

Return of a Lake: Contemporary Art and Political Ecology in Mexico

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Maria Thereza Alves, *El retorno de un lago—The Return of a Lake*, 2012. Detalle—Detail [Cat. 1]

For *Return of a Lake*, Maria Thereza Alves' photographic and sculptural installation, first presented at DOCUMENTA (13), 2012, the Brazilian artist (long based in Europe) investigates the region of Chalco, just east of Mexico City. There, water, as if possessing a will of its own, has rebelled against human environmental degradation, colonial domination, and exploitative economic interests, and unexpectedly reappeared in recent decades. More than a century after its drainage to make way for farmland, the lake's return has helped inspire the imagination of a different world, one that is politically just, equitably resourced, and ecologically sustainable.

In 1985, water began emerging from the ground in Chalco, just after several wells were built to tap the aquifer and deliver water to the capital, which, expanding exponentially in recent years, has grown a voracious appetite for natural resources. As the liquid was withdrawn from subterranean cavities, the ground began descending, and by 2013 it had sunk some twelve meters from its level twenty years ago (descending approximately forty centimeters per year). Filling an area previously dedicated to agriculture, the emergent Tláhuac-Xico Lake has now become a substantial body of water—and a new source of conflict for regional disputes, real estate interests, land use policy, and competing water management systems.¹

It is this conflict that is mapped in Alves' installation, comprising three dioramas that represent the Chalco area, among its diverse elements. These include: a scaled-down model of the lake region, showing its blue expanse and bordering land developments; another of the nearby volcanic mountain now supporting ringed housing projects that extend the informal urbanism of Mexico City; and a reproduction of a lengthy section of the local canal, Río de la Compañía, which, used for waste disposal and notoriously plagued with inefficiency, regularly overflows during rainy seasons, pouring untreated sewage into local homes (when its walls broke in 2010, 18,000 people were forced to flee, as one of many descriptive cards explains included

1— Xico is a city in the State of Mexico, and is more or less coterminous with the municipal seat of Valle de Chalco Solidaridad municipality.

on the dioramas). While giant ramshackle pipes extend from the lake, indicating the interventionist technology of water extraction, the volcano appears in blazing eruption, as if responding angrily to humanity's treatment of the land (the eruption also refers to local tradition: belief has it that the Mesoamerican deity Quetzalcoatl, first documented in nearby Teotihuacan in the first century BCE, fled to safety from the Spanish by diving into the Xico volcano, where he now slumbers). Alves' models utilize a crafty folk aesthetic, employing a vernacular hand-made style of construction reminiscent of presentations in the Museo Comunitario del Valle de Xico (Community Museum of the Valley of Xico,) with which the artist has collaborated for her research into the history of the area and its present troubles.

The visual argot speaks to the artist's politics of localism, posed against the forces of NAFTA—era globalization, forces that would see the Chalco area given over to further real—estate development, or recruited to service Mexico City's water needs, or in the meantime, abused as an informal trash dump and industrial waste site (the installation includes a selection of newspaper clippings that offer examples of ongoing governmental, industrial, and political threats to the region's ecology and the Community Museum's existence). In this sense, Alves' recent work develops further her longstanding environmental-political commitments—in 1979 she created the Brazilian Information Center, which lobbied for human rights of indigenous peoples; in 1987, she co-founded the *Partido Verde* (Green Party) in Sao Paulo, Brazil; and she lived in Cuernavaca, Mexico during 1987-94, with her partner and fellow-artist Jimmie Durham, in part to extend her political-ecological agenda. In addition, *The Return of a Lake* builds on Alves' past artistic projects such as *Seeds of Change* (1999-ongoing), investigating the botanical dissemination of seeds during the maritime trade of colonial and industrial modernity.² Finally, the project continues Alves'

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2— Alves describes the project, which began in Marseille, France, as follows: "*Seeds of Change* is an investigation based on original research (no previous scientific studies exist on ballast flora in Marseille) to unearth historical ballast sites and ballast flora while studying the emergent flora at the sites in the Port of Marseille. This project raises questions on the parallels between the discourses of defining what epoch in the geographical history of place classifies its 'naturalness'? At what moment do seeds become native? What are the socio-political histories of place

collaborative practice, joining together her work's exhibition on an international scale with a local social cause, forming an aesthetics of resistance that advances postcolonial justice, indigenous rights, and ecological sustainability.

