



# COMMUNITIES AND MUSEUMS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

SHARED HISTORIES AND CLIMATE ACTION

EDITED BY KAREN BROWN,  
ALISSANDRA CUMMINS AND  
ANA S. GONZÁLEZ RUEDA

# COMMUNITIES AND MUSEUMS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

*Communities and Museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* brings together innovative, multidisciplinary perspectives on contemporary museology and participatory museum practice that contribute to wider debates on museum communities, heritage and sustainability.

Set within the context of globalisation and decolonisation, this book draws upon bi-regional research that will enrich our understanding of the complex relationships between Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean through museum studies and practice. Chapters reflect upon the role of museums in defining community identities; the importance of young people's participation and intergenerational work for sustainability; the role of museums in local development; and community-based museums and climate change. Contributors examine these issues through the lens of museum partnerships and practices, as well as testing the continued relevance of the notion of 'integral museum' and its relatives in the form of ecomuseums. With its focus on regional museums in Latin America and Caribbean, this book highlights how the case studies promote greater intercultural dialogue, global understanding and social cohesion. It also demonstrates how the methodology can be adapted to other communities who are facing the perils of climate change and unsustainable forms of development.

*Communities and Museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* proposes creative and sustainable strategies relevant to a globalised future. With its focus on global societal challenges, this book will appeal to museologists and museum practitioners, as well as those working in heritage studies, cultural studies, memory studies, art history, gender studies and sustainable development.

**Karen Brown** is Professor of Art History at the University of St Andrews, UK.

**Alissandra Cummins** is Director of the Barbados Museum & Historical Society, and lecturer and coordinator in museum and heritage studies at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill.

**Ana S. González Rueda** is a researcher focused on critical approaches to learning in contemporary art curation.



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

## ICOM Advances in Museum Research

This research series, developed by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), draws on the expertise of ICOM's worldwide network of museum professionals, representing a range of museum- and heritage-related disciplines.

Bridging theory and practice, the series addresses diverse issues of broad interest to the museum field and is of relevance for institutions around the world, featuring contributions by representatives of a range of cultures. Focusing on different types of museums and diverse fields of activity within the museum, the titles in the series will provide useful and thought-provoking insights for today's museum professionals. Its multi-perspective approach ensures its relevancy for academics, researchers and students of museology. The behind-the-scenes glimpses offered into the state of the field will also appeal to the general museum-going public.

The following list includes only the most recent titles to publish within the series. A list of the full catalogue of titles is available at: <https://www.routledge.com/ICOM-Advances-in-Museum-Research/book-series/ICOMAMR>.

### **The Future of Natural History Museums**

*Edited by Eric Dorfman*

### **Communities and Museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Shared Histories and Climate Action

*Edited by Karen Brown, Alissandra Cummins, and Ana S. González Rueda*

# COMMUNITIES AND MUSEUMS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

Shared Histories and Climate Action

*Edited by  
Karen Brown, Alissandra Cummins, and  
Ana S. González Rueda*

Designed cover image: Heritage Identity Workshop at the Túcume Site Museum. © Luis Repetto Málaga

First published 2024

by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2024 selection and editorial matter, Karen Brown, Alissandra Cummins, and Ana S. González Rueda; individual chapters, the contributors

The right of Karen Brown, Alissandra Cummins, and Ana S. González Rueda to be identified as the authors of the editorial material, and of the authors for their individual chapters, has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

The Open Access version of this book, available at <http://www.taylorfrancis.com>, has been made available under a Creative Commons [Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives (CC-BY-NC-ND)] 4.0 license.

Funded by International Council of Museums (ICOM).

*Trademark notice:* Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-032-29127-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-28841-3 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-28813-8 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003288138

Typeset in Times New Roman

by codeMantra

# CONTENTS

<i>List of figures and tables</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>List of contributors</i>	<i>xvii</i>
<i>Preface by Alissandra Cummins</i>	<i>xxiii</i>
<i>Funding Acknowledgement</i>	<i>xxvii</i>
Introduction: museum communities/community museums <i>Karen Brown</i>	1
<b>PART I</b>	
<b>Community museums: nurturing identities and resilience</b>	<b>21</b>
1 Community museums and decolonisation: reflections from the Network of Community Museums of America <i>Teresa Morales Lersch and Cuauhtémoc Camarena Ocampo</i>	23
2 International collaboration between ecomuseums and community museums: the experience of the EU-LAC Museums Bi-Regional Youth Exchange in fostering identity, building community sustainability and resilience <i>Karen Brown and Jamie Allan Brown</i>	37



3	Passion as a mobilising tool for community-based museums: case studies from southern Chile <i>Karin Weil, Bárbara Elmúdesi Krögh, Laura Fúquene Giraldo and Javiera Errázuriz Contreras</i>	52
4	Museums and community engagement in Belize: case studies for protection and active participation of knowledge <i>Sherilyne Jones</i>	72
5	The EU-LAC Museums project and community-based museums <i>Karen Brown, Marie Claverie and Karin Weil</i>	88
6	Museums as tools for sustainable community development: a study of four archaeological museums in northern Peru <i>Luis Repetto Málaga and Karen Brown</i>	116
7	Connecting museums through citizen science: Jamaica/US partnership in environmental preservation <i>Tracy Commock and Dionne Newell</i>	137
8	Evoking wonder to inspire action around climate change—a collaborative exhibition project in the Cayman Islands <i>Natalie Urquhart</i>	160
<b>PART II</b>		
<b>Connecting regions: communities and museums co-curating heritage and memory</b>		<b>175</b>
9	The case for a rhizomatic research approach in Caribbean museology <i>Natalie McGuire</i>	177
10	Co-curating memory: deconstructing the silences around Caribbean migration to Britain <i>Kaye Hall and Natalie McGuire</i>	198

- 11 A case study of community virtual museums in the age of crisis: designing a Virtual Museum of Caribbean Migration and Memory 221  
*Catherine Anne Cassidy, Alan Miller and Alissandra Cummins*
- 12 Ecomuseology in artistic practice: postcolonial strategies of collective return in Latin America and the Caribbean 245  
*Kate Keohane*
- 13 Exhibition-making as storytelling: the 14th FEMSA Biennial in Michoacán Mexico 266  
*Ana S. González Rueda and David A. J. Murrieta Flores*
- 14 The *Arrivants* exhibition: art, migration, museums and resurrections 292  
*Allison Thompson*
- 15 The politics of change: new pedagogical approaches to Caribbean museology, conservation and curatorship 313  
*Alissandra Cummins and Anne Bancroft*
- Index* 343



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

# 13

## EXHIBITION-MAKING AS STORYTELLING

### The 14th FEMSA Biennial in Michoacán Mexico

*Ana S. González Rueda and David A. J. Murrieta Flores*

In her manifesto *How to Make Art at the End of the World*, artist Natalie Loveless (2019, p. 21) reflects on using Thomas King's *The Truth About Stories* in her teaching to conceive of stories as 'material-semiotic events that configure worlds' and affect how we see the world and act within it:

Stories are wondrous in their capacity to reorganize our approaches to our social material worlds; they are dangerous for their capacity to produce themselves as compelling objects of belief [...] the telling of stories is a political performative. A world-making, knowledge-making practice.

*(Loveless, 2019, p. 21)*

Loveless (2019, p. 21) stresses the need to think about the stories '*we are crafted out of*' as well as which we participate in crafting'. This chapter investigates Mexican modern and contemporary art's implication in both national history and the stories that challenge and unsettle established narratives. It concentrates on the decentralising curatorial proposition of *Inestimable azar* ('Inestimable chance'), the 14th Fomento Económico Mexicano S.A.B. de C.V.(FEMSA) Biennial (February 2020–February 2021), based in the Mexican state of Michoacán and directed by Daniel Garza Usabiaga. The biennial's exhibition programme centred on a series of 'museological interventions', such as site-specific commissions that responded to the cultural heritage of the venues—especially various understudied mural paintings from the 1930s and 1940s in the cities of Morelia and Pátzcuaro (Biental FEMSA, n.d.). We approach the interaction between the biennial and the venues' murals through storytelling to address the kinds of worlds and knowledges it constructed. Our analysis engages with the wider call for a postcolonial reinvention of the museum (Chambers et al., 2014; Simpson, 2001; Von Oswald and

Tinius, 2020). Introducing her volume on museums and indigenous perspectives, historian Susan Sleeper-Smith (2009, p. 2) considers museums as powerful rhetorical devices intentionally built to tell stories and maintains that the public museum became the site for ‘official and formal versions of the past’. Traditionally, the history told by objects and their curatorial and interpretive contextualisation followed an evolutionary narrative that contrasted the ‘primitiveness’ of indigenous cultures with the ‘progress’ of Western societies, a story that served to justify the violent colonial imposition of ‘civilised order’ across the world (Sleeper-Smith, 2009, p. 2). Sleeper-Smith (2009, p. 4) underlines indigenous peoples’ demands to ‘deconstruct the colonization narrative from the viewpoint of the oppressed [and introduce] a multiplicity of voices, a variety of narratives, and the use of museums as tools of revitalization’. In this case, the biennial introduced a collaborative framework that sought to facilitate the participation of Michoacán’s indigenous communities.

