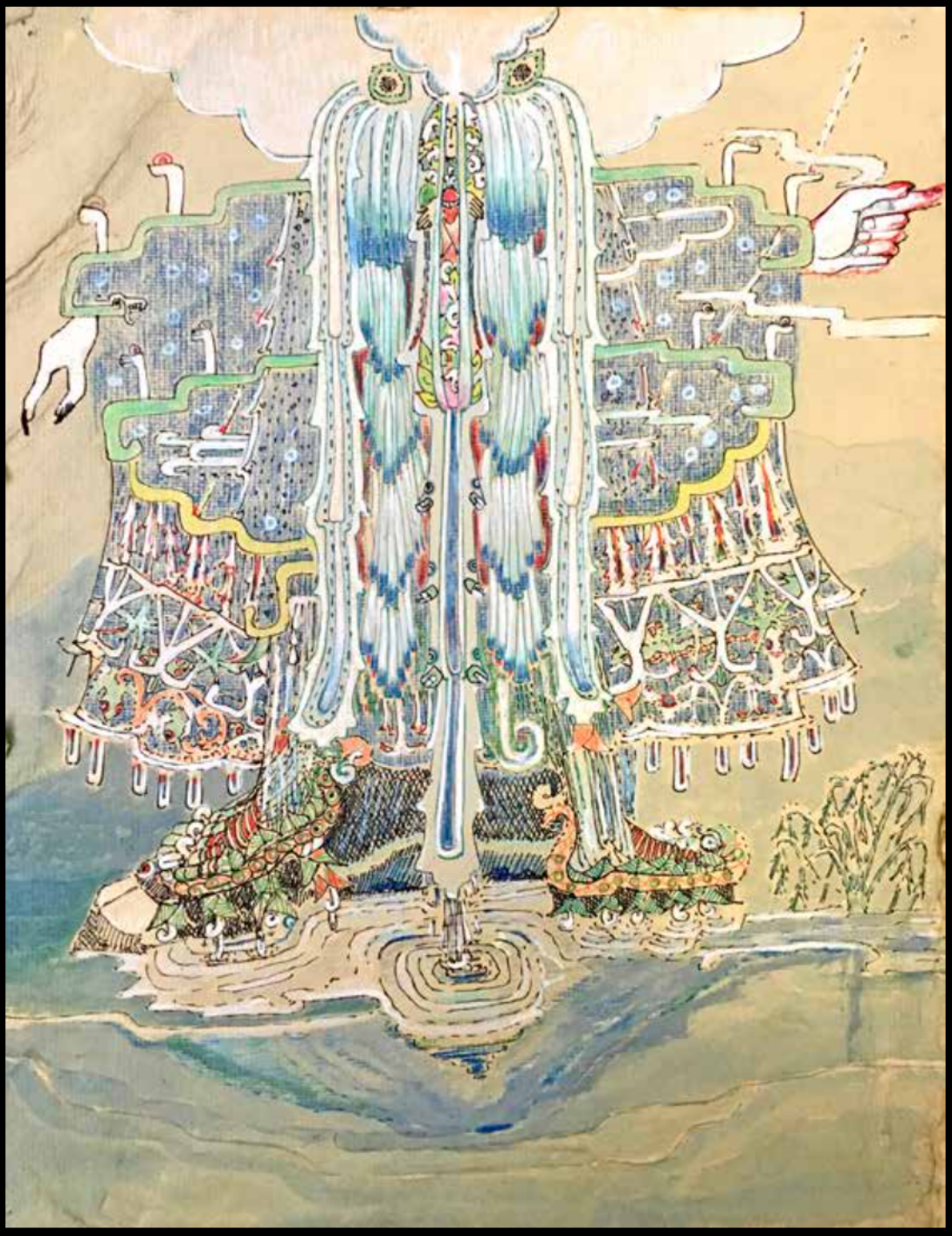


Conocimiento Callejero

CELIA HERRERA RODRIGUEZ

Conocimiento Callejero

I have always understood that entrusting the road of study and practice would finally lead me to knowing the evolving direction of my work. The deep influences of the doctors/ medicine peoples that were able to help me, turned my attention toward another understanding of my work as an artist as a spiritual and intellectual life practice. Using the word art sounds incomplete to me, although it is an old word, a western European word that signifies "skill gained from study and practice." The Nahuatl terms 'toltekatl /amantecatl/ tlahcuiloh' give more breadth to the meaning of art as an act of imagination made visible that is experienced by heart and mind. I am interested in connection to place of origin, which I feel is the homework that we as Xicanas must do on a personal, familial, and community level. The política of place brings us to the personal experience of I/we. So I am interested in what I have always described as 'following the symbols,' perhaps as the common language of our continent. I am drawn to what is left on the ground, the stones, and cave walls, the shards of our culturas embedded in the rich earth of our homelands, las huertas, our backyards, and the common spaces in our homes. This is the visual tangible language of our gente. There is much to know there. The value in getting back to the place of origin, our roots, is not about pride or idealistic notions of identity. The value resides in finding our way, and having the tenacity, to recognize what is still alive in our imaginations that moves us and shapes the continuity our culturas.

