, Chris
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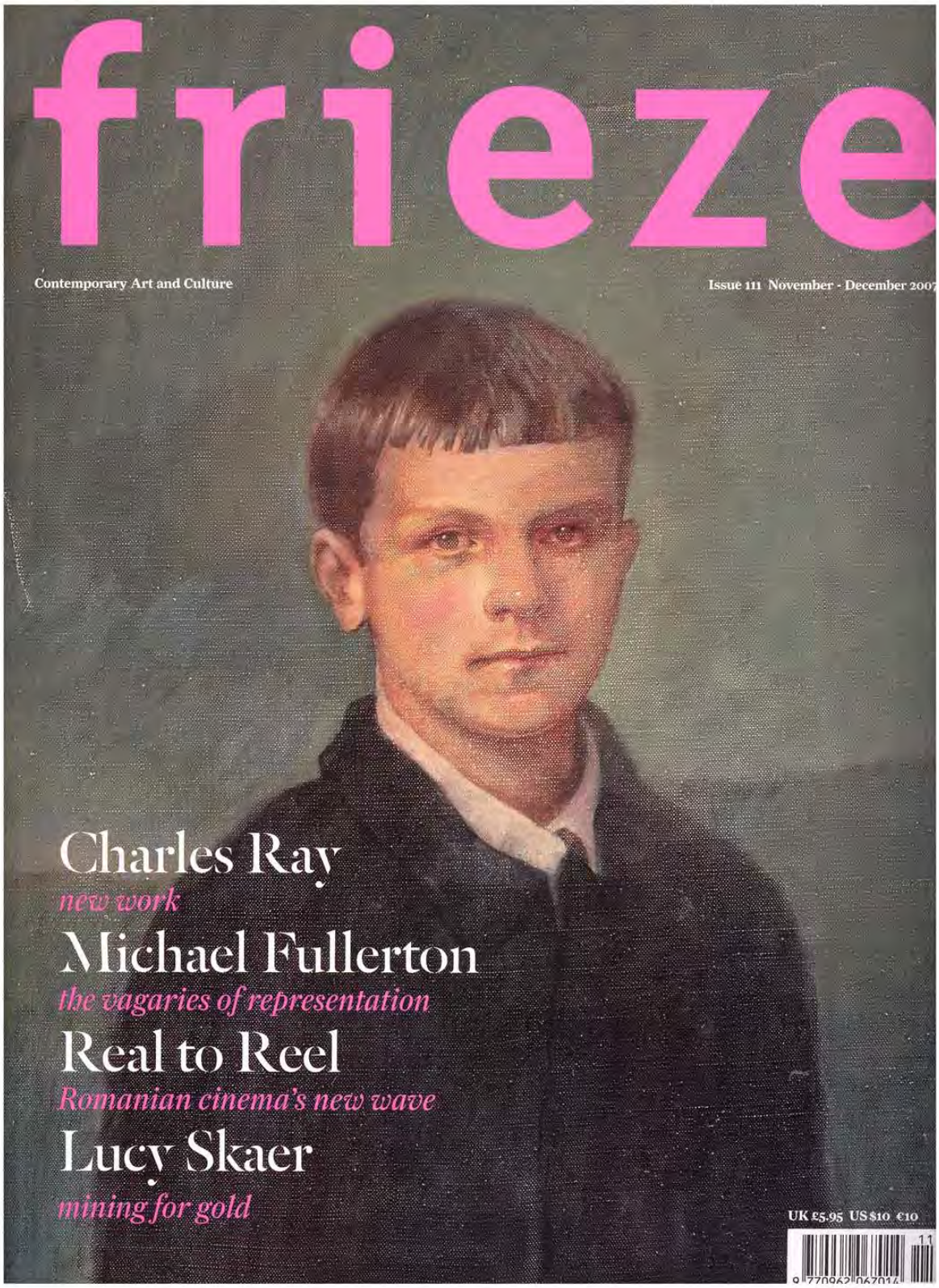

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"MC"
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BACK

MC, Los Angeles, USA

Minerva Cuevas

While issues of bio-chemical terror may have gained visibility in recent years, through their dreaded presence and on-the-ground absence (in the case of Iraq), artist Minerva Cuevas gives such chemical agents a weight that is equally invisible but more socially pervasive. Here those agents take the form of pesticides: the common household sprays used to terrorize unwanted creatures, to protect the security of a home, to ward off disease or to keep a farmer's crops unharmed. But for Cuevas pesticides are not simply solutions to pesky problems – necessary evils in the trade-off between order and chaos. They serve as analogies for the synthetic ills pervading contemporary global society. A pesticide is a toxin that symbolizes a technologically advanced society's capacity for self-preservation via self-poisoning.

