

Laura A. L. Wellen

Laura A. L. Wellen is a writer and curator based in Guatemala City and Houston. She is working on a book about Kansas artist James Dean Pruner, titled *Tell it to the Horses*. Her writing has appeared in *Artforum*, *Artishock*, *Art Lies*, *Art Review*, *Arts + Culture Texas*, and *Pastelegram*, as well as in numerous international artist monographs. Wellen is the co-founder of the apartment gallery and residency Yvonne in Guatemala and of the Houston-based project Francine, and she is a 2016 recipient of The Creative Capital | Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. She holds a PhD in Art History.

One Stone and the Rain

Una piedra,
el lecho marino
alzado en hombros
por el fuego.
La lluvia,
la lluvia del martes,
la lluvia del domingo,
el diluvio universal de todos los días,
la tormenta de los siglos
de los siglos de los siglos,
la lluvia, el tiempo,
que cae sobre la piedra
y se acumula
y la socava
y la erosiona
y la carcome
y la lame
y la enmudece
y la acaricia
y la recorre
y la derrite
y no la agrieta
la perfora
la dibuja
la recita
le traza en las manos
las líneas
el canto
la memoria.
La gravedad,
la sutil fuerza del silencio,
hacia abajo,
por entre la piedra,
gota a gota
el silencio,
la piedra,
un río.
Un cuerpo,
dos cuerpos,
tres mil
y ciento cincuenta mil cuerpos
y el río
y los cuerpos
y los ciento cincuenta mil ríos
la piedra
la suma del tiempo
sobre todos los cuerpos,
el mar.

One stone,
the sea bed
raised on shoulders
by the fire.
The rain
the rain of Tuesday
the rain of Sunday
the great Flood at the end of days
the storm of the centuries
of the centuries of the centuries
the rain, the time
that falls about the stone
and that gathers
and ruins it
and erodes it
and consumes it
and licks it
and makes it mute
and caresses it
and returns to it
and melts it
and does not split it
punctures it
draws it
recites it
and traces in the hands
the lines
the song
the memory.
The gravity
the subtle force of the silence,
from below,
which enters the stone,
drop by drop
the silence,
the stone,
a river.
One body,
two bodies,
three thousand
and one hundred fifty thousand bodies
and the river
and the bodies
and the hundred fifty thousand rivers
the stone
the sum of time
above all the bodies,
the sea.¹

Wind

In Comalapa, artist Edgar Calel's studio is in the home where his grandmother lived. "I [always] heard my grandmother walking in the patio of her house, calling the birds," he says. "Chickens and parrots, other birds that were up in the trees. . ." As she called the birds, her song was *kit kit kit kit kit*. "When she died, I was in São Paulo. And I kept thinking that I would never hear her voice again, and her song. When I came back to Guatemala, I painted and wrote the song *kit kit* with clay on the wall of her house. To paint with clay was a way of giving voice to the land to which my grandmother had gone. Here, as the land mixes with water and starts to become transparent, it is like how her voice disappears in the wind."²

Guatemala's 36-year armed conflict is the starting point for most texts about that country's cultural production in the 20th and 21st centuries. Indeed, *not* to begin by citing the war would be to neglect a major, defining context for the present, not just in Guatemala, but also in the United States and in Latin America.³ And yet, there is also a futility to describing again what has been written by historians, sociologists, activists, and poets in the 20 years since the war ended.⁴ What happens, I wonder, if we take Calel's description of land mixing with water, of a voice disappearing in the wind, as an alternative starting point for writing about contemporary artistic practices? To embrace physical elements (including water, stone, earth, wind) as the tools for writing about art means to place value and knowledge in another site, to activate seemingly inanimate objects, to connect the natural world with the visual world directly, and to embrace the movement and change that they embody. It is to avoid a certain fixity, even in how we understand and process the enormous violence of the past and present.