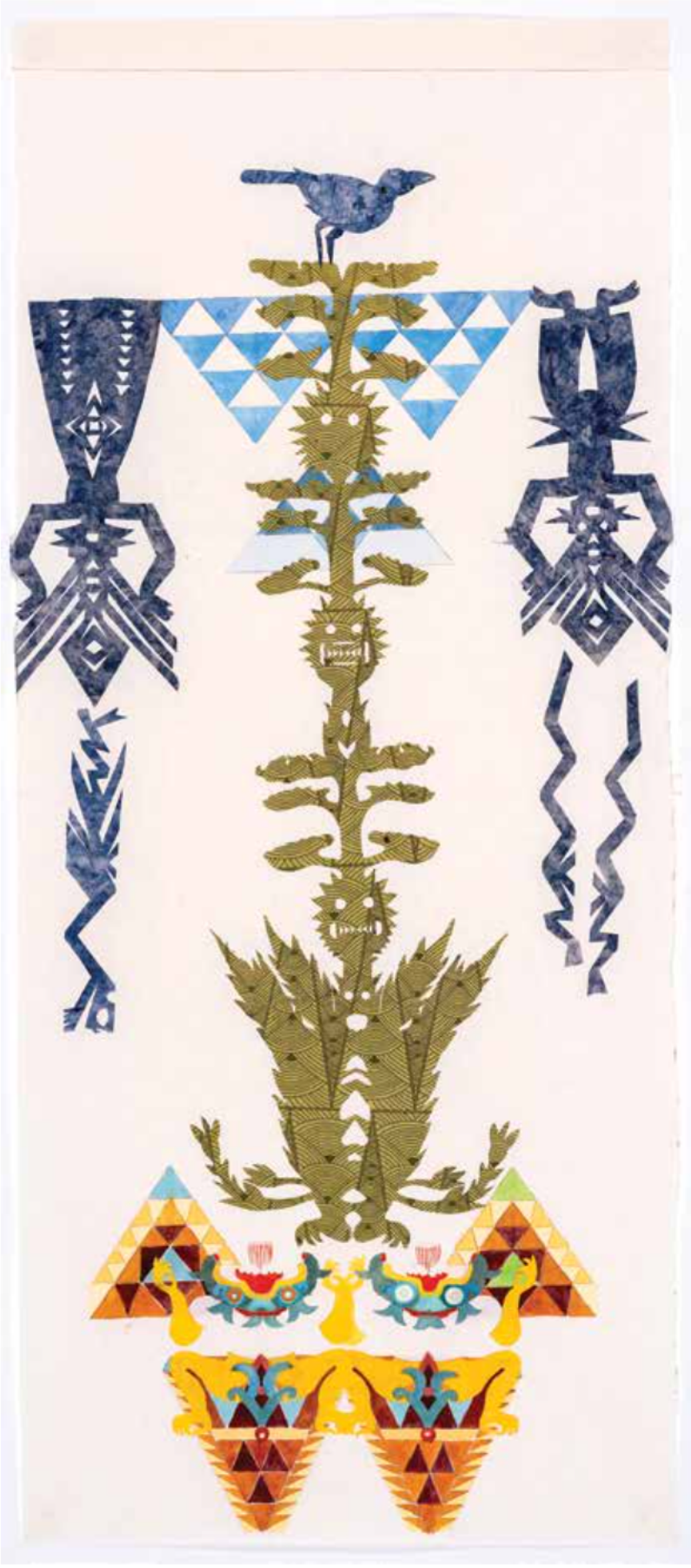
CHR (Xicana/O'dami)
2019

The Latinx Research Center, an interdisciplinary and transAmericas research center at University of California, Berkeley, is proud to host an exhibition of Celia Herrera Rodríguez' artwork. We consider art a vital social laboratory for thinking about our society and our world, for presenting alternative understandings of these, and in doing so, supporting views that are necessary to human, social, and even environmental well being. This exhibition catalog is second in an ongoing series documenting Latinx arts of the Bay Area and California, providing knowledgeable and sensitive essays regarding the same, and making available to people all over the world the cultural wealth of Latinx artists.

Laura E. Pérez,
Professor & Chair
Latinx Research Center
October 4, 2019

Conocimiento Callejero 2019

North Grasslands
2019



South Maguey
2019

East Anima de Vida
2019

West Anima de Agua
2019

Maria Esther Fernandez

ENGAGING THE SPIRIT

The Art of Celia Herrera Rodriguez and the Contemporary Art Museum

EDITED BY Lily Lucero

There is a need for more curators of color, but more importantly for a critical look at current modes of curation so that we might develop practices that mitigate this inequity within the contemporary art museum. It is in working with artists who deploy decolonial practices, such as Celia Herrera Rodríguez, that I am able to glean how museum curatorial practices perpetuate misrepresentation. Her work disrupts how the contemporary art museum exhibits, collects, and constructs the art object, requiring curators to consider new methods of interpretation that decenter colonial perspectives incorporating memory and Indigenous spiritual traditions as sources of knowledge production.

Celia Herrera Rodríguez's artistic practice is a rigorous remapping of Indigenous thought for diasporic de-tribalized Xicanx people.[1] It is a realignment of contemporary art practice with the spiritual to reframe social, historical, political, and economic narratives that have shaped identity in the social consciousness of the Xicanx community. This remapping of a more complex understanding of identity formation harnesses memory through the incorporation of traditions that are functional, serving a specific purpose, intention, and prayer. Herrera Rodríguez explains that Indigenous spiritual practices have changed over time due to the invasion of the Americas that fragmented cultures, however the materials have remained the same.[2] Her work is a "looking through the rubble" remapping Indigenous thinking that has endured.[3] Her conceptual practice explores the philosophical underpinnings of ceremonial practices through the use of objects that remained, divorcing them from their anthropological contextualization by Western institutions in an effort to elicit the thought behind their creation. This is a useful framework that can model how to unpack western constructions of Indigeneity that are embedded and perpetuated in curatorial practices.

