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CRISIS



SHELTER-IN-PLACE SURVEY JOSÉ VAL DEL OMAR CAULEEN SMITH

MOUNTAIN TIME ARTS PANDEMIC PROGRAMMING CHRISTINA LAMMER

ARCHIVOS DE VIDEO COMUNITARIO DE OAXACA (COMMUNITY VIDEO ARCHIVES OF OAXACA)

Museum of Contemporary Art of Oaxaca
December 14th, 2019 until closed by COVID-19 Pandemic

If you step off the primary pedestrian street in Oaxaca's city center, which is usually filled with wide-eyed tourists and mezcal-swiggling destination wedding parties parading with the giant puppets and brass bands of Oaxacan tradition, and you veer into the colonial-era edifice that houses the city's contemporary art museum (MACO), you'll be struck, first, by the stone architecture's cool air, arched breezeways, and relative silence. But if, last Winter, you continued up to the second-floor galleries, you would have been greeted anew by a cacophony of brass bands, protests, masked celebrations, and incantatory voices speaking many different languages. An extraordinary video exhibition, "Archivos de video comunitario de Oaxaca," traced the state's emergence as an epicenter in the community video movement, as it also bore witness to the vast changes in rural Mexico since NAFTA was enacted – and the Zapatistas revolted – in January 1994.

What exactly is "community video"? For this exhibition it refers to videos made by Indigenous media collectives (e.g. K-Xhon Video-Cine Zapoteca), community organizations

(Centro Cultural Driki, Comunalidad), and autochthonous auteurs who focus on their home communities (Crisanto Manzano, Teófila Palafox). It also includes programming made by and for community TV networks that sprouted alongside the already-existing streams of Indigenous community radio (e.g. Revista de la Sierra, TV Tamix). Many of these people, groups, and networks were supported, produced, or trained by Ojo de Agua, an Oaxaca City-based organization that kick-started the state's community video movement and is still going strong. Finally, it includes works made by urban video collectives (e.g. Mal de Ojo TV) that sprung up during the 2006 teachers' strike-cum-popular occupation of Oaxaca City, which leftists nostalgically refer to as *the Commune*.¹

Why is community video significant? To start with, it subverts our mainstream understanding of cinematic authorship, indexing the theoretical poverty of auteur theory. It does so by emphasizing that these videos were created not by individual "directors," but by a community of people, including but not limited to the person or people behind the camera. Furthermore,

Archivos de Video Comunitario de Oaxaca: Monogramas III, installation view, 2019. Photo by Enrique Macías Martínez. Courtesy MACO Oaxaca.



CLOCKWISE

Crisanto Manzano Avella, *Guia Toó* (1998), frame enlargement. Courtesy MACO Oaxaca.

Tonatiuh Díaz for Ojo de Agua, *Sobre la Marcha* (2001), frame enlargement. Courtesy MACO Oaxaca.

Tito Antunez, *Moojk* (1994), frame enlargement. Courtesy MACO Oaxaca.



as a category of nonfiction filmmaking, community video insists that it is epistemologically significant for a video's nominal makers to be part of the community they record. People who grow up in a given community or culture will naturally focus on (and thus deem significant) different things than an outsider would. In this, Oaxacan community video is an explicitly anticolonial movement: it reflects the interests and values of the communities themselves, rather than those transmitted via commercial television, Hollywood movies, or other currents of cultural hegemony.

Two videos compiled by Ojo de Agua using material and testimony from community producers make this point clear. Speaking Mixteco, Hugo Aguilar Ortíz tells us “everything our people have, everything our ancestors left us – the Mixtec language, our music, territory, traditional clothing and food – is now considered ‘Indigenous rights.’ But the government doesn’t

care to recognize these rights – this is the problem.” Aldo González Rojas continues “such as they are, communication technology doesn’t work for us, because the content is created outside of our communities. One of our projects has been to create new content for local transmission. Now Indigenous communities across the country are demanding their right to self-determination.” Fabiola Gervacio tells how video is crucial to her work for gender equality, as “a way for women to express feelings and share their knowledge and understanding.” Purépecha educator Valente Soto concludes “if you’re gonna watch television then let it be grandfather telling a story through this medium. Although this elder will pass, we can keep his image alive for future generations.”²

Indeed, much of the exhibition documents traditional ways of life – the quotidian work, sacred rituals, and cyclical activities of rural indigenous existence. In *Moojk* (Tito Antunez, 1994), a village elder takes a break from hand-planting his corn to address

the earth and trees: “let’s have a drink together” he says in Mixe, emptying a cup of that sacred Oaxacan spirit, mezcal. Here and elsewhere there are signs of change, both technological and ideological, like when a younger campesino laments “it costs a lot to feed the earth, give sacrifices year after year.” Some videos document the work of living in community – what Oaxacans call *tequio* – chores or community service required of all community members. In the video *Nuestro Tequio* (Comité de relaciones de la Asamblea de Autoridades Zapotecas y Chinantecas de la Sierra, 1984) this resembles a barn raising, except the communally-constructed edifice is the Yalalag town hall.

