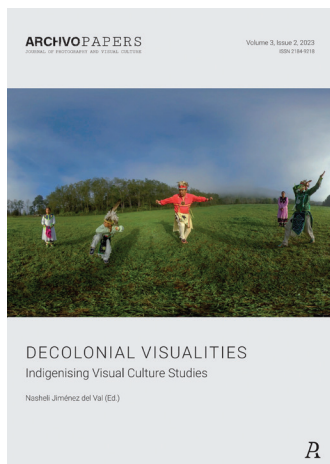




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ESSAY

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ARTICLE

DIGITISING THE *FORTALEZA DE LA MUJER MAYA* ARCHIVE: IMAGES, POSSIBILITIES, AND RESPONSIBILITIES. NOTES ON CATALOGUING A LIVING CULTURAL PROCESS

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Abstract

This article will present some notes on the possibilities and limits of archiving or cataloguing living cultural processes based on the experience of digitising the photographic archive *Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya*. Latin American visual culture studies and the functioning of the association based on dialogic and collaborative learning have been our paths to carry out this study.

Keywords: Archive, *Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya* A. C., Decoloniality, Digitisation, Latin American Visual Studies

To Isabel Juárez Espinosa, *in memoriam*,

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the archival turn, referenced in countless projects such as exhibitions, congresses, workshops, publications, and conferences, among many other formats that monopolise its representation and production, has reached an unusual prominence in all cultural spheres, including the arts. Within and beyond institutional apparatuses, approached critically or uncritically, we could argue that the archive is a clear trend in today's society of information and image. This "way of doing" is so recurrent and deployed so often that its power to produce knowledge in the field of visual cultures is often taken for granted, and it is therefore reduced to a taxonomic category or, at best, just another metaphor. Why do we archive, what do we archive, how do we do it, for whom or to what end? These are some of the initial questions we must responsibly ask ourselves before beginning our research if we do not want to deactivate this concept and empty it of meaning.

This article will present some notes on the possibilities and limits of archiving or cataloguing living cultural processes as based on the experience of the digitisation of the photographic archive at *Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya* (FOMMA). This gesture is part of a broader research project in the field of Latin American visual studies situated at the crossroads between academia and decolonial feminist activism.¹ What communicative and creative archiving manoeuvres favour the dynamics of interaction between academia and wider communities? What strategies can we use when cataloguing or archiving artistic projects and collaborative cultural practices in specific contexts or on specific issues? To what extent is digitisation useful to all actors involved? What complexities arise during its implementation and how can we deal with them? What aspects should we be careful of throughout the process? And in this sense, what does it mean to archive with *response-ability*?² These questions, which emerge from the research itself, will serve as routes for thinking and imagining new ways of conjugating the verb "to archive".

Regarding methodological tools, we have analysed the unpublished photographic archive at FOMMA, an archive that has been compiled and organised in albums for over a decade. Our approach from the perspective of Latin American visual studies has provided us with a richer standpoint that allows us to situate ourselves in the complex territory that comprises FOMMA as a self-managed civil association. For, as Esther Gabara explains, visual culture studies in Latin America have had one noteworthy characteristic since their beginnings: the interweaving of art history, anthropology, and sociology.³

Concurrently, the very functioning of an association based on dialogic and collaborative learning through an exchange of knowledge and skills that goes beyond hegemonic disciplinary frameworks has signposted the path to follow:

participatory action understood, in this specific case, as a type of collaborative and committed exchange between academia and Indigenous Mayan women's "other societies in movement".⁴

THE LATENT MEMORY OF FORTALEZA DE LA MUJER MAYA A. C.: BETWEEN FEMINISM AND POLITICAL ECOLOGY

I became acquainted with FOMMA's work in 2012 during a doctoral research stay at the Centro de Investigaciones de Estudios de Género, UNAM. Specifically, I was interested in their theatrical work as playwrights and actresses who found a psychological cure for themselves and other Indigenous Mayan women through popular community theatre. I kept track of them through their website and Facebook, where I became aware of their eco-social vocation.⁵ It was not until 2018 when I came across anthropologist Susannah Ray Daniels' ethnographic text *Mayan Women Transforming Identity through Theatre*⁶ that I learned of the existence of a photographic archive that she helped to compile as a volunteer in 2003. When I wrote to Daniels expressing my interest, she told me to keep in mind that these were amateur photographs of all of FOMMA's activities, both within and beyond the organization. Subsequently, she put me in touch with its director, Isabel Juárez, and a few months later I went to visit them in order to meet the members personally, confirm that the archive still existed, what its contents were, and what state it was in, as well as to present my project in depth so that we might discuss establishing research alliances. Finally, in 2021 in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were able to put our plan into action: to tell the story of the association's history through the photographs they produced, to bring to light its eco-social vocation, and to highlight the decolonising, re-appropriating, re-territorialising, and meaning-producing power to which the images and the archive itself contribute.⁷