Memory plays a key role in Herrera Rodríguez's practice. She activates objects through functional acts, such as copal smudging, harnessing embodied memory. M. Jacqui Alexander argues that practices of (re)membering are transformative spiritual labor and knowing that empowers the individual to break free from the boundaries placed upon them by institutions allowing for the creation of historically grounded and specific frameworks that are intersectional, relational, and look beyond the material to the metaphysical.[4] Her practice reaffirms Indigenous spiritual traditions presenting ceremony as a legitimate form of political resistance that provides communities a new framework with which to understand systemic oppression. While Alexander's broader application of spirit knowing is focused on the impact of the sacred on the self and their daily interaction with institutions, Laura Pérez's reading of the spiritual in Xicanx art practice

1. I define Xicanx as an identity centered on a recovery of indigenous spiritual tradition rooted in a queer, feminist framework.

2. Celia Herrera Rodríguez, interview by María Esther Fernández, November 5, 2017.

3. Rodríguez, interview by María Esther Fernández, November 5, 2017.

4. Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations of Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred,* 253-254.

implies that it has agency in redressing neocolonialism in a direct assault on capitalist institutions. Pérez explains specifically how Xicanx art "is politically and historically operative … returning to our field of vision a politically engaged spiritual consciousness."[5] She argues that capitalism and imperialism are challenged by Xicanx artists who engage with the spiritual in a restorative effort to heal historical trauma, providing a much needed intervention against cultural imperialism and its devastating effects on the individual, community and the planet.[6] This construction of the spiritual as a political framework for community underscores how Herrera Rodríguez's reconstituting of Xicanx spiritual practices within her artistic work can have the potential to disrupt contemporary art museum practice by exposing the limitations museum professionals place on alternate ways of knowing and being.

Herrera Rodríguez's artistic practice is an epistemological break from the institution that is best understood in the philosophical underpinnings that inform how she thinks of and works with the art object. Jesus Barraza explains that through the use of Indigenous aesthetics, artists are creating a "site of intervention…an indigenous understanding of site that destabilizes the history of colonialism and displacement."[7] Her creative process incorporates Indigenous ways of knowing and being that challenge the contemporary art museum's understanding of the art object and its function. In looking at this epistemological difference, we can begin to understand how the museum marginalizes/misrepresents Indigenous artistic practices. Herrera Rodríguez's practice, installation process, and resulting art object, have the potential to disrupt contemporary art museum practice because they require a new understanding of the art object and its function; which has implications on the curation and visual analysis of this work.

It is important to understand how intangible concepts like spirit and memory function as material, informing the creation of Herrera Rodríguez's art pieces. t is in their activation that the epistemic differences between her practice and the contemporary art museum are made clear. Herrera Rodríguez's practice accesses the forgotten or the unknown through ceremonial acts, which activate the mundane cultural objects that have endured/remained in the present; Cherríe Moraga describes these objects as sacred because they carry knowledge and retain memory.[8] Herrera Rodríguez's use of them in her installations activates the spirit through memory, which is a sacred act.

In allowing new ways of knowing and being to inform curatorial practice, new lines of interpretation/inquiry emerge expanding the visual landscape. It is important to understand how the spiritual is made material in artistic practice so that the visual analysis can be extended beyond the anthropological crutch often used by curators to misread this work. Curators' inability to do so is what subjects this work to narrow dialogues around authenticity and essentializing themes of race and identity that fail to present the historically grounded complexity of the Chicanx community. Herrera Rodríguez employs the spiritual as material and that is crucial to understanding the work and the ceremonial functions necessary for its installation and interpretation.

In the Nahuatl language, there is no direct translation for the word object.[9] Herrera Ro-

5. Laura E. Perez, *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities* (Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2007), 46-47.

6. Laura E. Perez, *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities*, 21 & 23. Perez explains that historical trauma or "cultural susto" is the "'frightening' of spirit from one's body-mind in the colonial and neocolonial ordeals, the result of which is the 'in-between' state of nepantla, the postconquest condition of cultural fragmentation and social determinacy."

7. Jesus Barraza, Looking Back Seeing Forward: Indigenous Tactics and the Development of Decolonial Aesthetic,

8. Cherríe L. Moraga, *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000-2010* (Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2011), 204

9. Nahuatl is the Mexica language predominantly spoken by the Aztecs, however, there are many iterations of

dríguez explains, "I don't really think of [the material in my installations] as objects, I think of them as symbols, as part of a whole, those things are not individual. So, the meaning of them IS of them together, not each thing that needs to be spoken about [as] a symptomatic list, which doesn't indicate the whole relationship."[10] Contemporary art museums focus on materiality within the context of Western artistic practice. Although artists use unconventional materials in the museum, they are primarily understood as adding an aesthetic value and their use is heavily monitored.[11] Herrera Rodríguez selects material for its capacity to animate the spirit, for its ability to activate the space, which gives the art object a completely different function. For example, copal smudging, which is both a mundane and ceremonial practice, is used to cleanse the space. In addition, earth, mud, branches, and water are key materials in Herrera Rodríguez's practice for their ability to represent and harness the spirit. The museum commodifies the art object and therefore thinks of materials in terms of their collectability, value, and/or aesthetic function. Museums require, if they permit their use at all, that organic materials be secured in airtight containers over a certain period of time to sterilize them before they can be used for installation. The negotiation of material between the institution and Herrera Rodríguez exposes a fundamental difference in how they understand materiality. Museum practice requires organic material to be mediated to preserve the sterile environment of the gallery divorcing them from their ceremonial context and stripping them of their function. They can dictate how these sacred materials can be used without regard to Herrera Rodríguez's artistic practice. Her work requires that the museum reconsider its understanding of the art object's materiality and function to prevent myopic policy from impacting cultural production. In addition, how she approaches these materials informs interpretation, so it is incumbent on the curator to understand opposing practices. Herrera Rodríguez explains, "that if I can't [create] these pieces the way I make [them] in community, then I can't go to the gallery and make something different. That's fake. To remove its function means to take the spirit out of it. To take the heart out of it."[12] The objects used within her installations are not selected solely for aesthetic purposes, they are used for their ability to harness memory and hold the spirit.

