Using Participatory Art to Revisit History, Memory, and the Self in a Post-historical Context: A Series of Case Studies from the Exhibition *Guatemala Después*

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Abstract:

Today, notions of historic and collective memories are known to be highly problematic: They often function as cultural tools at the service of power institutions, imposing dominant narratives and eliminating individual differences and agency. Nonetheless, they remain key to processes of self-identification and solidarity both at the individual and community levels. Scholars, artists, activists, and individuals from diverse fields strive to develop frameworks that recognize the relevance of these processes while also acknowledging their complexities, risks, and limitations. Contemporary processes of remembering and constructing the self demand new approaches that allow for a better understanding of the weave of narratives and actors in constant interaction involved in them. It is in this context that relational art can serve as a device through which individuals and groups can explore, contest, and reimagine their relationship to knowledge(s), the world, and themselves.

Keywords: identity, self, history, memory, discourse, intersubjectivity, participation, art

Introduction: What does it mean to think about History, Memory, and the Self today?

In his book *Post-history*, Vilém Flusser defines humans as historical beings, in the sense that it is their capacity to produce, store, and transmit information from one generation to the next one what separates them from nature. This production and accumulation of information occurs through *discursive* and *dialogic* communication practices. The former deals with *objective* knowledge, the latter with *intersubjective* knowledge (51). Both communication practices are equally important to guarantee humanity's existence and well being. According to the author, the current crisis of humanity is consequence of the hegemony of Western scientific knowledge, a mode of existing in the world that privileges discourse over dialogue, objectifies human beings and society, and produces specialized knowledge only accessible to the masses through simplification–and impoverishment– carried out by mass media. In this scenario, Flusser argues, two things occur: The systems humans create become autonomous and unpredictable, and *individuals are programmed by the apparatus* and start acting according to the models in which they exist. This, he says, is what has made Auschwitz and many other modern tragedies possible.

In Flusser's work, the term *post-history* alludes to the condition in which human beings have already realized the failure of the Western project of modernity. Beyond that, it also refers to the strategies individuals might implement to distance themselves from its guiding principles. Surprisingly, these strategies do not contemplate abandoning the project that is being criticized: "It is not possible to reject one's own culture. It is the ground we tread. Those who reject their culture's models are incapable of grasping the world in which they live. Cultural models are traps to catch the world." (Idem, 7) And so, the tactics of resistance are those of infiltration.

Flusser's reflections on the post-historical condition can be used as a starting point to reflect on historic, collective, and personal memories; a highly problematic set of concepts: In Flusserian terms, history and in some cases collective memory are discursive practices that act as programs shaping individuals, imposing dominant narratives, and erasing differences among

them. Still, they remain key to processes of identity building and solidarity at individual and community levels. This last dimension –that of *community*– is no less problematic than the ones previously discussed:

> Community contains both a positive and a negative dimension. On the one hand, collective identities encourage us to break down our defensive isolation and fear of others. Further, they serve to honor and sustain a shared consciousness shaped by common experiences of life and labor. On the other hand, collective identity is often established through an abstract, generalizing principle ('the nation', 'the people') that does as much to repress specific differences as it does to celebrate points of common experience. (Kester, 14)

Contemporary processes of remembering and constructing the self demand new approaches that both recognize the value and acknowledge the risks and limitations of these dynamics. These approaches can be particularly useful to question discourses of national identity in countries such as Guatemala, a nation that experienced more than three decades of "internal armed conflict" and whose peoples are still affected by colonialism and cultural discrimination. In this paper, I examine how artistic and creative practices can act as devices through which individuals can explore, question, and reimagine the ways in which discursive and dialogic practices of remembering affect their relationship with themselves, others, and the world. I will use a series of artworks exhibited in Guatemala as point of departure for these reflections.

I will begin this analysis by presenting three projects from the exhibition *Guatemala Después*, a curatorial research project developed between 2013 and 2015 in collaboration between The New School and the Guatemalan arts organization *Ciudad de la Imaginación,* whose goal was to showcase artistic investigations that rethink notions of collective memory, official history, and erasure in relation to Guatemala's recent history, while also reflecting on the intertwined relationship between the U.S. and Guatemala. After introducing the works, I will delineate a series of concepts that serve as a framework to discuss the idea of art and participation as a means to question and reimagine history, memory, and the self. In that process, I will also analyze how such concepts might look in practice by examining some of the strategies used by the artists to create the pieces chosen as examples for this paper.