The founders of FOMMA are Isabel Juárez Espinosa (a Tzeltal woman from Aguacatenango) and Petrona de la Cruz (a Tzotzil woman from Zinacantán), both single mothers when they settled in San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Their friendship was consolidated during their work at the civil association *Sna jtz 'ibajom*, or "the house of Mayan writers" in Tzotzil, which had been exclusively composed of male members until then. This experience helped them acquire knowledge in dramaturgy, and they began to write their first stories based on the multiple forms of violence and oppression they had experienced in their lives, as well as those endured by other women in their communities. Thanks to their work at *Sna 'ibajom*, they were soon acknowledged in the literary world as the first female Indigenous playwrights in Mexico. However, *Sna 'ibajom* refused to perform their plays.

It was this "impossibility of telling" which led them to create a travelling theatre group in 1991 that toured throughout their communities. Then, in 1993, coinciding with the uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN), and with the support of Miriam Laughlin

and Carlota Duarte they decided to establish FOMMA, an association comprised of only women. Later, Juana María Ruiz Ortiz (Tzotzil woman from Chenalhó), Faustina López Díaz (Tzotzil woman from Huixtán), María Pérez Santiz (Tzotzil woman from Paraje Chicumtantic, San Juan Chamula), Francisca Oseguera Cruz (Tzotzil woman from La Florecilla), and Victoria Oseguera Cruz (Tzotzil woman from La Florecilla), and Victoria Patishtan Gómez (Tzotzil woman from Paraje Katixtik, San Juan Chamula) joined the association, coming down from the highlands of Chiapas, in the Sierra Madre, to the wetlands and riverbanks of the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Today, only Francisca and María remain in the association. The popular community theatre group and the theatre training workshops, as well as their contents and performance, formed an interdependent unit that enabled the development of both aspects of the association [Figure 1].



Figure 1.

From left to right, Margarita (student), Francisca Oseguera, Faustina López (student and then teacher), Petrona de la Cruz, Juna María Ruiz, Lucía Méndez (student and then teacher), Isabel Juárez, and María Pérez. Fotografía, 10 x 15 cm. Courtesy of the FOMMA Archive. Album 4, 1996.

Because they deployed autonomy as a guiding principle, they were able to write and tell their stories and those of other women who had asked them to write or narrate them. At the same time, theatrical practice, both through the content of the plays and their performance, generated new horizons of meaning that unbuilt established hegemonic imaginaries and their stereotypical representations. On the one hand, it allowed them to acknowledge themselves, to become aware of internalised violences that had taken the form of ongoing subordination, by remembering, testifying, and acting out past and present histories; on the other hand, it created new narratives based on imagination and desire. This working methodology is what made it possible to overcome trauma but also to build a critical agency in their own image that strengthened their position as social actors, the evolution of which is tacitly observed in the archive images [Figure 2].

This decolonising practice is inextricably linked to the place where the FOMMA members were born, where they grew up, and where the association is based: the San Cristóbal de las Casas basin. It is a territory that has favoured the millenary settlement of communities by waters of a recent past that has gathered over hundreds and thousands of years and has, at least partially, codified the past in its present structure and activity. This fragment of information is called “ecological memory” by Western knowledge. Part of this memory can remain latent and be expressed or activated in the future; part of it is retained in the active processes that originated in the past and are projected into the future. It is retained in the landscape, in the climate, in the land, in the air, in the water, in communities of human and non-human organisms, in the body. Using the language of biology, we could say that it is the historical component of their resilience.

Accordingly, the latent memory that inhabits FOMMA is intrinsically relational. It is radical not only given the construction of its historicity, but also for the way in which they have imagined and put into practice their ways of doing and seeing the world, among which is the creation of the archive. Based on the precept of *lekil kuxlejal* or Good Mayan Living, it implies a profound acknowledgment of the wholeness of existence as renewed through the practice of caring for human and non-human life. At the same time, it is a horizon of struggle⁸ which has led to the production of “ecological manoeuvres of re-existence,”⁹ i.e. creative practices that sustain life on a daily basis in defence of its territories: body, home, land, and community. The long memory of colonisation, internal colonialism, struggles, and re-existences are incorporated into their life experiences: discrimination within and outside their communities, the failures of numerous indigenist plans carried out over a century by different state governments, as well as by transnationals, international agencies, and NGOs from the global North in collusion with the State. They have undergone the imposition of development policies that have not taken them into account or have instrumentalised them in an essentialist way as goods or resources, forcing them to accept policy that is alien to their needs or interests, ignoring their knowledge or implementing cognitive extractivism, dispossessing and displacing entire communities and peoples from their ecosystems, devouring their lands and bodies.