Herrera Rodríguez's use of the object, for its ability to animate the spirit, is unconventional when considering how museums commodify the art object. Many of her objects are reused and repurposed in the creation of other installations defying museum collection practices. Herrera Rodríguez's motivation for creating these works is not for them to be permanently housed within the institution, sold, or to be reinstalled by a preparator in another exhibition. She creates these objects to provoke recognition in community, and to disrupt institutional practices that marginalize Indigenous ways of knowing and being. In Herrera Rodríguez's practice, the art object's importance is in its spiritual capacity, but for the contemporary art museum, it is a commodity.

The ceremonial acts that inform her artistic practice not only reshape our understanding of the art object and its function, but also inform how the culminating art piece holds space in the museum over the course of the exhibition. The importance of how she constructs the altar or conducts the copal smudging is not only in the materiality that results, but also in the energy that it produces. To engage her practice in terms of the spiritual requires that the museum suspend its conception of materiality and mediate an experience for the viewer that

it spoken by Nahuatl people in central Mexico and El Salvador. Generally, Nahuatl is considered the native language of Xicanx people.

10. Celia Herrera Rodríguez, interview by María Esther Fernández, April 27, 2017.

11. Museums dictate what is conventional and deem some practices unconventional, leveraging policy to restrict the latter.

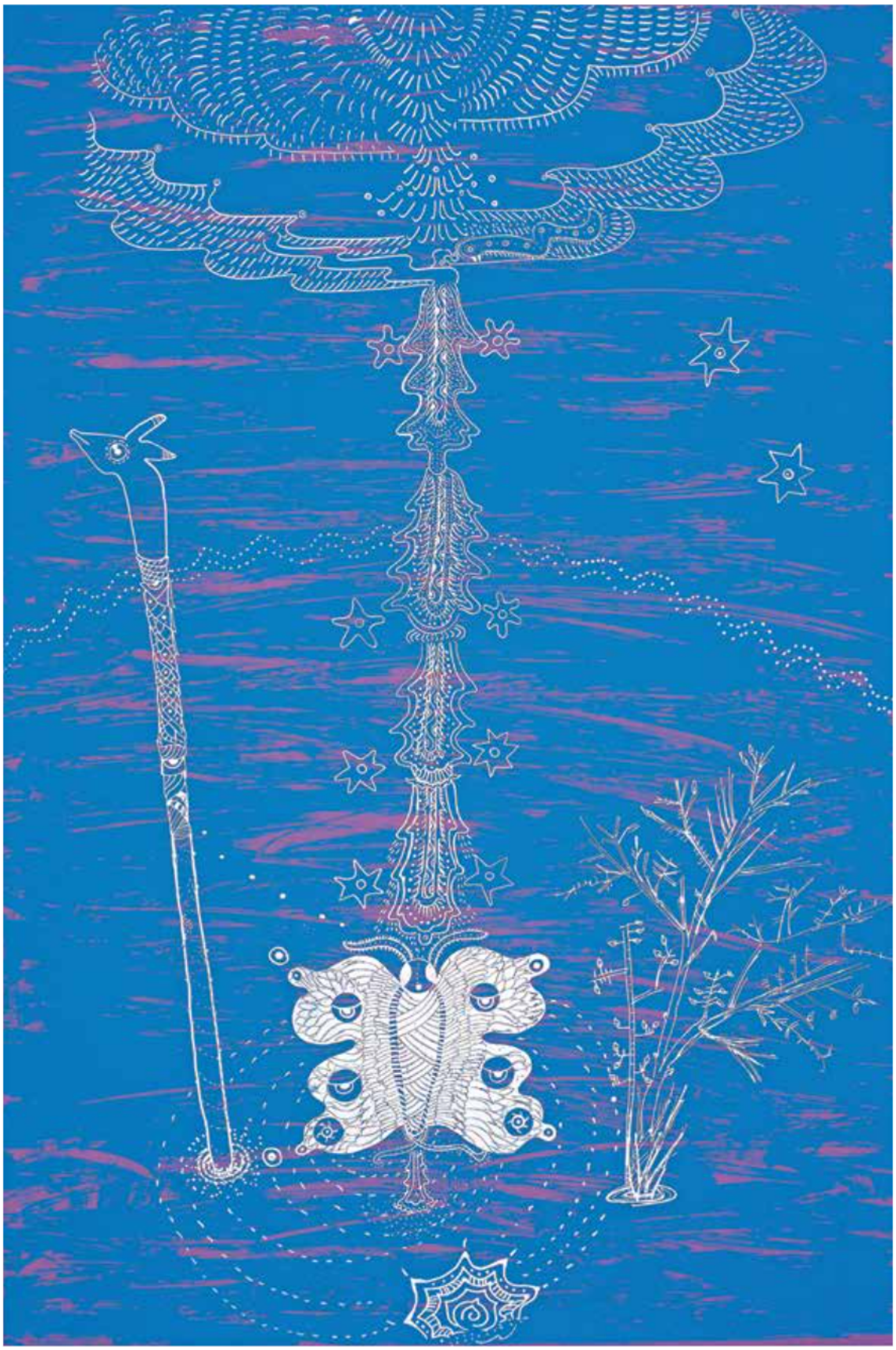
12. Celia Herrera Rodríguez, Interview by María Esther Fernández, November 6, 2017

is less focused on the visual and more on the visceral.[13] This (re)understanding of material impacts the ways in which curators work with the object, and how the museum conditions the experience for the viewer.