1. Julio Serrano Echeverría, "Paisaje kárstico," (unpublished, 2016). Used with permission. Translation by the author.

2. Edgar Calel, conversation with the author, 23 October 2016.

3. As Greg Grandin, Deborah T. Levenson, and Elizabeth Oglesby note, "The CIA's June 1954 overthrow of Arbenz was one of the most consequential events in Latin American history. . . . The conflict—more of an extended period of crisis politics than a recognizable civil war between two clearly defined opposing camps—was driven by, on the one side, diverse and increasingly militant peasant, worker, indigenous, and political movements and episodic armed insurgencies; on the other, murderous

military and paramilitary forces financed by domestic economic elites and the United States. The conflict officially ended in 1996, but its climax took place between 1981 and 1983. During those years the military government launched a scorched-earth campaign against Maya communities, the savagery of which was matched only by historical memories of the Conquest. All told, the state killed two hundred thousand people, tortured tens of thousands more, drove hundreds of thousands into exile, and committed more than six hundred massacres." Greg Grandin, Deborah T. Levenson, and Elizabeth Oglesby, introduction to *The Guatemala Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 4-5.

A Caveat

My conversations with artists in Guatemala began with a published interview with Darío Escobar conducted during long drives in Guatemala and a year's worth of email exchanges. Afterward, my introduction to Guatemala's contemporary art world continued over kitchen tables with Hellen Ascoli and Karl Williamson; around a fire at the studio of Angel Poyón in Comalapa with Angel and Fernando Poyón, Edgar Calel, and Pablo José Ramírez; with many liters of Gallo at Shai Wa—a smoky dive bar in downtown Guatemala City—with Marilyn Boror and Manuel Chavajay, while walking at the weekend Pasos y Pedales in Zone 2 with Esvin Alarcón Lam; and at the gym with Jorge de León. To write about contemporary art in Guatemala, then, I draw from the fragile, imperfect, transitory, and elusive act of conversing as both a resource and as an organizing—or, better, a dis-organizing—structure. That is, the constituent parts of this text come from personal conversations with artists, modulated by attachments, interruptions, friendships, and conflicts: this is not a survey, and I do not claim the position of connoisseur, nor expert. Instead, I am involved, implicated, and intimately bound up in this community. As I place these pieces together, then, I intentionally leave space between them. And without describing every intimacy of every exchange, I want to note at the outset that I am writing a text borne from affective encounters. Here a stone, here another. Placing two things together, I propose, changes both, and changes the balance of things around them, too. Place a stone in water and it will not only change the flow of the water, but it will also change its shape over time.⁵

4. Description is both a key tool of art history and a method for documenting genocide. See the four-volume description and analysis of Guatemala's genocide: Recovery of Historical Memory Project (REMH) and Human Rights Office, Archdiocese of Guatemala, *Guatemala: Never Again! The Human Rights Report*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

5. I have written and spoken about the importance of including conversation in written histories, most recently at MUAC in Mexico City. In this, I align myself with the work Lauren Berlant has done on spaces of encounter. In their dialogue on relationality and its intensities, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Berlant and Lee Edelman use conversation as a site for facing the challenges of encounter. "An academic culture in the United States still dominated by the privilege of the

monograph only rarely affords occasions for critics to converse with each other in print," they write. "That may reflect conversation's low place in the hierarchy of literary genres." In Guatemala, though, a place with almost no institutional support for the arts and with almost no published texts about art, conversation structures every narrative and its interpretation. Spoken exchanges determine the formation of artistic practices, communities, theory, and audiences. "Structurally determined by interruption, shifts in perspective, metonymic displacements, and the giving up of control, conversation complicates the prestige of autonomy and the fiction of authorial sovereignty by introducing the unpredictability of moving in relation to another," write Berlant and Edelman. Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), ix-x.

