

On *The Return of a Lake*. MUAC, Mexico City, August - November 2014.

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On the white walls of a museum gallery, grey vinyl letters write the exhibition's title in two languages: *El retorno de un lago*; *The Return of a Lake*. Below, there are close to twenty framed color portraits of men and women from the Mexican town of Xico, southwest of Mexico City. Cutting across the room are three curvy tables with colorful miniature models. At MUAC (Museo Universitario de Arte



The Return of a Lake. Exhibition view, Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico DF. Image author: Oliver Santana, source: <http://muac.unam.mx/>

Contemporáneo, México DF), *The Return of a Lake* features work by Maria Thereza Alves, Brazilian artist born in Sao Paulo in 1961. The project had already been seen in Documenta 13, Kassel, in the summer of 2012; this time, it returns close to its origins by the volcano, over dried ancient farmlands. In a problematic way, this exhibition links local and global narratives about a Mexican town's relationship with its land.

An activist as well as an artist, in the late seventies Alves began a years long collaboration with the International Indian Treaty Council, an organization active in the defense of indigenous rights across the globe. Later, Alves also helped founding Brazil's Green Party. In parallel to her political action, through time her artwork registers an ongoing defense of indigenous rights to own, manage, and exploit their natural and cultural resources. In the gallery, in addition to the photos I see a tubular papier mache sculpture representing a volcano. It refers to a legend present in the collective imagination of the Xico community: that of Mexica god Quetzalcoatl going into the mountain's fiery core in order to bring back to humans the gift of corn. In the scale models, a dry landscape of punished lands and faint crops, sparsely populated areas, and some paper index notes.

The community of Xico was once limited to the shores of lake Chalco around the volcano Teuhtli. After centuries of overexploitation by colonial and post-independence governments, the lake dried leaving the town thirsty and its inhabitants unable to farm the land. Íñigo Noriega Laso, a XIXth century Spanish landowner, was responsible for the displacement of hundreds of locals, expropriating their fields and disowning them of a centuries long relationship with the land. Protected by dictator Porfirio Diaz, Noriega Laso dried the lake to plant his crops. The landscape changed. Centuries after, due to the overuse of an aquifer under the now dry lakebed, the body of water begun to reemerge in the 1980s. Noriega Laso's story is mentioned in the catalog as a "myth of decay". The new reservoir is now focus of water rights disputes involving members of the expanded metropolitan area. In response to this phenomenon, Maria Thereza Alves's original drive was to engage



Lake Chalco. Image author: Oliver Santana, source: <http://muac.unam.mx/>

with the community in the construction in the area of a *chinampa*, “an artificial island of pre-Hispanic design used for hydro-agriculture”. *Chinampas* integrate organic and recycled materials in rectangular indents into the lake, and were widely used by the Aztecs and other mesoamerican civilizations in agriculture. Alves’s construction of a *chinampa* with members of the community is defended in the catalog as art since it “redefines the possibilities of environmental politics today, and does so contributing to [the region’s] movement for environmental and social justice”. Furthermore, in addition to the transformative potential of recovering traditional local agricultural techniques, T. J. Demos defends in his catalog essay that the project “operates to forward an agenda of positive social and environmental transformation, which Alves’s work advances further”.

Both stories, the legend of Quetzalcoatl and Noriega Laso’s exhausting of the region, shape the community’s shared narrative about the space they inhabit, according to Alves. In the exhibition catalog, the artist makes room for both: she tells how she and Genaro Amaro Altamirano, community member and founder of the Xico Community Museum, compiled them in a book and travelled first to Kassel’s Documenta 13 in 2012, and later to the Northern

Spanish town of Colombres, from where Noriega Laso had once parted. In the later, the catalog tells, Genaro Amaro Altamirano and Maria Thereza Alvez offered the volume to local authorities, in a symbolic act of revision of the Spanish town's debt with the Mexican community of Xico.

Back from Europe, Genaro, director of the local museum, changed its programme in an attempt to include contemporary art in it. Genaro brought young artists and musicians to town, and hoped to expand the museum's pre-Hispanic collection of objects with works by active artists from the region. In the catalog, *The Return of a Lake* is presented by MUAC as a circular series of relations involving local communities, a global biennial, and a metropolitan Mexican museum, all together in the shared revision of the relations of exploitation of individuals and land through time. MUAC is a big university museum in Mexico City, directed by well-known curator Cuauhtemoc Medina, with a program focused on contemporary practices. The institution often partners up with avant-garde European centers in the production and touring of its shows. On the other hand, the Xico Community Museum is a local initiative founded, directed, and managed by Genaro and his assistant Mariana Huerta Páez, who has learned the art of archiving and classifying online. Its collection is made up of pre-Hispanic objects found and donated by locals in the area. The only contacts with the outside world are the visits Genaro and Mariana pay to local schools to promote the museum's role in keeping memory alive. Funds seldom come in. Moreover, the community of Xico comprises individuals of diverse racial backgrounds. Mostly dependent on the work of the land and a weak trade and service economy, a big part of its population lives in poverty. High rates of drug addiction, crime, and violence go hand in hand with a decades long rising unemployment. The communities around MUAC and Documenta, however, are very different: as groups of experts articulated around a shared knowledge on the specific category of art objects, curators, critics, and museum professionals make much higher wages, and participate of global codes and conversations.