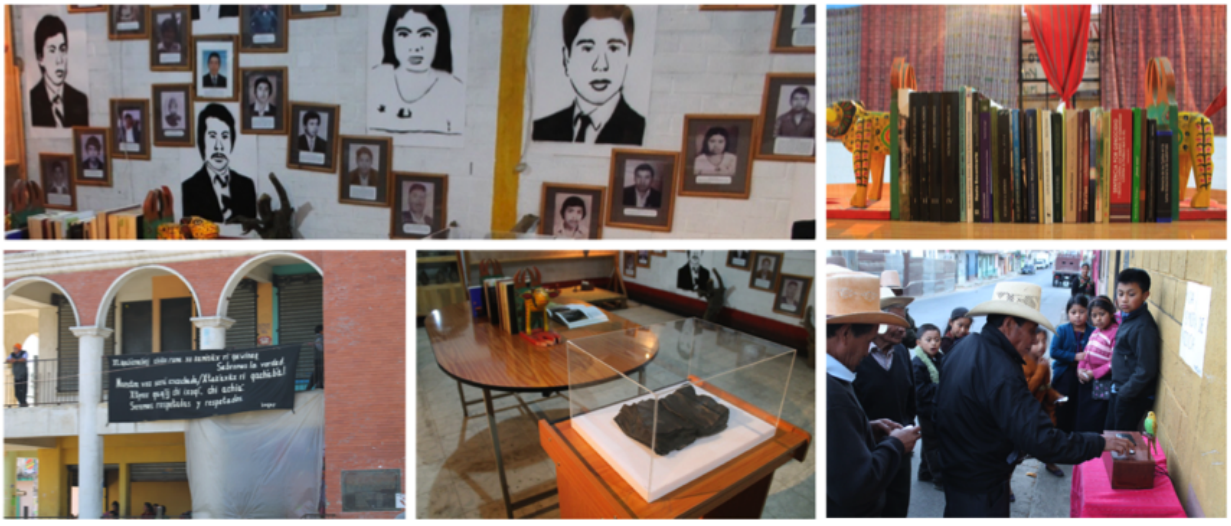
I

Ka'i' K'atun (*Two Katuns*) is a multimedia installation that invites those who interact with it to reflect on the idea of censorship, what that word means for the Kaqchikel people in Guatemala, and how can they still imagine and work towards a better future. Its title, *Two Katuns*, refers to the Mayan circular conception of time, in which past, present, and future coexist. The installation –exhibited in NYC, Quetzaltenango, and Guatemala, as part of Guatemala Después– was an adaptation of the exhibition *Life and Memory of Patzicía*, first showed in the *Community Museum of Patzicía* in Chimaltenango, Guatemala, in 2015.

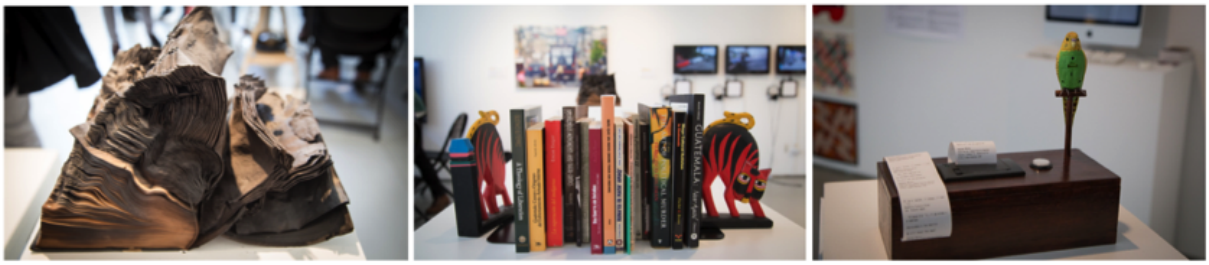
For the community of Patzicía, this was a show heavy with meaning. It honored the sorrow, courage, and stories of its people. Pieces of the exhibition confronted victims and