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The geological transformation of Chalco is, of course, only the most recent of a series of geographical changes stretching back to pre-colonial days, when the Valley of Mexico basin contained an ecology well balanced between lakes and land, between indigenous reproductive systems and the region's biodiverse flora and fauna. In the history that Alves has built, as represented in both her installation and the detailed, collaborative catalogue accompanying her artwork, she focuses on one figure in particular who brought about a substantial alteration of the region's habitat, verging on ecocide.³ This was Íñigo Noriega Laso (1853-1923), a Spanish landowner and businessman living during the repressive regime of Mexican president Porfirio Díaz, whose modernizing projects brought about the brutal dispossession of indigenous lands.

A close friend of Díaz who emigrated to Mexico in 1867, Noriega had no problem gaining the right to drain the lake—an ecosystem that had supported native life for thousands of years—and carried out the massive geo-engineering project between 1885 and 1903 to make way for agricultural lands to surround his opulent hacienda. Noriega soon became one of the country's richest men through his agro-industrial ventures, though he was forced to flee Mexico when the Revolution broke out in 1910, as we learn from Alves' and the Community Museum's research presented in her 2012 catalogue.⁴ In Spain, he is considered a heroic

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that classify the framework of belonging?" See *Maria Theresa Alves*, ed., Mai Tran (Nantes: École des beaux-arts, 2013), and particularly the essays by Jean Fisher ("The Importance of Words and Actions") and Catalina Lozano ("Stubborn Waste").

3— See Maria Thereza Alves, *The Return of a Lake* (Köln: Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012).

4— This is corroborated through independent research: Noriega's interests included his agricultural enterprises in Xico, Colombres/Río Bravo, and La Sauteña in Tamaulipas; factories producing turpentine and resin (Río Bravo), textiles

“indiano,” celebrated to this day for his colonial entrepreneurialism in the Museo de la Emigración (Museum of Emigration) in Colombres (Asturias), housed in a mansion Noriega had built in 1906 (its façade is represented in a relief sculpture in Alves’ installation).⁵

Importantly, Alves’ research puts the lie to this triumphalist history, detailing how Noriega amassed his immense wealth through the exploitation of Nahua *campesinos* and the destruction of the local habitat. As supported by evidence presented in various chapters of her catalogue—such as “Íñigo Noriega Laso: The Destroyer of My Pueblo” by Raymundo Martínez (a Chalca whose grandparents were expelled from San Martín, a village in Xico, by Noriega), and “Why the Indigenous People did Not Like Íñigo and Held Prejudices Against the Spanish”—Noriega has many strikes against him: he was responsible for the destruction of the viability of the indigenous community’s livelihood, eradicating the lake’s biodiverse ecology (including numerous species of birds and fish—for instance, in her installation, she includes a fishtank with Axolotl fish, originally from Lake Chalco), and forcibly resettling native communities on inferior lands. Those who resisted he got assigned to military service or had killed, their houses burned, the displaced prohibited from cultivating traditional lands or collecting wood from local forests. Benefitting from corrupt arrangements with the Mexican government, Noriega had the country’s military do his dirty work.⁶

It is for this reason that Alves presents a sculpture of Noriega in her installation showing him surrounded by flames, as if he were gazing at visitors from his everlasting

(Compañía Industrial La Guadalupe); tobacco (La Mexicana); mining (Compañía Minera Tlalchichilpa); and railroads (Ferrocarril Río Frío and Hidalgo). See the (generally uncritical) bibliographic entry at Texas Online Resources: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/utlac/00277/lac-00277.html>.

