

Mexico Tlatelolco, a space of resistances, two views of its past and present

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ABSTRACT

This is a review of two exhibition proposals on Tlatelolco, Mexico, developed for the 500 years of the fall of the last bastion of Tenochtitlan during the Spanish conquest: *Xaltilolli. Espacio de Artes, Memorias y Resistencias* (*Space of Arts, Memories and Resistances*), at the Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco (CCUT), and *Bienal Tlatelolca*, at the Central de Maquetas. The text presents the contents and objectives of both and reflects on their particularities. It problematizes the concept of *original peoples* and discusses artistic production as a tool for analysis and linkage to a territory.

KEYWORDS

Tlatelolco, resistance, history, contemporary art, Mesoamerica

INTRODUCTION

Tlatelolco is an emblematic place in the history of Mexico; it has had a key role as a space of resistance. Since its foundation, in 1337, *Xaltilolli*, 'place of the round mound of sand', was the result of a dissidence of Tenochtitlan's elite group: "a non-conformist group decided to move from an islet to the north of the newly founded Tenochtitlan" (Matos, 2008)¹. Tlatelolco was the

¹ Editorial translation. All quotes where the original text is in Spanish are also editorial translations.

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most important open-air market of Mesoamerica, a venue to trade multiple goods that had barter as its economic form. It was in Tlatelolco where the last and decisive battle of the Spanish conquest, against the Mexica, took place, on August 13, 1521, when Cuauhtémoc, defeated, was forced to capitulate before Hernan Cortés. Later during the colonial age, the Spaniards edified the temple and the college of Santiago on pre-Hispanic architectonic foundations.



FIGURE 1. *SILO/Semillera de Memorias Tlatelolcas*, Laura Valencia Lozada, 2022 (Photograph: Rodrigo Suárez; courtesy: *Bienal Tlatelolca*, Mexico).

In 1964, President Adolfo López Mateos built the Nonoalco-Tlatelolco housing complex, one of the most important architectonic and social housing projects of Mexican modernity. The area also resonates in the history of contemporary Mexico, as it was where the student movement, with the massacre of students from various schools during a meeting, was repressed by the Mexican State on October 2, 1968, and because the Nuevo Leon, one of its buildings, collapsed during the earthquake of September 19, 1985.

All this history, summarized in a few moments, has given the site its emblematic character. It still is a multifamily building where its inhabitants create meaningful relationships with their territory. After 500 years of the fall of Tlatelolco to the Spanish conqueror, two exhibition initiatives reflect on the site from a contemporary

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perspective: *Xaltitloli. Espacio de Artes, Memorias y Resistencias* (Space of Arts, Memories and Resistances) and *Bienal Tlatelolca*.

XALTITLOLLI. ESPACIO DE ARTES, MEMORIAS Y RESISTENCIAS

El Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco (CCUT), one of the most representative cultural institutions of the area's opened a space to reflect on the history of the locality: *Xaltitloli. Espacio de Artes, Memorias y Resistencias*, a proposal that includes a review of the collection of the Fondo Universitario de Artes de los Pueblos Originarios, *Xaltitloli* (University Fund for the Arts of Original Peoples, of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), which on its website is presented as a "fund centered on conserving, researching, digitizing and disseminating nearly 15,000 works that the University has received from collectors, artists, and intellectuals; and continues growing with works of contemporary artists" (CCUT [Xaltitloli], n. d.).

Installed in a renovated space, the exhibition resorts to various museum setup tools that include explanatory texts, technological consultation devices, and QR codes. Through these materials, visitors get to know archaeological pieces found at the site as well as contemporary artistic projects that deal with Tlatelolco as a space of resistances. The website explains the project as follows:

It offers experiences from Tlatelolco as a paradigmatic example of resistances throughout time, and arts as promoters of memories, particularly from the original peoples of what we call Mexico today. *Xaltitloli* converses with collectives, artists, research groups, and communities to discuss viewpoints, imposed discourses, and dissidences [CCUT (Xaltitloli), n. d.].