Unlike Xico's inhabitants, they belong to their narrow community by choice. Furthermore, Documenta and MUAC act in this project as moments where Xico's two main foundational myths (Quetzacoatl's myth of abundance, and Noriega Laso's myth of decay) need be translated to fit into the type of art shown in biennials and contemporary art museums. These two dispositives activate an aesthetic and ideological torsion in that alienates publics from the real problematic originally addressed by Alves: an environmental and social crisis in a Mexican town.

Hanging from one of the big walls in the gallery is a sculpture of Quetzalcoatl made by Maria Thereza Alves. Next to it are a series of vitrines displaying pre-Hispanic objects borrowed from the Xico Community Museum. In a fish tank, one specimen of Mexican axolote, an albino amphibian endemic to the lakes and canals of Xico. The species is in high risk of extinction. On entering the gallery one is presented with a number of colorful elements directing our attention to Xico's centuries long environmental crisis. The show meets all conventions that have become the norm in translating socially engaged projects for the museum space: scale models, full body portraits, non-art objects, live evidence, ephemera, many of them taken from the field, some crafted by the artist. But in an interview I held with a member of the education department at MUAC, things acquired a different color. This artist-educator was in charge of designing and facilitating a series of activities connecting MUAC with the Xico Community Museum, and shared her impressions about the project with me. As mentioned in *The Return of a Lake's* catalog, MUAC's declared intentions of partnering with the local context were materialized in a series of workshops held at the Xico museum plus a number of visits to the town by curators, critics, and artists from Mexico City. These events were seen by MUAC as extensions of the project's gallery set up, in an attempt to expand the curatorial scope by rethinking how neighbor institutions in disproportionate power positions can relate to each other.



Image taken during the first workshop held at the Xico Community Museum, facilitated by members of MUAC's Education Department.

After *The Return of a Lake* opened in August 2014, MUAC met most of its short-term commitments with the community of Xico: its education team designed two workshops and facilitated two roundtables. The educator I interviewed explained them as a “way to share with [the local community] the artistic processes being exhibited in MUAC, (...) and reinforce a relation that had already been established with this specific audience”. The roundtables had a twofold goal: to learn about local environmental and economic problems, and to connect different community groups from Xico with experts on resource exploitation and management brought from the capital. The two workshops, however, were offered just to the local community. The first one consisted of a day long photographic tour around the town, the crater, and the lake. In the second workshop participants were invited to discuss and stage the legend of Quetzalcoatl. My informant and other educators from MUAC provided prompts and costumes. Community members of different ages and social groups joined in a shared revision of their

“present problematics” and “shared mythologies,” which were brought back to the local museum as photographs, performances, and personal testimonies. In addition to these events, a last visit from MUAC had been planned in advance for some weeks after the show’s closing date. However, as my informant explained, a very reduced number of people from MUAC stuck to their original commitment of joining to the further visits to Xico’s Community Museum. This falling out was exacerbated by MUAC’s failure to provide assistance to the Xico Community Museum after an unexpected notice of eviction. A group of workers at MUAC plus members of the Mexico City art community requested the university museum assist Xico’s institution in this crisis. Having nowhere to store their collection, nor means to guarantee their objects were kept from deteriorating in the move to a new building, the two-person team behind Xico’s Community Museum needed material



Image taken during the second workshop held at the Xico Community Museum, facilitated by members of MUAC’s Education Department.

aid. My informant, part of the group of MUAC workers behind the call, said that the exhibition's curators denied all assistance and did not sponsor the fund collection workers had initiated. Part of the petitions that MUAC workers made included connecting MUAC's important conservation department with the team at Xico, donating part of MUAC's extensive assortment of discarded past exhibition props to the local museum, mediating with local authorities to find a new venue for the institution, and collecting funds to help them get out of the eviction notice. According to my informant's words, their objective was to start a real campaign to repair an institution's material debt, in an attempt to continue facilitating the revision of Xico's history of exploitation by external agents.

Though in the end, MUAC seemed only capable of restoring debts in the realm of the symbolic. The show closed; doors shut. I can't help but feel uncomfortable with MUAC's reaction. Why is it still preferred for an art institution to reproduce in the symbolic a community's history of colonial and neocolonial exploitation rather than to champion new relations between big and small museums in times of need? Is MUAC's intention to keep structural inequality untouched so that nobody mistakes experts with locals? Or is it about alienating a community enough from their land and resources through art so that we can all speak of the problem as a global cause? Looks like it is often in the museum that these alienations occur today.

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Notes

Exhibition catalog: Maria Thereza Alves y T.J Demos, *Folio 019-Maria Thereza Alves. El retorno de un lago* (MUAC-UNAM: Mexico, 2014).