Stone

In our many and varied conversations, the artists I speak with in Guatemala insistently and recurrently turn to stones, to fire, to water, to volcanoes, to earth. Each element bears a kind of life, animates specific interactions, *participates* in actions. I mean this quite literally, and it is nothing new: stones, for example, have been participants in ritual and daily life in Central America for centuries. Archeologist and epigrapher David Stuart writes:

Among the significant discoveries in the last decade of Maya epigraphic studies is the realization that a great many texts possess a strong self-referential quality... I would go so far as to say that sacred or important objects are the principal concern of most of the extant Maya texts, rather than the deeds and histories of royal figures. Many of the texts that do record elite history, in fact, concern the ritual interaction between rulers and objects... Some stelae were even given their own personal names and might themselves be considered 'participants' in ancient Maya ritual and historical narrative.⁶

In the summer of 2014, Calel participated in the 19th Paiz Biennial with a work titled *Abuelos*. Together with Rosario Sotelo, he brought 70 stones from Comalapa to the city, placing a fruit on each one. "Our work consists in arranging the things and the ideas that form part of our environment," they write. "We give a space to all these elements that later are transformed with time into sacred material, in a fusion between art and spirituality... To give space to the stones inside a living space, they start to come to life, we bring them drinks, food, and music... The action is our *Toj*, or an offering... We chose fruit for the stones with the intention of sustaining the energy that gives us life and supports our weight from the earth."⁷

Fiery Bundle

The Classic Period Maya are believed to have bundled stones in important ritual moments. One ceremony, Stuart writes, was known as a k'altun or "stone-binding," and was connected to time-keeping.⁸ "Such temporal symbolism, in which time and its permutations were literally bound, may

6. David Stuart, "Kings of Stone: A Consideration of Stelae in Ancient Maya Ritual and Representation," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 29/30 (1996): 151.

7. Anabella Acevedo, Rosina Cazali, Cecilia Fajardo-Hill, and Pablo José Ramírez, *19 Bienal de Arte Paiz: Transvisible*, (Guatemala City: Fundación Paiz, 2014), 188-189.

8. As Stuart explains, the word K'al translates to "score" and K'altun, which signifies 20 tuns, or a period of 7,200 days, also means "to knot or tie." He writes, "...the entry for k'atun in the *Diccionario Cordemex* suggests that the name of the time period originated not simply as a numerical term but more precisely as 'piedra que cierra,' or 'closing stone.'" Stuart, 156.

trace its origins back to shamanic traditions of carrying small divination stones in cloth bundles,” writes art historian Julia Guernsey.⁹ *The Popol Vuh*, the great creation epic of the K’iche’ Maya, describes a sacred object—“wrapped fieriness”—left behind by Balam Quitze, who is recorded as saying: “This is the token of my memory that I shall leave with you.”¹⁰

The wrapped stone and its relationship to memory bears a direct and poignant relationship to the way in which the justice process surrounding the genocide continues to unfold. In early 2016, two former members of the Guatemalan military were convicted of crimes against humanity and sentenced to 360 years of imprisonment.¹¹ Their case was the result of decades of legal work and testimony by a community of Q’eqchi women from Sepur Zarco, victims of sexual slavery and sustained abuse in the 1980s. Notably, the trial hinged upon the oral testimony of the women, given in Q’eqchi. The women recounted the abuses, their faces wrapped in and obscured by textiles. All remaining evidence of the violence was described from memory: the words became the only trace. Poet, activist, and filmmaker Julio Serrano Echeverría photographed the wrapped women during the trial. It is, he tells me, as if they themselves became sacred bundles, a wrapped fieriness. “Bundling an object,” writes Allen J. Christensen, “separates it from the mundane world.”¹² While the Sepur Zarco women’s history-making words could drift away on the wind, just as importantly, they were spoken from a sacred space: the space of the wrapped fire, the bound stone.

Volcano

In October, Serrano travels with me to Georgia, where we give a series of presentations about Guatemalan politics and geography.¹³ He is at work on a project called *Ser el Fuego*, which he describes as an *ensayo expandido* or expanded essay that, through photography, documentary, text,

9. Julia Guernsey and F. Kent Reilly III, introduction to *Sacred Bundles: Ritual Acts of Wrapping and Binding in Mesoamerica* (Barnardsville, NC: Boundary End Archeology Research Center, 2006), x-xi.

10. Guernsey and Reilly, ix. See also Allen J. Christensen, “Sacred Bundle Cults in Highland Guatemala,” in *Sacred Bundles: Ritual Acts of Wrapping and Binding in Mesoamerica*, eds. Julia Guernsey and F. Kent Reilly III (Barnardsville, NC: Boundary End Archeology Research Center, 2006), 227.

