

Invisible Culture

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Historias Oficiales – Official Stories

(Exhibited at la Celda Contemporanea, Mexico City, August-October 2006)

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Invisible Culture

[http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture]

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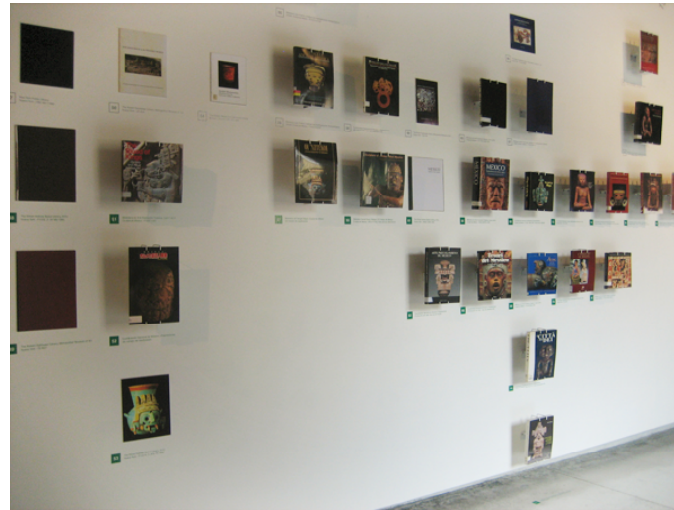
Official Stories was originally an installation of archival material intended as an inquiry into the transformation of the Mexican government’s political investment in pre-Hispanic iconography and history. Two timelines charted the contemporary fate of nationalist symbols that have helped support Mexico’s identification with its pre-colonial past. I am interested in this nationalist identification at a time when the requirements of globalization upon developing countries have turned allegiance in historical and geographical territories into both a burden for development and an economical investment. Using materials from almost 20 libraries and museums from Mexico and the US¹, this project focused on the contradictory institutional/governmental administration of imagery through two cultural practices: on the one hand, the historiography of pre-Hispanic civilization in public school textbooks, and, on the other, globe-trotting government- sponsored exhibitions of pre-Hispanic artifacts.



¹ My research took place mainly in public and academic libraries in the US, such as the Los Angeles Public Library, the New York Public Library, the Libraries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Boston Public Library, the repositories at The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Harvard University. In Mexico, I worked in conjunction with The Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, the Centro Nacional de las Artes, the Universidad Iberoamericana, the Library from Relaciones Exteriores, and several libraries from UNAM. The catalogues gleaned from these libraries and used in the installation are a selection of my findings and don’t encompass absolutely all of the exhibitions of pre-Hispanic artifacts exhibited in the world from 1959 until now. Nevertheless, archeologists from Templo Mayor, administrators from Relaciones Exteriores and other experts in the field have checked my selection and agreed that it offers the most comprehensive list ever compiled.



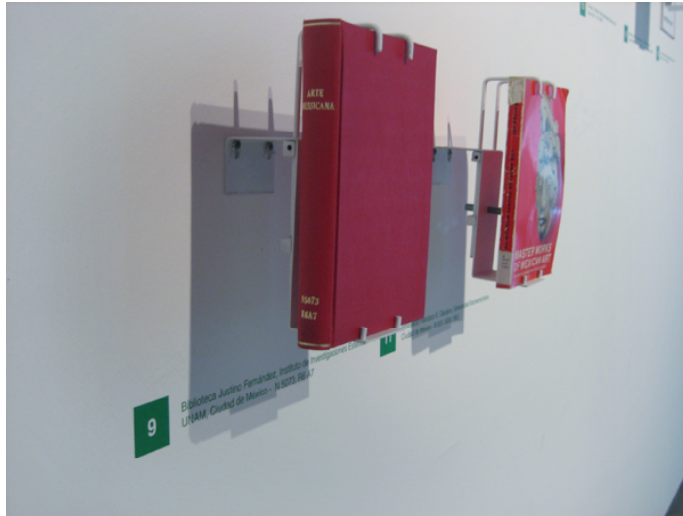
These first images correspond to the installation of this project at La Celda Contemporánea, a university gallery located in Mexico City. The division of the gallery space into two separate rooms allowed the project to be presented in sections. The first part of this installation consisted of a chronological selection of one hundred exhibition catalogues of pre-Hispanic artifacts, demonstrating the Mexican government's varied involvement in the production of nearly eighty exhibits (lending some of the work, asking the country's specialists to be involved, financing the project, and so on). The twenty remaining publications corresponded to exhibitions produced in different countries (mainly in the US and Austria), countries that continue to have enough pre-Hispanic material themselves to put on comprehensive exhibitions. These exhibitions have in turn nurtured the field in interesting ways, offering interpretations often times different than those of local Mexican discourses, delivering their theses to an audience that might see the material through these catalogues for the first time.



