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COACTION

Veneration and Wonder—the politics of making art in an Oaxacan village

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Abstract
This article examines a 5-year collaboration between the Stockholm-based video artists Performing Pictures and Talleres Comunitarios, a studio based in the Oaxacan town of Santa Ana Zegache where local artisans employ traditional skills in the restoration of religious artifacts. In images and text, we trace the exchange of skills, knowledge, and aesthetic sensibility that took place as these two groups of artists collaborated in producing a series of video animations of venerative objects, against a backdrop of religious, social, and political tensions that characterize everyday life in Zegache.

In the article and the accompanying series of three short films, "Wonder & Veneration 1–3" (http://vimeo.com/album/2682070), we examine how the artists negotiate questions of aesthetics and religious belief as their collaboration unfolds within the context of the Zegache community, where the Talleres contribute skills of carpentry and painting, while Performing Pictures provides skills of film, animation and micro-electronics. The processes and practices involved in creating three works provides the framework for this examination: the first, an animation of the Virgin of Guadalupe as she appears to a simple peasant, and the second, produced 2 years later, an animation of Santa Ana, local patron saint and mother of Maria, as she teaches her daughter to read the scriptures. Whereas both figures are central to the syncretic religious belief of southern Mexico with its challenge to the entrenched authority of the hispanicized clergy, the local figure of Santa Ana carries even more complex meanings for the community of Zegache. These meanings are embodied in the third work we examine, a small solar-powered chapel that the artists built to display the Santa Ana animation. With the mayor's support and located at the entrance to the town, the chapel embodies a shift of power away from the church, standing as an example of indigenous empowerment in civil society.

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Geska Helena Brečević, together with Robert Brečević, formed Performing Pictures in Stockholm in 2004. They draw on their backgrounds in filmmaking, costume design, cinema and drama criticism, as well as game development to make shorter-than-short films, snapshots that blur the line between still and motion media. These are built into physical objects, often installed in locations outside the fine art circuit: a Stockholm railway station concourse, a watchtower on a former Soviet army base, the entrance to the cashier's hall of a bank in Istanbul. Performing Pictures work combines stillness and movement, often coming alive at the moment a viewer approaches. This responsiveness creates a sense of intimacy and surprise, a playfulness that attracts and occasionally provokes. A work visit to Mexico in 2008 led to an ongoing collaboration with indigenous artisans from the region of Oaxaca. This phase of Performing Pictures work has seen an increased attention to the patterns of human movement associated with economic migration and religious pilgrimage.

The three films, *Wonder and Veneration I–III*, were edited by Performing Pictures artist Robert Brečević.

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In 2008, a small group of Stockholm-based artists made a trip to Oaxaca, in southern Mexico, to visit an artisan workshop in the town of Santa Ana Zegache where local residents were employed in the creation and restoration of church artifacts from the region. In words and photographs, this article examines the collaboration that arose out of that first meeting between the video artists from Performing Pictures in Stockholm and the artisans from the Talleres Comunitarios studios of Zegache, through several of the works that they created together.[1] The article grows out of the two authors' observation of and participation in the creation of these works. Geska Brečević is the artist from Performing Pictures who together with her partner Robert Brečević initiated the collaboration with the Zegache artisans. Karin Becker's research within media studies has focused on visual practices in different cultural settings, often using visual ethnography as a form of inquiry. Having previously documented Performing Pictures' work in a series of artistic research projects focusing on the Brečević's screen installations as interventions in public space, she accompanied the artists to document their collaboration with the Talleres. The article brings together the two authors' meta-reflection on the collaboration that developed in Zegache, integrating the researcher's perspective, following Donald A. Schön, as a "reflection on action" with the artist's "reflection in action."[2]

Three works are selected, in order to trace the collaborative process and how it changed, as questions of aesthetics and vernacular belief were negotiated within an evolving framework of creative and social practice. The first, in 2009, is an animation of the Virgin of Guadalupe as she appears to a simple peasant, and the second, produced 2 years later, is an animation of Santa Ana, mother of Maria, as she teaches her daughter to read the scriptures. Whereas both figures are central to the syncretic religious belief of rural Mexico, the figure of Santa Ana, the local patron saint portrayed as she witnesses to the legacy of women's insight and knowledge being passed on to future generations, carries even more complex meanings for this community. These are embodied in the third work we examine, a small solar-powered chapel the artists built in the spring of 2012 to display the Santa Ana animation. With the mayor's support and located at the entrance to the town, the chapel embodies a shift of power away from the church, standing as an example for women's empowerment in civil society.