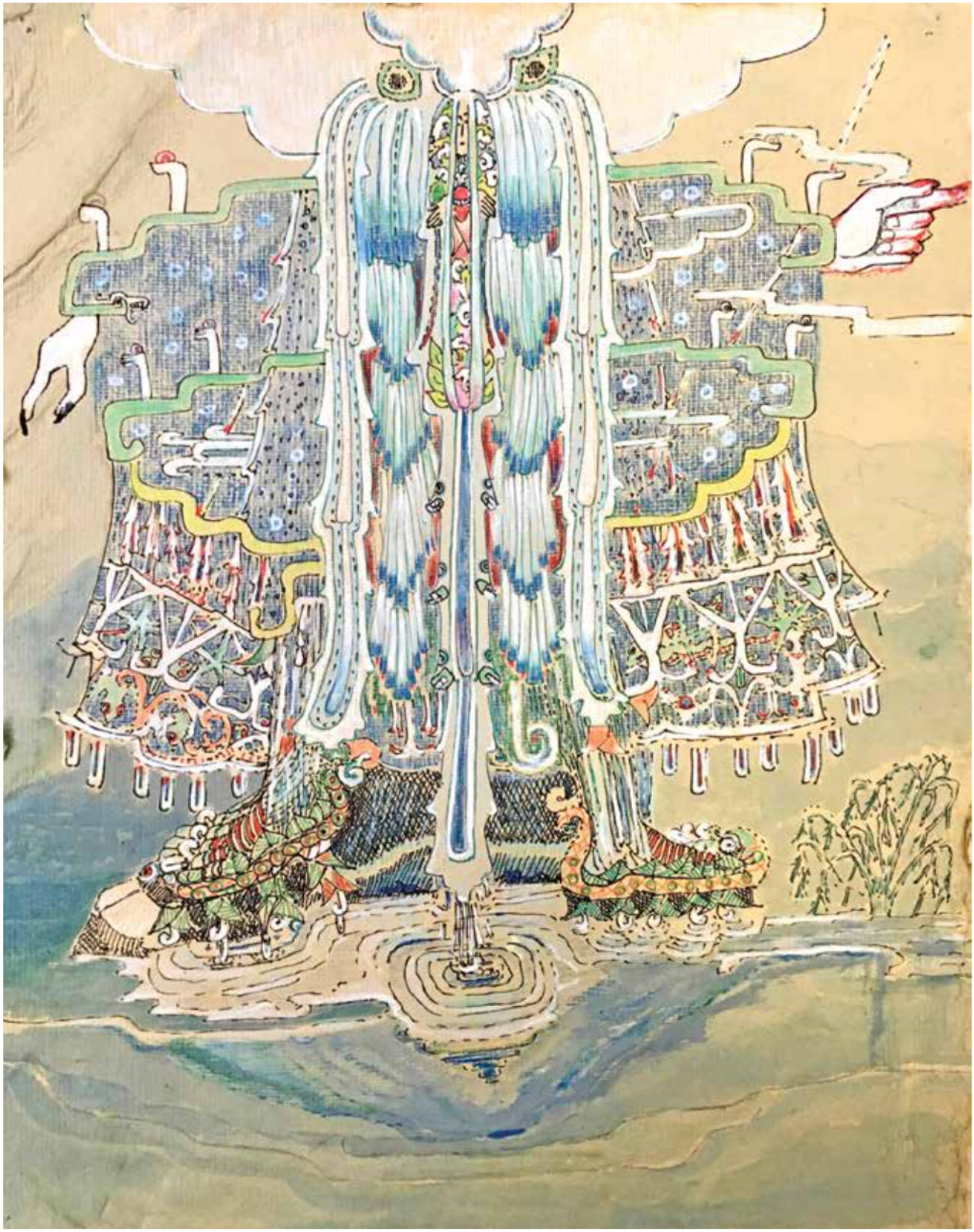
Celia Herrera Rodríguez's artistic practice deploys Indigenous spiritual practice for a diasporic Xicanx community introducing alternative ways of knowing and being, bringing forth a new way for curators and viewers to engage with the contemporary art object while exposing how western ideology is so deeply embedded in museum practice. Spiritual artistic practices create moments of disruption where interventions to existing curatorial practice can be made to achieve a more equitable and curative model for exhibiting marginalized communities. Herrera Rodríguez's practice is a call toward the spiritual in a decolonial effort that has the potential to hold institutions accountable to recognize other ways of knowing and being so as to develop curative practices that redress this marginalization. The call is not only for more curators of color, but for a particular brand of curation that decentralizes Western ideology and leaves room for multiple epistemologies to inform a more *curative* curatorial practice.

13. This can be mediated through curatorial choices in the selection of work, lighting, and informational text that can inform the viewer's experience.