With this discussion, I am in no way trying to romanticise or victimise either Indigenous cultures or Mayan women. Proof of this is that FOMMA advocates the opposite. As actresses, playwrights, and social agents, their work consists of creating a counter-hegemonic visuality through a pedagogy of care in the community that intersects gender, ethnicity, class, cultural identity, nationality, and their experience with nature in complex ways. They do so from a decolonial gaze that is both material and symbolic, exercised through the body, but also through hearing, taste, touch, smell, and orality. It is a practice that exceeds Western “ocularcentrism”, producing knowledge from the everyday because, as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui argues, “there cannot be a discourse of decolonisation, a theory of decolonisation, without a decolonising practice.”¹⁰

LEARNING TO THINK WITH AND AGAINST VISUALITY FROM THE SITUATED EXPERIENCE OF FOMMA

Approaching an archive with *response-ability* implies asking ourselves where it comes from, who created it, what are its silences and its possibilities, as well as the limits it presents. It means thinking about how we imagine what we know and how we know it, which institutions validate that knowledge, and how they do so.

Underlying these questions we encounter centuries of philosophical positivism and Eurocentric scientific naturalism based on empirical evidence, reason, and logic, which have determined how to name, classify, categorise, and cohere all that exists in the world, both human and non-human. But these taxonomies and codifications are never innocent, never harmless; on the contrary, they are always self-interested and involve, to use Bruno Latour's words, operations of reduction and purification.¹¹

If we delve into the world of colonial archives, the production of knowledge through the practice of archiving constituted in itself a technology of government where political, economic, religious or intellectual authorities decided what should be preserved and would—or would not—be worthy of conserving at each specific moment in history. An archive is the collection of traces or vestiges invested with certainty, proof or true fact.

With the arrival of the new nation-states, the reproduction of an internal colonialism exercised by *criollo* elites continued. Categories, hierarchies, and cultural distinctions were reproduced in post-colonial archival practices and their national archives, as well as in disciplined knowledge, sites of the imaginary that legitimised discourses of power and control with scarce objectivity. After all, the etymology of the term “archive” should not be overlooked: it comes from the Latin *archivum*—residence of the magistrate—and the Greek *arkhe*—to order or govern.

Joaquín Barriendos coined the term “coloniality of seeing” to indicate that coloniality is also inscribed in the gaze since it reproduces and legitimises the colonial matrix, thereby functioning as an instrument of patriarchal-capitalist domination. This means that Western society's ways of seeing, its cognitive and perceptive codes of representation, and its cultural, historical, and epistemic values were imposed as a visual regime which had a radical effect on the territories and bodies of others.¹² Thus, the relationship between visibility and power was configured as constitutive of subjectivity, collective imaginaries, forms of representation, and the construction of stereotypes. This hegemonic visibility continues to be transmitted through different technologies and mechanisms, including photography, which since the mid-19th century has been used as a classificatory tool of the naturalist scientific method, and was conceived by 19th century modernity as a visual trace of reality and memory.

In the particular case of Mexico, as Deborah Dorotinsky has shown in several of her studies, the photography of Indigenous groups has been, practically from the beginning, a fundamental part of Mexican photographic history. These are images disseminated in different graphic media that constructed and consolidated

a homogeneous imaginary associated with the indigenist policies that would endure in the official discourse of the 20th century.¹³

These imageries persist in the present, upheld by a cultural economy which, far from diluting prejudices and archetypes, continues to legitimise them and reproduce a hierarchical order of existence. They are fixed images that perpetuate Indigenous cultures and their cosmovisions as a folkloric reduction anchored to a remote past and, therefore, as a resource subject to the logic of merchandise or entertainment.

Hence, Nicholas Mirzoeff invites us to learn to think “with and against visibility”, against and through images, insofar as they are part of our shared experience of the world. In fact, there is a counter-history of visibility that opposes visibility’s complicity with authority: “the right to look”.¹⁴ This is a popular counter-visibility that emerges to claim its autonomy from hegemonic visibility. It does not simply consist of a different way of seeing things but rather of counter-visualisation “manoeuvres” carried out to disarticulate the visual strategies of the hegemonic system, such as, in this case in point, the FOMMA archive.