Among the 115 videos on display, dozens document the elaboration of regionally-specific crafts, cuisines, dances and folklore across the phenomenally diverse state of Oaxaca; others document herbal and shamanic medicine; another broadcasts Indigenous Oaxaca’s most popular sport, basketball. But two of the simplest and most striking videos evidence cultural resourcefulness in the service of play. In one recorded by Ojo de Agua in 1998, fishing canoes crafted from hollowed-out logs are converted into sailboats, their sails made from recycled sacks of corn. In another, recorded by Crisanto Manzano in the same year, children play leaves like kazoos, forming a silly and surprisingly sweet-sounding leaf orchestra.³ These videos evince an extraordinary aspect of the exhibition’s sense of time: there’s no rush, just presence. The slowness is not affected, like some art-film productions: it’s as natural as can be. My guess is that, for the people in these videos, time is not (yet) a surrogate for money. When they were recorded, many of these communities had subsistence economies: trade was primarily barter; manufactured goods were hard to come by.

Crisanto Manzano’s pastoral *Guia Toó* (Powerful Mountain, 1998), the only video to be accorded its own room in the exhibition, is at once a paean to the eponymous mountain’s mystery and fecundity, and a dirge to traditions lost amid post-NAFTA changes to rural Mexican life. It’s a film that manages to be ethnographic without being anthropocentric: it portrays processes like ox-driven plowing and the artisanal production of herbal medicine, green banana tortillas, aguardiente and panela (cakes of caramelized brown sugar). But these scenes are interwoven with contemplative recordings of natural wonders: jungle flowers, birdsong, migrating butterflies, and more. One shot that manifests this relationship begins as a mountainscape jutting up through the clouds. As the camera zooms in on a single mountain, you notice a patch of green two shades lighter than the rest. The zoom continues and a half-dozen specks appear on the patch; they start moving and you realize these mysterious ant-like figures are humans working a field of corn. After observing the Zapotec people and the mountain they inhabit for fifty gorgeous minutes, *Guia Toó*’s final three shots dispel the notion that these people and their culture might be untouched by modernity: a noisy industrial grater clears trees for a mountain road; a truck unloads crates of packaged food; and a child chomps down on

a bag of chips. His smiling satisfaction captured in freeze-frame, in the last frame of the video, dispels any hint of cynicism on the part of the director, who seems to be saying “pues, así es” – this is how it is.

As I write this the museum is now closed and Oaxaca’s streets are quiet, devoid of tourists and celebrations due to COVID-19. Meanwhile, protests rage across the US in the wake of George Floyd’s murder at the hands of police. Scrolling through the news, I’m struck by the historical rhyme: in *Video Comunitario*’s climactic display of the 2006 Oaxaca rebellion, the now-empty streets are full of protestors and militarized riot police, barricades and fires.⁴ And just like the current BLM protests, the Oaxaca rebellion was preceded by years of organizing and struggle to evidence the simple fact that, yes, Indigenous lives matter. The community video movement was a crucial part of this struggle for recognition and autonomy, as was the Zapatista rebellion and the campaigns it inspired. *Sobre la Marcha* (Tonatiuh Díaz for Ojo de Agua, 2001) documents the Zapatista caravan as it traveled from Chiapas to Oaxaca and other states en route to Mexico City in 2001. In each city they’re greeted as heroes, march together with the people, and give inspired speeches with local Indigenous leaders. Watching this footage and hearing these voices amidst the novel Coronavirus pandemic, it’s finally clear to me that the Zapatista mask is not just symbolic: it’s a prophylactic against state violence, targeted assassination, and the dismissive attitudes of the status-quo-embracing majority. Indigenous people who demand equal rights (not to mention justice or reparations) are a threat to the neoliberal order, to states and societies predicated on property ownership.

Throughout the exhibition of Oaxacan Community Video Archives, videos are displayed on age-appropriate technology: televisions, editing decks and monitors that date from the 1980s and ‘90s. But one video stands out among this functional excavation of media archaeology: *Marcha* (Bruno Varela, 2006) loops on a mammoth triple-beam cathode-ray projector parked – like the glowing carcass of a burned vehicle – among other videos from the Oaxaca Rebellion. Throwing light onto a nearby wall, the separate red, green, and blue beams multiply the image of an endless stream of countless protestors marching down the street that passes in front of the museum. The camera doesn’t move, the take seems endless, and the bodies keep coming, demonstrating the power of presence: much has changed since 2006, but mass gatherings are still the people’s ultimate protest against neoliberal states that prefer to ignore them.

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Notes and Citations:
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