Palabra, 2019



roubled (Male) Waters, 2019



Tlaloc Male Waters, 2019

roubled (Male) Waters, 2019

Tlaloc Male Waters, 2019

Tlaloc Male Waters, 2019

Amazonian Waters - South
2006

Jesus Barraza

A COMMUNAL OFFERING

Altar Making as a Decolonial Social Form

EDITED BY Abraham Ramirez

I first found Celia Herrera Rodriguez' work in the CARA exhibition catalogue. La Llorona, a water color painting, revisits the story through a feminist lens and depicts her, as Ana María Carbonal describes it, a "resistant maternal figure who confronts the unjust race, class and gender hierarchy of colonial Mexico (56)." Years later when I encountered Rodriguez' work, again, in her installations along with water color paintings that at times become part of her performances. I found the critique of the colonial role placed on indigenous woman and their descendants, contemporary Xicanas, profound and alive. Another dimension I found in Rodriguez' work is that of collaboration, a strategy that can be traced back to her work with the Royal Chicano Air Force in the 1970s, inviting family, friends and community to help in the realization of her installations and performance pieces. In her Rodriguez's practice, we find the spirit of decolonial art through collective engagement, allowing for an experience to make one whole again and heal from the colonial wounds we have inherited.

The spirit of decolonial art is found in the experience of reclaiming ones indigeneity. What surfaces is a decolonial form that, according to Catherine Walsh, provides the tools to develop a critical view of the world, participate in reinventing society, and intensify the turmoil of decolonization that generates a new humanity.[1] What arises from these artistic interventions is a decolonial aesthetic, which counteracts epistemological and ontological negation by igniting a conversation about the importance of maintaining a sustainable relationship with the land and environment. Laura E. Pérez's situates Chicana artists as *curanderas* (healers) "reclaiming and reformulating spiritual worldviews that are empowering to them as women of color and reimagining what a more social role for art and the artist might be."[2] This decolonizing move is a process in which Chicanas reconnect with non-Western worldviews, not as an idealized history, but as a strategy to "interrupt the reproduction of gendered, raced, and sexed politics of spirituality and art."[3] Spirituality is "reclaimed as a healing force, not an opiate of the ostensibly brain-dead masses that numbed people into acceptance of their unfortunate and unenlightened lot in life but rather as a constitutive element of personal, social, and environmental well-being."[4] Reintroducing an indigenous understanding of the world is to expose how colonization imposes a new set of spiritual and political beliefs that subjugate indigenous subjects through new constructs of race, gender and sexuality. Decolonial Chicana artists actively connect and reconnect with their own indigenous roots to center decolonial aesthetics and spiritualities. The task of reconnecting results in an artistic practice based on sensing, thinking, and doing that reflects indigenous philosophies and contemporary realities of detribalization, displacement and globalization.

Celia Herrera Rodriguez's (1952) *A Prayer to the Mother Waters* exhibit is an example of a

1. Catherine Walsh, "Decolonialidad, Interculturalidad, Vida Desde El Abya Yala-Andino," in *Los Desafíos Decoloniales De Nuestros Días: Pensar En Colectivo*, ed. Maria Eugenia Borsani and Pablo Quintero (Neuquen: Editorial De La Universidad Nacional Del Comahue, 2014), 31.

2. Ibid., 23.

3. Ibid.

4. Pérez, *Chicana Art*, 23.

decolonial practice that brings people together to learn, dialogue, and create. Rodriguez articulates that her art practice involves gathering people with the hope that they connect with each other, see beyond their own issues, and see each other as a reflection of themselves. This relationship is similar to the Mayan concept of *In Lak'ech*, "you are my other me." For Rodriguez, the goal of bringing people together is to alleviate feelings of isolation that people experience in contemporary society, where cultural traditions have been commodified by capitalism and globalization. The exhibit consists of four altar installations, each is dedicated to the female water spirit form one of the cardinal directions that connects people from around the world. What results from the altars created during the gathering is a psychic marker of the shared experience in the space that absorbs the spiritual energy produced by the participants through conversation and art making. Altar making plays an important role in the work. According to the critic Laura Perez, Chicana art practices "makes use of the gallery or exhibition space itself as an altar, a place of *ofrenda*, or offering, and a meeting place of the seen and unseen, of the past and present, spirit and flesh."[5] Rodriguez uses the altar as a decolonial pedagogy, engaging participants with a Xicana worldview that informs the process of forming a collective that aims to engender a transformative relationship with art making.

Rodriguez was raised in Sacramento, California, and joined the Chicana/o Movement after enrolling at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) in 1970, where she studied art and ethnic studies and received her BA in 1979. During her time in college she traveled to Cuba in 1971 with the Venceremos Brigade, worked as an organizer at Union Latina in New York City and in 1972 moved to Los Angeles to volunteer at the Center for Autonomous Social Action (CASA). While working at CASA, a Chicana/o Marxist-Leninist organization, Rodriguez was mentored by founder Bert Corona. In 1975, Rodriguez became a member of the Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF), a socially engaged art collective that used mural and printmaking workshops as a way to connect with the Chicana/o community. Participating at the Barrio Art Workshop at CSUS, Rodriguez worked closely with RCAF co-founders Jose Montoya and Esteban Villa. The most notable work she completed with the RCAF was the collaborative Chicano Park mural, *Women Hold Up Half of Heaven* (1975), in San Diego, California.