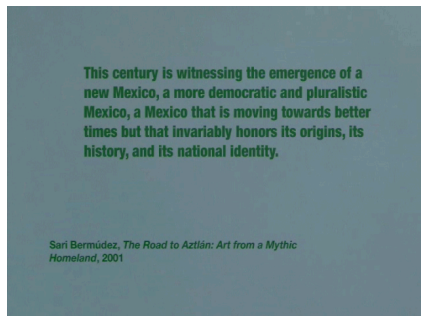
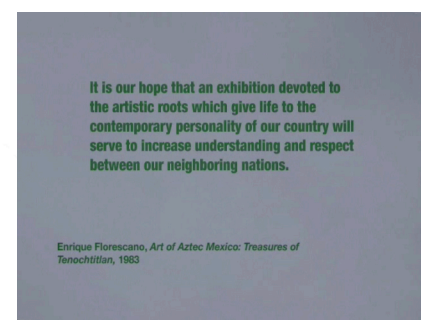
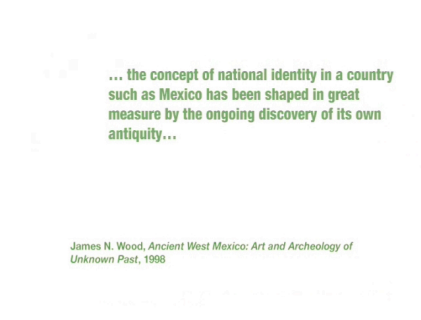
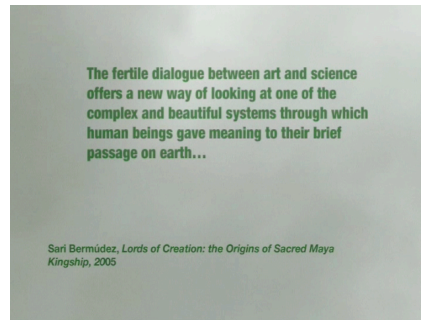
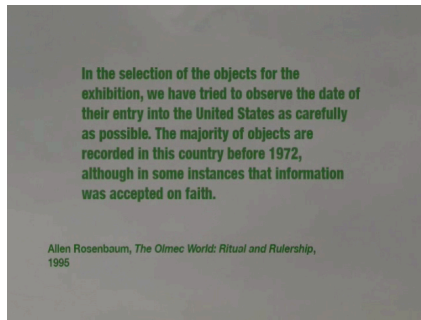
I displayed the exhibition catalogues in a grid. This traditional organization might have proposed an order, perpetuating a supposed continuity between Mexican past and present. But besides the possible inscription of a mythical progression that such an organization offers, the grid also allowed one to visualize a set of discontinuities: moments when the production of the catalogues/exhibitions abroad increased dramatically and moments when the production stagnated or even decreased. Within the chronology, on average, one or two catalogues per year were printed. The grid enabled an evaluation of the moments when discontinuities took place in relation to contextual factors, such as economic development, political stability and, of course, archeological discoveries. For instance, Templo Mayor, the main Aztec site located in Mexico City, was not discovered until 1978— before this major archeological find, few exhibitions featured Aztec culture. Mayan work, which was then better known, was more frequently presented. The discovery of the Templo Mayor transformed the interpretation of Mexico’s past at a moment when economic conditions— Mexican oil exports doubled that year due to the Iranian Revolution— enabled a new wave of cultural export. In the 1980s the Iran-Iraq war further reduced the output of crude oil in that region, forcing its price even higher. For several years, the countries of OPEC maintained these high prices by reducing their production. The tandem events of the uncovering of Templo Mayor and the rise of oil prices helps explain the increased production of international exhibitions and catalogues from 1979 to 1984.