All these issues have been key to our work. Archiving constructs our lives, has effects on our reality, and shapes our particular gaze and our collective imaginaries. Working with the members of FOMMA and their photographic archive, which they had not accessed for years, has allowed us to critically approach a structure that has determined almost everything that constitutes and troubles us: colonialism, racism, patriarchy, homophobia, gender, sexuality, memory, and the body. But it also allows us to pinpoint and identify the conditions of possibility that shaped it and, in doing so, to create our own ways of approaching the archive and its images: through listening, oral tradition, affection, and mutual care. Accordingly, throughout this project we have understood visibility in a broad sense, not limited only to the image, as Marta Cabrera explains:

The implications of these new ways of interrogating images paradoxically supersedes the space of the images themselves, opening up an interesting terrain for inter- and trans-disciplinary inquiry to include new questions about the role of the spectator, the gaze as a historically situated fact imbued by relations of power, the apparatuses of vision and their multiplication in the space of everyday life, the practices of seeing, invisibility and concealment, surveillance and panopticism, and the ways in which the image is untethered from its two-dimensional surface to inhabit screens, spaces, bodies, etc., thus involving the other senses and constructing complex sensory experiences.¹⁵

ON THE EXPERIENCE OF ARCHIVING A LIVING CULTURAL PROCESS WITH LIVING INDIGENOUS MAYAN WOMEN

In order to remain mindful throughout the whole process of accessing an archive, one must approach it by reflecting on one’s expectations and the meaning of the project at hand, which one must be as familiar with as possible. This includes



knowing the interests and needs of the association, its self-management policy, the activities they have developed, the plays represented, the life history of its members, their worldview and culture, the history of the place, the territory, and the type of socialisation that takes place there, among other aspects. I did this exercise in the knowledge that we would only really get to know each other once we established face-to-face relationships. However, the prior research that I conducted gave me hints on ways to establish a dialogue with the FOMMA members, thereby seeking to create alliances and respectfully negotiate my entry into their living space.

Yet you can never anticipate what is going to happen. I remember the first time I met Isabel. I was struck by her presence and her circumspect manner. It wasn't until I told her my personal story that the conversation and the listening started to flow. I imagined that, after thirty years of experience, they are quite careful about who they let into their house, with all that this entails.

When we set out on this journey, none of us were experts in archival work (nor are we now), but that gave us the advantage of not taking anything for granted. Embarking on a situated, collaborative project meant being open to change, to tacit processes, and to relational nuances. In other words, the biggest challenge has been not so much the capacity to carry out the project, but the ability to sustain a shared dialogue where the contributions of all of us are brought into play, as well as the ability to readjust or reconvene throughout the process. This malleability does not mean an absence of rigour in the process, nor does it imply a lack of responsibility on my part. In fact, the first thing we did was plan the objectives, the people involved and their expectations, as well as the interlocutors, that is, those who the project was aimed at beyond ourselves, what knowledge, material, economic, and human resources we had, the places and times, the formats of visibility or modes of representation. However, as we describe below, the content of the project inevitably changed over time.

Figure 2. [left]

Representation of the play *Sueño de un mundo al revés* [*Dream of an Upside-Down World*]. Photograph, 10 x 15 cm. Album 5, 1997. Courtesy of the FOMMA Archive.

Figure 3. [right]

Sonia From left to right, Isabel Juárez, Belén Romero and Francisca Oseguera. At the FOMMA House Theatre. Digital photography taken by Francisca's mother, Clementina Ruiz. July of 2022.

The FOMMA archive is housed in a small bookcase in the computer room, organised in albums. The idea of creating it came from Miriam Laughlin, who knew the collection was originally stored in boxes and arranged in envelopes with their negatives. It began to be put together in 2003 by Victoria Patishtan along with Susannah Ray Daniels, who would ask the other members to find information about the event, the place or the play being performed. The support of Carlota Duarte, director of the Archivo Fotográfico Indígena, was crucial because, as Isabel told me, she had given them a camera ten years earlier so that they could work on their photography. However, they were very clear that their vocation, their choice of expression/struggle was drama and theatre. Even so, the use of the camera helped them to record everything that happened, and it became part of every activity.

The compartmentalised laminated albums, which were already common in the 1980s, were numbered and arranged by year, and contained analogue photographs, mostly in colour, from 1993 to 2007. Each album contained a control sheet with instructions for its organisation and an index arranged by numbered events which corresponded to a page number and to the negatives roll. The same references were included on the back of the photographs in biro. An important point to mention is that the authorship of the images is collective, as they have decided to attribute them in a way that is coherent with the vision of the association. They are not anonymous because, although they do not remember exactly who took each of them, they do know that they were all taken by FOMMA members or volunteers.