5— See Alves, “Some Points of View of Íñigo Noriega,” *The Return of a Lake*, p. 149: “It is thought by the Museo de la Emigración in Íñigo’s hometown of Colombres, Asturias, in Spain, and by his descendents in Mexico, that Íñigo was ‘a great man’ who was outstanding in his business due to his grand vision as an impresario.” See <http://www.archivodeindianos.es/>.

6— See Alves, “Why the Indigenous People did not like Íñigo and Held Prejudices Against the Spanish,” in *The Return of a Lake*, esp. p.151, and “Íñigo Noriega was Not a Good Man and was Bad to his Workers,” pp. 66-67.

position burning in hell—a form of socio-environmental and political justice that Alves’ project delivers.⁷ Yet Noriega’s actions were only one episode, however significant and brutal, in the longer history of colonialism and capital’s primitive accumulation, stretching back to the first conquests, and continuing today with contemporary neoliberal practices of capitalist enclosure, privatization of the commons, and resource extraction. As such, it reveals much about the contemporary situation of Mexico City’s catastrophic ecology, which in many ways continues a neocolonial relation to land use, social relations, and resource exploitation under neoliberal capitalism.

Looking backwards, Chalco’s fate at the hands of Noriega reverberates like an echo of Hernán Cortés’s conquest and violent destruction of Tenochtitlan, the island city-state of the Aztecs situated on Texcoco’s lake, connected at the time to Lake Chalco, in the Valley of Mexico. Established over hundreds of years as sustainable agroecology, the Aztec’s farming involved an ingenious system of “chinampas,” or floating water gardens that sensibly integrated organic materials and waste recycling for heightened fertility. (Diego Rivera provides an inspired, if idealized, portrayal of the pre-colonial capital at the Palacio Nacional de Mexico, which strikingly contrasts with the urban sprawl of present-day Mexico City; and Alves’ installation includes a watercolor diagram of the *chinampas* system.) After Cortez subdued the Aztecs by murdering the leadership, he went on to destroy their temple complex that represented the infrastructure of religious practice (its ruins lie today in the center of Mexico City), fill in the canals, demolish the *chinampas*, and begin the process of hispanicizing the land and people—a prefiguration of Noriega’s later expropriation of indigenous lands and practices of ecocide.⁸

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7— As Alves writes: “In my research, I encountered a statement by an academic who hoped that Íñigo Noriega and his brother would burn forever in the fires of hell for the destruction that they had caused in Chalco.” (Alves, “Some Points of View of Íñigo Noriega,” *The Return of a Lake*, p. 149.)

8— See Rebecca P. Brien and Margaret A. Jackson, *Invasion and Transformation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008).

While Noriega receives special blame for Chalco's ecological devastation, Alves' project also addresses the entanglement of the region in contemporary political conflicts, which have created the conditions of further environmental stress. Situated between competing demands for water resources by both the Mexican state and the local municipality, Chalco's social demographic has been profoundly altered by NAFTA policies that have destroyed rural subsistence and small-scale commercial farming, driving urbanization and internal and international immigration (increasingly illegalized and militarily enforced) to explosive proportions.⁹ NAFTA disastrous result has been to eliminate subsidies to small farmers (but without corresponding subsidy cuts to US farmers), which has driven down wages, increasing poverty (by some nineteen million compared to twenty years ago) and economic inequality, and has left more than a million small farmers out of work. In addition to these stresses and the resulting weakening of the region's social fabric, commercial real estate interests threaten to develop the Chalco area further with poorly-constructed housing, developments with inadequate sewage treatment facilities and water management systems. The area is also influenced by corrupt politicians, which constrains local commitments to bringing land management in line with ecological criteria and social wellbeing. In this regard, Alves' project defines a geological approach to this region that is simultaneously local and global, contemporary and historical, where the site of intervention represents "a teeming assemblage of exchange and interaction among the bio, geo, cosmo, socio, political, legal, economic,