Another discontinuity takes place during the years when Mexico was preparing its economic alliance with the US and Canada through the signing of the NAFTA treaty. In 1992, the year corresponding to the trade agreement’s proposal and after four years of economic stability, the catalogues of six exhibitions in Germany, England, France, the US, Italy and Spain were published. This rate continued for a couple of years and can be paired with other cultural actions orchestrated to promote the diversity of Mexican cultural heritage such as the country’s presence in Europalia² in 1993.

² Europalia is a cultural organization established in Brussels in 1969. It aims to highlight the culture of member States of the European Community by organizing festivals of art and culture at the heart of Europe. Europalia has also welcomed and presented countries outside from Europe such as Japan or Mexico. See www.europalia.org



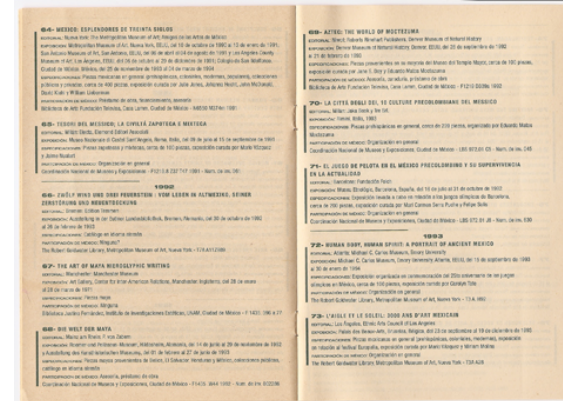
I am offering these interpretations to a reader who can only, at the present moment, be exposed to the records and documentation of this exhibition. Some of my interpretations and afterthoughts come from conversations with the audience that took place once the exhibition was up. None of these interpretations were stated in the timeline. The catalog covers— 100 different images of clay and stone sculptures— competed with each other for the viewer’s attention. The viewer could also see the evolution of the typefaces used in the exhibition’s titles, as well as the varying qualities of catalogue paper stock over the last thirty years. Hence, she could experience both quantity and a desire to organize. This library of catalogues was offered to her eyes but further information and interpretations needed to be found elsewhere. Offering these interpretations in an online format may short-circuit the exhibition. Yet today, the exhibition no longer exists, and this library of catalogues has been dismantled as every book has been given back to its original repository. Or perhaps, from an orthodox point of view, the library never truly existed, since the books remained closed throughout the exhibition’s duration.



Adjacent to the catalogues' wall installation, a silent video formatted in four sections was screened on a monitor. This video presented fragments of the catalogues' prologues, which continue to be written often by high-ranking cultural intellectuals and government officials. Among them, I used quotes from Mexican presidents, such as Carlos Salinas de Gortari and Vicente Fox, as well as from other politicians, such as Tony Blair. Mexican intellectuals Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes, among others, also contributed. Pre-Hispanic artifacts exhibitions are often presented as national gifts endowed to various countries. In their presentations, politicians and intellectuals make sure to bring into play the ambassadorial function of these catalogues. Accompanying these political overtures, art historians, archeologists and anthropologist usually write on the ways the exhibitions' artifacts contribute to science (i.e. how much information can be extracted from a solar calendar stone) or culture (i.e. how beautiful we consider the shapes and figures from that same stone).

