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***Translating Memory from Exhibition to Digital Collection: Reflections from  
Guatemala Después***

In January 2015, the exhibition *Life and Memory of Patzicía* opened in the *Community Museum of Patzicía* in Chimaltenango, Guatemala. A fabric banner by the entrance displaying a series of stencil portraits welcomed the visitors. The faces on the banner were not strangers’; they belonged to indigenous people from the community who has disappeared over the last century. This exhibit was an invitation to discuss and challenge censorship, to reflect on what this word has meant and still means for the Kaqchikel people and on how can they still imagine and work towards a better future.

For the community of Patzicía, this was a show heavy with meaning: The photographic installation was not only a memorial for all 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. A banner with the phrases “We will know the truth - Our voices will be heard - We will be free” hung from the market’s verandah, equally confronting victims and perpetrators in the community’s public space. A burned book on a pedestal represented all the texts that these people had to burn or bury in order to avoid being attacked for thinking differently, or thinking at all. Across the room, a small library with oftentimes-unfamiliar books about Guatemalan history and indigenous Guatemalan communities proved that, even when they no longer have to hide or destroy their books, censorship remains current. An electronic parakeet that

printed wishes for the future written by the community attempted to highlight that despite the adversities, they should remain hopeful.



Source: [www.kaqjay.com](http://www.kaqjay.com)

Images from the exhibition *Life and Memory of Patzicía*. Source: [www.kaqjay.com](http://www.kaqjay.com)

Beatriz Cortez and the Kaqchikel Collective Kaqjay Moloj had to rethink the experience in the context of *Guatemala Después*, a curatorial research project developed in collaboration between The New School and the Guatemalan arts organization *Ciudad de la Imaginación*. It aims 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. *Life and Memory of Patzicía* was included as a multimedia installation in the three iterations of the exhibition (NYC – Quetzaltenango – Guatemala City), under the title *Ka'i' K'atun (Two Katuns)*.

*Guatemala Después* is a project that has required translation at many levels: 1) Each artwork included in the exhibition is an effort to communicate in the artistic code the memories, thoughts, concerns, and hopes of Guatemalans. 2) At the same time, these pieces were conceived by trans-disciplinary and sometimes transnational teams who had to develop a common language along their processes in order for rich

collaborations to happen. 3) Showing the artworks in contexts as different as the US and Guatemala demanded from the artists and the curatorial team to reframe and tweak the artworks and the exhibition in order to make the experience approachable and meaningful for each public. 4) The creation of the digital collection of *Guatemala Después* demands from the team to find a balance between making the content intelligible at the global scale and preserving its local essence.

## GUATEMALA DESPUÉS



Images from [www.guatemaladespues.org](http://www.guatemaladespues.org)

Neiger, Meyes, and Zandberg define media memory as “the systematic exploration of collective pasts that are narrated by the media, through the use of media, and about the media.”(1) The different dimensions of *Guatemala Después*—the three exhibitions, the academic courses, the public programming, and the digital collection—fit in this category. However, it is in the process of creating the digital collection that the mediation is more evident and where the challenges seem greater: We wish to share our experiences on how have we approached these challenges in the practice, by proposing a set of principles that might be used as a framework for

conceptualizing digital collections of this sort, and by discussing three very different case studies from *Guatemala Después*' digital collection.

In 2004, Nelly Richards addressed the challenges of mediating memories in her introduction to the book *Revisit the Past, Critique the Present, and Imagine the Future*: There, she warned the reader about the risk of diluting the message as a consequence of format or repetition and about the danger of sacrificing the reflexive character of the memories in favor of spectacle. She also wondered how to engage the academia in a way of studying remembrance that is done hand in hand with the communities, instead of from the confines of the white tower. She writes these reflections in the context of post-dictatorship Chile, but her concerns are aligned with ours while creating the *Guatemala Después*' Digital Collection. We might not have the answer to all of them, but here is part of what we have learned along the way:

- Artists and communities must be equally involved in the process of designing their media memory
- When dealing with projects that try to translate memory and its narratives into the digital space, both critical and pragmatic approaches must be developed
- In the process of digitally mediating memory, there is not a single formula that can be applied in every case. However, the design of frameworks can be useful for systematizing the process to some extent
- Digital mediation of local memories should be treated carefully. By including the artworks of *Guatemala Después* in a digital collection, we are making local memories universally accessible. In order for the owners of those memories not to be exoticized or the objects in the artworks not to be

fetishized, the collection also needs to provide the necessary context for each entry.