The ceremonial fireplace and altar is a central component in Rodriguez's installations and performances that stem from her participation in the Native American Church (NAC). Her experience in NAC created a shift in the way she related to the altar, and led her to reflect on her grandmother's altar and its place in her house. Rodriguez's altars are connected to the domestic space, in particular, the kitchen—the heart of the home where people come together to share food and conversations—a space that has been forgotten. Rodriguez reconnects with her grandmother's tradition in a manner similar to what the visual critic Laura Perez observes in the use of altars in Chicana art:

> [These altars call upon] an ancient domestic art to bring to light the enduring and alternative beliefs and practices of those who have historically and officially worshipped and communed at altars other than those of the official and institutionalized.[6]

Embracing her grandmother's altar served as a way to circumvent the barriers men have created and move away from the roadman's notion of altar and establish a woman's altar—one that is tied to the home's kitchen fire that nourishes and sustains the family. For Rodriguez, her art practice is a spiritual and ceremonial practice, and a practice in which she–grants herself the permission to move away from a traditional, male centered ceremony. Rodriguez creates her own alter and uses it to channel

5. Pérez, *Chicana Art*, 141.

6. Pérez, *Chicana Art,* 144.

the history of colonized women and the cultural disruption they experienced that reframed the domestic as an oppressive site for women. Rodriguez's women's altar stages a decolonial gesture of reconnecting with her grandmother and the domestic spaces that are at the center of her work. Through her workshops Rodriguez incorporates pedagogy to pass on the altar and the lessons she has learned by centering a women's experience.

Celia Herrera Rodriguez 2006 exhibit, *Prayer to the Mother Waters for Peace*, was part of the FOCO Festival, dedicated to honoring Latino cultural heritage at the College. Rodriguez approached the exhibit as a collaborative project, where her participant-collaborators included a group of twelve college students, local community members, and a few people from other countries who sent in water through the mail. The workshops served as a mechanism to teach collaborators about the spiritual and ceremonial significance that the altar holds for a Xicana worldview. The process included gathering materials for the installations, making small offerings for the altars, and engaging in dialogue about pollution in the bodies of water around the earth. In situating these concerns in a local context, Rodriguez and workshop participants gathered primary materials for the altars from the Chicago River. According to Rodriguez, these outings to the river allowed for a pedagogical discussion in which everybody could contribute to the conversation about waste and industrial pollution in the water. Rodriguez's collaborative and pedagogical approach creates a convivial environment that opens up space for community building. Together, Rodriguez and the participants imagined five altar installations for the exhibit. Xochipala Maes Valdez (b. 1960), along with workshop participants and the local community, created the *Community Altar* dedicated to the female waters. With the help of her participants, Rodriguez constructed four sculptural installations dedicated to water bodies, and they were located in the four cardinal directions. These include *Water Carrier Abuelita South*, *Water Carrier Abuelita West*, *Water Carrier Abuelita East*, and *Water Carrier Abuelita North*. The installations were given life as *Abuelitas* (grandmothers) to protect the water bodies throughout the world.

For Rodriguez, the theme of the Mother Waters is connected to her spiritual practice and dates back to the late 1990s when she went through her vision quest. During the ceremony Rodriguez dreamt about the peyote, and realized that much like humans, peyote is in danger due to drought caused by disregard for the environment. This made her consider how humans are in danger because of the pollution created in the water systems throughout the earth that nourishes all living things. After this experience, Rodriguez began incorporating in her altar what she refers to as the female waters, which she explains are standing waters, such as rivers and lakes. By giving water the space on the altars, the healing process extends beyond treating the impurities created by pollution to acknowledging the disturbance created by human intervention. In accomplishing this mission through *Prayer to the Mother Waters for Peace*, Rodriguez incorporated local river water and reached out to friends around the world to send her water through the postal service, particularly from places where armed conflict had been ongoing. The waters arrived from the Ganges River in India (*Abuelita West*), the Amazon in Peru (*Abuelita South*), the Hudson River in New York (*Abuelita East*), and the Chicago River (*Abuelita North*). Subsequently, local residents were invited to bring water from their homes for the Community Altar. Using this strategy, Rodriguez incorporated waters from places most affected by conflict, connecting the *Abuelitas* with the women from these locations and created a series of altars that honor the experiences of these women as the protectors of the environment. Similarly, inviting local participation and asking people to bring water from their homes connected communities around the world in a struggle to protect

the environment. In this way, Rodriguez evokes the energy of everyday women who struggle to change their world and channels this energy into the series of *Abuelitas*.

Rodriguez recounts that through a pedagogical process, participants generated dialogue connecting the local pollution in the River to the global issues people face with regards to access to clean water. Rodriguez's approach and use of the altar constitute a teaching tool as a decolonial pedagogy: an opening for reciprocal conversation rooted in the complex history of colonization and its effects on people and the environment. Catherine Walsh contends that practices of decolonial pedagogy stem from a political, epistemic, and existential uprising in Latin America by indigenous and afro-descendant communities in the 1990s. This process calls for teachers, students, and community members to engage in a rigorous critique of their society to develop an understanding of the conditions that shape their way of thinking.[7] Inspired by Pablo Freire and Frantz Fanon, Walsh describes this pedagogy as an approach to critically read society and take part in the reinvention of culture—to fuel the flames of decolonization and bring about a new sense of humanity.[8] Within the context of decolonization, Walsh suggests, this teaching philosophy helps participants analyze the causes of social inequalities and develop strategies to overcome the impacts of coloniality that have long created the conditions of dehumanization and environmental degradation.

