

DISSERTATION REVIEW OF:

Pablo Ramírez González (°27/02/1990)

MESOAMERICAN MATERIALISMS AS ECOSYSTEMS OF RESISTENCE:

Decolonizing Botany in the Context of Plants from the Global South

Dissertation to obtain the degree of Doctor in the field of art, in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation, Presented at The Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław, at the Department of Sculpture and Art Mediation

Overall appreciation.

When I look at the material that has been to my disposal, first the reading of the dissertation, second the artwork, in casu the artefacts or realized art work, and finally the other realizations such as participations in exhibitions, awards and distinctions obtained, I'm convinced that Ramírez González has realized a tremendous effort, produced a good corpus of work, and presented a decent piece of research. Especially seen the conditions in which he apparently had to work (the covid 19 pandemic), causing him to reorganize his research plan and limiting his possibilities for travel and thus limiting direct contact with an international art community. This, I understand, initially was foreseen and planned through artist residencies. From my own experience (living for longer period abroad as an artist) quite some time is needed to get to know and settle in, in a new place, a new community, a new country, before you are productive as a creative artist. Restrictions in even small exchanges and contact, due to even local lock-downs, will not have benefitted the creative process and the research process. Despite these limitations, he managed to achieve quite a bit of research and realize relevant artistic work over a 3-year period of time.

The artwork and exhibitions

It is fascinating to see how Ramírez González uses ancient technique of ceramics in combination with modern digital technology to realize interactive installations with plants as centered living creatures.

As such, the use of plants and/or of living organisms, is not new. In recent times, artists as Angelo Vermeulen (*Biomodd*, 2007) and Colectivo Partículas (Ana Paula Hall,

Ernesto Monasterio, Lina Duarte Tobal; *Partículas de acervo, cartografías mínimas del intersticio*, 2021) made similar installations in museal context. They also used biotechnology as a base for their artwork, however, they rarely make their work interact with the audience. Also, they rarely make the combination of new technology (conductors, amplifiers, digital screens, etc) with ancient technology like ceramics, and native Latin American iconographic sign and symbols.

The combination, in one installation, of the ceramics (ancient, cultural loaded, but through research made conductive), the living plants (symbol for a history of slavery, land grabs, a monoculture and cloning) and new technology (in the form of modular frame for the support structure, the visible electricity wires, computer, speakers, screens, ...) often set on a soil of turf in the form of culturally loaded patterns, automatically takes a spectator out of its normal “reading” strategy towards artwork. As such Pablo Ramírez González confronts us with one of his main topics of research; our default colonial way of looking. We, as spectators might already have learned to regard our fellow humans as equal, but often do not realize our western idea’s still affects how we approach other living forms as plants. Even our way to approach art objects, read them, is of course culturally loaded. Pablo Ramírez González demonstrates that this Western approach undervalues and even misses a valuable relation with the more-than-human beings. This is the strength of his installations.

Since the publications of botanic research in the early 1980-ties, by o.a. Masatsugu Toyota from Saitama University and Mamta Rawat of Louisiana State University, I regard it as known by the general public, that there is inter plant communication by leaves and root-systems. By making interactive installations with plants, Pablo Ramírez González makes visual that the interaction is also between different living being. By doing so, he makes his spectators realize that also other reference frames should be considered. Instead of sticking to our default Western-dominating-mindset. Valuing multiple reference systems make all together an ecology of knowledge (p.32). His installations really support his vision and appeals for a more open frame which he calls the Mesoamerican materialism.

Dissertations

The dissertation of Pablo Ramírez González is well written. It has a clear structure, has accurate and traceable reference, and a well formulated conclusion. Within his dissertation Pablo Ramírez González brings together a vast theoretical knowledge from different scientific fields, a cultural heritage which he had to re-discover and appropriate, and his own art practice. The research is relevant to contemporary art practice, to the understanding of our society and is up to date. The research therefor has to be understood as a decent and good work that deserves the title of a Doctor in the art.

In bringing together decolonial theories, his understanding of Latin American culture and the Nahua philosophy, Pablo Ramírez González questions our contemporary relation towards plants. He used four “colonized plants”. They are typical Latin American plants that are brought to Europa and became so very well-known. The

plants are reproduced for production of all kinds of beauty products or cultivated for the production of food that is available independent form season or location. As a result, for many of us, these plants are no longer recognized as, or linked to, their original habitat. The plants are deliberately chosen. And although Pablo Ramírez González does not elaborate this in his research, to me it seems important that those plants have this status of “homeless” plants or plants without a clear cultural history for most of the spectators, as this makes his statement even more clear. These plants play a central role in his installations and are, as he writes himself; “his companions” (p.100) throughout his research. This translates into an understanding of the plants as “more-than-human”. Observing the trajectory of their movement (resulting from colonial practices), examining their role in medicine and spirituality, allows him to go in conversation with the plants and engage the public in this conversation. In making the interaction with these more-than-humans visible he asks to move away from a Eurocentric viewpoint. The analyses of the four different plants (Monstera Deliciosa, Persea americana, Musa Paradisiaca, Aloe Vera) enhances his vision and supports his call for an ecology of knowledge in contrast to one dominant point of view that overshadows all others.