The FEMSA Biennial was founded in 1992. Its eighth edition introduced a new itinerant format that aims to engage with the local heritage and artistic production of the host state (Bienal FEMSA, n.d.). Funded by the FEMSA Foundation, the biennial is part of a more extensive cultural programme through which the multinational corporation professes its commitment to support the sustainable development of the communities where it operates (FEMSA Foundation, 2021).<sup>1</sup> Philosopher and political theorist Oliver Marchart (2014, p. 264) has argued that biennials from the periphery contribute to the decentring of the West, especially regarding issues ‘around the legitimacy and status of non-Western art’. He observes that, while biennials are often instrumental in enhancing the public impression of a particular city and are an asset to the tourist industry, they crucially assist in ‘constructing local, national and continental identities’ (Marchart, 2014, p. 264). Marchart cites the 1989 Havana Biennial as a key reference that introduced a model less focused on spectacle and more concerned with a specific discursive interest. Its theme, ‘Tradition and Contemporaneity’, addressed ‘anticolonial politics and non-Western modernities’ (Marchart, 2014, p. 271). The 1989 Havana Biennial also posited the now widely accepted idea that biennials should interact with their host locations and not, as Marchart (2014, p. 273) describes, ‘simply descend like a UFO’. This landmark exhibition anticipated the current curatorial interest in participatory and critical education strategies. For Marchart (2014, p. 273), the idea of decentring biennials refers to an effort ‘to shift the canon and to open the field for dissident practices and discourses’.

The widespread influence of the 1989 Havana Biennial is evident in the case of *Inestimable azar*, particularly in its decentralising, discursive approach and interest in collaborating with local, indigenous craft makers. However, art and cultural theorist Panos Kompatsiaris (2020) underlines the ambivalences of contemporary art biennials as proclaimed sites of resistance that ultimately rely on the dominant neoliberal order they seek to contest. In this sense, it is important to consider that FEMSA, the biennial’s sponsor, is a multinational corporation, owner of

the world's largest Coca-Cola bottling franchise and the largest convenience store chain in Mexico. Over the years, it has been the target of criticism for its appropriation of public resources such as water, often to the detriment of indigenous communities (Pearson, 2017; Franco, 2020); its consistent opposition to public policies that address health issues from which it profits (De Alba, 2020); its hostile labour practices across the country (Lobo, 2019) and the extensive environmental impact of its operations (Peredo, 2011, 2015). To make matters worse, FEMSA's extractivism has often been abetted and protected by the Mexican government (see Ramírez Miranda, Cruz Altamirano and Marcial Cerqueda, 2015; Pacheco-Vega, 2015). It is crucial, then, to consider how the biennial worked within the local heritage sites and arts scene, reflecting wider cultural struggles about identity where the state is no longer the dominant actor.

The role of the 14th FEMSA Biennial is particularly significant considering the dire state of cultural institutions in Mexico at the time of writing. The government, led by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has chosen to concentrate on a single mega-project: 'Chapultepec Park: Nature and Culture', directed by renowned artist Gabriel Orozco, which took 12 per cent of the federal culture budget for 2020 with a total estimated cost of £368 million (Cepeda, 2020). In light of budget cuts to culture in the public sector and concomitant mass layoffs, critics have pointed to the project's reinforcement of a central site in a wealthy area, while peripheral institutions struggle to survive the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government's attention to this single enterprise demonstrates its adherence to neoliberal logic: the grand scheme serves as a distraction from the deep-seated issues and prevalent precarity within the cultural sector (Cepeda, 2020).

This chapter considers the critical agency of the 14th FEMSA Biennial and its intervention in museum knowledge production processes at a moment of crisis. We begin by considering the biennial's curatorial proposition: the setting up of a dialogue between contemporary art and Michoacán's local heritage, an encounter that was conceived as a historiographical revision that might challenge official national history. The second section provides a historical contextualisation of the post-Revolutionary, state-led cultural and educational campaign in Mexico during the first half of the 20th century. In particular, we examine the didactic role of muralism, as well as the redefinition of crafts within the narrative of modernisation. The third section concentrates on the biennial's re-reading of the local modernist heritage, especially regarding issues of Mexican identity. As an example of the biennial's storytelling, we discuss Graciela Speranza's participation in the public programme and her analysis of Juan O'Gorman's mural *Historia de Michoacán* (1942). Finally, we present two of the artistic commissions and their different approaches to local craft: Marco Rountree's imaginative rethinking of modernist aesthetics and Adela Goldbard's collaboration with Arantepacua's Communal Indigenous Council (2019–2021) on a craftivist project.

### An encounter between the modern and the contemporary

As explicitly stated by artistic director Daniel Garza Usabiaga and public programme curator Esteban King, *Inestimable azar* was intended as a platform for dialogue between the 20th-century Mexican avant-garde, whose works feature prominently in the buildings and institutions housing the biennial, and contemporary artists (Miércoles de SOMA, 2021). The title itself alludes to the complex geographical network of the avant-garde in Europe and the Americas, being a reference to the 1938 manifesto written by André Breton, Diego Rivera and Leon Trotsky, which resulted from a series of discussions held in the town of Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, that year (Tarcus, 2019). The manifesto conceived of chance encounters as a way to know the world better (or change it); the biennial's title included this reference to centre the state of Michoacán as a meeting point between local, regional, national and international cultural currents.

Acting within the discourses of the art world while also expanding into the related terrain of history and art history, the biennial's curatorial line sought to break with the unitary quality of Mexican art historiography, which has tended to homogenise the country's artistic developments through national perspectives (see Bienal FEMSA, n.d.). Its inaugural conference bore a provocative title, *Adiós historia oficial* ('Goodbye official history'), suggesting that the nationalist narrative that characterises Mexican art and education would be left behind. This claim on the history of the nation was based on an interpretation of the biennial's simultaneously local and global focus as offering an alternative to official nation-making narratives. The dialogue between the 20th-century avant-garde and contemporary artists was thus framed as an opportunity to renew the historical links between both: first, through the involvement of local artists, artisans and curators in the biennial's development, and, later, by the inclusion of international audiences in the digital instances of the programme due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The preceding iteration of the FEMSA Biennial (2018), directed by curator Willy Kautz, had already revised its structure in order to encompass activities and proposals beyond the usual exhibition-centred format. It took place in the state of Zacatecas, which has even less involvement in the contemporary Mexican art world than Michoacán. Entitled *Nunca fuimos contemporáneos* ('We were never contemporary'), Kautz's biennial integrated heterogeneous works within a programme designed to involve public spaces and institutions peripheral to the art world.<sup>2</sup> Garza Usabiaga and King's continuation and expansion of the FEMSA Biennial's possibilities two years later reflected an even greater interest in the interactions between the local and the global, positioning these as integral to an understanding of art's role in Mexican history and identity. The role of a robust pedagogical programme articulated through free conferences, workshops, networking events and academic activities continued the precedent set by the 13th Biennial in terms of knowledge production. However, where the latter's questions and critical

standpoint were related to generic concepts of modernity and contemporaneity, the 14th iteration focused on particularly Mexican approaches to history.

The staged encounter between modern and contemporary Mexican art and the biennial's production of knowledge through artistic, representational and educational means—whether presence-based or digital—reveals similar patterns to *avant-garde* muralism. The common starting point is history, and, in this sense, the re-evaluation of historical discourses usually belonging to the nation represents the primary site of struggle where the biennial inserted itself as a contender. The Mexican muralists' context, shaped by the Revolution that broke out in 1910, was thoroughly permeated by discussions about history. The murals themselves were conceived by intellectuals as part of a vast educational programme first designed in 1921 after the creation of the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (Public Education Ministry, hereafter referred to as SEP). As will be discussed below, the educational logic of muralism, which stakes a claim on historical discourse and even becomes indistinguishable from it, is the basis from which the biennial's proposals emerged. In this, they mirrored statements of a historical nature that touch upon issues of identity and nationality.

### **Muralism's teaching of national history**

The creation of the SEP in 1921 was guided by an educational ethos that transcended the more technical aims of progressive instruction and acculturation that were typical of prevailing positivist views at the end of the 19th century (see Vázquez de Knauth, 1970, p. 81). In the hands of the Revolutionary intellectual José Vasconcelos as Education Secretary, the institution's aim was social betterment and national harmony understood as a path towards the redemptive 'light' of civilisation (Garciadiego Dantan, 2015, p. 34). Vasconcelos's project had three major components: the school, the library and the arts. All were organically related in a way that is best expressed through the free textbooks created in the 1920s and distributed nationally to schools and libraries, which were illustrated by artists aligned with the values of the Revolution. Each of the three components was represented by professionals and students (teachers, librarians, artists), who were recruited by the SEP to go on 'missions' across the country to improve literacy, and for the practical education of peasants and the working class. One of Vasconcelos's ambitions was to 'decentralise culture' through the creation of arts and teaching centres even in the most geographically challenging parts of the country (Garciadiego Dantan, 2015, p. 44). Education understood in this way was part of the implementation of social justice. Harmony, under the nation's banner, was seen as the necessary end-point of the creation of Mexican citizens (Garciadiego Dantan, 2015, p. 49). Thus, nation-building became a primary concern for the Mexican system of education throughout the post-Revolutionary period, up to and beyond the Lázaro Cárdenas presidency (1934–1940), when practically all the murals that feature in the biennial were commissioned and completed.



