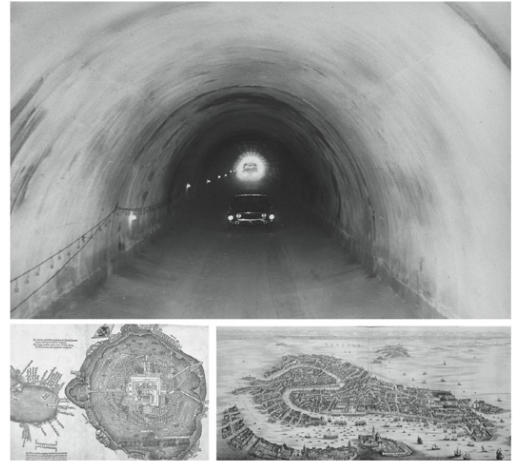


Tania Candiani

Flying Device. Besnier. 1978
(tested on a zero gravity flight)
La Gravedad de los Asuntos 2015

Tania Candiani & Luis Felipe Ortega
Possessing Nature 2015



Much has been said about the geopolitical nature of the alignments of the national pavilions at the Venice Biennale. This year, in the context of 'All the World's Futures', directed by Okwui Enwezor, a significant change has been the highlighting and migration of former 'excluded' pavilions – that many visitors arrive at almost as an afterthought – into the main Arsenale section. No exception to this is the Mexican pavilion, which (along with the Azerbaijan pavilion) also managed to achieve prominent marketing around the city, its distinct blue billboards everywhere. More on this migration later, but one of the main pulls of the Mexican project *Possessing Nature* was the team of collaborators – curator Karla Jasso, artist Luis Felipe Ortega and a rising force in Latin American contemporary art, Tania Candiani.

Many recent advances in contemporary Latin American art, particularly the explosive increase in media art, have been powered by the concept of repurposing reclaimed technologies. Candiani is no exception. Her contribution in Venice was influenced by an extraordinary historical event when the invader Hernán Cortés was fighting a war between Aztec factions, with only a few thousand soldiers and some horses. Mexico City at this time was criss-crossed by a massive system of canals. As in Venice nowadays, the Aztecs relied entirely on these canals for moving around the city, inflicting several defeats on Cortés. Apparently, the wily conquistador decided to hack the system and drain the canals, thus rendering the enemy helpless against the Spaniards, who travelled by horse. This colonial manoeuvre has its recent echoes in the way the forces of neoliberalism are rampant in Mexico and similar countries, privatising or closing state infrastructure everywhere. For example, the privatisation of the Mexican railway system led to the comprehensive closure of the extensive passenger system. Even now, the current government, hand-in-glove with a super-rich developer, is set to drain the city's remaining lake, Texcoco, to build a new airport.

All these issues are addressed by Candiani's participation in the Venice project. One of the artist's main interests is engineering, and she has built an elaborate pumping device for draining the Venice Lagoon in significant quantities and recycling it through the Arsenale in a provocative act of reverse colonialism. She describes this action as 'historical biopsy'. Influenced in her childhood by images from Jules Verne and *Popular Mechanics*, Candiani, daughter of an architect, was given access to power tools in an era when girls were definitely discouraged from pursuing a career in engineering. Born in Mexico City, she became active as a visual poet and writer

in Tijuana, moving in circles like those depicted by Roberto Bolaño in *The Savage Detectives*. Did she see herself as linked to that cocktail of dishevelled feuding poets, 'magical substances' and madness, escaping to the border in a stolen Chevrolet Impala? Of course. In any case, her early involvement in literature paved the way for her later work involving complex intersections between language systems, sound and the logics of technology – what she calls 'sandwich technologies'.