Our first task was to photograph the archive space, the layout of the albums, and their interiors. In the albums, we found images of rehearsals and theatrical performances, mask making, costumes and scenery, celebrations of Children's Day, Mother's Day, pre-weddings, FOMMA anniversaries, diploma awards, training courses, meetings with other national and international Indigenous women's organisations, the construction of the house, and trips, among other things. To me, they seemed like personal albums in the sense that Martha Langford attributes to the term, as they deal with "a concrete model of family or community and are situated in it."¹⁶ The most noteworthy particularity of these albums lies in the fact that it is an archive of non-Zapatista Indigenous Mayan women constructed by them in which they are the protagonists on their own terms.

The first contingency we encountered when we started working was that Blanca Olivia Ortiz, communication, library, and archive coordinator, left the organisation during the pandemic, then left San Cristóbal altogether, and there has been no way of communicating with her. On examining the albums, we noticed that some events did not match the index on the control sheet; they were out of order and many photographs or their negatives were missing. There were amendments and erasures. This indicated that they had been neglected for many years. Many photographs had been taken out for exhibitions, press publications, loans to researchers, etc., and some were never returned.

Our working method included semi-structured interviews which simultaneously, thanks to our daily coexistence, became improvised conversations through the act of

what Martha Langford terms “recounting the album” or, better yet, of confabulating in an orality shared with its makers, where the visuality and materiality of the analogue images correlates with a narration of memory, testimony and recollection, as seen in Figure 3. The latent memory contained in the archive is now the memory of Isabel, Francisca, and Mari. A memory that palpates, that expresses, activates, and embodies. This exercise of telling, but also of allowing oneself to be told, *Ayibel smelol*, Tzotzil for “learning to pay attention, to listen”, comes into play.

Carlos Lenkersdorf, in his book *Aprender a escuchar. Mayan-Tojolabal teachings* (2008), tells us that “learning to listen implies the conjunction of two attitudes: on the one hand, to stop conceiving of the word as the property of the speaker, and on the other hand, to listen with the heart in order to receive the word of the other and build an ‘us’.”¹⁷ This is where, in my situated experience, I can see two indissoluble actions that have enabled us to put this project into practice: getting close to the voice of others and then learning to listen, to be listeners. These paths have enabled us, especially in the case of my learning process, to imagine from “lo parejo [being equal]”,¹⁸ as they taught me. This leads us to the concept of complementarity, of “emparejarse o estar parejas [pairing or being even]” that is expressed in the “us”, where there is no top or bottom. The “nosotrificación [making-us]” does not entail a homogenisation, as it does not diffuse individuality or the disparity of views, feelings or opinions. Rather, each of us has a way of thinking, a task, and a specific role to contribute to the commons.

It follows that the gaze we carry into this archive, which already activates a deliberate counter-visuality, is also consciously and intentionally decolonising. It invites us to read and analyse previously unnoticed aspects due to the visualisation of the images it brings together, thereby helping us reinforce this intentionality, as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui has suggested. But, simultaneously, it adds a dimension of *response-ability* that responds to links of inclusion, not of subjugation.

I remember images of several Tzotzil women dancing during the first presentation of diplomas for a bilingual literacy workshop. I asked Francisca what dance it was. Then she joined in and started dancing to show me that they were different dances, the *bolonchón* and the *zapateado*. But a particular series of images, which I was reviewing with Francisca two months after her son died of Covid, comes to mind. In them, her daughter Pilar appears in the background coming down some stairs dressed in white during a performance of the play *La Migración* (1995) [Figure 4]. Then the tone of our conversation changed. Francisca began to tell me about her life since childhood, and that is how we spent that morning. When we went back home, I told Isabel what had happened and she said she was glad because “Francisca had not been able to open up before then”.



Figure 4.

Presentation of the play *La Migración* [Migration]. From left to right, Francisca Oseguera, María Pérez and Isabel Juárez. FOMMA House. Photograph 10 x 15 cm. Album 3, 1995. Courtesy of the FOMMA Archive.

RETURNING THE GAZE BY CONFABULATING WITH FINGERS: DIGITISING

One aspect that I consider radical in collaborative projects is the ethics of the relationships established throughout the collaboration. While the key to an “ethics of sustainability of life” in collaborative projects between academia and activism on living cultural processes is trust and mutual support, we must also take into account the unequal power relations that arise, as we are agents with asymmetrical social acknowledgment. For this reason, from the very beginning I committed to offering something in return to my collaborators which would consist of producing a joint publication, fanzine-style, with accessible language, that could be disseminated by the community, and even be redefined or reused by them. However, the precarious situation that the association is going through, the age of its members, and the concern that the analogue archive might deteriorate or disappear led us to consider the possibility of digitalising it. This led us to evaluating the limits and possibilities that we were going to encounter.