The federal scope of the SEP meant that schools proliferated under the mantle of the state, which extended the nationalisation of the population of the Mexican territory even in places where governments previous to the Revolution had little outreach. The process involved a complex conceptualisation of Mexican identity derived from the new Revolutionary values and interpretations of history in which indigenous populations, local traditions and cosmopolitan or nationalist outlooks played crucial roles. The colonial process of ‘Mexicanising’ indigenous peoples was one of the main threads of the educational system, with various positions vying for hegemony throughout the 20th century. In the 1920s and 1930s, there were two prevailing views: the first advocated erasing indigenous identities in favour of a Mexican one centred on the figure of the *mestizo* (mixed-race person); the second sought to produce a dialectical dynamic in which indigeneity and *mestizo* identity would be synthesised into a new Mexican identity, ‘elevating’ the indigenous in the *mestizo* and the *mestizo* in the indigenous. Thus, political and educational processes became deeply intertwined, leading Mexican intellectuals of the period to conceive of education as an organic remedy to all the ailments of society. Following this model, schools would transform ‘not only the individual, but the entire social medium comprehending the entire community’ (Bruno-Jofré and Martínez Valle, 2009, p. 49). With history as the core discursive node, the homogenisation of the country (culturally, but also politically, economically and socially) as a task to be realised by educative means implied a broad array of informal pedagogical tools, such as art, public rituals and ceremonies that would engage entire communities (Bruno-Jofré and Martínez Valle, 2009, p. 49). The school would be integral to the social life of populations, and its jurisdiction would extend beyond traditional teaching facilities. Among the vehicles of nation-building were mural commissions and vast art-historical, anthropological and archaeological projects, such as the creation of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (National Institute of Anthropology and History) in 1939.

In this sense, it is significant that the SEP was the centre of both educational and cultural projects. For instance, in 1937 the Cárdenas government created the Departamento Autónomo de Prensa y Publicidad (Autonomous Department of Publicity and Press, hereafter referred to as DAPP), which was explicitly and expressly charged with propaganda matters both within and outside the country. The DAPP conceived of education as a tool of propaganda (Cruz Porchini, 2014, p. 243), and, as a result, its functions came directly into conflict with the interests of the SEP. For instance, SEP mural projects that post-Revolutionary governments understood to be crucial in the creation of a national imaginary were seen by the administrators of the DAPP as interior propaganda efforts (see Dümmer Scheel, 2018). Consequently, the DAPP began to model their posters on murals commissioned by the SEP.<sup>3</sup> The DAPP’s interpretation was made possible by the SEP’s nationalist programmes themselves, which also included posters, and which were often designed to convince the people of the benefits and rights they had—perhaps indirectly—gained from the Revolution. Nonetheless, the Cárdenas presidency

represented a culmination of the educational projects born from the Revolution. Deliberations on national identity and the historical foundations of the country were concentrated in the SEP, and the borders between history, memory and the nation became porous (Fariás Mackey, 2010, pp. 261–2). Within Cárdenas’s doctrine of a ‘socialist education’ (Bruno-Jofré and Martínez Valle, 2009, p. 48), history would be a crucial subject, used to show how Mexican society is, how it had been and how it *should* be—in other words, the role of history in socialist education would be one of socialisation (Vázquez de Knauth, 1970, p. 80; Buenfil Burgos, 2004, p. 48). This conception is similar to the muralist avant-garde’s sustained development of historical subjects as the revolutionary key to activate the Mexican masses.

The creation of the DAPP was but one instance of the Cárdenas government’s comprehensive nation-making strategy and the wide-ranging nature of its approach to education, demonstrated by its adoption of a visual communication system in which murals shared the same discursive space as propaganda due to a common historical subject matter. Turned into vehicles of education, murals proliferated across the country in SEP projects that targeted less wealthy regions outside the metropolitan centres, such as Michoacán, Veracruz, Guerrero and Sinaloa (Cruz Porchini, 2014, p. 16). Born in Michoacán and a former governor of the state (1928–1932), Cárdenas embraced regional projects and even experimented with Pátzcuaro, one of the 14th FEMSA Biennial’s seats, as a modernist tourist attraction (Jolly, 2018, loc 10.68). The realisation of Vasconcelos’s ‘decentralisation of culture’ by the Cárdenas government is well represented by its numerous mural commissions, distributed across towns and cities of the state of Michoacán, including Pátzcuaro. As suggested by art historian Jacqueline Jolly (2018, loc 7.17), the development of Pátzcuaro under Cárdenas offers ‘two competing ways of imagining the region vis-à-vis the nation crystallized’: first, that Mexico ‘was the sum of its regions, each with distinctive cultures, products, and landscapes to contribute to the national whole’; and, second, that ‘the regional could embody the national’, so that ‘the local might serve as a microcosm of the nation’. This tension is reflected by the mixed themes of mural commissions in the period, which oscillate between local, national and even international historical topics (as in Phillip Guston and Reuben Kadish’s *The struggle against terrorism*, also known as *The struggle against terror and fascism*) (see Boime, 2008). As vehicles of nation-building, murals attempted to situate Mexicans in various *present* contexts grounded upon history, moving between the local and the global.

Conceived as part of the educational system, muralism generally produced historical discourses without recourse to the conventionally text-based, academic processes of history-making. Its bases were developed throughout the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary periods by the artistic avant-garde in relation to both political and aesthetic issues that were expressed, for the most part, in representations of history. Against Romantic conceptions of the individual genius (although ultimately reaffirming them through an image of heroic participation in public life),

the muralists privileged collective work, regarding art as a public endeavour that would take place outside and beyond the art world and its established institutions (Jaimes, 2012, p. 19). They proposed a break with the conventions of looking at artworks within museums; their intent was to dissolve the limits between art and life, critiquing the existing institution of art and explicitly freeing the spectator from art world constraints and conventions, such as the exhibition space or the individualised aesthetic experience. As art historian Renato González Mello (2008, p. 15) argues, the muralists conceived of their practice as an ethical imperative, meaning that it had to act beyond artistic concerns to impact social life. Moreover, their ethos coincided with the educational project of Vasconcelos's SEP, since they also understood art as a privileged form of knowledge, even more apt than social and natural sciences, which ignored the spiritual dimensions of human existence in its path towards *illumination* (González Mello, 2008, p. 88). The murals' representations of history turned public spaces into national sites where the nation's memory and the identity of Mexicans were at stake. The murals' historical discourse, however, put the intricacies of historical processes aside, limiting its knowledge and its world-making to the nation construed as a homogeneous—or at the very least homogenising—entity.

Muralism's revolutionary origins resulted in an art *for* the masses, emphasising its public nature as the rejection of traditional art world institutions.<sup>4</sup> Its social themes highlighted historical content as a way to impact reality by interpellating viewers as Mexicans. The aesthetics and politics of murals taught viewers through visual and narrative means *what* Mexico was, *who* a Mexican was and *how* they came to be such. One of the critical elements of the educational aspect of muralism was its capacity to generate popular historical knowledge while ignoring historiographical debates. Its appeal to a strained heterogeneous identity was rooted in the 'inclusion and appropriation of a glorified and nationalized indigenous culture' (Oesterreich, 2018, p. 5). The muralists' representations of the Mexican people as the primary subject of history entailed defining who exactly said 'people' were, a process articulated around the 'elevation' of the category of popular art and its highest expression: the *artesanía* (craftwork). This view was promoted by the first Exposición de Arte Popular (Exhibition of Popular Art) in 1921, which was commissioned by President Álvaro Obregón and coincided with the SEP's creation. The category of popular art as redefined by artists and intellectuals of the period implied the transformation of everyday objects, which is to say craftworks from all over the country, into *works of art*. In other words, the heterogeneity of objects from daily life across the Mexican territory—mostly indigenous in origin—was reduced to a homogeneous category of (high, culturally acceptable) popular art that was necessarily tied to a unifying image of the nation.

Additionally, popular art was seen as a result of the revolutionary process and its path towards further emancipation. As such, it connoted a newly achieved modernity in terms comparable to the claims of the muralist avant-garde (see Subirats, 2018, p. 119). This modernity-born-from-revolution was not exclusive to the

major cultural centres of the country and could be found everywhere, including the periphery. As art historian Miriam Oesterreich (2018, p. 9) argues:

the early staging of the indigenous as representing the national and the traditional as epitomizing the modern, like the *Exhibition of Popular Arts* in 1921, can be interpreted as manifestations of the national for Mexicans themselves, as an aesthetic strategy to unify diverse social strata into a single national identity by means of cultural politics and touristic development of the provinces.

As mentioned in the previous section, the Cárdenas government actually developed many of these cultural discourses that had been first advanced—but never realised—in the 1920s, and that privileged ‘the provinces’. Alongside its mural commission projects, it founded the Museo local de artes e industrias populares (Local Museum of Popular Arts and Industries) in Pátzcuaro in 1938, which was among the first of its kind in the country.<sup>5</sup> The formation of an image of the nation that was both homogeneous and heterogeneous, *mestizo* and indigenous, suggested a complicated relationship between the country’s centres and its margins (Jolly, 2018, loc 10.73). The Cárdenas regime, in its effort to decentralise culture, essentially conceived of Mexico as the sum of its peripheries.