perpetrators in the community's public space, exposing the scars of a wound that has not yet fully healed, and opening opportunities for dialogue and reconciliation. In the context of *Guatemala Después,* Beatriz Cortez and the Kaqchikel Collective Kaqjay Moloj –the authors of the installation– had to rethink the experience. While some layers of meaning were lost in translation, new readings also became possible. In its NYC version, the installation included three elements: A *Burned Book*, a sculpture-like object about to turn into ashes, representing all the texts that the Kaqchikel people had to burn or bury in order to avoid being attacked for thinking differently or thinking at all. The *Library of Memory*, a selection of books in English, Kaqchikel, and Spanish, with oftentimes-unfamiliar writings about Guatemalan history and indigenous Guatemalan communities, protesting that even when their people no longer have to hide or destroy their books censorship remains current. And a *Fortune Teller Machine*, an interactive object in which a mechanical parakeet gave visitors pieces of papers with good wishes for the future by the Kaqchikel community, written in Kaqchikel, Spanish, and English.

In the version exhibited in Quetzaltenango and Guatemala City, two elements from the original exhibition were added to the installation and the setup was modified in order to encourage longer interactions: a fabric banner with the phrases "We will know the truth - Our voices will be heard - We will be free", and a photographic installation with pictures, stories, and some personal belongings of the disappeared. This was not only a memorial for the men and women massacred during the armed conflict; it was also a monument to the courage of all their loved ones who kept their photographs despite knowing the risk they were running by doing so. In this installation, the elements were supposed to make the visitors oscillate between a past full of grief and sorrow –represented by the photographic installation, the *Burned Book*, and the *Library of Memory*– and a hopeful future –encouraged by the same *Library of Memory*, the *Fortune Teller Machine*, and the banners.



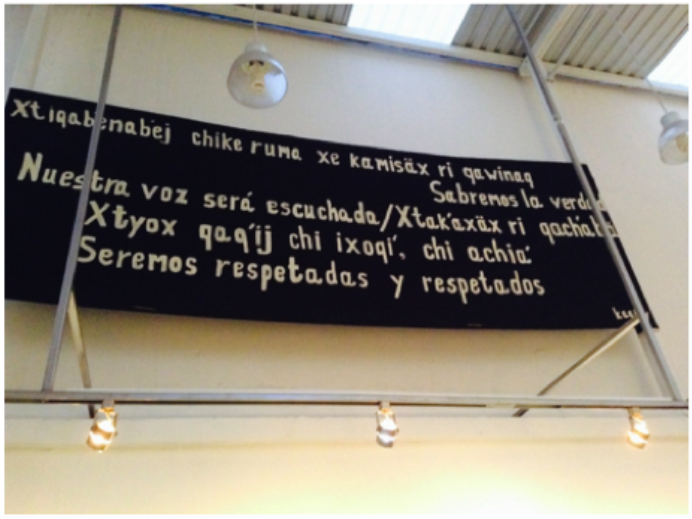
Images from the exhibition *Life and Memory of Patzicía*. Source: www.kaqjay.com



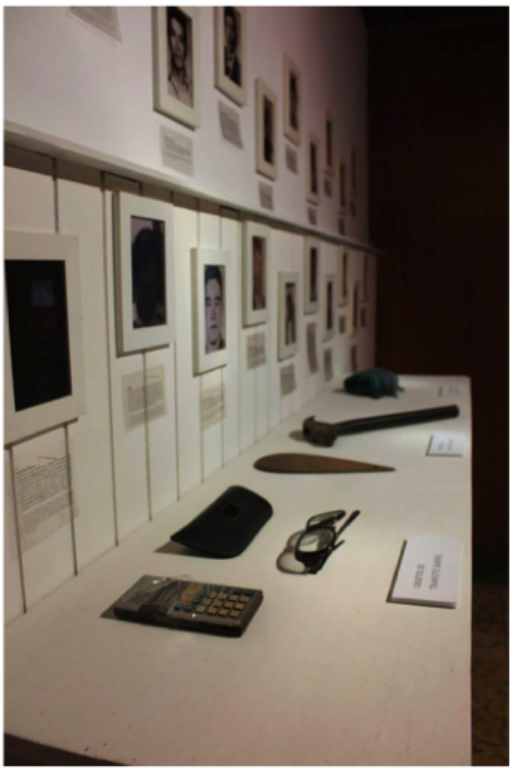
Burned Book | Library of Memory | Fortune Teller Machine