Museum directors and curators also add to these introductions, usually by promoting the efforts of their institutions and gauging the relevance of each respective exhibition by size, diversity or novelty. The variety of the discourses published in each one of these catalogues, promotes flexibility in the interpretation of pre-Hispanic material. This flexibility is compatible with the great variety of exhibition spaces where the material has been presented: from natural history museums such as the Peabody Museum to contemporary art institutions such as the Guggenheim Museum. In the video, each one of these quotes, which slowly faded in a cloudy background, seemed to be posing the same question: What is the value of pre-Hispanic art/artifacts?





The last element of this first part of the installation consisted of a small duotone publication. This publication was made available for free and listed all of the catalogues on display, citing their bibliographic information and reference numbers in order to facilitate future investigation. The viewer was thus invited to further study this material on her own time, once the exhibition ended and each book had been returned to its original repository. This publication had the same function as a type of book popular in the 16th century Europe: called “libraries,” these publications served as book catalogues, and were an important tool on a number of levels: to prove, for instance, the superiority of one language over another (French/Italian and Italian/Latin)³. The function of my publication was to catalogue a range of 100 found catalogues dating from 1959 until 2005.

³ Roger Chartier refers to this type of books as “libraries without walls”. See *The Order of Books*, California: Stanford University Press, 1992, chapter 3

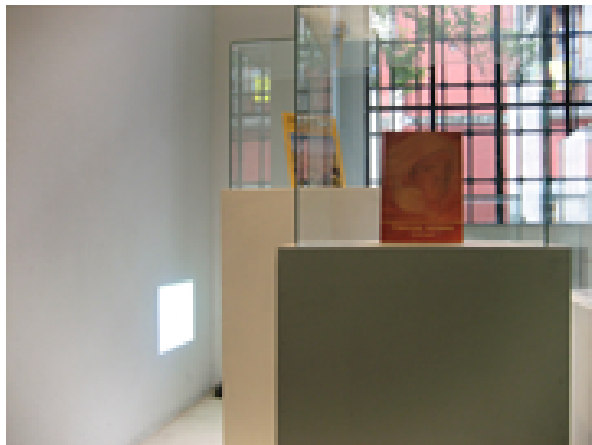


Notably, the Mexican government's effort to export the country's cultural inheritance has had a positive economic impact. Tourism is now the third largest source of foreign income to Mexico (only after the money produced through remittances and oil exports). Alongside vast publicity of Mexican beaches, and recently added ecotouristic routes, the Minister of Tourism often collaborates with cultural institutions to promote pre-Hispanic exhibitions abroad and the publication of catalogues.



In the second installation room, the viewer encountered four pedestals each displaying a textbook. These were the four different editions of the third grade history textbooks⁴ used in Mexican public elementary schools from 1959 until the present. In 1959, Mexican president Adolfo López Mateos stipulated that the government would directly control the production and distribution of the textbooks used in the Mexican public school system. With the help of special teams in each academic subject, such as History, Mathematics, Biology, etc., the state printed and distributed these books to every elementary and middle school student free of charge. This heroic effort continues today and has prevailed despite the fervent criticism that every new revision receives. Three major revisions have taken place since 1959. Each of them corresponds to presidential desires to improve education according to their beliefs: Luis Echeverría in 1972, Carlos Salinas de Gortari in 1992, and Vicente Fox in 2002.

The revisions of the History course textbooks (during certain periods these textbooks were redesignated as books for “Social Science” or “History and Geography”) have always been the subject of the strongest attacks. Walter Benjamin’s famous quote “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” is quite relevant here. In order to promote cultural integration— a fundamental ingredient for development and empowerment within a global economic order— Mexico’s diversity is seemingly de-emphasized in the curricula. Likewise various indigenous cultures are gradually effaced from the syllabus and the presentation of a pre-Hispanic past is progressively neglected.