A turning point in her practice, bringing her from literature to visual art, was when in the late 1990s she was invited, as a writer, to take part in 'InSite', one of the first international contemporary projects to take place at the Mexican/US border between Tijuana and San Diego and involving many significant artists, including Vito Acconci, Francis Alÿs and Andrea Fraser. This was an important turning point, moving her towards collaborative community-based performance actions. Working with battered women in a shelter in Tijuana, she devised technologies for self-defence using everyday objects such as buckets and brooms.

She remained working in Tijuana and continued with the theme of repurposing domestic objects as weapons when she was invited to take part in 'Battleground' in El Paso and Juarez at a time when the endemic violence in Juarez was at its most dangerous. Working with students on both sides of the border she engaged, in the words of curator Kerry Doyle, in an 'intimate exploration of the feminine body preparing for or engaged in battle with unseen forces ... protecting her body using common kitchen implements as both weapons and armour'.

Because of the difficulty of taking students from El Paso into the dangerous environment of Ciudad Juarez, the work finally emerged as a virtual performance on an early version of open-source Skype, with participants barricaded in a room on the Juarez side and another 'army' of participants on a hillside

overlooking the militarised US border wearing the pots, pans and brooms of a popular uprising in an impossible but moving protest against the violence fuelled by corruption, movement of capital rather than people and the unwinnable 'war on drugs'.

Turning to her current work, which mainly involves lost technologies that she describes as 'impossible inventions, inventions that get you stuck', Candiani embarked on one of her major participatory works this decade: a magnificent giant organ. Operated by the public via an ancient typewriter in a 17th-century convent in Mexico City (now Laboratorio Arte Alameda), *Five Variations on Phonic Circumstances and a Pause* is described by Karla Jasso as 'the result of scientific investigation that contains a "magic" side that elicits astonishment and desire in spectators'. This work was also shown in Ars Electronica in 2013, winning an award of distinction. An interest in disappearing technologies and craftsmanship was also developed in her recent work with wooden ceildh trumpets in the Scottish highlands as part of the 2014 Glenfiddich artists' programme.

But perhaps the most audacious project by Candiani was that for a Russian zero-gravity flight inspired, believe it or not, by proposed inventions like Edison's anti-gravitation underwear – intended to allow the viewer to see the tops of large paintings 'skied' in crowded salon-style exhibitions. This will be the inspiration for a new project in which she hopes to design a jetpack-style flying jacket with a backyard engineer in Mexico City. In her project in Star City, she decided to re-enact the unsuccessful flight of Besnier, a 17th-century French locksmith. In the exhibition 'Matters of Gravity', curated by Nahum Mantra and Ale De La Puente, now showing at the Polytechnic Museum in Moscow, Candiani is seen, weightless, strapped into an exact replica of the wooden 'flying device' with which Besnier tumbled to his death.

Possessing Nature at the Venice Biennale has, despite an interesting backstory, received mixed reactions. In a large Richard Serra-like structure, the deep sound of rushing water can be heard resonating through the building. To see it properly, one must climb steps overlooking the vast steel structure, where lagoon water flows in what Candiani describes as 'a system of contention and loss'. Videos below superimpose Venice canals and Xochimilco, the sad remains of Mexico City's canal system and now a popular folkloric tourist destination with floating boatloads of wedding parties and mariachi bands almost parodying the grandeur of this ancient Aztec system – not unlike the bobbing vaporettos filled with the nomadic partying art crowd of Venice. The parallels don't end there. When you finally climb to the viewing platform it can be seen that the structure is the shape of a map reflecting the various migrations of the Mexican pavilion in four different incarnations, moving across the city to different locations. This subtlety may well have been lost on the *vernissage* crowds moving around this monstrously sized Biennale. This was the initial premise, but the underlying strength of the basic idea behind re-draining the canals of Mexico and Venice, coupled with the tumultuous exchange of fluids between lagoons, is obscured. That said, Candiani, now 'consecrated' – as they say – by the Biennale, has the vision and ability to continue with her repurposing of the past, fuelled by her intense and poetic research into those lost moments of magic and technology. ■

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installation at the Venice Biennale