After duly consulting with the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas at UNAM (IIE), I offered to digitise the archive through the Institute’s platform so that it could be accessed online, which in turn would redirect us to FOMMA’s website. FOMMA accepted enthusiastically, facilitating the whole process without intervening or setting any particular conditions. In fact, a collaboration agreement has been signed between the two parties, which is linked to two fundamental lines of the IIE’s Institutional Development Plan in relation to the Research Programme in Art History and Visual Culture: 1) community engagement catering to current social issues and emergencies, especially in defence of human rights and gender equality, and 2) the documentation of cultural heritage in Mexico.

At first glance, this might appear to be a strategy of institutionalisation that undermines FOMMA's principle of autonomy and self-management. However, it is clear to us that we are deploying a tactic to gain access to channels of wider dissemination. During a brief discussion on digitalisation that I held with the FOMMA members, I mentioned the work of Brazilian geographer Carlos Porto Gonçalves, who affirms that "there is no absolute autonomy. All autonomy is dependent. Every living being simultaneously has holes in its body (its eyes, its nostrils, its ears). Never, no community, and no place is or will ever be absolutely autonomous."¹⁹ To which Isabel replied: "everything is in complementary opposites, like night and day."

On this basis, the work changed radically. In the first place, it was crucial to be especially careful when it came to respecting the format and the organisation of each analogue album according to events, as well as maintaining an effective acknowledgment of collective authorship, among other aspects. Getting down to work and starting to rearrange all the materials was an arduous task because, as I mentioned above, it had been years since they had accessed the archive, and every decision, no matter how trivial it seemed, required consensus.

On one occasion when I was working with Mari, there was a muddle with a series of images of two early plays on personal and environmental care: *La Familia Rasca Rasca* [*The Scratchy Scratch Family*] (1995) and *El Sueño de Telex* [*Telex's Dream*] (1995). The plays had been presented several times in various communities and towns throughout Chiapas, but there was no indication of which images corresponded to which place. Little by little, Mari attempted to decipher it through the clothes people were wearing or the landscape and, once this was accomplished, we decided to make a note so as not to forget. Then Mari told me to write it in pen on the back of the photographs, and I replied that it was best not to alter the pictures, to which she replied: "but I do want to". In the end, we agreed to write it in pencil.

The days and hours of work had to adapt to our daily commitments. Due to the pandemic, financial resources were no longer available. FOMMA lacked running water and internet, and its members had to find outside jobs that took up most of their time. Moreover, according to the conditions of my postdoctoral fellowship, I was limited to forty-five days a year for fieldwork, and all travel expenses, as well as the remuneration for FOMMA members' cultural work or the purchase of materials, have been out-of-pocket. That said, we had to make significant changes in the way we worked, especially given the new direction of the project, our time, and resources. While I digitised on the portable scanner and drew up new control sheets, Isabel, Francisca, and Mari re-ordered the albums, remembering events that had not been documented, and the places and times that had been omitted [Figure 5].

For this reason, daily care among us became the true sustenance of our project. Isabel welcomed me into her house from the very first day but, when she fell ill, Francisca invited me to stay at FOMMA. This allowed me to extend my working



Figure 5

Working on the digitisation of the FOMMA Archive. From left to right, Isabel Juárez, Francisca Oseguera, and María Pérez. Photograph 10 x 15 cm. Belén Romero. 2022.

hours to twelve. We shared our *itacate* [lunchbox], cooked, and ate at the house, all of which led to a much more intimate relationship that further consolidated our affective alliance.

However, our lack of experience and fatigue led us to commit many mistakes, which meant we had to revise the whole order of the digitisation, the coding of the images, and the new control sheets. Before beginning the digitising, we had to reconstruct the analogue archive, and time was pressing. This meant that we had to carry out two tasks simultaneously. Each discrepancy in the analogue archive had repercussions on the digital archive and vice-versa. It was a work of reciprocal

construction.

In December 2022, with just two weeks left to finish, Francisca found a box with some 800 photographs, more than half of them from 1993 to 1998, and the rest from 2008 onwards; the latter were prints of digital photographs. Following our amazement at this new find, I stayed up all night working to organise the new images. On the one hand, we were happy to have found them, but on the other, we were running out of time as I was due to return to Spain in February. In the end, I had to spend the full month of January at FOMMA.