Through government policies in which politics and aesthetics were entangled, murals and schools went hand in hand when it came to the production of knowledge about the Mexican self and its context. While it would be difficult to claim that murals themselves *were* schools, they did perform functions that had previously been the preserve of the school environment, developing beyond the art world and considerably affecting the everyday lives of Mexicans. First, by 1934, the rate of illiteracy was very high: only one in six adults could read (Lira García, 2014, p. 132). Second, the influence of the Catholic Church in education was a threat to the state’s secularism, as well as its anchoring of the Mexican identity in revolutionary social values. In this context, the state’s expropriation and occupation of church buildings that were central to smaller cities and towns, as well as its missionary ethos of school-building, necessitated more than textual tools of education. Murals played the role of not only establishing the state’s presence within essential buildings but also teaching Mexicans about their history in a purely visual, aesthetic manner that did not need them to be able to read. Since every Mexican must visit public buildings, whether for bureaucratic or educational purposes, murals became one of the centrepieces of daily public life in the country. Considering all of the above, the history that murals taught—with very few exceptions—could be summarised as follows: first, an indigenous golden past is ruptured by the barbaric Spanish conquest, followed by three centuries of resistance and torture (often at the hands of the Church)<sup>6</sup>; then, a new libertarian rupture occurs in the form of the country’s independence (where the heroes of the motherland are born), followed by a century of struggle against foreign interventions and imperialism; the last rupture is the Revolution, when justice is done for indigenous peoples and the working

class comes into being (along with its new heroes), and whose future is bright with further emancipatory potential. This is the core of the ‘official history’ that the FEMSA Biennial explicitly rejected through new approaches to storytelling. However, it faced several difficulties in its attempt to overcome the foundations of Mexican identity with which it engaged.

### The biennial’s reinterpretation of local modernist heritage

On the one hand, the biennial’s organisers explicitly utilised terms reminiscent of the artistic avant-garde and focused on the historical connections between modern and contemporary art, such as in their proposal to create an ‘anti-manual’ about the ‘encounters and crossings between art, curating and pedagogy’ (Biel FEMSA, n.d.). Articulated around axes that include ‘realisms’, ‘artistic integrations’ between, for instance, painting and architecture created by muralists and their state patrons, and ‘traditional artistic practices’, the biennial’s curatorial approach was firmly based on modernist concerns about the relationship between art and life. As King’s statements show, the organisers sought to think of the biennial beyond the art world, conceiving of it as a space that could have an impact outside the exhibition space. It would be a place for art, as well as for knowledge exchange and community-making (Miércoles de SOMA, 2021).

On the other hand, the organisers also engaged with historical issues about Mexican identity and questions of indigeneity, cultural centralisation and the revision of the category of popular arts. In Garza Usabiaga’s words,

This year’s public programme is bringing into discussion the historiographic task of re-reading our local cultural patrimony. Due to its rich artistic history, the state of Michoacán presents interesting examples of where the local intersects with the national and the global.

*(Garzon, 2021)*

The biennial’s artistic and curatorial commissions reflect both King’s and Garza Usabiaga’s statements, promoting local curators and institutions under the international framework of the biennial, but also giving great importance to artists whose projects involved Michoacán communities through collaboration with their workshops and artisans. While some of these projects will be discussed further below, our interest at this point is to suggest that the attempted destabilisation of artistic categories, such as popular arts, and the rethinking of established narratives and historical canons mirror modernist educational approaches to the same issues.

Muralism’s elaboration of historical discourse was well supported by the Mexican post-Revolutionary state. It was used by governments throughout the 20th century to turn the country’s history into a series of static myths and images (official history). However, the muralists themselves were continually at odds with the state’s attempts to co-opt their works. Art historians and scholars such as

Subirats (2018) and Jaimes (2012) are among the most recent authors to argue that the relationship between the muralist avant-garde and the governments that would often sponsor them was not free of conflict and contradiction. This is a relevant factor when considering the likewise contradictory developments of the Mexican educational system, which involved murals, public rituals, ceremonies and traditional educational institutions. This system produced a shift in art-historical hierarchies related to artworks and popular craftsmanship; developed historical discourses that privileged the marginalised and peripheral; attempted to connect the local and the national with the international; and attempted to impact the everyday lives of Mexicans through knowledge production.

At times, the biennial's pedagogical discourse becomes indistinguishable from its modernist counterpart. Discussing the commissioned curatorial work of Erandi Dávalos in an interview with SOMA, Garza Usabiaga insisted on the biennial's role as a platform for the recognition of artisanal work, stating that the intent was to 'bring these artists out into the light' (*sacar a estos artistas a la luz*) (Miércoles de SOMA, 2021). This act of 'elevation' mirrors those made by post-Revolutionary intellectuals. It was supported by the accompanying programme's various conferences about culture during the Cárdenas period, monographic talks on Juan O'Gorman—author of *Historia de Michoacán* (History of Michoacán), one of the biennial's modernist centrepieces—and the relation between art and propaganda in the 1930s. The programme with which the event staked its historiographical claim closely followed the authoritative methods of modernist knowledge production, undertaken through a diversification (perhaps even 'regionalisation') of means: workshops, talks, events and exhibitions in public spaces across cultural centres in Michoacán that put artisans, artists and spectators in dialogue with one another about historical issues of identity and the nation. It is significant, in this sense, that both Garza Usabiaga and King are agents from the art world, like most muralists were, and that they are both from Mexico City. Additionally, all of the website's materials are in only Spanish and English (there are four indigenous languages in Michoacán alone), and the talks were delivered solely in Spanish.

What makes the biennial distinct, first, was its private, corporate origin, since it was able to enter the struggles of history-making without the burden of nation-building that characterised the educational core of the muralist avant-garde. The post-Revolutionary state saw education as a path towards modernisation and citizenship, national *illumination* and emancipation, creating a 'regionalist' aesthetic in which murals played the role of monumentalising the state's appropriation of various indigenities for identity purposes. The biennial's programmes critiqued the consequences of this process, which are especially relevant in a context where the current Mexican government, led by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has fallen back on historical appeals to unity in national identity. Thus, instead of appropriating marginalised voices in historical representations, the biennial attempted to let them speak out through its critique of official history and



by involving local communities and artisans throughout its development. Instead of knowledge driven by homogenisation, the plurality sought by the biennial produced heterogenisation and the possibility of new narratives about the local, national and international. The intention was to present Mexican identity as a site of encounter, a history in the making, instead of a settled imaginary or an immovable past. Second, then, the biennial framed its public programme in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, facilitating dialogue through its own infrastructure, no longer the state's. The state's articulations of history were not mediated conversations in which several points of view could be articulated. By contrast, the biennial promoted a view of history in which the periphery *should* have a voice, amplified through the private and global nature of its own structure, and best seen in the artistic commissions. In this regard, it is important to mention that the López Obrador government, self-proclaimed as leftist and thus supposedly committed to further representation of the country's peripheries, has so far mostly reproduced the strategies of appropriation that characterised nationalist discourses throughout the 20th century. The government has even made itself a protagonist in Mexican history in a process it has called 'the fourth transformation' (an allusion to what it considers to be Mexico's epoch-building historical events), offering its own interpretation of its place in official history. Furthermore, its claims to having single-handedly ended the neoliberal fragmentation of cultural institutions is hardly a reality; the biennial, in this context, only reaffirmed the market's incisive participation in struggles over historical discourses.

During her lecture for the biennial's public programme, Argentine critic Graciela Speranza (XIV Bienal FEMSA, 2020) presented a detailed reading of O'Gorman's mural, *Historia de Michoacán* (1942), whose narrative follows the pattern outlined above.<sup>7</sup> At the top, O'Gorman depicted the Purépecha cosmogony and scenes of indigenous life before the conquest, including dances, rituals, violent confrontations with the Aztecs, villages, temples and pyramids. The Spanish colonisers advance at the centre of the composition, followed by evangelisation scenes and the main heroic characters of the Mexican Independence and Revolution struggles. Speranza observed that while the mural synthesises centuries of history, O'Gorman has attended to every detail: each water ripple, each feather on the Purépecha headpieces, the manes of the conquerors' horses, the thread of a fishing net, the ribbon bows tying a weaver's braids, the folds on José María Morelos's headscarf and so on. Speranza argued that, through these details, the artist achieved 'a referential illusion, an effect of reality that vivifies the history lesson' (XIV Bienal FEMSA, 2020). However, she noted that O'Gorman also resorted to surreal figures for the darkest moments of the story. The mummy at the centre and the hand-headed monster with serpent arms at the right anticipate the artist's post-apocalyptic later work. O'Gorman completed the lesson with his didactic use of text. A dog carries a sign with an ironic commentary: '*conque así es la famosa civilización humana*' ('so this is the famous human civilisation'). At the bottom left, the artist's self-portrait holds a written statement that refers to the resistance of the oppressed peoples and their

latent strength, which will someday produce extraordinary art and culture ‘like a gigantic erupting volcano’. In alignment with the biennial’s curatorial premise, Speranza’s analysis of O’Gorman’s realist, surrealist and didactic storytelling strategies offered a historiographical revision, a retelling.