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9— The North American Free Trade Agreement, inaugurated in 1994—in part inspiring the beginning of the Zapatista revolution—intensified neoliberal structural adjustment programs of the 1980s, including privatization of state industries and services, government deregulation, elimination of trade barriers and social services related to health, education and welfare. It also included the elimination of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, the Revolutionary guarantee of small plots to millions of Mexicans living in rural areas, and offering the land for sale to foreign firms and large plantations. See David Carruthers, "Indigenous Ecology and the Politics of Linkage in Mexican Social Movements," *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 5 (1996); and "NAFTA at 20: Lori Wallach on U.S. Job Losses, Record Income Inequality, Mass Displacement in Mexico," *Democracy Now!* (January 3, 2014), http://www.democracynow.org/2014/1/3/nafta_at_20_lori_wallach_on#.

strategic, and imaginary.”¹⁰ In sociological terms, there are numerous “actants”—not simply characters, but structural functions—that drive this narrative of conflict. Highlighting this complexity helps overcome the tendency to define social problems as uniquely caused by individual moral failure, as if humans are fully in charge of nature, and, conversely, allows us to see agency more accurately as driven by human-non-human assemblages¹¹—which begins with Alves’ suggestion that the lake has “returned” by an agency other than human. Yet avoiding the risks of new sociology’s actor-network theory that potentially dissolves human responsibility for environmental change amidst the distributive agency of post-anthropocentric arrangements, Alves, along with figures like Genaro Amaro Altamirano (director of the Community Museum of the Valley of Xico), does not loosen the grip on key agents like Noriega, or contemporary formations like neoliberal capitalism. Nor does her project miss the chance to celebrate the contributions of the numerous so-called “Heroes of the Lake,” who are singled out in portrait photographs surrounding the installation that show local community members like Altamirano and Martínez as agents of positive and progressive social and ecological transformation.

As such, Alves’ project can be considered an artwork that redefines the possibilities of political ecology today, and which does so by contributing to Chalco’s movement for environmental and social justice.¹² First, it helps to recover local cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge, using its own aesthetic presentation as a vehicle for substantial research, which also translates, develops, and amplifies the research of the Community Museum. The museum not only presents an impressive display of local archeological objects that narrates a complex pre-Columbian history of the region (used extensively in community educational

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10— Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse, eds., *Making the Geologic Now: Responses to Material Conditions of Contemporary Life* (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum, 2012), p. 23.

11— Jane Bennett makes a similar point in Klaus K. Loenhart, “Vibrant Matter, Zero Landscape: An Interview with Jane Bennett,” *GAM 07* (2011), online at: www.eurozine.com/articles/2011-10-19-loenhart-en.html.

12— For more analysis of contemporary art and political ecology, see the special issue of *Third Text* no. 120 (January 2013), which I guest edited on the subject.

initiatives), but also operates to forward an agenda of positive social and environmental transformation, which Alves' artwork advances further.

Commissioned for dOCUMENTA (13), the project entered the artworld's own site of institutionalized globalization, one marked by corporate influence and consumerist spectacle (and dependent on climate-changing, fossil-fueled transportation). Yet it did so to join with other critical positions included in the exhibition and its related publications, which opened up diverse and urgent cultural and political subjects—for instance, that of eco-activist Vandana Shiva, who, in her contribution to dOCUMENTA (13)'s publications wrote about *The Corporate Control of Nature*, advancing her struggle against India's neoliberal turn and the state's support for environmentally destructive mining, corporate appropriation of tribal lands, destruction of biodiverse habitats, and commodification of seeds by agribusiness and biotech firms, which finds resonance in Mexico's NAFTA-era context.¹³ With its display of dioramas, photography and texts, Alves' installation scales up a local struggle to contest economic globalization and resource extraction, and relates that struggle to Chalco's colonial past, which raises critical consciousness to an international level. As such it offers a welcomed alternative to the artworld's recent fetishization of the generic and often depoliticized practice of "knowledge production," and proposes new possibilities of political-cultural solidarity around trans-local points of resistance to the project of neoliberalism.