- How to digitally communicate the richness of an encounter between strangers? How to communicate the grief and the absences of a community that was destroyed by a massacre? Despite the multiple possibilities that digital technologies offer nowadays, there will always be memories that cannot or should not be encapsulated for public consumption.

The following principles have served as guidelines to approach the creation of each piece's entry for the digital collection:

*Standardization vs. Personalization:*

By this we refer to the balance we are trying to achieve between giving some consistency to the collection and being mindful of the particularities of each work, as well as of their individual possibilities for engagement with the users in the digital realm. This includes, in the one hand, decisions like selecting [Omeka](#) as the digital archival platform that will act as a base for preserving and establishing relationships between the items within the collection; and in the other hand, choices that are made specifically for each artwork in order to make their experience more engaging (for instance: including additional files that document the making process, the creation of minisites that emulate certain aspects of the pieces, etc.)

*Access and Reach*

It is our aim to make this collection as accessible as possible. In this sense, we are committed to the creation a bilingual site (in Spanish and English) and we are also mindful of the weight of the content for each page we design –in terms of connection speed and download times– as well as of how accessible might the platforms we use be.

### *Amplification* (instead of replication)

While collaborating with one of the artists in creating her work's entries for the digital collection, she mentioned that she would like to think of this process as a continuation of the piece once shown in the gallery instead of an adaptation of it. We are completely aligned with her vision, so the premise when thinking of each entry is to ask ourselves how could we amplify the experience of the artwork instead of just trying to replicate it.

### *Openness*

In a certain way, this principle relates to our idea of amplification. It refers to the value we give to the process behind each piece and to the context they were created in. It is in this spirit that we have decided to include in the entries of the artworks some additional documents like data sets, historical documents, or sketches of the pieces.

### *Dialogue*

We refer to dialogue in three different levels: 1) the collaboration with the artists in the process of designing their work's entries for the digital collection, 2) the dialogue between the artworks, and 3) the interactions of the users with the digital collection. This principle has been key when trying to find a balance between the local value of the pieces and their global relevance.

After this introduction to the project elements, our approach, and our core work principles: we would like to show how some of these ideas look in the practice, by briefly reviewing three case studies from our digital collection: *Ka'i' K'atun (Two Katuns)*, by Beatriz Cortez and the Kaqjay Collective; *Timeline of Guatemalan Arts and Socio-Political History (1955-2015)*, by our exhibition team, and *Can you hear me?* by Jessica Kaire and Daniel Perera.

## *Ka'i' K'atun*

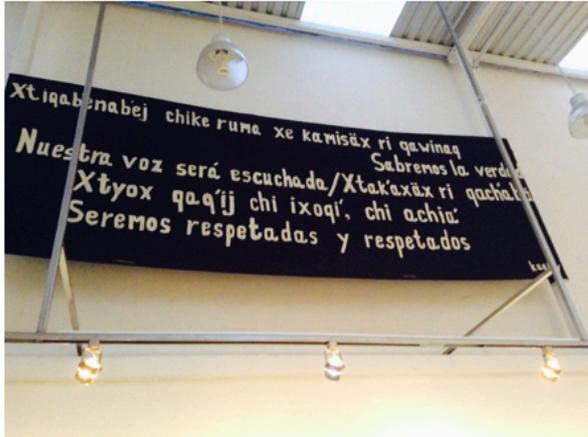
The title of *Ka'i' K'atun* (*Two Katuns*) refers to the Mayan circular conception of time, in which past, present, and future coexist. In its NYC version, the installation included three elements: *The Burned Book*, an object that evokes a moment in time where Kaqchikel people would burn or burry their books for fear of being attacked by thinking differently; *The Library of Memory*, a selection of books about Guatemalan history, written in English, Kaqchikel, and Spanish; and *The Fortune Teller Machine*, an interactive object in which a mechanical parakeet gave visitors pieces of papers with wishes of the Kaqchikel community printed on them.

In the version exhibited in Quetzaltenango and Guatemala City, two other elements were added: 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. In this installation, the elements were supposed to make the visitors oscillate between a past full of grief and sorrow (the photographic installation, the burned book, and the library of memory) and a hopeful future (the same library of memory, the fortune teller machine, and banners).