11. Catalina Ruiz-Navarro, “Guatemala

sexual slavery verdict shows women’s bodies are not battlefields.” *The Guardian*, 29 February 2016. Accessed October 1, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/feb/29/guatemala-sexual-slavery-verdict-womens-bodies-battlefields-sepur-zarco>.

12. Christensen, “Sacred Bundle Cults,” 228.

13. The conversation was at the invitation of Georgia College & State University in Milledgeville, Georgia and given in memory of Dr. Tina Yarborough.

and installation reflects the relation between volcanoes and histories of resistance in Guatemala: "...somehow, the volcano is not only a metaphor of what we are feeling, thinking and fighting, but IT IS THE FIGHT, IT IS THE FEELING, we are, ourselves, this same telluric force," he says.¹⁴

In 2012, performance and video artist Jorge de León covers his body in alcohol and sets himself on fire in a work he titles *Combustión*.

Water

There is a moment at the end of his two-minute video performance *Calentar los huesos (To Warm the Bones)*, in which Reyes Josué Morales García faces an elderly woman who cups warm water in her hands. The video records the artist being washed by his family members in the public baths in Tonicapán; it is both intimate and communal, this shared washing. As the woman empties the hot water from her hands over his head, Morales smiles broadly, a split-second window into an affective exchange. The piece was, he says, about family relationships, "but then I realized that this place [the baths] had to do with many things." He describes the water as a "space where intimacy is expressed," a space in which one can "change, resignify, and modify" how the past resonates in the present.

In his 2015 video *Sik' Ch'aoj*, Manuel Chavajay Morales appears rowing a *cayuco*, a small wooden boat, in the middle of Lake Atitlán. The only sound is that of the oars pushing against the water. As the boat moves in and out of the frame, Chavajay appears first in military uniform and then in Tz'utujil *traje*.¹⁵ At times, he carries a machine gun; in the back of the boat are bouquets of white flowers. The legacy of the war in his community of San Pedro La Laguna, Chavajay tells me, is in internalized violence. Rumors of murders cross generational lines, and violence springs from feelings of mistrust and misplaced grief. *Sik' Ch'aoj* speaks of this dissonance within many Maya communities, which springs from the war's division of families: some members were conscripted into the

14. "Este ensayo trata de hacer una revisión de asumirnos, asumir nuestras identidades y los códigos que usamos para salvaguardarnos. Concretamente estoy hablando de los pueblos mayas como una historia de resistencia y de la cantidad de dispositivos que se han creado y alimentado para salvaguardar la cultura, la tradición, la memoria y la dignidad sobre todo. En términos muy generales el proyecto trata de explorar esos dispositivos en términos de imaginario y cómo de alguna manera también el volcán no

es una metáfora de lo que nosotros sentimos, pensamos y luchamos sino ES LA LUCHA, ES EL SENTIR, nosotros somos esa misma fuerza..." Translation by the author. Salazar Ochoa, "Julio Serrano: 'Ser el Fuego.'" *La Hora*, 16 October 2015. Accessed 1 October 2016. <http://lahora.gt/julio-serrano-ser-el-fuego/>.

15. Traje roughly translates to traditional clothing; Chavajay is Tz'utujil, one of the 21 Maya ethnic groups in Guatemala. The clothing is specific to his community in San Pedro La Laguna.

military and others remained in communities that were massacred by the same military.

In Chavajay's video *Casa Hundida*, also from 2015, an empty *cayuco* bobs in the water that has filled the abandoned frame of a house. The water fills, washes, takes over, smooths, and destroys.

