

Santiago Borja. Replica

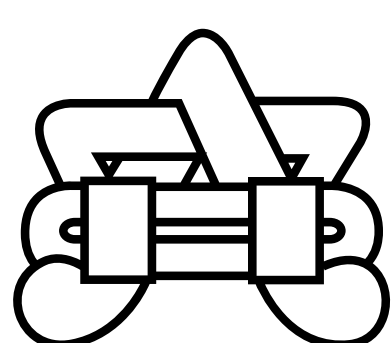
Réplica [Replica] brings together an extensive selection of work by Santiago Borja (Mexico City, 1970) on key issues such as architecture, heritage, and esotericism, that have been constant in his reflections over the last fifteen years. In his work, Borja generates speculative analogies between the system of modern thought and other forms of knowledge that have not only been developed within this logic, but as symptoms of a certain malaise of its supposed rationalism—as in the case of esotericism and even psychoanalysis—or that are definitely alien to it even though it has been nourished by them—as has happened with the cosmologies of what is generalized as “Indigenous peoples.”

The projects that are displayed in the different spaces reveal particular connections that open up possibilities for rethinking established epistemologies. By placing modern architecture with its universalist aspirations in relation to forms of thought and tasks that speak from other ecologies, Borja proposes actions that allow us to permeate the limits and divisions that have been fundamental to Western knowledge. In the same way, by visiting constructions that precede modernity, he can observe the positions that are generated from different points of view and diverse sensibilities.

Borja often collaborates with people from different fields and his projects are often conceived for specific places, outside of art centers and museums: Sigmund Freud’s house in London, Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye in Poissy (France), or Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s reconstructed Pavilion in Barcelona, among other buildings. That is why this exhibition is largely an exercise in translation that seeks to display processes in very specific areas in a space that is alien to its initial form. For many of them, this is the first time they have been exhibited in this format.

The notion of heritage, especially intangible heritage, has accompanied Borja as an open question in recent years, leading him to inquire into the values that are built through the policies that establish it and the contradictions that are often embedded in their origin. The title of the exhibition, then, points to the values and ideological instrumentalization that adhere to material culture and its multiple manifestations. Replication, in its two senses, as counter-argument or response, but also as copy or reproduction, alludes to a critical dialogue that suspends the modern values attached to the notion of originality, both material and symbolic.

Catalina Lozano
Curadora / Curator



Museo Amparo

Graphic Material

This series of works are posters that Borja has created for several of his projects and today constitute a set in which concepts from different structures of thought are graphically displayed. They are the result of abstracting and synthesizing several elements in a singular image.

Freud

Divan, free-floating attention piece is an intervention on the orientalist divan of Sigmund Freud, founder of psychoanalysis. The Persian tapestries that Freud chose to cover his divan were replaced by Borja with other weavings with Wixaritari motifs, woven by women from that community and also in Oaxaca. Freud's orientalist taste evokes in part his interest in "non-Western" cultures, which he expressed in his book Totem and Taboo (1913). However, his writings reveal a way of thinking influenced by European civilizing prejudices that generalized as "primitive" all peoples who did not function under Western scientific paradigms.

Borja proposed this collaboration to a Wixárika group, following his interest in the resistance that these people have exercised against evangelization and in the importance that, like Freud, they give to dreams. By introducing these textiles into Freud's museumized working environment, Borja problematizes the psychoanalyst's primitivist ideas and engages with the specificity of the relationship between mind and world that the Wixárika people express in textile patterns. In this relationship between the psyche of the observer and the world, the former is integrated into the latter, whereas scientific thought is abstracted as an observing subject that separates itself from what it considers its object of observation.

Chiapas / Operador totémico

In these works, Borja continues to explore the convergences and divergences of different forms of thought, some of them founded in modern thought, and others which remain on its margins.

On the one hand we find drawings and models that belong to his project Operador totémico, presented in the Lobby of Museo Amparo, in which Borja gives a third dimension to a diagram elaborated by the structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss to explain symbolic frameworks of kinship.

In a second group of pieces, Borja continues his collaboration with a group of weavers from the partnership El Camino de Los Altos in Bautista Chico, Chamula, Chiapas, with whom he made the piece that was presented in the Mexican Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2022. These collaborative weavings, made specifically for this exhibition, propose, on the one hand, ways of working in which the weavers have the possibility of expressing themselves outside the norms imposed by the handicraft market. On the other they delve into an interest in exploring these objects as an active part of an ecosystem in which an organism (human, animal, vegetable, or other) and the environment in which it develops are not so easily differentiated and influence each other in a very complex network of relationships. Thus, Borja questions the notions of custom and heritage, opening them up to constant renewal and placing them in a dialectical relationship with what is given to us at birth.