Rodriguez uses a socially engaged process, creating a space guided by traditional indigenous spiritual teachings and aesthetics, which offer an embodied way of spiritual healing through collaborative art making. Anzaldúa stresses the importance of praxis in this process and the transformative healing power through active engagement in community building:

> It means creating space and times for healing to happen, espacios [spaces] y tiempios [times] to nourish the soul. Meditative prayer, a work of the imagination and a powerful generative and transformative force, often accompanies each stage of this healing process. [9]

Anzaldúa's hands-on approach to theory and community building provide a structure and methodology to understand socially engaged art that can be used in this decolonial process. Rodriguez enlisted the help of Xochipala Maes Valdez (b. 1960), a queer Yorùbá-diasporic priestess and close friend, to help orchestrate the *Community Altar* that was collaboratively built with the help of participants who contributed offerings for the mother waters. The water fountain built by Valdez was filled with small gourds floating inside, and the participants were asked to bring water from their homes to fill these carriers. Through this ceremonial gesture, the artwork constructed a collective domestic space as people brought to the exhibit water from their own kitchens. The fountain was constructed using a yellow metal basin with a chalice-like copper pipe sitting inside, where the pump was installed to keep the water circulating. The fountain's base was covered with multicolor tobacco ties—small thumb size packets made of tobacco enclosed in paper and tied to a long string that wrapped around covering two-thirds of the basin. The fountain sat on a flat circular base made of leaves and flowers and decorated with shells, branches, gourds, bottles of water, and other ceremonial objects.

Rodriguez included community voices in the altar by inviting participants to contribute water or a small offering and acknowledging them in the prayer. The *Community Altar* created for the exhibit expresses a group prayer and connects

7. Ming Fang He, Brian D. Schultz, and William H. Schubert, eds., *The SAGE Guide to Curriculum in Education* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2015), 171.

8. Catherine Walsh, "Introducción. Lo Pedagógico Y Lo Decolonial: Entretejiendo Caminos," in *Pedagogías Decoloniales. Prácticas Insurgentes De Resistir (re) Existir (re) Vivir, Tomo I*, ed. Catherine Walsh (Quito: Ediciones Abya-Yala, 2013), 31.

9. Anzaldúa and Keating, *Light in the Dark,* 90.

people with the act of communal making, thus transforming the experience into a memory. Likewise, Valdez performed a Yoruba water ceremony for the opening of the exhibit during which participants contributed their water to the altar's fountain. In both cases, the performative nature of the ceremony in the gallery space activated the altar, giving it life as the spiritual assemblage of sacred offerings made in hopes for a more just world. Rodriguez has developed a socially engaged approach to altar making where participants' offerings constitute a communal prayer, and the energy within the communal space is developed according to the ways people's lives intersect. As Perez argues, Xicana altar art is based in continual and cross-cultural notions, such as the Mayan expression of "In'Laketch" or "You are my other me."[10]

Materials used in the *Abuelita* sculptures have ceremonial meaning as *offrendas* from the students and community. In this manner, they take on an altar form similar to the ceremonial shrines Rodriguez came across while visiting the mountains of Sandias, Durango. Through the *Abuelita* shrines, participants focus their energy on the female water spirit that lives in standing bodies of water. The sculptures symbolize the prayers that become part of ceremonial experience that embraces the natural world. Rodriguez, moved the forms found in the natural world into the gallery as a tactic to share goddess shrines with an urban community in Chicago, giving the audience the opportunity to offer shells, feathers, flowers, and other items to the altar. This is an attitude that centers community and sustainability and is concerned with the spiritual elements not as abstract ideas but tangible elements that exist in the world and are currently under threat.

Rodriguez's socially engaged practice and her use of workshops to share her altar making process introduce participants to a spiritual tradition tied to their own heritage. Together with participants, Rodriguez engages in a decolonial pedagogical process—one that focuses on a Xicana worldview of reclaiming spiritual elements found in domestic spaces as an act of transgression. Rodriguez's practice is exemplified in the women's altar she establishes in defiance of patriarchy, in which she subverts sexism through the very space of the home. Formally, the works produced in the workshops are sculptural pieces, but their spiritual purpose as altars reflect a Xicana worldview that connects them with the natural world and the need of a worldview based in sustainability. The workshops create a space where these ideas can be explored through a hands-on embodied experience, allowing participants to engage in an art practice that connects the act of making with a spirituality grounded in the land. These type of interactions precisely shape a socially engaged decolonial practice: it is not only about bringing people together but also sharing an indigenous worldview that situates human relationship to the land.[11] A decolonial aesthetic resides not merely in the visual component of an artwork, but the transmission of cultural beliefs and a radical consciousness that introduces people to an indigenous way of understanding their place in the world.[12] Furthermore, in Rodriguez's work, there is a balance between the aesthetics of the project and the participatory component, and that it is important for participants to understand the functionality of the altar to be able to engage in the creation of the work. I consider this aesthetic-communal balance an important part of Rodriguez's altar-making process, as Anzaldúa writes, "without creativity, 'other' epistemologies-those of the body, dreams, intuition and senses other than the five physical senses- would not reach consciousness."[13] A decolonial socially engaged practice positions the role of making with consciousness raising, and thus the act of connecting people with the altar initiates their processes of transformation.

10. Pérez, *Chicana Art*, 92.

11. Leuthold, *Indigenous Aesthetics*, 130.

12. Leuthold, *Indigenous Aesthetics*, 117.

13. Anzaldúa and Keating, *Light in the Dark,* 44.