Cuevas' recent exhibition, titled 'On Society', gathered itself around a fable by the Spanish socialist writer Tomás Meabe. Written around the turn of the last century, the story, 'The Poor Man, The Rich Man and the Mosquito', tells the tale of two men of different social classes bound together by a wayward mosquito carrying an indiscriminate disease. Their view of each other's worlds is through their respective homes' windows, and this external detached relation becomes the construction Meabe seeks to topple. In the final lines of the story he writes: 'The only thing set in stone is that there is never a shortage of mosquitoes, nor of even more minute beings, there to violently remind us of that which men of the heart should already know, that we all have much, very much in common with our neighbours, particularly when our neighbours are dreadful wretches.'

In the exhibition Cuevas employed Meabe's fable as both a press release and a narration for her video *The Poor Man, the Rich Man and the Mosquito* (2007). The latter showed a young boy calmly reciting Meabe's story from an old, tattered volume. Throughout his monologue the camera panned outwards, slowly melding the boy's image with that of a mosquito. Here Cuevas offers childhood innocence as the thing set in stone, in bountiful supply, a subtle antidote to determinative societal structures. Less innocent in appearance, Cuevas' *Target with Shelltox* (2007) sat opposite, offering a destructive solution to Meabe's mosquito. Made up of a found Shelltox pesticide spray-gun mounted to a target painted on the wall, it hung with the weight of both chemical and ideological artillery. Pesticide is the artificial bile that can formulate distinctions between Meabe's 'neighbours', guaranteeing the persistence of class differences and the primacy of those in charge by way of nature's destruction.