Based on these principles, *Xaltitloli* exhibits works connected with Tlatelolco and, taking its history of resistance as an excuse, it proposed a general approximation to "arts of different communities from Mesoamerican past to present, in what we call Mexico today" (CCUT [Xaltitloli], 2021). Thus, the exhibit has two sections: one dedicated to Tlatelolco and another one that gathers art of original peoples.

That collection belongs to the Fondo Universitario de Artes de los Pueblos Originarios. Undoubtedly, the use of the concept of *original peoples* responds to the academic need of grouping distinct collections (in both their origin and content). Encompassing different cultures under this unifying term is a controversial prac-

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tice, questioned by several contemporary thinkers, such as *Nahuatlato* (Nahuatl speaker) Emmanuel Tepal:

Indigenous Mexico is necessarily multiple, and to think about its possible union, or at least its dialog, is a challenge. The series of problems of the unity of the multiple, of the understanding and conversation of over sixty languages is then raised. How to do this if the multiple spectrum demands to be considered in its concrete dimensions, in it is “own” forms (political, cultural, of thought, etc.) from its language? The question of the unity of the multiple, at first, is complex and difficult for obvious reasons [...]. Faced with such difficulty, multiplicity is unified by means of abstractions or terms that typecast the many, and allow exercising power (Foucault). Such unity, moreover, is a response to situations that demand a “solution” of a certain character: political, economic, administrative, academic, etc. As a response to such typecasting, many have the right to break out of the imposition making it possible to criticize a unity that is more fictitious than effectively integrated and recognized [Tepal, 2020, p. 55].

Tepal’s quote centers on the linguistic perspective but can be applied to the cultural one, that is, the one addressed by *Xaltiloli*. The narrative that organizes the second part of this exhibit follows a chronological order, which invisibilizes, even more, the difference of the processes of diverse cultures in very distinct contexts by equalizing moments in different places, as if the become of each community were in parallel.

The section in *Xaltiloli* dedicated to reflect on Tlatelolco presents proposals that problematize the territory from various strategies: some informative ones, such as the impressive model of Nonoalco-Tlatelolco of five of its historical stages (Figure 2); others, besides being reflective, are aesthetic, such as the works of contemporary art developed together with current inhabitants of the multifamily building. In those productions, there is an exchange between *Xaltiloli* and the *Bienal Tlatelolca*; some of the pieces at the CCUT are also part of the *Bienal*, for example *SILLO/Semillera de Memorias Tlatelolcas (Seedbed of Tlatelolcas Memories)* by Laura Valencia Lozada, 2022 (Figure 1); *¿Sobre cuántos pasos caminamos? (On How Many Steps do We Walk?)* by Antonio Bravo, 2021 (Figure 3), and *Cuerpo y trayectoria (Body and Trajectory)* by Balam Bartolomé, 2021.

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FIGURE 2. History of the transformations of Tlatelolco as a social space (model), in Xaltillo, ccut (Photograph: Lucía Sánchez de Bustamante, 2022; courtesy: Archivo Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco, UNAM, Mexico).



FIGURE 3. *¿Sobre cuántos pasos caminamos?*, Antonio Bravo, 2021 (Photograph: Balam Bartolomé; courtesy: *Bienal Tlatelolca*, Mexico).



FIGURE 4. View of *Bienal Tlatelolca* (Photograph: Jorge Guadarrama; courtesy: *Bienal Tlatelolca*, Mexico).