Images from the installation as exhibited in NYC

Fabric Banner



Photographic Installation



Images from the installation as exhibited in Quetzaltenango

When creating this work's entry for the digital collection, the main challenge lay on the intimate character of the installation. *Two Katuns* is born from the Kaqchikel people's memory and from what Marianne Hirsch would define as postmemory: "In my reading, postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection." (22) The way locals experience *Two Katuns* in Patzicía is very different than the way visitors experienced it in NYC – not to mention the way users might experience it in the digital collection.

It has been a great challenge for us to identify what kind of mediation could help each component of *Two Katuns* to be properly understood and felt, as well as to determine whether or not some of these elements are *too private* to be included in the digital collection. In this particular case, our priorities were to highlight the value of *knowledge production by and for the community*, to document the artistic efforts of the Kaqjay Collective and Beatriz Cortez, and to give this initiative visibility and

open possibilities for further connections. Having this in mind, each element of the installation was treated differently:

*Burned Book*

This entry includes a series of pictures of the object and a description of the piece that explains its meaning in the context of Guatemalan censorship.

*Library of Memory*

A series of pictures of the library is complemented with a brief description of the concept behind the piece, a document with a full list of the titles that conform the collection, and images with excerpts of certain books, selected by Beatriz Cortez and Edgar Esquid –Mayan intellectual and member of the *Kaqjay Collective*.

*Fortune Teller Machine*

A series of pictures and a brief description of the object, accompanied by a transcript of all the wishes written in Kaqchikel, Spanish, and English.

*Photographic installation and banner*

No description could provide the context needed to understand the power behind each individual photograph. These images belong to the community of Patzicía, and the best we can do is to document their effort to preserve their memory while respecting their privacy. The same could be said about the banner, whose power is lost when exhibited in a different place than the market in Patzicía. In this sense, our documentation of these elements comprised a general image of the photographic installation, an image of the banner, and a very brief description of them that ends with an invitation to follow a hyperlink that will take the user to the *Kaqjay Community Museum*.

### ***Timeline of Guatemalan Arts and Socio-Political History (1955-2015)***

In order to provide a general framework for the artworks, our 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.

In Guatemala, the timeline served as a discussion-starter, inviting people to reflect on the information they were reading and to participate in the conversation by either inserting bites of their personal stories, suggesting additions or editions to the already existing layers, or imagining the future of their country. Ranging from the trivial to heartfelt, the participatory installation in Guatemala 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.

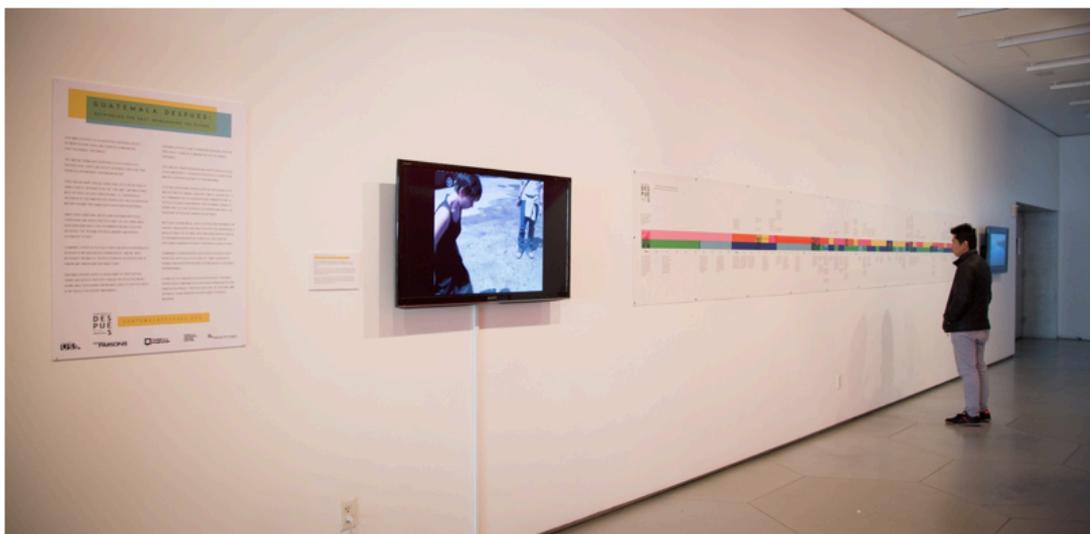
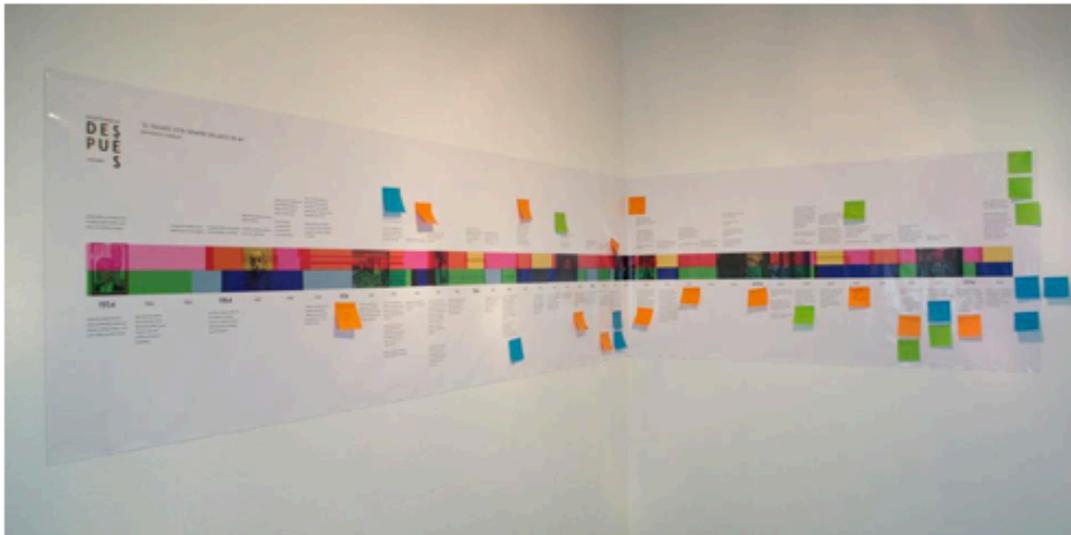