Images from the installation as exhibited in NYC

Fabric Banner



Photographic Installation



Images from the installation as exhibited in Quetzaltenango

II

In order to provide a general framework for the artworks of *Guatemala Después*, the exhibition team designed a multilayered timeline showing the interactions between sociopolitical events and artistic interventions in Guatemala over the last 60 years. In the NYC exhibit, the visualization gave the visitors a basic context to approach the artworks and to understand the relevance of the exhibition in both a national and a global scale.

But in Quetzaltenango and in Guatemala City, the timeline became a participatory installation, inviting visitors to engage with the narrative in different ways. People were expected to reflect on the information they were reading and to participate in the conversation by inserting bites of their personal stories, suggesting revisions and additions to the already existing layers, or imagining the future of their country. Ranging from the trivial to heartfelt, the participatory installations in Quetzaltenango and Guatemala City gathered the most diverse contributions, evidencing the blurred boundaries between the notions of history, collective memory, and personal memories as well as problematizing around them.

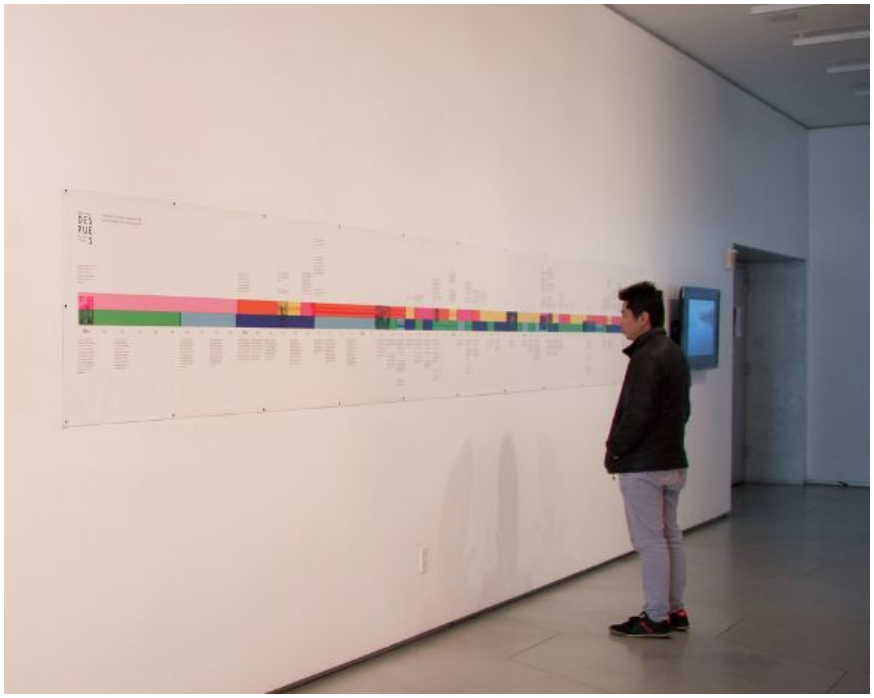
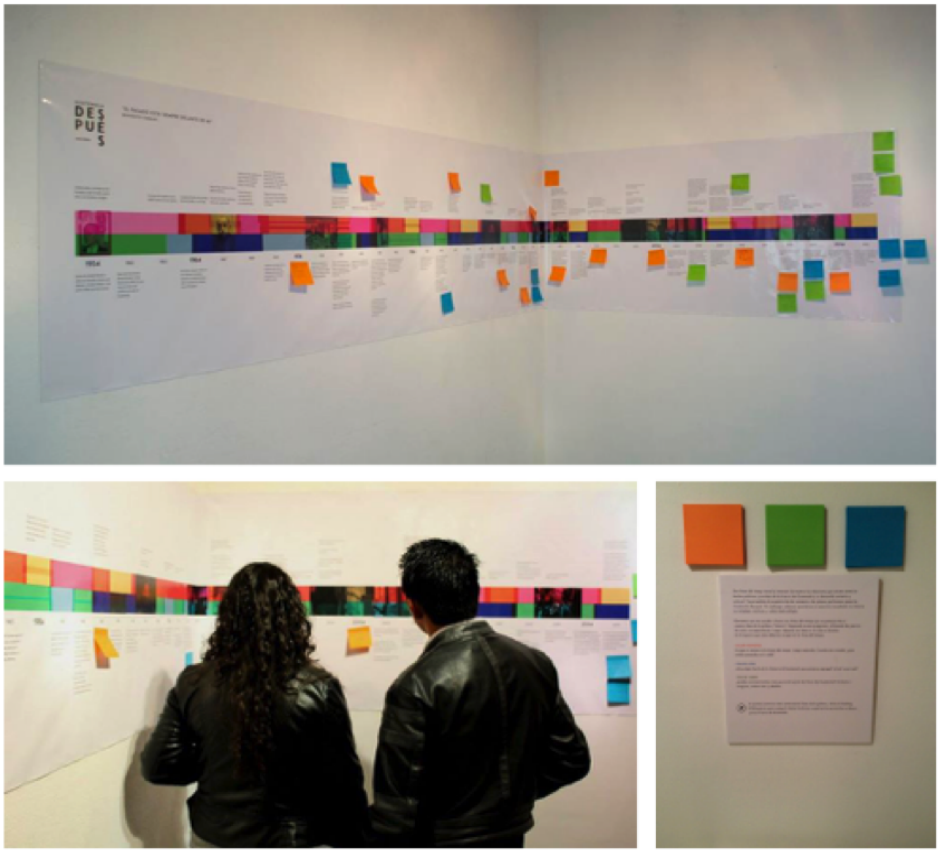
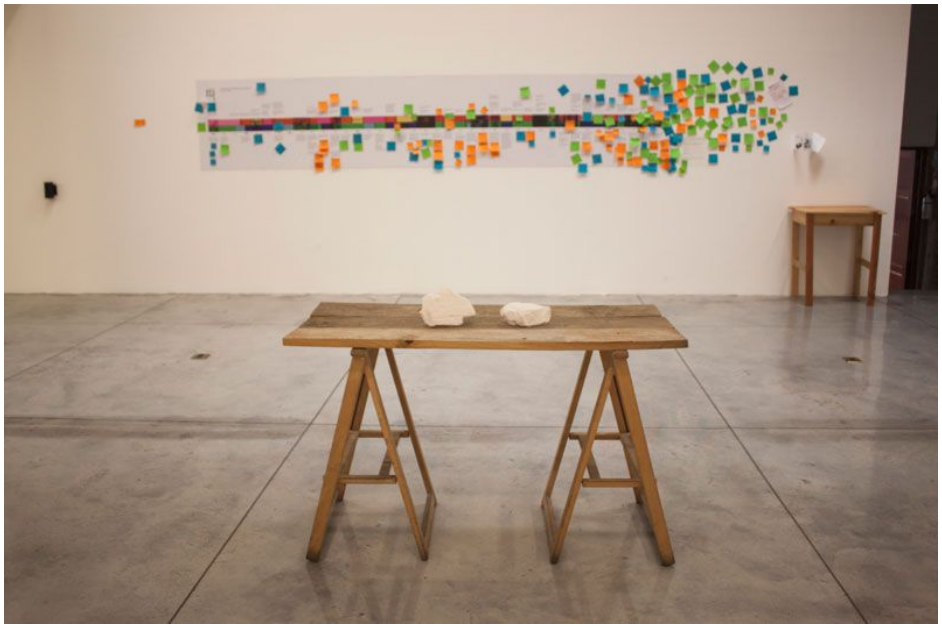