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BIENAL TLATELOLCA

Bienal Tlatelolca is an artistic research and exhibition project designed by Antonio Monroy (Toluca, State of Mexico, 1984) and Balam Bartolomé (Ocosingo, Chiapas, 1975). It has two phases: the first one, regarding research, began in 2019 and was conceptualized as a series of artistic residences, where the invited creators developed projects anchored to the territory of Tlatelolco. The second exhibition phase (from August 13, 2021, to June 5, 2022), called *Una Vasija dentro de un Cántaro (A Vessel within a Pitcher)*, was exhibited in the physical space of the Central de Maquetas—the first store specialized in model materials in Mexico, in operation since 1956—, in a store in the Torre 5 de Febrero, in the second section of Tlatelolco. The *Bienal* conceives the guest artists as *tlacuilos*—a Nahuatl term to name scribes or painters of Mesoamerica—, who were invited with the following premise:

The topic to develop has been the construction and connection of artists with the community and territory they inhabit from a historical perspective, from which collaborations with anthropologists, cooks, biologists, archeologists, and neighbors have arisen. The project is interested in the social, political, and historical facts that have taken place in the area, from the Mesoamerican period to the present day, which has allowed us to gauge the importance of Tlatelolco as a center of social, economic, and cultural exchange that has been built on ruins. Tlatelolco narrates the destruction and reconstruction of Mexico and raises the architecture and construction of a Latin American identity [Bienal Tlatelolca, 2021].

In addition to the artists already mentioned, over 20 guest artists including Dulce Chacón, Isaac Torres, Arturo Hernández Alcázar, Erik Tlaseca, Victoria Núñez Estrada and Luis Rochin (Figure 5) developed on-site projects based on research and interdisciplinary connections. In the productivist dynamics where the contemporary artistic scene unfolds, it is rare for this type of initiatives—which are also healthy and encouraging—to exist, that promote and accompany long-term projects where production is solidly anchored in consistent research processes.

Each piece comprising the *Bienal* presents an approximation to the memory of the place, making use of diverse strategies. For instance, *Esquizos (Ololiuhqui)*, by Dulce Chacón (Figure 6), work inspired by the methodology of the Cruz Badiano Codex, written at the Colegio de la Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, proposes: “Emulating

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FIGURE 5. *Ollin*,
Luis Rochin, 2021
(Photograph: Rodrigo
Prian; courtesy:
Bienal Tlatelolca,
Mexico).



a naturalist, I prepared a log where I described with text and drawings the plants that could be found in green spaces, gardens and public spaces through a process of self-recognition of my herbal knowledge” (Chacón, 2022).

FIGURE 6. *Esquizos*
(*Ololiuhqui*), Dulce
Chacón, 2019-2022
(Photograph: Dulce
Chacón; courtesy:
Bienal Tlatelolca,
Mexico).



On the other hand, the piece *Tormento* (*Torment*), by Balam Bartolomé, recovers tezontle stones from the colonial church of

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FIGURE 7. *Tormento*,
Balam Bartolomé,
2021 (Photograph:
Balam Bartolomé;
courtesy: *Bienal*
Tlatelolca, Mexico).



Many of the works in the *Biennial* are based on an investigation of the history of the site and set a critical link with the current reality. This represents a significant contribution, far from bucolic, folklorizing, essentializing, or exoticizing views of places with history, which deny the current life of these places, with their problems, tensions, networks and exchanges.

CONCLUSIONS

It is interesting to find two parallel exhibition proposals on Tlatelolco as a common territory considering its history, its communities, its symbolic value, and its inhabitants. For both, the history of the place is relevant and, being displayed in the site itself, they underline the importance of rootedness and belonging to it. It is to be celebrated that there are exchanges between two dissimilar entities that were able to collaborate to produce and display pieces for both exhibitions. The complementary nature of these perspectives is enriching.

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However, there are differences in their perspectives: in the case of *Xaltliloli*, its institutional origin meant an unavoidable challenge that, despite its critical intention, built a fictitious homogenizing narrative that invisibilizes the irreducible multiplicity of the resistances it represents. In contrast, the gaze of *Bienal Tlatelolca*, free of schematic categorizations, problematizes the territory in the interplay of its powerful past with the problems and refluxes of a space that is alive and complex in its present.

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