Image from the timeline as exhibited in NYC



Images from the timeline as exhibited in Quetzaltenango

Very soon we realize the huge potential the timeline has: It can become a rich resource for researchers, students, artists, and citizens. For this purpose we decided to consolidate the two versions (NYC and Guatemala) in one and make it available both in Spanish and in English. People will be able to download the timeline in its graphic and its spreadsheet versions, the latter including information about consulted sources.

But the timeline can also be transformed into a navigation tool that allows the users to explore the content of the digital collection in two alternative ways: chronological and topical (under the categories Migration and Flows, War and Violence, and Alternative Epistemologies). We are implementing these functions by tagging the entries of the timeline as well as the artworks. The tagging will make possible to establish new exploration routes and connections between items.

### *Can You Hear Me?*

On April 11<sup>th</sup> 2015, a diverse group of Guatemalans based in NYC and Quetzaltenango shared a 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 Jessica Kairé (artist) and Daniel Perera (anthropologist) was to facilitate a candid and friendly exchange between strangers that found themselves united in a Guatemalan tradition that claimed to be authentic 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 they decided to dispense images of the transnational interaction and show only the infrastructure installation (the dinner table and all the cooking and eating instruments). Additionally, they would invite the visitors to plug-in a set of earphones and listen to a looped audio of the entire conversation that would enliven the space and evoke the experience of participating in a transnational meal. In the exhibitions in Quetzaltenango and Guatemala City, the artists' decided to show the performance documentation only, highlighting the unique value of experience as well as the limitations of representation.



Images from the durational performance in NYC



Images from the performance documentation as exhibited in Quetzaltenango

Instead of trying to find digital ways of emulating the performance, for the digital collection we have decided to share its documentation; including a series of photos of the performance, a description of the artwork, and an artists' statement about the value of ephemerality itself and about how this notion apply to their artwork.

### **Final Thoughts**

The team of *Guatemala Después* is committed to take the reflections from the project beyond the exhibition room. It is this commitment what drove us to develop academic courses, diverse public programming around the three exhibits, and now a digital collection.

When dealing with a project of the nature of *Guatemala Después*, both critical and pragmatic approaches must be developed. We are aware of the challenges and limitations of this enterprise, and we are certain that the key for developing a valuable resource is collaboration: with the curatorial team in Guatemala with whom we conceived this project; with the artists, professionals, activists, and citizens that were

involved in the creation of the pieces; and with the potential users that will be able of giving us valuable insights during the design and implementation process.

We hope that the digital collection can serve several purposes: documenting the initiative, preserving the artworks in the digital form, providing useful resources for researchers, educators, and students in fields such as Arts, Memory Studies, History, or Central American Studies; giving visibility, access, and opportunities for connection to some local initiatives in Guatemala; and being a resource for Guatemalans to reflect on their own history, memory, and identity.

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