The topographical model of Bautista Chico is made with candles from San Juan Chamula; each color corresponds to a cardinal point and a specific energy within the Chamula cosmology. (Green is wellbeing and good growth, and represents the south; yellow is rebirth and represents the north; black is death and has a negative connotation, and represents the west; and white is peace, the positive, and represents the east.)

Architecture

Architecture is one of the interests that runs through the work of Borja—who was initially trained in this discipline. He has carried out several projects in specific places emblematic of modern architecture, such as Richard Neutra’s house in Los Angeles (Fort Da, 2010), Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye in Poissy, France (Sitio [Site], 2011), Mies van der Rohe’s reconstructed Pavilion in Barcelona (Suprasensible [Suprasensitive], 2015), or the Sonneveld House in Rotterdam (Blavatsky Observatory, 2016). The drawings, photographs, models, videos, and other elements presented here are exercises in the translation of site-specific interventions into the space of the Museo Amparo. Between documentation and art object, they gather diverse temporalities in which Borja has sought to link modern architecture to esotericism, as in the case of the Suprasensible and Blavatsky Observatory projects, in which the artist collaborated with The Theosophical Society to affect the iconic spaces of supposedly internationalist and functionalist architectures (universalist in its most Western sense), pointing to the esoteric discourses that underlie them. Likewise, highlighting its condition as a deterritorialized and timeless cultural icon, Borja intervened Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye in his project Sitio. Using a term from archeology, Aby Warburg called “anachronistic contemporaneity” through the superimposition of two palapas and a series of textiles.

Casa Grande

Interested in the notion of heritage and the political implications that decisions related to it entail, Borja explored the site known as Casa Grande (“Siwañ Wa’a Ki” or “Sivan Vahki” in the O’odham language), the first place to be considered a nationally protected monument in the United States. This site has different implications for the different groups involved: Native peoples who claim it as their own, park rangers, state or federal administrations, archaeologists, and anthropologists.

In Everything Falls into Place When It Collapses, Borja attempts to respond to these different visions of the site, questioning the conservation mechanisms imposed on it and the interests that run through it. Apparently abandoned by its original builders since the fifteenth century, the Casa Grande Ruins National Monument was built in 1932 with a structure superimposed on it as a mechanism to protect its physical structure. Borja questions what is really being protected by such strategies when knowledge about the site is so limited and communication with contemporary Native American peoples so full of paradoxes.

Text / Textile

The adobe wall presented in this room evokes, on the one hand, the Mayan temples and, on the other, the Ennis House by American architect Frank Lloyd Wright. However, Borja considers it more of an artifact than a sculpture since with its geometric patterns it is more of a graphic textile than a wall. Textile architecture was a construction method developed by Wright that consisted of concrete blocks stamped with Mayan motifs that were “woven” with rods.

The words text and textile have a common origin in the Latin texere, a theme explored in the works gathered here. The tapestries Cosmic Tautology I & II, handwoven in Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, are composed of nine squares. Their composition is based on the work Red Square, White Letters (1962) by American artist Sol LeWitt, but also on Black Series II by another American artist, Frank Stella. However, Borja also introduces Mayan motifs in order to interrogate the nature of abstraction and language. In their relationship to architecture and text, textiles are coded systems as well as mechanisms that are connected to communication.

Santiago Borja

Individuo como especie, 2022

Estructura de madera pintada a mano

Operador totémico, 2018

Tapete de lana de forma irregular

Textil hecho por Jerónimo Hernández

(Low Dain, Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca)

Operador totémico [Totemic Operator] is a wooden structure superimposed on a set of wool textiles juxtaposing traditional Mexican sarape designs and modernist motifs, both from the early twentieth century. The textile patterns function as a kind of binary code or language that intermingles Mexican and European traditions, which are in turn articulated by a wooden structure based on the “totemic operator” of French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Thus, the Operador totémico converts a two-dimensional diagram representing a symbolic kinship structure into an architectural structure.

Textiles can be considered the first forms of architecture, but they also have a foundational relationship with text as a code of communication, a narrative tool, something that interests Borja and is present in several of his projects.

Operador totémico literally links anthropological structuralism to architecture, reinterpreting the diagram as an architectural project. The accompanying textiles could be understood as the cultural genetic material underlying the structure. If the carpet is a code, the structure contains the possible force represented by each individual flow that deforms it.