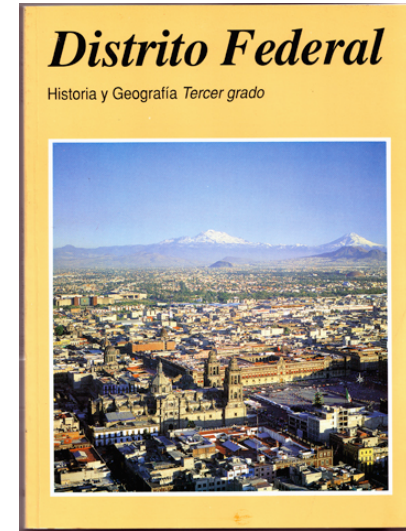
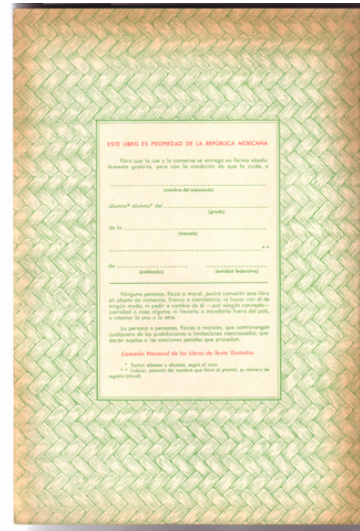


In the exhibition, each textbook was presented as a “sculpture” protected inside a

vitrine. As sculptures, these textbooks are studied and read (by students or scholars) but in the gallery setting they were not meant to be touched. A disclaimer at the end of each book lays down some rules. The copyright inscriptions forbid anyone to take the books outside of the country. Just as with pre-Hispanic sculptures after 1972, these books are confined to the national borders; their commercialization is limited and economic profit from them is penalized.



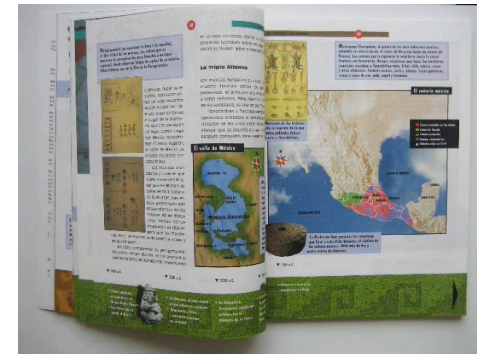
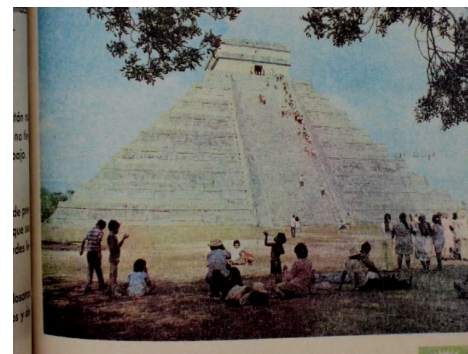
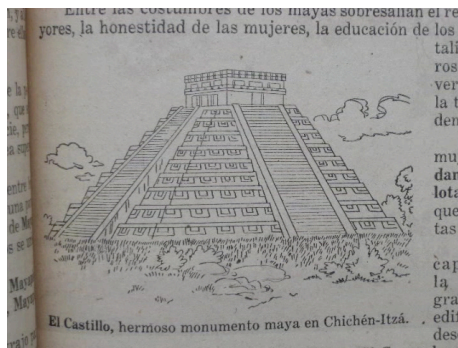
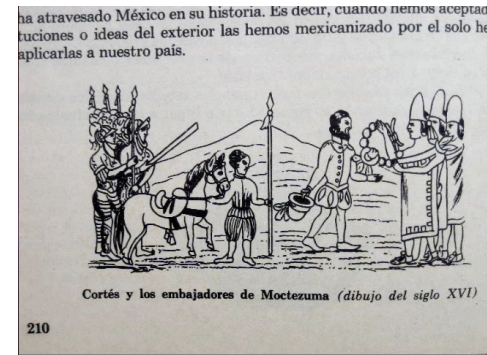
⁴ I chose the third grade of elementary school, because it corresponds to the school year where students are exposed to different pre-Hispanic cultures and Mexican pre-colonial past.