In this sense, Alves' catalogue defines an expansive and collaborative research project that adds substantial material to the installation's range of meanings. Including numerous chapters written by Alves, and by other Chalca researchers, and documentary photographs of the region and its colonial history, the catalogue also reproduces facsimiles of several

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13— On Indian political ecology, see Felix Padel and Samarendra Das, *Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminum Cartel* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010), 575: "Activists in East India deserve to be seen as the grassroots cutting edge of worldwide movements against the 'death culture' of unbridled corporate growth." On dOCUMENTA (13), see T.J. Demos, "Gardens Beyond Eden: Bio-aesthetics, Eco-Futurism, and Dystopia at dOCUMENTA (13)," *The Brooklyn Rail* (October 2012), at: www.brooklynrail.org; and Julian Stallabrass. "Radical Camouflage," *New Left Review* 77 (September-October 2012).

short information booklets produced by the Community Museum of the Valley of Xico. These booklets offer further historical research on diverse themes, including the geology of Chalco, the history of the museum's building, the poetry of the region's indigenous Nahuatl-speaking people, the politics of water, colonial history, and an account of the destruction of Xico's archaeological patrimony. Mobilizing this local knowledge, the catalogue effectively develops Alves' mixed-media artwork into an impressive and interdisciplinary research project, an engaged activist monument, a multi-part grassroots collaboration, and an archive that supports critical knowledge production in relation to postcolonial history and Mexico's precarious ecology.

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In the course of her investigation, Alves has revealed a fascinating genealogy: Noriega's hacienda, it turns out, was built in the same area as a former country estate of Hernán Cortés—architecturally linking the regimes of Spanish colonialism in the sixteenth century with the neocolonialism of the Porfiriato, the initial conquest of the Americas with industrial modernity's further incursions into indigenous land and labor. Adding to this stratified history, none other than Emiliano Zapata worked for Noriega at his mines in Tlalchichilpa, in the state of Guerrero, and his experience of exploitative working conditions and economic inequality led to the Revolutionary uprising, when Noriega's mansion was occupied and turned into the general headquarters of Zapata's movement in the region.¹⁴ "Today, that same mansion houses the Community Museum of the Valley of Xico, which actively defends the patrimony of indigenous culture," Alves writes.¹⁵ When I visited the Community Museum in

14— See Alves, *The Return of a Lake*, 69, and 76. Also: "The Zapatistas took possession of the mine operated by [Noriega's] Compañía Minera Tlalchichilpa where Emiliano Zapata had once worked, as well as Xico, Río Frío, and the Hacienda de Zoquiapam, exploiting the properties and appropriating the revenues and assets for themselves," (<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/utlac/00277/lac-00277.html>).

15— See Alves, "Íñigo Noriega was Not a Good Man and was Bad to his Workers," *The Return of a Lake*, p. 69.

October 2013, the museum's displays included a selection of framed photographs next to a painting of Daniel Rivera (the first president of the local *comisariado ejidal*), one showing Zapata, another depicting two masked Zapatistas (Subcomandante Marcos and Comandante Ramona), a connection that establishes a radical political lineage that extends from Zapata's Revolution to today's Zapatistas and their own current demands for indigenous autonomy, cultural dignity, and political rights in the Chiapas region (and in fact the Museum hosts Zapatista militants when they come through the Valle de Chalco). Even though the Museum is no revolutionary withdrawal from the state, its struggle for local self-determination, return to subsistence, greater autonomy, community solidarity, and ecological sustainability, resonates with the Zapatistas' insurgency.