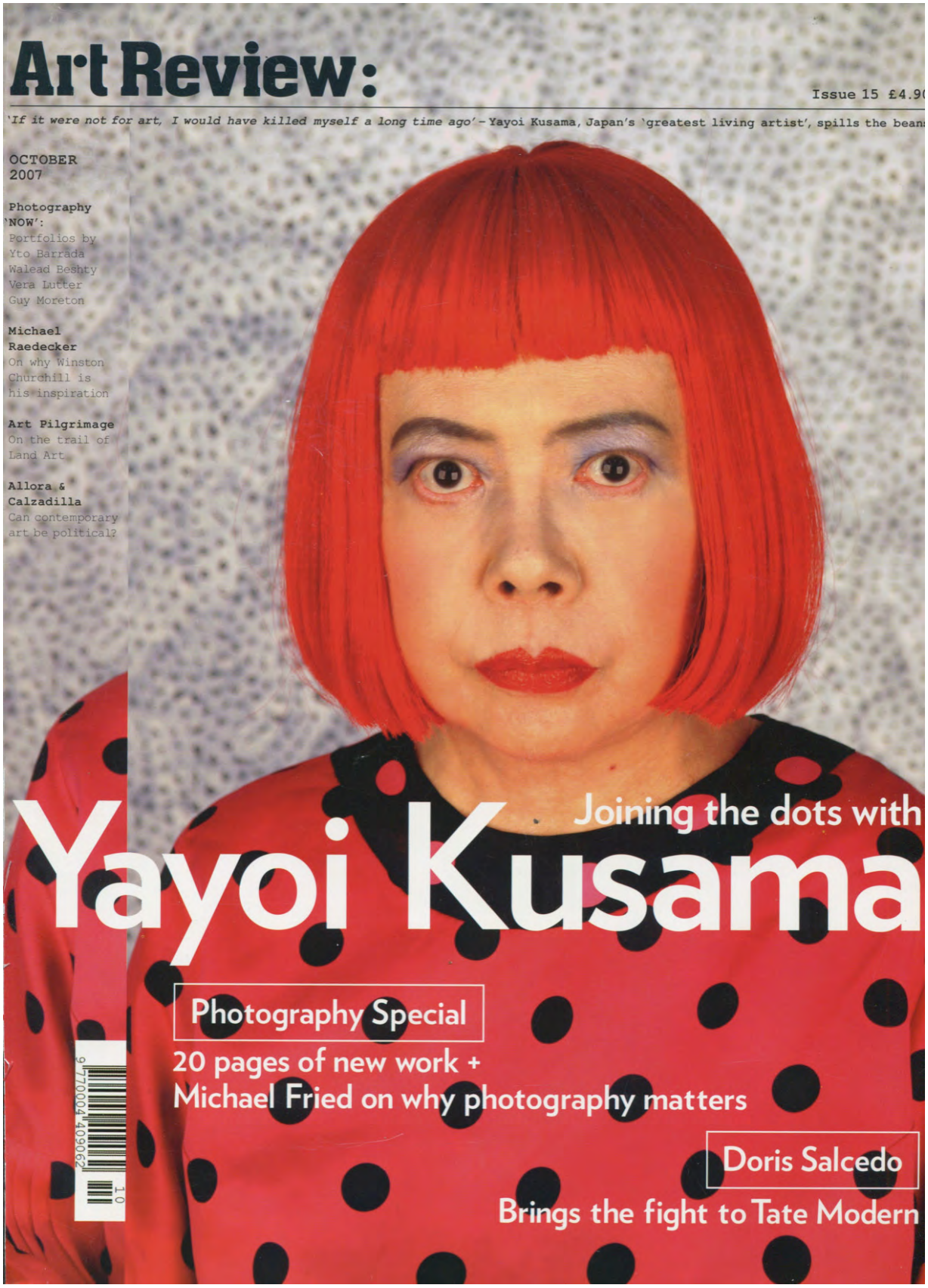
The video *Silent Spring* (2007), which borrows the title of Rachel Carson's seminal and influential 1962 book exposing the environmental havoc caused by the indiscriminate use of the pesticide DDT, occupied a space between these poles of innocence and immorality, and somewhat clarified Cuevas' own position. The work consisted of three monitors, each repeating a loop of archival footage. One showed a stop-motion image of a decaying plant, another that of a crop-dusting plane working a field, the last a montage of two men wandering around a hillside farm. In their soundless brevity these clips evoked the overall condition of the exhibition. Here pesticide is not only an agent reinforcing the hierarchies of modern society but also, in the paranoid medical parlance of our day, a 'silent killer' ensuring the passing of a certain agrarian culture.

In this context Cuevas' *Concert for Lavapiés* (2003) was the most apt part of the exhibition. Like many of Cuevas' best works to date, the piece was a public action (documented here in photographs). Although it took place in Madrid some four years ago, this event was the practical realization of Cuevas' essayistic and metaphorical propositions in 'On Society'. She invited musicians from the eclectic and socially diverse Lavapiés neighbourhood to join in a one-off, free-form concert. The event featured players of every level, on every instrument from guitars to brass instruments to home-made percussion. For Cuevas the cacophony of this grassroots performance proposes an organically structured society, one ignoring the rules of modern economic or political order. In Cuevas' proposition pesticide is the destruction of innate forms of community, and its rejection offers a path away from artificial solutions to a more holistic and egalitarian culture.

Chris Balaschak

Minerva Cuevas
Target with Shelltox
2007
Mixed media
Installation view

Minerva Cuevas: On Society
Taft, Catherine
Art Review, issue 15, October 2007



Minerva Cuevas: On Society
Taft, Catherine
Art Review, issue 15, October 2007

MINERVA CUEVAS: ON SOCIETY

MC, LOS ANGELES
28 JULY – 8 SEPTEMBER

State, 2007, wall painting, white acrylic paint, dimensions variable, edition 1 + 1 AP. Photo: Joshua White. Courtesy MC, Los Angeles

At the crux of both propaganda and what has been loosely termed 'activist art' is any fixed ideology. But unlike the immediate and systematic mind-control of propaganda, the activist aesthetic materialises as a tool of ideological communication and empowerment; Mexican artist Minerva Cuevas's Mejor Vida Corp. (Better Life Corporation) is an outright expression of such. Cuevas's nonprofit art organisation is best known for its stealth campaigns and interventions like bootlegging subway and lottery tickets, fabricating stick-on barcodes that lower supermarket prices and issuing fake student IDs to swindle institutional discounts. For her recent solo show at MC, Cuevas held back on these sorts of performative actions in favour of a more conventional (and comparatively tame) take on politicised issues.