Image from the timeline as exhibited in NYC



Images from the timeline as exhibited in Quetzaltenango

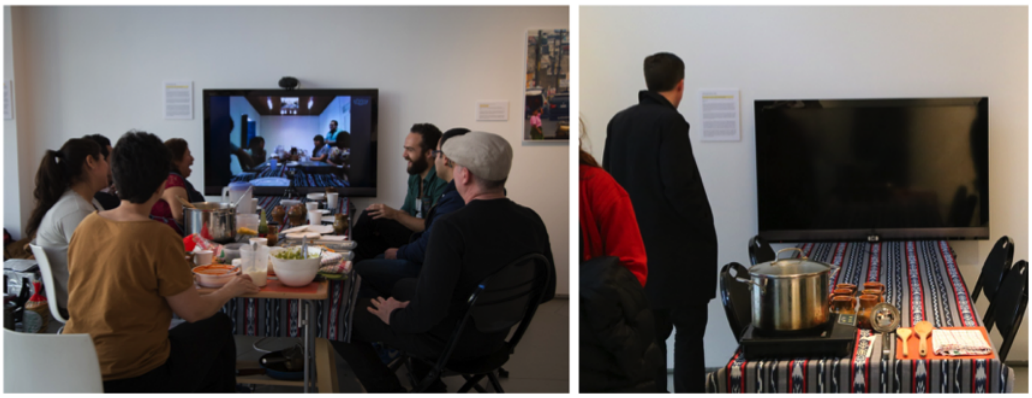


Images from the timeline as exhibited in Guatemala City

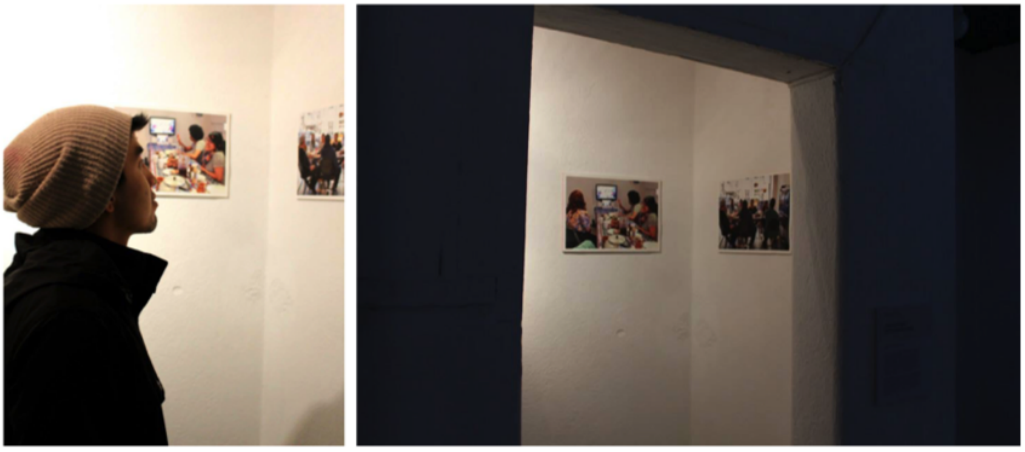
III

On April 11th 2015, a diverse group of people including Guatemalans based in NYC and Quetzaltenango shared a Guatemalan traditional meal via Skype. Identical tables were set up and the same dishes were served in both locations, creating a translocal experience mediated by a screen that challenged notions of physical vs. digital interactions. The purpose of this durational performance conceived by the artist Jessica Kairé and the anthropologist Daniel Perera was to facilitate a candid and friendly exchange between strangers that found themselves united in a Guatemalan tradition that attempted to preserve its authenticity despite being strongly mediated.

After the performance, the authors of the piece wanted to make a clear distinction between the artwork and its documentation, so for the remaining time of the exhibition they decided to dispense images of the transnational interaction and display only the infrastructure of installation –the dinner table and all the cooking and eating instruments. Additionally, they installed a set of earphones that played a looped audio of the entire conversation and reanimated the space; evoking the experience of participating in a transnational meal. In the exhibitions in Quetzaltenango and Guatemala City, the artists substituted the dinner setup for a couple of photographs showing the people who gathered at each end of the table. This way of presenting the work playing with presence and absence attempted to highlight the value of an experience that cannot be captured through documentation.