In addition to revealing the terms of this ideological solidarity with past and present revolutionary and decolonization struggles, Alves' project amplifies the contemporary political-ecological mission of Chalco's Community Museum. It does so by reproducing concrete proposals to realize local claims for political self-determination, the recovery of the natural surroundings of the valley of Chalco, and sovereignty over local resources—against what Community Museum director Don Genaro defines as “a capitalist dynamics” that “in its attempts to obtain the highest economic benefit possible does not refrain from putting into practice policies that result in the rape of the social resources of the nation and privatizing them for the benefit of a capitalist class.”¹⁶ Reproducing and translating the booklet, *Cultural and Ecological Patrimony of Xico*, 2006, Alves' catalogue details proposals for “the sustainable use of natural resources,” and “a program for the orientation and management of the micro-basins in the Chalco-Amecameca area with the purpose of assuring the social use and usufruct of the resources for the original communities of the region.”¹⁷ This program, as set out in this booklet, demands the participation of the population of the

16— Genaro Amaro Altamirano, “Recuperacion del Entorno Natural del Municipio de Valle de Chalco Solidaridad (Propuesta de Acción),” in *Cultural and Ecological Patrimony of Xico*, 25; cited in Alves, *The Return of a Lake*, p. 143.

17— Altamirano, “Recuperacion del Entorno Natural,” in *Cultural and Ecological Patrimony of Xico*, 25; cited in Alves, *The Return of a Lake*, p. 143.

region's thirteen municipalities as "autonomous and self-managed" agents, in order to: create communal land committees for the purpose of reforesting the high areas of the hills and preventing further urban sprawl; provide education for local farmers in sloped crop cultivation; establish community-based water management organizations to counter real-estate industry privatization; restore the Xico lagoons; and promote recycling, rainwater collection, eco-education, and ecotourism with cantinas, lodgings and communal transport (avoiding resource-damaging predatory tourism).

In addition, the "Manifesto for Water," signed by representatives of the various boroughs surrounding Mexico City, including Chalco, Xochimilco, Iztapalapa, and Milpa Alta, is reproduced in the catalogue. It demands a reorientation of water policies in the Valley of Mexico so that Lake Tláhuac-Xico serves local uses, its aquifer protected, flood damage reduced, and the Compañía and Ameameca rivers and canals restored—the goal being, ultimately, to "stimulate a sense of roots, of respect, and sustainable use and conservation of the land by supporting [locally based] agricultural producers so that they will be able to keep their lands for this purpose."¹⁸

Alves' piece thus defines a project of ecological and social justice—not only in representational terms, for instance, in the way Noriega is shown suffering in a fiery inferno—but also as a museological intervention, as when her project facilitated the trip of Community Museum director Don Genaro to Colombres, Spain, during 2012, so that he could deliver a report on Noriega's leading role in Chalco's ecological destruction, and donate a copy of the catalogue to the director of the *Archivo de Indianos* and *Museo de la Emigración*. The gesture translates the emergence of water into a political act of the return of the repressed, into a historical reckoning that, as Alves observed, presented "an excellent moment for Europe to face its colonial history."¹⁹ When the project is

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18— "A Manifesto for Water," as reproduced in Alves, *The Return of a Lake*, p. 168.

19— Cited in Teobaldo Lagos, "The lake that disappears, the lake that emerges: *The return of the Lake* by Maria Thereza Alves," (18 September 2013), <http://www.a-desk.org/highlights/The-lake-that-disappears-the-lake.html>. In this regard, Alves is part of a movement of artists, including Jimmie Durham, whose work investigates the colonial legacy; I examine a younger generation of

exhibited at the *Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo* (MUAC) in Mexico City in 2014, it will offer an additional excellent moment for the capital to reconsider the destructive terms of its environmental and political present, and, with hope, find ways to support initiatives like that in Chalco that offer a sustainable way forward.

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European artists who have recently done this in my book *Return to the Postcolony: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013).