On Society consists of five works from 2007 – sculpture, video projection, a three-channel video installation, a wall piece and a polemic text stencilled on the face of the gallery – and the photographic documentation of a public action from 2003. The new body of work is strong, centring on issues of agriculture, economics and social divides. In the video, *El Pobre, el Rico y el Mosquito/The Poor Man, the Rich Man and the Mosquito* (2007), a young boy reads a short story of the same title written by the Basque nationalist, Tomás Meabe, around the turn of the last century. The boy reads in Spanish, unfolding a tale of two men, one rich and one poor, who eventually die of the same disease carried by a single mosquito. As the story progresses, the camera pulls back to reveal a looming image of a magnified mosquito behind the boy, a figure that reappears in Cuevas's magic lantern-like sculpture, *In the Darkening Land the Light* (2007). As counterpart to this recurring insect, the three video monitors of *Silent Spring* (2007) loop found footage of pesticide crop-dusting, the time-lapse shrivelling of a plant, and the faces of workers in fields.

Given that Cuevas lives in Southern California and is witness to America's sick immigration system, it's easy to read the artist's central imagery and use of Meabe as metaphors for US/Mexican border issues. An estimated twelve million undocumented immigrants live in the US, embodying the enormous tension between human-rights responsibilities and cultural anxiety that plays across geopolitical boundaries. Seemingly at odds with this pressing theme are Cuevas's six static photo-documents, which recount her *Concert for Lavapies* (2003), an impromptu public jam session orchestrated in the streets of Madrid. While the photos speak to a momentary cultural integration, they seem dislocated, begging to resound with the music of the actual event. In proximity to her new work, these documents make me question whether Cuevas's action-driven aesthetic isn't better suited outside the gallery walls altogether. Literally located on MC's exterior, the work *State* (2007) is put to the test. The white-lettered text, written in English, publicly asserts that all government reduces its citizens to calculable data and variables in pecuniary exchanges. Interjected between gallery and street, the work proves a more activist function missing in the other pieces – to incite thought and challenge the status quo within the public landscape. *Catherine Taft*

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Minerva Cuevas: 'DODGEM'
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e-flux
May 7, 2002

e-flux

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New York, NY 10002, USA

Minerva Cuevas: "DODGEM"
May 2 - June 10th, 2002

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Minerva Cuevas,"DODGEM", Mexico City, 2002

Minerva Cuevas: "DODGEM"
May 2 - June 10th, 2002
Amusement Park at Patriotismo and Ave. Mixcoac, Mexico City
kurimanzutto

kurimanzutto is pleased to announce "DODGEM", the most recent project by Minerva Cuevas. This time the gallery will open its doors in a local amusement park in Mexico City.

For this exhibition Minerva Cuevas presents an intervention in an amusement park's bumper-carts ride -- a perfect context for Cuevas' commentary on the recent energy politics. This greed-driven battle characterized by a permanent war among the petrol companies (referred to ironically by the artist through the aimless bumping of electric cars) looking to control the international markets with the ultimate goal of private profit. These companies are ultimately the ones who dictate environmental policies and control the exploitation of natural resources.

Minerva Cuevas' work is characterized by public interventions, the use of media articulating campaigns which address economic and social processes, communications and biotechnology. Her work consists mainly of installation, video, photography and advertising resources.

For more information please go to: http://www.kurimanzutto.com

Minerva Cuevas belongs to the collective Irational.org since 1998.
CV: http://www.irational.org/minerva/resume.html

The project is open for view and participation during the regular opening hours of the Amusement Park.