By considering how we might look at the mural today, Speranza’s lecture also contributed to the biennial’s intention to draw connections between the modern and the contemporary. Her talk compared the ‘excess’ of muralist figuration with the digital overload of the 21st century. For instance, she discussed Trevor Paglen’s *From ‘Apple’ to ‘Anomaly’ (Pictures and Labels)* (2019–2020), a mosaic of thousands of images that problematises machine-learned categories. Speranza also mentioned Carlos Huffman’s painting *El Juegador* (2013) and its meticulous depiction of realist and surrealist figures: the fern leaves among the cables, techno-garbage, old printers and routers that allude to a dystopian future. She drew further connections between O’Gorman’s late, post-apocalyptic, ‘anti-architectural’ work and contemporary artists’ responses to the Anthropocene, such as Adrián Villar Rojas’s monumental, futuristic, clay and cement ruins in *The Murderer of Your Heritage*, the 2011 Argentine pavilion at the Venice Biennale and Pierre Huyghe’s *After ALife Ahead* (2017), an evolving ecosystem installed in an abandoned ice rink that brought together organic, inorganic and augmented reality components. In this sense, she presented O’Gorman’s surrealist visions as prophetic.

Most importantly, Speranza reflected on the non-anthropocentric Purépecha worldview and the blurring of the boundaries between humans and animals suggested by the masks portrayed in the mural. For the critic, these scenes suggest a more equitable relationship with nature. Her most compelling insight, which offered a radical reinterpretation of the mural, is borrowed from philosopher Déborah Danowski and anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2017, p. 104):

indigenous people have something to teach us when it comes to apocalypses, losses of the world, demographic catastrophes, and ends of History [...]: for the native people of the Americas, *the end of the world already happened* – five centuries ago. To be exact, it began on October 12, 1492.

While their thinking informs Speranza’s rediscovery of O’Gorman’s mural, it can also assist our analysis of the rest of the biennial, especially at the time of the COVID-19 crisis. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro argue that the American genocide of the 16th and 17th centuries has been the largest demographic catastrophe in history, even taking into account the current and future threats of nuclear war and global warming. They observe that survivors found themselves as ‘*humans without world* [...]’. They carried on in *another world*, a world of others, their invaders and overlords’ (pp. 105–6). In what follows, we discuss two of the biennial’s artistic commissions and examine how exhibitions may investigate and present ‘the many worlds in the World’ (p. 120).



## Contemporary art and craft retellings

### Marco Rountree

Marco Rountree's untitled installation drew from local heritage to investigate progressive historical narratives and trouble the notion of a national modernist aesthetic. The dogs from O'Gorman's mural reappear in clay as one of three components. Rountree commissioned local craftsman, Juan Carlos Marín, to reproduce them life-sized, in the same colours and positions as the mural: one is standing and the other is sitting holding the sign with its mouth. Detached from the context of the painting, their unimpressed, sceptical remark 'so this is the famous human civilisation' is open to new interpretations. The artist also had four wooden columns with fish motifs carved locally. These reference the *troje*, the region's traditional housing which consists of various structures surrounding an *ekuario*, a central area demarcated by greenery, low walls and different units that constitute the interior living space of extended families. Spatially, the *troje* is formed by a square or rectangular room, a raised platform used to store corn and seeds and a porch at the front with decorated wooden columns (Ettinger, 2015, pp. 71–2). Finally, Rountree's installation includes a mural made of colourful seeds, another reference to



FIGURE 13.1 Marco Rountree, *Untitled* (2020). Wood, ceramic and seeds. Installation detail. 14th FEMSA Biennial, Centro Cultural Clavijero, Morelia, Mexico. Courtesy of the artist.

the *troje*. However, the mural was also inspired by a common craft activity for children in Mexico (Rountree, 2021). Most people who grew up in Mexico remember arranging shapes with beans and pasting them on paper. Rountree's sculptures, columns and murals revisit a fundamental principle of modern art and architecture in Mexico, and one of the biennial's central lines of research: the integration of the visual arts. The artist has developed an imaginative approach to Mexican modernism, as seen in previous works, such as *Xitle Volcano School of Sciences and Artisanry* (2019), a series of interventions of the Museo Anahuacalli, built by Diego Rivera to house his collection of pre-Hispanic figurines and opened posthumously in 1964 (Museo Anahuacalli, n.d.).

Both Rountree's project at Anahuacalli and his installation at the biennial reveal his interest in artist Adolfo Best Maugard's drawing teaching method which, according to art historian and curator Karen Cordero Reiman (2010, p. 45), was formulated to create decorative images 'endowed with a Mexican national character'. Cordero observes that the state endorsed Best Maugard's method as part of its cultural programme and school curriculum in the early 1920s. His method proposed a basic vocabulary for a national art, based on elements allegedly taken from pre-Hispanic art. Best Maugard put forward seven primary elements found in



FIGURE 13.2 Marco Rountree, *Untitled* (2020). Wood, ceramic and seeds. Installation detail. 14th FEMSA Biennial, Centro Cultural Clavijero, Morelia, Mexico. Courtesy of the artist.

different combinations across the ‘primitive’ art of all nations: the spiral, the circle, the half circle, the S motif, the curved line, the zig-zag line and the straight line (Cordero Reiman, 2010). Rountree’s mural starts from this basis; there are water drops, a pot of flowers, a fish, a snake, and a tree and its roots, all highly schematised. The tree’s trunk and branches are made up of straight lines of black beans; more colours are used for the blooms represented in circles. The roots below are also drawn in straight lines, mostly in white and pink. A snake surrounding an arch on the wall is mainly drawn using a zig-zag line, and Rountree has even left some free-floating spirals. During our conversation, the artist emphasised the importance of the line in his work (Rountree, 2021). His reference to Best Maugard is particularly telling in the context of the biennial. Cordero Reiman underlines the significant influence of the method in introducing and popularising modernist aesthetics in Mexico. She notes that it encouraged the adoption of rural material culture as a model rather than a subject of contemporary painting. It provoked a generational shift towards a more abstract use of line and colour, reinforced the compositional role of drawing in the canvas and extended the stylisation of figurative motifs. According to Cordero Reiman (2010, p. 55), Best Maugard was driven by the need to produce a national art ‘on a grassroots level’, as part of the public education programme. Together with the columns which stand for the local, traditional way of life and O’Gorman’s dogs, which are unconvinced of the enlightening narrative, Rountree’s seed mural interrogates the nation-building, unifying didacticism of avant-garde muralism, making space for other stories.

The installation invites renewed scrutiny of the ‘modernism of *artesanía*’ (Montgomery, 2014, p. 233). Art historian Harper Montgomery (2014, p. 235) has problematised the post-Revolutionary conception of indigenous artisans as ‘natural, innate creators’ integral to Mexico’s modernisation. Her study delves into the conflicting discourses surrounding popular art. She notes that before crafts were commercialised, they were displayed as a resilient system of production resistant to capitalist markets. Montgomery pays particular attention to Dr Atl’s commentary on the volume accompanying the 1921 *Exposición de Arte Popular*. There, the artist considered the popular market as a ‘site of socialist integration’ that demonstrated communal self-reliance and sustainability as an alternative social and economic system, which was resistant to US industrialisation (Montgomery, 2014, p. 240). Dr Atl’s ideological reflections emphasised the rural communities’ connection to the land, based on the traditional standing of minerals, earth and clay as communal property in Mexico. However, Montgomery draws attention to the more problematic implications of Dr Atl’s vision: the idea that indigenous labour was driven by an instinctive, creative drive rooted in ‘race’, and his notion of *habilidad manual indígena* (indigenous manual skill) as the basis of a mythical work ethic. These informed immigration policy and discourse that posited Mexican labourers as exceptionally skilled and an asset to the US economy. Accordingly, Montgomery notes the contrast during the 1930s between the Mexicans crossing the border to work in the US, and the US citizens travelling to Mexico to vacation.

In this context, crafts played a significant part in supporting tourism and presenting Mexico as a colourful, peaceful and non-industrial retreat. Montgomery reflects on the ‘deeply problematic myth of the Mexican as a “naturally” able worker’ (2014, p. 247). For all the utopian values embedded in *artes populares*, however, artisans remain vulnerable to the forces of globalisation, especially considering the increased privatisation of cultural tourism in Mexico, in which the biennial is implicated (see Coffey, 2010). We must underline at this point the paradoxical role of biennials as both critical agents and sites of spectacle, and the political ambiguity that legitimises these events within global neoliberal culture (Green and Gardner, 2016; Kompatsiaris, 2017). In this case, Rountree’s installation made a subversive historiographic intervention by offering an alternative retelling. At the same time, the biennial’s emphasis on crafts as representative of resilient, anti-capitalist ways of life provided a unique selling point, even if visits were hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic’s travel restrictions.