Due to their sculptural arrangement, the textbooks-as-catalogues were closed, showing their differing covers according to each edition. The transformation of these covers speaks about the transformation of their contents and the curricula in general. The oil painting titled “La Patria” by Mexican muralist Gonzalez Camarena is represented on the cover of the first edition. 523 million textbooks had portrayed this iconic woman, her indigenous features complemented by an eagle, a snake and the flag. These attributes of Mexican identity (the flag’s official seal represents an eagle devouring a snake) are deeply engrained in the memory of every Mexican citizen. But these highly nationalistic representations have been tamed. The covers of subsequent editions were executed by a series of Mexican artists. José Luis Cuevas, one of the main participants of the “Ruptura” (an artistic movement that questioned the institutionalization and hence validity of muralist painting), designed the “History” course book. His cover depicts the portrait of a national hero of the independence war looking towards his right. He is situated over a simple red background and his features are very discreet. Though I understand Cuevas’ decision to get rid of symbols and work with other narrative strategies, the concern here is that any reference to national symbolism is compromised. Adding to this is the fact that gradually, the covers start being produced by lesser known artists. Startlingly, the cover of the last edition is a color aerial photograph of Mexico City (the covers of books distributed in different states present photographs of their capital city). This generic and atemporal vista, which resembles a postcard of downtown, is placed on a yellowish cover lacking any kind of specification.



This set of textbooks was accompanied by a silent video that allowed the viewer to browse their content without skimming their actual pages. The video presented many of the illustrations in the books; color photographs of artifacts from anthropology museums supplemented hand-made illustrations printed on offset press. The naiveté of these early drawings was confronted by the clinical information of present-day pictures. Here, as with the front covers, the question rested on the possibilities and limits of photography. What had been lost (or gained) through the use of this medium? Why did the photographic descriptions of pyramids and ancient vases seem out of place? Perhaps the combination of these supposedly objective representations clashed with the images of ancient people (still rendered through illustrations in the newest editions). Or maybe it was the substitution of textual content for an image that was unsettling.





In this same room, a second timeline, drawn with chalk over green walls, depicted the indexes of the textbooks. This material made obvious references to elementary education. Its impermanency invited the viewer to think on the practical possibility of changing the way history has been written and taught. Yellow highlights on these chalk indexes indicated whenever students had been presented material of pre-Hispanic civilizations. Each revision followed the way pedagogues from consecutive generations surmised the most efficient and appropriate cultural knowledge from which to learn and the appropriate methodologies to do so. A major transformation in the seventies is the realization that a student might learn better from the past through a process of identification from a moment in the present. Hence the curricula changed from the description of a great variety of pre-Hispanic civilizations to a more personal appropriation of fewer of them. But what happen to the rest? Erased from the books these civilizations and their costumes perish in the eyes of the students. During the latest revision of the History course's curricula, the biggest modification happened in the middle school textbooks. The decision was to simply erase revisions from the pre-Hispanic past. Consequently students are only taught about their indigenous inheritance almost entirely during their third year of elementary school.

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This project was not and is not about forming conclusions regarding how much children today are actually learning about their pre-Hispanic past. The most that we can say, by looking at the chalk indexes, is that they are certainly less exposed to it now than they were in 1959. Rather than measuring their learning itself, my methodology allowed for the display of a paradox in which the Mexican government and its cultural institutions has become entangled. In their efforts to carve a niche in the global scene, they have promoted abroad the very image whose effacement conditions progressive identity, namely: the diversity of pre-Hispanic cultural inheritance.

I am interested in using the gallery space as a place to present archival material (frequently documents whose function resides outside of the artistic realm) and re-contextualize its function. **Official Stories** took the form of an impossible library, where documents that are commonly used for consultation are presented as inaccessible sculptural objects. The information exposed relies on the covers and what these can convey. This strategy removes these documents from their original *logos*, their cause, and instead transforms them into discursive objects. This distance allows us to treat them as objects of study, always susceptible to new interpretations, but also revealing their own historicity, and hence their temporal condition and unavoidable decay.