Further information:
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"Presents of Mind."
Art News
López Cuenca, Alberto
March 2002

Presents of Mind

As sole employee and representative of her company Mejor Vida Corp., Minerva Cuevas dedicates herself to the art of the giveaway • By Alberto López Cuenca

When Minerva Cuevas asks you to meet her at the Torre Latinoamericana, one of the most important office buildings in Mexico City, you might wonder why a 26-year-old artist is working in this symbol of Mexican business. You can find her there answering the phone, sending faxes, and receiving people "from 9 A.M. to 9 P.M."

Cuevas rents a 21st-floor office in the Torre Latinoamericana as the sole representative of Mejor Vida Corp. (Better Life Corp., or MVC), a nonprofit company she created in 1998. Funded by sales of Cuevas's videos and photographs, MVC developed out of the artist's desire to give away free products in public spaces. On a 1998 trip to New York City, Cuevas was surprised by a security campaign in the subway system with the slogan "Awake Is Aware" that urged passengers not to fall asleep on the trains. "I understood it as a mistaken campaign," she comments. "On a social level, what they were saying was that since the transportation system wasn't able to provide security, you should be afraid and alert at all times. So I gave away packets containing two caffeine pills, which read 'security pills.' This became the first product of this corporation."

Cuevas began exhibiting throughout Mexico City while still a visual-arts student at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, from which she graduated in 1997. Now she is a leading member of a young, emerging group of Mexican artists, says Patricia Martin, curator of the Jumex Collection, one of the largest private collections of contemporary art in Latin America, which owns two of Cuevas's works. Represented by the Mexico City–based Kurimanzutto Gallery, she will have a solo exhibition there in May. Her videos sell for around $5,000 and her photographs for $3,000. One 60-minute video, *Drunker* (1995), shows Cuevas methodically getting intoxicated to the point of unconsciousness as, all the while, she writes down the reasons why she's drinking.

The giveaways from MVC—ranging from UPC codes that, when placed on select products from chain grocery stores like Safeway, slash prices by 40 percent, to lottery tickets—unabashedly aim to improve people's lives. Cuevas's main intention is to raise questions about seemingly obvious but often dismissed issues of social inequality, such as why personal wealth is, for the most part, the result of chance. "I do not expect people to get a well-defined message," she says. "I don't think that exists. It is more like generating new questions from everyday issues."

The free items the corporation offers also include tear gas (available in Mexico City only), subway tickets, and prestamped mailing envelopes. In addition, MVC delivers information about poverty in Mexico and renders services such as typing for illiterates, cleaning subway platforms, and issuing reference letters for those seeking a job. "Minerva Cuevas is two people," says Mexican art critic and curator Cuauhtémoc Medina. "On the one hand, Minerva Cuevas is an artist; on the other, she is the creator of a field of social intervention."

Cuevas, whose petite stature, sweet manners, and casual dress undercut the image of a corporate executive, has carried out MVC activities in various museums and galleries around the world, including the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris (2001) and the Museo Rufino Tamayo in Mexico City (2000). Patricia Sloane, director of Mexico City's Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, where MVC was featured in 1999, finds Cuevas's work compelling for the way the artist operates from within the museum. At the Museo Rufino Tamayo, for instance, Cuevas gave away student IDs so that visitors of all ages could enter for free. "Using the institution as a starting point, she has a scope that maybe the institution itself could not have," says Sloane. Cuevas herself says, "In the end, museums and galleries interest me as public spaces with well-defined audiences, not as institutions with names, prestige, and cultural status." She continues, "It took time for the project to get into the museums and galleries, because I did not conceive it for these spaces." As a member of the Net art collective irational.org, Cuevas also presents much of her work online (at www.irational.org/mvc).

COURTESY THE ARTIST (2)

Zucchini are among the items for which Cuevas designed bar codes that discount prices at the grocery store chain Comercial Mexicana by 40 percent. Anyone can order the codes from her Web site; stickers for products from Safeway are also available.

"What I'm interested in is the social reception," she says. "My motivation has always been to provoke people. To provoke in the largest sense, not just socially but also visually." ■

Alberto López Cuenca, based in Mexico City, regularly writes for Spain's ABC Cultural *and* Revista de Libros.