Images from the durational performance in NYC



Images from the performance documentation as exhibited in Quetzaltenango

Participation and the (Inter)Subjective Self

Although these three examples from *Guatemala Después* differ from each other in many aspects, I would like to focus on their similarities: In all of them, the visitors' participation is the element that activates the pieces, they all try to propitiate dialogue and and self-recognition *in relation* to others, and they use art to mediate these processes.

Claire Bishop defines participation in art: "Participatory art in the strictest sense forecloses the traditional idea of spectatorship and suggests a new understanding of art without audiences, one in which everyone is a producer." (2012, 2) From this definition is not the death of the author but the possibilities for dialogue and co-creation that participation opens up what interests me. Despite of how nice this definition might seem, Bishop highlights the importance of always asking the question: *participation to what end?* Having done extensive research and written copiously on the topic, she advises her readers to approach these practices with critical eyes. In her article "Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?" she argues that participatory art has traditionally been perceived as a strategy that "...re-humanizes a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production." (Idem, 1) and that can be used to fight the oppressive power of ideologies in general –be it military dictatorships, oppressive regimes, or neoliberalism. However, she questions the relevance of participation as a tool for political intervention, especially in contexts where other political structures are not in place to turn awareness into actions: "At a certain point, art has to hand over to other institutions if social change is to be achieved." (Idem, 10) Jacques Rancière also examines the reasons for political and participatory art and accompanies Bishop in her suspicion:

> The paradox of our present is perhaps that this art, so uncertain of its politics, might be invited to a higher degree of intervention by the very deficit of its politics proper. It's as if the shrinking of public space and the effacement of political inventiveness in a time of consensus gave a substitutive political function to the mini-demonstrations of artists, to their collections of objects and traces, to their mechanisms of interaction, to their provocations in situ and elsewhere. Knowing if these substitutions can 'recompose' political spaces, or if they must be content to parody them, is certainly one of the questions of today. (Rancière, 92)

Instead of putting all our democratic hopes over the shoulders of participatory art, Claire Bishop considers we should look at participatory artworks as spaces of experimentation, opportunities to reimagine our existence and experience new relationships, as portals of sorts that allow for micropolitical gestures to occur. Nicolas Bourriaud's concepts of *interstice* and *relational art* are particularly useful to continue this discussion while also starting to point how these theoretical reflections take shape in the examples of artworks from *Guatemala Después*.

> An interstice is a space in social relations which, although it fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, suggests possibilities for exchanges other than those that prevail within the system. Exhibitions of contemporary art occupy precisely the same position within the field of the trade of the presentations. They create free spaces and periods of time whose rhythms are not the same than those that organize everyday life,

> and they encourage an inter-human intercourse which is different to the 'zones of communication' that are forced upon us. (Bourriaud, 161)

Can You Hear Me? exemplifies this concept of the interstice: The artist Jessica Kaire and the anthropologist Daniel Perera decided to use Skype and traditional Guatemalan food as means to engage participants in meaningful exchanges that resembled their everyday interactions but that under different conditions allowed for chance and experimentation by the participants. During this transnational conversation, language limitations became at times an opportunity for them to try alternative ways of communicating with others. In this durational piece, strangers that otherwise would have probably never met shared food, laughs, personal anecdotes, and even cooking tips.

Guatemala Después as a whole can also be categorized as interstice, not only for showcasing contemporary art, but also for being a transnational collaboration showcasing artistic works created by transdisciplinary teams. This exhibition aimed to share and enable nuanced perspectives on Guatemala's past(s), present(s), and future(s), and its relationships with the rest of the world.

Social relationships and their role in processes of self-identification is an notion at the center of *Two Katuns*, *Timeline of Guatemalan Arts and Socio-Political History (1955-2015)*, and *Can you Hear Me?* The three pieces embody the principles of what Nicolas Bourriaud defined as *relational art*, a form of art centered in human relationships, interactions, and the contexts in which these take place:

> Their work [pieces of relational art's] brings into play modes of social exchange, interaction with the viewer inside the aesthetic experience he or she is offered, and processes of communication in their concrete dimensions as tools that can be used to bring together individuals and human groups. (Idem, 165)

In the case of the artworks examined in this essay, quotidian activities –eating, reading a book, studying history– are the starting point for reflecting about the participants' stories, memories, beliefs, relative position… In sum, about their ways of existing in the world. Bourriaud states that the predominant themes in relational art are "...being-together, the 'encounter' between viewer and painting, and the collective elaboration of meaning." (Bourriaud in Bishop, 1998, 161) *Can You Hear Me? Two Katuns*, and *Timeline of Guatemalan Arts and Socio-Political History* exemplify each one of these variations of the practice respectively.