My general admiration for the research that happened does not take away from the fact that I still have some reservations about the research, or observations that could have given the research even more strength.

Every academic research is embedded in a larger whole. It is meant to produce new knowledge. In general, to do so one starts with a state of the art. Who in the researched field did similar work? What is my position compared to their results?

This state of the art is missing, I think. It would not have changed the research as such. Pablo Ramírez González did embed his research profoundly in a range different research field (cultural studies, Art history, philosophy, bioscience, decolonial theories ...) and thus has a solid base for his research. I have no doubts about this. But the reference of his research to his own field, the field of fine arts and audiovisual arts, is almost absent. His work nevertheless elaborates on a tradition of activists art and bio-art.

For example, there has been a recent overview exhibition; *Symbionts: Contemporary Artists and the Biosphere*, MIT List Visual Arts Centre (Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A., October 21, 2022, till February 26, 2023). I personally have not seen this exhibition, but in an online review the caption reads; “Can the recent revolution in BioArt revise human relationship to the planet?” (Sunena v Maju, jan 30, 2023, <https://www.stirworld.com/see-features-can-the-recent-revolution-in-bioart-revise-human-relationship-to-the-planet>) This question is clearly also part of Pablo Ramírez González research. I’m convinced that incorporating these kinds of exhibitions, and art work of other colleague artists as Angelo Vermeulen, Esther Hoogendijk or Gilberto Esparza, would have given an even more convincing thesis and would have shown a more clear line in the building of artistic knowledge.

Similarly so for the field of activist art. With his installations Pablo Ramírez González calls for action. He asks the viewer to perceive the technological parts of his installation,

not as something universal as we do with our Western mindset, but as something local, a response to a specific local need (p.136) and therefore he brings in the concept of Cybershamanism. As noted before Pablo Ramírez González asks to step away from a Eurocentric vision and allow a multi-perspective knowledge. I think this fits perfectly in the tradition of the activist artist. His plea may not be as strident as when the Dada artists stood up to the violence of the First World War and the political elite of their time. Nor is it as prominent as the billboards produced by the Guerrilla Girls in their call for equal rights for female artists. However, Pablo Ramírez González's more subdued and multi-layered work can be put in line with Martha Rosler's collages, Ai Weiwei's installations or Banksy's graffiti.

There might have been good reasons for not going into those paths. Maybe there was not enough time to also open up these fields of activist-art and bio-art, and maybe the comparison to other artists would have opened too many other lines of research. But even in that case I would have expected the research to demonstrate that Pablo Ramírez González is aware of these exhibitions and artists with a short statement why, within the framework of this research, they are no longer investigated. With a state of the art, Pablo Ramírez González would have demonstrated that he himself is not working on an island, but that he is part of a research field in art. And this not to force him "to use a colonial methodology" (p.20), but to make clear from which artistic knowledge he is benefitting and to which artistic knowledge he is contributing (which he certainly is doing).

Finally, we read: "In this sense, Mesoamerican materialisms derives from a place of epistemic discontent, from contemporary elsewhere. This framework advocates the necessity of unlearning of colonial/modern categories and aims to learn from the elsewhere in order to build new ecologies of knowledge"(p.32). In my opinion, it would have been an added value, if Pablo Ramírez González would have tested his ideas and concepts also in his new environment. Being himself "not from here" an immigrant in Poland, new and strange to the city of Wrocław, I wonder what artwork could have been created, using elements of the also turbulent history of his new city. Wrocław, a place where also one dominant narrative was imposed to erase another past, another culture and consequently so other insights and knowledge. In other words, how could these concepts of Mesoamerican materialism, naturally in his work focused on the global South, be relevant within another context, within a western society? Would it be possible to also, in these European setting, deploy a multi-layered ecology of knowing? Wrocław would have been a fine testcase and feels to me as a missed opportunity to support his research. Nevertheless, I can also imagine that time (a three year period for a PhD is short) and the restriction he encountered from the pandemic, did not help him to explore other and wide cases than the one he had in mind when starting his research.

Overall conclusion.

I highly value the research Pablo Ramírez González has conducted. He immersed himself in various scientific disciplines and created a solid theoretical base from which he could develop new concepts and gain new insights and understandings of the relationship of human being and plants. He uses the gained knowledge in his artwork

and created multi-layered installations that call for the public to change their default Western framework and adapt a more open one. In doing so Pablo Ramírez González also puts this theory into a practice.

Based on this analysis, the reading of the dissertation and evaluation of the creative output and exhibitions Pablo Ramírez González participated in, **I recommend an academic Ph.D. title in the field of art, in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation be granted to Pablo Ramírez González.**

Notwithstanding my previous formulated reservations, **I recommend this Ph.D. to be granted cum laude**, because the work has an above-average solidity, shows a nice balance between theoretical research and practice research, contains artistic experimentation, is highly relevant to contemporary society and can be more broadly meaningful than just the Latin American context.

As, in my opinion, the state of the art is missing and the theoretical framework is not put into a wide context, I would not opt for a higher mark such as magna cum laude.

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