The analogue archive consists of 27 albums, 1908 pages, 342 events, and 5374 photographs, all accompanied by their digital back-up. All of them are numbered consecutively, unlike the originals in which each album was independent and started with a new enumeration. Those albums that were badly damaged were also replaced and restored. The new control sheets were similar to the original ones. We maintained the organisation by events, but each photograph was assigned a correlative number that coincides with the digital code. These are essential for producing the metadata. I am currently working on them and continue to consult with the FOMMA members.

One of the issues on which we agreed to take the greatest care is to not reproduce colonial or hetero-patriarchal language and vocabularies, such as “Indian” or “race”, in order to prevent racist and sexist stereotypes and prejudices. We also avoided using the generic masculine [for gendered nouns in Spanish] in the descriptions of the photographs by imagining new collective, abstract or unmarked terms.²⁰

We are aware that the digitisation of the FOMMA archive gives rise to a new archive with a set of characteristics, possibilities, and limits and, therefore, it reconfigures the representation of the analogue archive. But this did not imply for any of us that we lose autonomy, rights or authorship. Nor does the archive become static, closed or an artefact of visibility that makes it docile and controllable. On the contrary, we understand it as an opening, a process of open imagination with the power to question other interlocutors. This does not mean, in my view, that the archive is activated simply by the fact of presenting or representing it, which is a widespread idea. Even a critical awareness does not guarantee a break with the “passivity” of the addressees and pushes them to redistribute their places and functions as co-participatory subjects in the production of meaning.

As I mentioned above, FOMMA has always strived to give voice and visibility to Mayan women in order to appropriate public spaces from which they have always been excluded. In her digital ethnographies, Sarah Pink explains that, even if we do not consider the virtual world physical, it is all around us. We are constantly connected to the Internet, it is a space that we occupy and through it we create “digital social worlds.”²¹ Digitalisation, in this sense, allows FOMMA to appropriate and recover this territorial dispute while also blurring the line between online and offline. The virtual world influences us, but we can also influence it through the ways we represent ourselves.

The digitisation of the FOMMA archive is, therefore, an exercise in collective de-alienation, where there is no longer a difference between those who research and those who are researched, those who represent and those who are represented. Rather, it is part of a “society in movement” that researches and represents itself in order to better understand itself with the sole purpose of becoming the subject of its own decolonisation.

Following these arguments, the digitisation of the archive constitutes a tactic of re-existence that expresses FOMMA’s capacity to “ably respond” to the structural violences brought about by the processes of destruction and appropriation/ commodification of all modes of eco-social existence by the recolonisation of extractivism. This is achieved through ingenuity and creative experiences that, speaking from sites of cultural, economic and ecological difference, put life back at the centre.

SHIFTING CONCLUSIONS

We may frequently imagine that living Mayan women do not have access to digital networks or to the internet, but this is not the case. Digitising the FOMMA archive is a way of skilfully responding to the specific alliance between visibility and power from its blind spots. This project broadens the field of visual cultures from Latin America, challenging the ways we look and making us look together towards other imaginaries and modes of existence. With this project, continually in the process



Figure 6.

Rehearsal for the play *La voz y la fuerza de la mujer* [The Voice and Strength of Women], at FOMMA House. From left to right, Isabel Juárez, Francisca Oseguera, María Pérez, Petrona de la Cruz, and Flor Aguilar. Photograph 10 x15 cm. Album 18, 2003. Courtesy of the FOMMA Archive.

of being, we are attempting to bring down that obelisk of modernity petrified in the archive because, in the end, these are the documents of a process of life-art-creation. Therefore, it should be imagined as an ever-changing process, a form of performance and fiction, as I have tried to demonstrate in these brief notes, from which we can continue to delve into its possibilities and limits once it is finished.

The institutionalisation of the archive, in this case, is not a form of co-optation or appropriation. FOMMA decided to do so strategically, as on other specific occasions, in order to carry out actions that allow them to change their eco-cultural reality. In fact, they are well aware that this “authorises” them. They use it to enter, dislocate, and re-exist the intersubjective imaginaries that exclude them from the status quo, as well as to open up the canon.

As for my position as a university researcher and its implications, beyond the labels of mediator or facilitator I understand my role as a companion in making knowledge, in building meaning through the transformative action of practice, of a critical understanding of what was already happening, is happening, and may continue to happen at FOMMA. I can’t understand how it could be otherwise when it comes to working with living cultural processes and women. It is, as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui suggests, “an experience of creative assembly”,²² where the tensions that arise between theory and praxis become evident no holds barred; rather, the bond between the two presupposes and implies a political finality.