Encuentro

In 2014, Hellen Ascoli made woven, human-scale cocoons, within which visitors to the Paiz Bienal could wrap themselves. On the floor, she installed a woven carpet, where visitors were invited to lie, roll, and rest, while wrapped. The work, *Encuentro*, also included documentation of Ascoli, wrapped, in the hills of Cuchumatanes. "Somehow, I wanted to flatten everything out," she writes to me, "I wanted to feel everything under me... Proprioception—the sense that lets you feel your body—reports to the brain where you are located. So, rolling stimulates that because all your body is in contact with something."¹⁶ The cocoons, she observes, were an extension of skin, a way of expanding the surface we use to touch the things around and outside our bodies. In this case, then, wrapping is a form of touching, an intimacy made by placing two things next to each other, and a way of knowing where you find yourself.

In a recent interview, Morales describes the overlaps he finds between different spaces, both psychological and physical: "There are many territories that intermingle: memory, the body, the places where we live, our histories, what we imagine, space that is ephemerally shared, projects, friendship, pain, desire, ideas, encounters or disagreements."¹⁷ *Encuentro*, of course, is *encounter* in English, and it means to meet with, to contend with, or to come upon something by surprise. When you place things next to each other, they change each other, and they change the possibilities for what surrounds them.

One Stone and the Rain

In Georgia, Serrano and I make a pilgrimage to two outdoor sculptures made in the 1980s by Beverly Buchanan: *Ruins and Rituals* in Macon and *Marsh Ruins* in Brunswick. Both are arrangements of large stones: "They

16. Hellen Ascoli, conversation with the author, 31 August 2016.

17. Reyes Josué Morales García, "Territorios de la Resistencia." *Revista Gimnasia*, 11 December 2015. Accessed 28 November 2016. <https://revistagimnasia.com/2015/12/11/641/>. "Hay muchos

territorios entremezclados: la memoria, el cuerpo, los lugares dónde vivimos, nuestras historias, lo que imaginamos, el espacio compartido efímeramente, los proyectos, la amistad, el dolor, el deseo, las ideas, el encuentro o el desencuentro." Translation by the author.

seem allergic to the kinds of affective attachments charm relies upon; neither pitiable nor picturesque, they are ugly (and not simply so), insistent, craggy,” writes art historian Andy Campbell.¹⁸ The *Marsh Ruins* in Brunswick sit in the Marshes of Glynn State Park, a swampy inlet near a busy road. The stones are overgrown, rough, in a muddy depression filled with spiky plant growth. We push our way down to them and sit there near the water. These are almost invisible sculptures, seemingly forgotten. Serrano places a textile bundle on top of one of them, and we stand for a while, listening. Filled with landscapes that are politically, historically and (for me) personally charged, our journey to find *Marsh Ruins* makes an intuitive kind of sense: these encounters I describe are not simply instances of contemporary artistic practice in Guatemala. Instead, they are a starting point for considering the world and its histories from a vantage point, a conversation, that includes landscape as a participant.

In Serrano’s poem “Paisaje Kárstico” (“Karstic Landscape”), he describes the rain that falls around a stone, “that gathers / and ruins it / and erodes it / and consumes it / and licks it / and makes it mute. . .”¹⁹ This water, this rain of Tuesday or Sunday, the storm of the centuries, however much it changes the stone, does not, cannot, split it, he writes. Maybe this is a way of thinking about the intractability, the impossibility of undoing past violence. Maybe it is a way of seeing the relationship of two things unfold over time. Maybe it is a way of intuiting what encounter can mean, a way of understanding it from the knowledge spoken by stones, by water and fire, carried by wind.

18. Andy Campbell, “‘We’re Going To See Blood On Them Next’: Beverly Buchanan’s Georgia Ruins and Black Negativity.” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29 (2016). Accessed

16 November 2016. doi: 10.20415/rhiz/029.e05

19. Julio Serrano Echeverría, “Paisaje kárstico” (unpublished, 2016). Used with permission. Translation by the author.



1. Jorge de León, *Combustión*, 2012. Video performance.

2. Manuel Chavajay Moralez, *Sik' Ch'aoj*, 2015. Photograph and video performance.



3. Hellen Ascoli, *Encuentro*, 2014. Photo documentation by Alejandro España.

4. Beverly Buchanan's *Marsh Ruins* and textile bundle placed by Julio Serrano, photograph by Laura A. L. Wellen, October 2016.

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