Relational art, by focusing on social interactions, abolishes the idea of art as an internal experience. It is no longer about the effects that a work has on an individual, but about what happens between individuals who *find themselves* and *each other* in a situation enabled by art. According to Bourriaud, this is what separates relational art from other artistic practices:

> [The novelty of relational aesthetics] resides in the fact that, for this generation of artists, subjectivity and interaction are neither fashionable theoretical gadgets nor

> adjuncts to (alibis for) a traditional artistic practice. They are at once a starting point and a point of arrival, or in short the main themes that inform their work. (Idem, 166)

Art pieces that focus on facilitating dialogue and intersubjectivity are particularly relevant to challenge concepts of history and memory in a post-historical situation. By adapting *Life and Memory of Patzicía* to be exhibited in NYC, Beatriz Cortez and the Kaqchikel Collective Kaqjay Moloj were hoping that through participation people would not only get to know the stories of the Kaqchikel people, but also to think about the ways in which their experiences relate to each individual's and how censorship shapes everyone's lives in different ways.

Similarly, the *Timeline of Guatemalan Arts and Socio-Political History*, especially in its interactive versions, invited participants to reflect on how the history they know challenged or was being challenged by the one proposed in the exhibition. More so, it encouraged them to understand how existence is a complex weave of interrelated people and events, and to think about how their own lives fitted within the polyphonic narrative that was being built by people visiting *Guatemala Después* and interacting with the timeline.

Participation, Knowledge(s), and Self

So far, I have discussed *the experience* of a specific type of art –relational art. Now, I would like to dedicate some lines to address what could happen *beyond the experience*.

In 2015, Luis Camnitzer published on the platform e-flux an article titled "Thinking About Art Thinking". The main goal of the piece was to criticize the instrumentalization of art schools but, in order to do so, he also put forth some interesting ideas about the notion of art appreciation and what should the effects of artistic experience be. He started by dividing paradigms of art appreciation in *looking at, looking through, and looking around* art. (3) These three modes refer to the artwork as an object, as a means to reflect on a specific theme or issue, and as the result of a specific set of cultural conditions. Camnitzer advocates for the last paradigm:

> This means trying to identify what questions the piece is trying to answer, and to then answer the question myself by any means possible. Thus, a process of problematization places the lay viewers on the same level with the artist. It essentially permits them to embark on the same research, and establishes room for creative dialogue. (Idem)

Camnitzer values the idea of *looking around art* because it places artists and viewers at the same level, opening opportunities for dialogue. He calls this way of relating to art *Art Thinking*. To some extent, Camnitzer presents art thinking as a form of participation, as defined by Claire Bishop on a previous page. However, differently from Bishop, Camnitzer's idea of participation goes beyond imagining new relations; it can also affect other forms of knowledge: "Art thinking is much more than art: it is a meta-discipline that is there to help expand the limits of other forms of thinking." (Camnitzer, 2015, 5) Camnitzer's elaboration of the concept and

power of art thinking also shares some elements with Flusser's notion of humans as beings who exist *through* and *because of* the interactions and equilibrium between discursive and artistic practices. In *Post-history*, Flusser argued that humans are beings with the ability to *experience, evaluate*, and *know* the world. Since modernity, we seem to be only capable of –or at least only focused on– the last part of that sentence. It is then through art thinking that we might resist the erasure of difference attempted by hegemonic discourses, that we might remember how to experience and re-evaluate life and how to reconsider our knowledge. In this sense, participation can help individuals achieve some sort of individual freedom and state of consciousness that enables them to recognize themselves *within* and *in relation* to a community. This hope is different from previous dreams of participation as a tool to guarantee democracy. Nonetheless, it still considers the value of micropolitical gestures that in the aggregate can help create a more empathetic, solidary, and livable world.

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