In the end, during these difficult times, the most significant thing has been that by deploying these communicative and creative “archival manoeuvres” we have managed to favour a dynamics of interaction between academia and FOMMA. So much so that we have all found, from our own locations, a sense of meaning and sharing that is similar, although not identical, as chosen by ourselves [Figure 6].

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1 As Deborah Dorotinsky and Riánsares Lozano explain in relation to Latin American Visual Cultures Studies, "it is an invitation to think, from Latin America, about certain images, and the socio-cultural and political problems associated with them, from a perspective that combines the renewal of the disciplinary field of 'art history' through the perspectives, analyses, and methodologies of visual culture studies." Deborah Dorotinsky and Riánsares Lozano, "Culturas Visuales desde América Latina o escalofríos visuales," in *Estudios Visuales desde América Latina*, ed. Deborah Dorotinsky and Ríán Lozano (Mexico City: UNAM-IIE, 2022), 11.

2 The term *response-ability* was coined by Donna Haraway two decades ago, in thinking through the crossovers between feminist political ecology and academic critical activism to imagine a human and more-than-human ethical life-becoming together. Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto. Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

3 Esther Gabara, "Gestures, Practices, and Projects: [Latin] American Re-visions of Visual Culture and Performance Studies," *E-misférica* 7, no. 1 (2009-2013).

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4 Raúl Zibechi, *Movimientos sociales en América Latina. El "mundo otro" en movimiento* (Mexico City: Bajo Tierra, 2017), 18.

5 It should be explained that initially the members of FOMMA did not define themselves as ecofeminists, nor did they even know what feminism or environmentalism consisted of, but their practices focused on emancipation through *lekil kuxlejal*. These have spread like seeds in multiple heterogeneous forms, becoming embodied in the daily lives of thousands of Indigenous, mestizo, and poor women.

6 Susannah R. Daniels, *Ruptures and Reparations: Mayan Women Transforming Identities through Theatre* (Mexico City: Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, UNAM, 2018).

7 This research was possible thanks to the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, within the Programa de Becas Posdoctorales, 2021-2022, 2022-2023, under the advice and supervision of Dr. Deborah Dorotinsky Alperstein, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas-UNAM. This project has resulted in several texts, such as Belén Romero, "Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya (A.C.). Poéticas autogestivas de trabajo: talleres y teatro desde el cuidado en lo comunitario," *Re-visiones* 12 (2022), <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=8754354>; or "Las movidas ecosociales de Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya (A. C.) Confabulaciones, re-existencias y maniobras de retaguardia," *Arte y Políticas de la Identidad* 26 (2022): 172-194, <https://doi.org/10.6018/reapi.530061>.

8 Although in this short space we cannot go in depth into the concept of *lekil kuxlejal* or Good Mayan Living, we refer to the definition provided by Xochitl Leyva as a historically situated horizon of struggle marked by a process that promotes autonomy and emancipation. A cultural, social, political and epistemological concept that transcends any romantic, essentialist or even utopian vision understood as a "way of condensing the gaze, a line of praxis, an ethical stance, a way of being in the world, which is what moves us to continue working". Xochitl Leyva, *¿Lekil Kuxlejal como horizonte de lucha? Una reflexión colectiva sobre la autonomía en Chiapas* (San Cristóbal de Las Casas: CIESAS, 2012), 16.

9 Belén Romero, "Mujeres Creando. El cuidado como maniobra ecológica de re-existencia," *Arte y Políticas de la Identidad*, Vol. 21, (2019): 74-95, <https://revistas.um.es/reapi/article/view/416731/279681>.

10 Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinnaks utxiwa. Una reflexión sobre prácticas y discursos descolonizadores* (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2010), 62.

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- 18 Márgara Millán, "Alcances político-ontológicos de los feminismos indígenas," in *Más allá del feminismo: Caminos para andar*, ed. Márgara Millán (Mexico City: Red de Feminismos Descoloniales, 2014), 139-141.
- 19 Colectivo de investigación El Llano en Llamas, "Entrevista a Carlos Porto Gonçalves," *Crítica y Resistencias. Revista de conflictos sociales latinoamericanos*, no. 2 (2016): 210-221.
- 20 Michel de Certeau has warned us that in our archival research we must not "simply adopt previous classifications", but rather deviate from the constraints such as "the H-series in the National Archives", and replace them with "new codes of acknowledgment" and "our own systems of expectations".
- 21 Sarah Pink, *Digital Ethnography. Principles and Practices* (Madrid: Ediciones Morata, 2019), 12.
- 22 Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, "Experiencias de montaje creativo: de la historia oral a la imagen en movimiento ¿Quién escribe la historia oral?" *Chasqui. Revista Latinoamericana de Comunicación* 120 (2012): 14-18.