### ***Arantepacua’s Communal Indigenous Council 2019–2021 and Adela Goldbard***

In contrast to Rountree’s more conceptual, individual approach, Adela Goldbard chose to collaborate with the Purépecha community of Arantepacua on a craftivist project. The co-authored installation centred on the events of 5 April 2017, when more than 300 members of the Michoacán police and army forces suppressed and attacked the community using police cars, trucks, helicopters and a ‘rhinoceros’ armoured tank. Four community members were killed and another nine were detained (Goldbard, 2021). The previous day, a delegation from Arantepacua had attended a meeting with officials in Morelia (the state’s capital) to discuss a land ownership issue with the neighbouring village of Capácuaro. Far from being resolved, the conflict escalated, and the Arantepacua community organised a protest, including road blockages, which prompted the police operation (Ureste, 2020). After the traumatic event, the community decided to reject and effectively expel political parties and the local police. They sought justice by exercising their right to self-determination as an indigenous community (United Nations General Assembly, 2007; Aparicio Wilhelmi, 2009). For instance, they established a communal patrol called *kuaricha* and formed a horizontally structured communal council made up of four women and four men, which acts as the local authority (Ureste, 2020). The state of Michoacán officially recognised their decision to self-govern in 2018. The neighbouring communities of Comachuén, Sevina and Nahuatzén are also struggling to reclaim their right to self-determination and resist impoverishment, political persecution, harassment and criminalisation. Arantepacua continues to demand that those responsible for the 5 April operation are brought to justice (Ureste, 2020).

Goldbard (2021) first approached Arantepacua’s Communal Indigenous Council and met with a relative of one of the victims. The artist recalls that during these initial meetings they ‘discussed the importance of making their struggle visible

through collaborative and creative work' in opposition to the dominant official narratives, and in support of their legal fight for justice. Her proposal involved a *trueque de saberes* (exchange of knowledges) with other nearby communities, based on an understanding of traditional craft and first-hand narratives as forms of resistance. As the central component, Goldbard (2021) proposed the fabrication and destruction of a real-scale papier-mâché rhinoceros, which was later commissioned in Cherán. Schoolteacher, Juana Morales, suggested the addition of cross-stitched embroideries made by craftswomen from Arantepacua and Turícuaro. The embroideries were based on photographs and video stills sourced from the council's archive and Auani Pascual's documentation. Three hundred clay *diablitos* (little devils) and over 70 wooden police cars, trucks and vans were made in Ocumicho and Pichátaro. Finally, Goldbard commissioned traditional songs known as *pirekuas* that narrate significant events for the community. An edited version of the artist's interviews with several community members was integrated into the installation at the Centro Cultural Clavijero (Clavijero Cultural Centre) in Morelia. These interviews were essential to the artist as first-hand accounts from the community.

Goldbard (2021) stressed that every decision was made in agreement with the council as the local authority. She reflects that the process was not easy; trust was gradually built through dialogue, and short- and long-term goals negotiated, including several commitments on her side, such as facilitating workshops for children and showing the installation in Tijuana and Chicago (which have large Purépecha populations). Council members, Juana Morales and Valentín Jimenez, acted as co-producers, facilitating the collaboration among neighbouring communities and initiating the *trueque de saberes*. Scholar Mary Loveday-Edwards suggests that, in this kind of approach, the artist assumes the role of 'co-learner, facilitator, [or] social transformer' (cited in Robertson and Vinebaum, 2016, p. 6). Goldbard (2021) sees herself 'as a weaver, a producer and a catalyst'. Her role consisted of 'intertwining' the shared narratives and bringing various components together. Ultimately, she aimed to 'reconstruct and preserve the collective memory of Arantepacua [...] and purge some of the harm inflicted on the community by the bloody events of April 5th, 2017' (Goldbard, 2021). In this regard, the project raises questions regarding authorship and a potentially uneven collaborative relationship between the artist and the community. In some respects, Goldbard's contemporary approach reproduces the modernists' intention to preserve endangered indigenous cultures. At the same time, however, the community members involved also recognised the value of the project for their own purposes.

Artist, critic and curator Nicole Burisch (2016) has examined the recent attention to craft within politically engaged, collaborative and performative projects. She notes that, in these cases, the centrality of the crafted object shifts to become a record, a prop or a tool, and sometimes the object disappears completely. Considering that performance art's transition from objects to actions has been historically interpreted as a political stance against commodification, Burisch (2016, p. 59) argues that the

analysis of dematerialised craft practices must attend to ‘the role of gestures, actions, and encounters’. As the central component of Goldbard’s *Kurhirani no ambakiti*, the life-size rhinoceros stood in for the police’s armoured tank, embodying the harm inflicted on the community (Goldbard, 2021). On 4 December 2020, the effigy was carried in a procession that followed the same route as the yearly remembrance procession for the victims of the 5 April raid. The papier-mâché rhinoceros arrived at Arantepacua’s central square to be burnt and destroyed with fireworks, while local musicians performed the commissioned *pirekuas* that narrated the events of 2017 and the community’s subsequent struggle for self-governance (Goldbard, 2021). The rhinoceros’s head was cut and displayed as a trophy at the exhibition. According to Goldbard (2021), ‘the aesthetic violence of this action [was] intended as a purging’. It sought to destabilise the politics of memory, dismantle ‘oppressor/oppressed’ dichotomies and assist in healing collective trauma. The artist reflected that the project’s title, translated as ‘burning the devil: since that’s the only way they listen to us’ suggests that violence is sometimes the only means left for oppressed populations to contest the violence inflicted on them, and that, in fact, it offers a radical approach to storytelling. While there is an undeniable gap between the performative action and its documentation, the audio conversations with community members and the video of the rhinoceros’s procession and burning, which was presented as part of the installation, offer a glimpse into the resistant potential of the project, which lies in the community’s sense of ownership over it.



FIGURE 13.3 Adela Goldbard, *Kurhirani no ambakiti* (*quemar al diablo*): *porque solo así nos escuchan* (2020). Video still. 14th FEMSA Biennial. Courtesy of the artist.



Based on the communal archive, the cross-stitched embroideries present a visual counter-account of the event. Scholar and curator Ellyn Walker (2021, pp. 303–6) has studied how diverse communities across the Americas use embroidery ‘as a site of resistance and re-imagination [...] to expose histories of gendered, colonial and state-sanctioned violence, and create models of feminist making, community-building and Indigenous resurgence’. In this case, the archival photographs and video stills became ‘pixelated’, tactile images (Goldbard, 2021). As Julia Bryan-Wilson (2017, p. 7) claims in her seminal study on art and textile politics, ‘to textile politics is to give texture to politics, to refuse easy binaries, to acknowledge complications’. Not only do the stitches ‘insist on the women’s survival’, but embroidery also supports healing and decolonising processes, demanding truth-telling and accountability (Walker, 2021, p. 308). In Goldbard’s installation, the stitched police barricades and approach, along with the community’s losses, defence and protest, present the counter-narrative that has been suppressed by the state. In this sense, the textiles perform ‘a vital act of memory work, allowing others to bear witness’ (Walker, 2021, p. 313). *Kurhirani no ambakiti* demonstrates how craft activism can support self-determination, autonomy and cultural memory, as well as their interconnections with global citizenship and justice (Black and Burisch, 2021, p. 56). In the context of the biennial, the commission’s curatorial framework encouraged and facilitated the collaborative process, allowing the Arantepacua community to craft their retelling as part of their ongoing fight for justice.

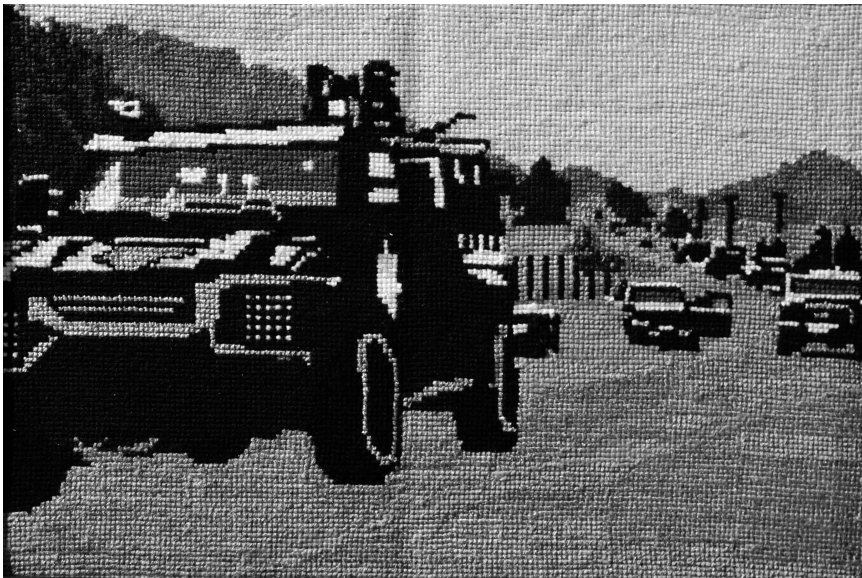


FIGURE 13.4 Adela Goldbard, *Kurhirani no ambakiti (quemar al diablo): porque solo así nos escuchan* (2020). Installation detail. 14th FEMSA Biennial. Courtesy of the artist.

