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DISSERTATION REVIEW

Name and surname of the doctoral student: Diego Gutiérrez-Valladares

Date of birth: December 5th, 1981

Title of the doctoral dissertation: *Making Milpa. Towards Collaboration, Care and Porosity*

University where the dissertation is carried out: The Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław, Poland

Supervisor: Aleksandra Janik

Field or discipline: Fine Arts

The dissertation entitled *Making Milpa. Towards Collaboration, Care and Porosity* (2021) submitted by artist, educator and Ph.D. candidate Diego Gutiérrez-Valladares revolves around themes such as the ecological crisis, decolonial and feminist radical pedagogies, as well as collective action and creativity, all of which have acquired great relevance in the field of contemporary philosophy, cultural production and art practice in recent years. In fact, the study tackles issues that are strongly present in the public debate and in academic discourses, connecting artistic research with current social challenges and open questions. This thesis represents the culmination of a remarkable academic and artistic career including research, teaching practice as well as the participation in numerous international exhibitions and art residency programs.

The work of theoreticians such as Hannah Arendt, Félix Guattari, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, Karen Barad as well as of writers and scholars from non-Western traditions such as Achille Mbembe, Arturo Escobar and Elicura Chihuailaf, among others, constitutes the theoretical foundation of the dissertation. All the referenced bibliography is relevant in the field of research explored by Gutiérrez-Valladares and is coherently presented in relation to the candidate's artistic work and investigation. Given the significant role played by dialogue and conversation in the Ph.D. candidate's practice, I believe drawing on Grant Kester's extensive work on *dialogical* and *collaborative aesthetics*

would have enriched the argumentation. Besides, a clarification on the terms *collaborative*, *participatory* and *socially engaged art* would have been useful since these expressions, though often used as synonyms, designate different practices.

The study combines theoretical reflection, creative practice and pedagogy, proposing an interdisciplinary art-based research approach. This methodological choice contributes to expand the limits of academic research and constitutes, in my opinion, a valid approach for it allows the researcher to openly address complex and transversal questions that it would be reductive to examine solely from the artistic perspective.

In the introduction Gutiérrez-Valladares identifies the main questions that motivated his research, defines some of the objectives as well as the structure of the dissertation. However, this section does not fully portray the state of the question, an aspect that could be developed in the candidate's future research. The chosen methodology is explained in the following chapters along with the in the description of the projects carried out by the artist and his collaborators.

The section entitled *Mapping relational practices* describes the first experimentations that sparked the candidate's interest in studying collective artistic and learning practices. It situates the research in relation to a series of previous experiences. It also illustrates the concepts of situated knowledge, opacity and network taking into account the contribution of different scholars. Moreover, this section describes the *SPAM* project (2019 and 2020), the candidate's first attempt to generate a collective network centered on mapping as a relational practice.

The chapter *How can a class operate like a to work of art?* draws on Guattari's theory and examines the dialogue between art and education through the analysis of world making practices, modes of relation and ways of knowing. These theoretical notions are intertwined with a case study of the candidate's work *Kamikaze (What a body can do?)*, a nine-day performance and site specific show carried out in October 2019. This experimental format investigated improvisation, participation, conversation and listening as artistic strategies to foster new forms of thinking and creating with others. This chapter highlights the idea of *not-knowing* as an essential step in learning processes. It also exemplifies Gutiérrez-Valladares' resistance to the imperative of productivity that characterizes the dominant neoliberal culture as well as academy and artistic practice.

The following section entitled *Towards Ecologies of Care and Repair* focuses on the most recent work developed by Gutiérrez-Valladares. It opens with a theoretical examination of notions such as *intedependence* and *making-with* in relation to cultural experimentations revolving around the current ecological crisis and the future habitability of our planet. The chapter also contains a detailed description of the multiple processes leading to to the creation of the *MILPA Collaboratory* (2020-2021) a nomadic network of artists and cultural workers inquiring into collective modes of creativity by carrying out artistic research based on making-with, *thinking-with* (Anna Tsing, 2015) and being-with. The attempt to reconnect cultural activities to natural cycles and elements is particularly relevant along with the choice to deconstruct and transcend individualistic forms of art production.

Finally, the section devoted to the conclusions summarizes the findings of the research as well as the future lines of investigation that the candidate may pursue in the future. All the sections that compose the body of the dissertation are accompanied by the photographic documentation of the projects illustrated by the artist. Also, they contain a detailed description of the exhibitions, iterations, happenings and art initiatives open to the public that emerged from the creative experimentation.

The described structure of the dissertation transcends the conventional academic essay format and it allows the reader to understand the gradual unfolding of the research process using a chronological narration and highlighting the interdependence between art praxis and theoretical speculation. This narrative approach is especially fitting for the analysis of multidimensional creative processes and allows the author to describe their different nuances and meaningful aspects, as well as doubts and new questions emerging as the work develops. The language and writing employed in the thesis are coherent, allowing a fluid and clear reading. The formal requirements related to images, literary sources, etc., have been met fully.

Regarding the artwork presented in the dissertation, a process of dematerialization of the creative process can be detected. In fact, in the first proposal entitled *SPAM* the printing workshop represents the focal point of attention whereas in later initiatives such as *Milpa*, the material culmination of the work is secondary compared to the processual and dialogical dimension of the practice, which becomes the core of the investigation, along with more experimental exhibition formats.

A transition from a participatory approach -essentially designed by the artist- towards a more open and collaborative strategy can be observed in the different projects presented. This shift mirrors the intention of gradually relinquishing control over the final outcome to co-creators and sharing responsibility as well as authorship with them. It is important to point out how care for the relationships and communication underlying the whole creative process constitute a craft, a learned ability acquired through listening and sustained cooperation. Also, there is an evident tendency to expand the time frame of the projects exploring more prolonged and open-ended practices; a tendency that responds to the need to overcome the event-based approach of mainstream contemporary art platforms.

Among the most interesting insights offered by this research, the pedagogic potential of the experimented methodology is particularly relevant, since it opens new paths for art teaching practice and for exploring learning processes as creative acts. This interdisciplinary dialogue reflects the professional and academic career of Gutiérrez-Valladares, which combines art and education. Moreover, the proposed dialogue among different epistemologies and the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges, as well as the more-than-human perspective constitute a constructive strategy to foster practices of listening, care and collective learning as valuable tools to preserve the habitability of the planet from an environmental, cultural and social point of view. Furthermore, an ability to organize, coordinate and enjoy collective work can be appreciated as the research unfolds, a capacity often not included in the academic curriculum but that should be nurtured in learning processes related to art and other disciplines. Finally, I find the invitation to create safe spaces for sharing vulnerability, cultivating porosity, making room for error and tenderness especially helpful and necessary to counteract the destructive culture of atomization and competition imposed by the dominant socioeconomic and academic system.

Following my analysis of his dissertation and creative work and considering his professional practice in the field of art and education, I highly recommend that Diego Gutiérrez-Valladares be awarded an academic Ph.D. title in the field of the arts, in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation. I congratulate him and his Ph.D. supervisor for this significant contribution to a growing body of research in the area of collective art practice related to ecologies and decolonial pedagogies.

In view of a possible publication of this dissertation I recommend unifying the endnotes/footnotes system in order to facilitate reading and provide easier access to all the references. In relation to a possible future expansion of the research, as Gutiérrez-Valladares anticipates in the conclusions of the thesis, an interesting line of investigation could be the creation of an educational platform starting from the *MILPA* nomadic network. I hope this dissertation represents the beginning of a fruitful series of new collaborative experimentations in this direction.

Valencia, August 28th, 2021

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Maira Jaramelle". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.