The more than 300 clay *diablitos*, hand-painted with police and military uniforms, and more than 70 wooden police cars and trucks point to the excessive use of force by the Michoacán police (Goldbard, 2021). The *pirekuas*, mostly sung in Purépecha, narrate the events of 5 April, remember the deceased and praise the strength and resilience of the community (Goldbard, 2021): ‘*Arantepacua vive y seguirá viviendo; hoy se escucha su voz*’ (‘Arantepacua lives and will keep living; its voice is heard today’). Overall, the installation presents the tensions that lie in the distinction between art and craft. As Bryan-Wilson (2017, p. 6) suggests, the dynamics between ‘fine art/non-fine art [bring] to the fore extraordinarily fraught questions about race, cultural appropriation, valuation and class disparity’. However, while the line drawn between art and craft has emphasised the latter’s functionality or use-value, analysis and interpretation of art in the 21st century tends to explore the collapse of such boundaries (Bryan-Wilson, 2017, p. 13). Goldbard (2021) notes that indigenous communities’ artistic practice preserves and complicates oral memory, expresses identity and connects people to their territory, tradition and culture—all of which are urgently needed in a world in crisis. Similarly, in their introduction to *The New Politics of the Handmade*, editors Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch (2021, p. 31) stress the need for ‘re-articulating craft as a world-making and geographically specific aesthetic practice that connects to the land’. Black and Burisch reflect that while craft alone might not overturn colonial frameworks, it can offer alternative ways of knowing and imagining that contribute to



FIGURE 13.5 Adela Goldbard, *Kurhirani no ambakiti (quemar al diablo): porque solo así nos escuchan* (2020). Installation view. 14th FEMSA Biennial, Centro Cultural Clavijero, Morelia, Mexico. Courtesy of the artist.



cultural transformation. For Goldbard (2021), the biennial platform sustained some of the main aims of her project: making visible the attack of 5 April and giving voice to the community's struggle. Nevertheless, she stressed that, more than vindicating popular art, decolonising contemporary art requires moving away from its commodification, and abolishing or renewing its 'alienating and stagnant institutions' (Goldbard, 2021). Embroiled in these complex politics, the meeting between art and craft staged by Goldbard's project can be seen as what Bryan-Wilson (2017, p. 19) calls 'forms of making side by side' that offer no straightforward conclusions. These practices are best approached with a 'both-at once' or 'both/and' logic (Bryan-Wilson, 2017, p. 36): art and craft, authored and collaborative, action and object, local and global, aesthetic and political. While, during the 20th century, tradition was retrieved as part of the country's modernist project (ultimately reinforcing binary distinctions), contemporary practices concentrate on blurring their limits. In this case, by working at the seams of these boundaries, the project presents the community's claim over their history.

We have necessarily focused on only 2 out of 24 artistic commissions and 5 local exhibitions organised by the biennial. Our analysis is inevitably limited to the works that, in our view, best reflected the biennial's curatorial proposition and its emphasis on reconsidering official narratives and promoting co-creative processes of knowledge production. To briefly cite one more example, Costa Rican artist Carlos Fernández's site-specific installation *Continua despensa de saberes*—comprised of a series of ten abstract paintings and three photographs—responded to the 16th-century fresco paintings depicting botany lessons on the walls of the Old Jesuit School in Pátzcuaro.<sup>8</sup> Fernández (2021) regards his paintings as a 'live register' that incorporates graphics from the agronomy classes he teaches and the virtual dinners he hosted during lockdown, in which he performed a monologue tracing food products and capitalist trade networks. Fieldworkers, cooking processes and local markets are layered onto the canvas. As curator Gabriela Saenz observes, Fernández's work unveils traditional, more sustainable agricultural practices (Fernández, 2021). Overall, the biennial's decentralising, revisionist approach presented situated artmaking at the end of the world. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2017, p. 5) describe the Anthropocene as a 'passive present' or a present 'without a view'. We are living through a 'shared catastrophe' that we can no longer revert, which makes its mitigation more urgent (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 218). Crucially, as philosopher Bruno Latour (2017, p. 90) sustains, the events we need to cope with lie largely in the past rather than the future.

In the context of precarious cultural labour and contested narratives about Mexican identity, the 14th FEMSA Biennial offered a decentralising, revisionist perspective on the role of art in history-making. The biennial's discursive approach presented a historiographical intervention that questioned homogenising national narratives and re-examined, in particular, the concept of *artesanía* and its part in the post-Revolutionary definition of Mexican identity. Our analysis considered both the role of muralism within a larger cultural and educational programme during

the 20th century and the biennial's revision and challenge to official historical discourse. Through its public and exhibition programmes, the biennial facilitated contemporary art retellings in close collaboration with the local indigenous communities. While the corporate framework sustaining these commissions raises concerns regarding their critical and political potential, the curatorial proposition brought a crucial issue to the fore: the pressing concern about whom history speaks for and the possibility of communities crafting their counter-stories in response to their erasure. By approaching the biennial through storytelling, this chapter proposes that large-scale exhibitions may be knowledge- and world-making practices that potentially reflect the many worlds in the world.

## Notes

- 1 FEMSA Foundation works in three main areas: water sanitation and security, early childhood development and a cultural programme that promotes Latin American modern and contemporary art.
- 2 The title of the 2018 FEMSA Biennial referenced Bruno Latour's epistemological critique in *We Have Never Been Modern*, first published in French in 1991.
- 3 Another instance of friction between the SEP and the DAPP surrounding notions of propaganda was the film production programme that various post-Revolutionary governments, including that of Cárdenas, had implemented as part of their plans for education. The programme aligned with the 'Mexicanisation' project and the formation of a national imaginary, originally developed by the SEP (see Aobites and Loyo, 2010, p. 246). However, by 1938, it had been taken over by the DAPP, which understood it as less a cultural issue than one of interior propaganda in which a good amount of documentary films promoting the works of the Cárdenas administration be funded and created in a very short time (see Dümmer-Scheel, 2018, p. 294).
- 4 Despite muralism's focus on the masses, it was simultaneously for elite 'initiates', as González Mello (2008) demonstrates in his detailed reading of the masonic and occult elements of murals by Rivera and Orozco from the 1920s to the 1940s.
- 5 As the museum's website states, its purpose was to 'assert the economic and aesthetic value of products by Purépecha people' native to the state of Michoacán (INAH, 2020). The first Museo de Arte Popular in Mexico City opened in 2006.
- 6 So ingrained was this kind of reading of murals that Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish's work in Morelia about fascism and racism in the US came to be popularly known as *The Inquisition*, with its hooded figures understood as representations of Spanish Catholic torturers.
- 7 A detailed visual analysis of the mural is available from Canal Crefal (2018). *Conoce el Mural de Juan O'Gorman*. 24 October. [Online video]: [https://youtu.be/4j79zVo5f\\_o](https://youtu.be/4j79zVo5f_o)
- 8 The school was founded in 1574. It belonged to the Jesuits until 1767. It subsequently held diverse functions until around 1960, when it was abandoned. The building was restored between 1990 and 1994 and is now a dependency of Michoacán's Culture Ministry (Sistema de Información Cultural, 2017).

## References

- Aboites, L. and Loyo, E. (2010). 'La construcción del nuevo estado, 1920–1945', in Gómez Ruiz, F. (ed.) *Historia general de México ilustrada*. Mexico City: El Colegio de México, pp. 196–259.

- Aparicio Wilhelmi, M. (2009). 'La libre determinación y la autonomía de los pueblos indígenas. El caso de México', *Boletín Mexicano de Derecho Comparado*, 124, pp. 13–38. [Online]. Available at: <https://revistas.juridicas.unam.mx/index.php/derecho-comparado/article/view/4087/5262> (Accessed: 4 May 2021).
- Bienal FEMSA (n.d.). *What is the FEMSA biennial?* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.bienalfemsa.com/en/xiv-inestimable-azar/acerca-de/que-es> (Accessed: 15 March 2021).
- Black, A. and Burisch, N. (eds.) (2021). *The new politics of the handmade: craft, art and design*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Boime, A. (2008). 'Breaking open the wall: the Morelia mural of Guston, Kadish and Langsner', *The Burlington Magazine*, 150(1264), pp. 452–9. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40479800> (Accessed: 18 June 2021).
- Bruno-Jofré, R. and Martínez Valle, C. (2009). 'Ruralizando a Dewey: el amigo Americano, la colonización interna y la Escuela de la acción en el México posrevolucionario (1921–1940)', *Encuentros sobre Educación*, 10, pp. 43–64.
- Bryan-Wilson, J. (2017). *Fray: art and textile politics*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Buenfil Burgos, R.N. (2004). *Argumentación y poder: la mística de la revolución mexicana rectificada*. Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés.
- Burisch, N. (2016). 'From objects to actions and back again: the politics of dematerialized craft and performance documentation', *TEXTILE*, 14(1), pp. 54–73.
- Cepeda, G. (2020). "'Billion-peso tarp": the case of Mexico City's Chapultepec Park', *Art Review*, 27 October. [Online]. Available at: <https://artreview.com/billion-peso-tarp-the-case-of-mexico-city-chapultepec-park/> (Accessed: 15 March 2021).
- Chakrabarty, D. (2009). 'The climate of history: four theses', *Critical Inquiry*, 35(2), pp. 197–222.
- Chambers, I., De Angelis, A., Ianniciello, C., Orabona, M. and Quadraro, M. (eds.) (2014). *The postcolonial museum: the arts of memory and the pressures of history*. Reprint. London and New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Coffey, M. (2010). 'Marketing Mexico's great masters: folk art tourism and the neoliberal politics of exhibition', in Berger, D. and Wood, A.G. (eds.) *Holiday in Mexico: critical reflections on tourism and tourist encounters*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, pp. 265–94.
- Cordero Reiman, K. (2010). 'The Best Maugard drawing method: a common ground for modern Mexicanist aesthetics', *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, 26, pp. 44–79. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41432953> (Accessed: 15 March 2021).
- Cruz Porchini, D. (2014). *Proyectos culturales y visuales en México a finales del cardenismo (1937–1940)*. PhD thesis. UNAM. [Online]. Available at: <http://132.248.9.195/ptd2014/marzo/0709778/0709778.pdf> (Accessed: 22 January 2021).
- Danowski, D. and Viveiros de Castro, E. (2017). *The ends of the world*. Translated by R. Nunes. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- De Alba, J.I. (2020). 'Femsa: el negocio de la enfermedad y la cura', *Pie de Página*, 12 June. [Online]. Available at: <https://piedepagina.mx/femsa-el-negocio-de-la-enfermedad-y-la-cura/> (Accessed: 12 March 2021).
- Dümmer Scheel, S. (2018). '¿De quién es la diplomacia pública? El rol del Departamento Autónomo de Prensa y Publicidad (DAPP) en la propaganda exterior cardenista', *Estudios de Historia Moderna y Contemporánea de México*, 55, pp. 279–312.
- Ettinger, C.R. (2015). 'Perspectivas sobre la conservación de la troje purépecha. Entre la conservación ideal y la realidad', in Ojeda Dávila, L., Mijangos Díaz, E. and Mercado

- López, E. (eds.) *Cultura, sociedad y políticas públicas. Pasado y presente del patrimonio cultural en Michoacán*. Morelia: Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, pp. 69–87.
- Fariás Mackey, M.G. (2010). ‘Cárdenas, el indigenista’, in León y González, S. (ed.) *El cardenismo, 1932–1940*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, pp. 258–324.
- FEMSA Foundation (2021). *Our commitment*. [Online]. Available at: <https://femsafoundation.org/> (Accessed: 15 March 2021).
- Fernández, C. (2021). Interview by Ana S. Gonzalez Rueda [Skype], 20 January.
- Franco, L. (2020). ‘Los dueños del agua: trasnacionales acaparan reservas, mientras México avanza al temido “Día Cero”’, *Contralinea*, 6 January. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.contralinea.com.mx/archivo-revista/2020/01/06/los-duenos-del-agua-trasnacionales-acaparan-reservas-mientras-mexico-avanza-al-temido-dia-cero/> (Accessed: 11 March 2021).
- Garciadiego Dantan, J. (2015). *Autores, editoriales, instituciones y libros: estudios de historia intelectual*. Mexico City: El Colegio de México.
- Garzon, S. (2021). ‘Mexico’s FEMSA Biennial finds ways to decentre’, *Ocula Magazine*, 7 January. [Online]. Available at: <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/14th-femsa-biennial-in-mexico/> (Accessed: 21 January 2021).
- Goldbard, A. (2021). Email to Ana S. Gonzalez Rueda, 3 February.
- González Mello, R. (2008). *La máquina de pintar: Rivera, Orozco y la invención de un lenguaje*. Mexico: UNAM.
- Green, C. and Gardner A. (2016). *Biennials, triennials and documenta: the exhibitions that created contemporary art*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- INAH (2020). *Museo local de artes e industrias populares*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.inah.gob.mx/red-de-museos/299-museo-local-de-artes-e-industrias-populares-de-patzcuaro> (Accessed: 21 January 2021).
- Jaimes, H. (2012). *Filosofía del muralismo mexicano: Orozco, Rivera y Siqueiros*. Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés.
- Jolly, J. (2018). *Creating Pátzcuaro, creating Mexico: art, tourism, and nation building under Lázaro Cárdenas*. Austin: University of Texas Press. EPUB edition.
- Kompatsiaris, P. (2017). *The politics of contemporary art biennials: spectacles of critique, theory and art*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Kompatsiaris, P. (2020). ‘Curating resistances: ambivalences and potentials of contemporary art biennials’, *OnCurating*, 46, pp. 313–22. [Online]. Available at: <https://on-curating.org/issue-46.html> (Accessed: 15 March 2021).
- Latour, B. (2017). *Facing Gaia: eight lectures on the new climatic regime*. Translated by C. Porter. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Lira García, A.A. (2014). ‘La alfabetización en México: campañas y cartillas, 1921–1944’, *Traslaciones: Revista Latinoamericana de Lectura y Escritura*, 1(2), pp. 126–49.
- Lobo, A. (2019). ‘Trabajadores en huelga de la Coca-Cola se rebelan contra sindicato en Ciudad de México’, *World Socialist Web*, 28 June. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.wsws.org/es/articles/2019/06/28/coca-j28.html> (Accessed: 11 March 2021).
- Loveless, N. (2019). *How to make art at the end of the world: a manifesto for research-creation*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Marchart, O. (2014). ‘The globalization of art and the ‘Biennials of Resistance’: a history of the biennials from the periphery’, *World Art*, 4(2), pp. 263–76.
- Miércoles de SOMA (2021). *XIV Bienal FEMSA*. 14 January. [Online video]. Available at: <https://youtu.be/zAQy2ECXvnM> (Accessed: 25 January 2021).
- Montgomery, H. (2014). ‘From aesthetics to work: displaying Indian labor as modernist form in Mexico City and New York’, *Modernism / modernity*, 21(1), pp. 231–51.

- Museo Anahuacalli (n.d.). *Xitle Volcano School of Sciences and Artisanry*. [Online]. Available at: <http://museoanahuacalli.org.mx/en/xitle-volcano-school/> (Accessed: 15 March 2021).
- Oesterreich, M. (2018). 'The display of the "indigenous" – collecting and exhibiting "indigenous" artifacts in Mexico, 1920–1940', *Artelogie*, 12.
- Pacheco-Vega, R. (2015). 'Agua embotellada en México: de la privatización del suministro a la mercantilización de los recursos hídricos', *Espiral*, 22(63), pp. 221–63.
- Pearson, T. (2017). 'A US charity helps big businesses take indigenous people's water in Mexico', *Open Democracy*, 19 September. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/us-charity-helps-big-businesses-take-indigenous-peoples-water-in-me/> (Accessed: 15 March 2021).
- Peredo, X. (2011). 'Cuando te tomes una Indio recordarás esto', *Animal Político*, 17 August. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.animalpolitico.com/el-blog-de-anca/cuando-te-tomes-una-indio-recordaras-esto/> (Accessed: 11 March 2021).
- Peredo, X. (2015). 'El estadio BBVA Bancomer, monumento al despojo ambiental', *Horizontal*, 29 July. [Online]. Available at: <https://horizontal.mx/el-estadio-bbva-bancomer-monumento-al-despojo-ambiental/> (Accessed: 11 March 2021).
- Ramírez Miranda, C., Cruz Altamirano, L. and Marcial Cerqueda, V. (2015). 'Luchas por el territorio y soberanía alimentaria en el Istmo oaxaqueño, México', *Eutopía*, 8, pp. 29–44.
- Robertson, K. and Vinebaum, L. (2016). 'Crafting community', *TEXTILE*, 14(1), pp. 2–13.
- Rountree, M. (2021). Interview by Ana S. Gonzalez Rueda [Skype], 14 January.
- Simpson, M.G. (2001). *Making representations: museums in the post-colonial era*. Rev. edn. London and New York: Routledge.
- Sistema de Información Cultural (2017). *Centro Cultural Antiguo Colegio Jesuita*. [Online]. Available at: [https://sic.cultura.gob.mx/ficha.php?table=centro\\_cultural&table\\_id=259](https://sic.cultura.gob.mx/ficha.php?table=centro_cultural&table_id=259) (Accessed: 11 March 2021).
- Sleeper-Smith, S. (ed.) (2009). *Contesting knowledge: museums and indigenous perspectives*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Subirats, E. (2018). *El muralismo mexicano: mito y esclarecimiento*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Tarcus, H. (2019). 'Una voz libertaria en la medianoche del siglo: el "Manifiesto por un arte revolucionario independiente"', *Nueva Sociedad*, 283. [Online]. Available at: <https://nuso.org/articulo/una-voz-libertaria-en-la-medianoche-del-siglo/> (Accessed: 22 January 2021).
- United Nations General Assembly (2007). *United Nations declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples*. Resolution A/RES/61/295. [Online]. Available at: [https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP\\_E\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf) (Accessed: 4 May 2021).
- Ureste, M. (2020). 'Arantepacua: la comunidad indígena que expulsó a los partidos y creó su propia policía', *Animal Político*, 25 February. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2020/02/arantepacua-expulso-partidos-politicos-policia/> (Accessed: 15 March 2021).
- Vázquez de Knauth, J. (1970). *Nacionalismo y educación en México*. Mexico City: El Colegio de México.
- Von Oswald, M. and Tinius, J. (eds.) (2020). *Across anthropology: troubling colonial legacies, museums, and the curatorial*. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Walker, E. (2021). 'The sovereign stitch: rereading embroidery as a critical feminist decolonial text', in Black, A. and Burisch, N. (eds.) *The new politics of the handmade: craft, art and design*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 303–32.
- XIV Bial FEMSA (2020). *Programa público: real, surreal, virtual. De la desmesura muralista a la sobrecarga digital*. 25 November. [Online video]. Available at: <https://youtu.be/taPODqu6UqM> (Accessed: 15 March 2021).