Initially conceived as a collaboration of different media forms—for the Talleres this meant wood-carving and painting, while Performing Pictures contributed with film, animation and micro-electronics—as the work progressed, the traditions and institutions that informed the respective artists' work became increasingly central to the process, often challenged and contested, adding new layers of meaning to the objects they created. This suggests that the collaboration brought into play other processes, beyond the exchange of knowledge of techniques and media forms, and implicating a politics of what is acceptable within the given frameworks of creative production, aesthetics and belief each group brought to these projects. In a number of important ways, these artists and artisans were working in opposition to accepted forms of practice, and the venerative objects they produced cannot be easily accommodated within established frameworks of either fine art or religious art. By making religious objects, the Performing Pictures artists were distancing themselves from the constraints of the contemporary art world, with its veneration of the autonomous artist and its disconnection from religious art. For the Talleres Comunitarios on the other hand, animating the figures of saints and moving them out of the church draws on a long tradition of religious dissent and aesthetic practices in the syncretic movements among the indigenous people of southern Mexico, directed against the power of the hispanicized Church. It is against this background that we examine the relationship between aesthetics, politics and vernacular belief that are engaged in this work.

The theoretical framework for this examination is based first in an interrogation of collaboration as a term and practice often used in contemporary art and the extent to which it can be applied in this case. What were the intentions of these two groups? Did their expectations of a "collaborative" practice differ from other models that contemporary artists have used when teaming up with local communities to create works of art? Can we identify shifts in the social and political dynamic among members of these two groups, and in their impact within the larger community of Zegache?

These questions in turn raise issues regarding the politics of aesthetic practice, particularly when that practice brings together artists from radically different backgrounds and experience. Here we turn to Rancière's "politics of aesthetics" to help us analyze in what ways these artists' collaborative work challenges accepted frameworks of aesthetic sensibility, and the democratic potential of their practice.[3] Central to Rancière is the concept of "dissensus," as a political process that creates ruptures by introducing the "inadmissible" into established ways of perceiving, thinking and acting, and resulting in a "redistribution of the sensible," that is, a way of perceiving and thinking that was not previously possible.[4] Can we identify such a critical shift in the social practice of these artists and the work they produced? If so, we can make a claim for their work as involving what Rancière would call an "aesthetics of dissent." This is not the same as a dissenting practice, in the sense described above, by artists working in opposition to commonly held practices and belief. It requires, instead, that we examine their work for fissures, that is, activities and gestures that reconfigure the sensible—what is perceived and experienced—and that give voice to those who have been previously by-passed. If we can identify such breaks or ruptures that in turn result in new social and aesthetic figurations of what is admissible, we can point to the creation of these venerative objects as a democratic intervention.

The material used to address these issues is drawn from Performing Pictures' extensive documentation of the process, still images and videos they made as the work unfolded, and supplemented by Becker's photographs and field notes. Still photographs from this material appear in the article in order to concretize and elaborate visually on specific points. The three short films that accompany the article have been compiled from Performing Pictures' footage, shaky and crude, that was never intended to provide a "secondary storytelling about what we do."[5] Here the clash between the moving images and the sound—including conversation in several languages (not subtitled), with music in the background (or foreground), accompanied by the artisans' tools and sounds from the street—establishes a multi-focused montage with "associative links at a clip-to-clip level." Closer to the "clatter and multi-focused nature of creativity," the films provide a way of understanding the forms of practice that evolved.[6] The footage includes events that, although seemingly peripheral to the work, were integral to the evolving social and creative environment, as children and members of the wider community were gradually included. The films show the space of social interaction, not available through still image and text, and are used here for the insights they offer into what an expanded field of the aesthetic looks like in a specific context. In contrast to the article, entitled "Veneration and Wonder," the films begin with "wonder," carrying both a question and a sense of awe into the undertaking that lies ahead, and conclude with "veneration," as people from the community and the priest gather to bless the completed chapel.

We begin the examination of these artworks by providing some background on first, the Talleres

Movie 1. Wonder & Veneration 1: The Shrine Crafters.
Link: http://vimeo.com/83931974.
Format: .mov (available in HD and SD).
Duration: 13:43.
Description: In November 2009, artist duo Performing Pictures initiated their first collaboration with the Talleres Comunitarios de Santa Ana, Zegache. A month of work in Oaxaca lead to the completion of the video installation "Movement no. 7: To Appear," featuring Our Lady of Guadalupe appearing and withdrawing interactively.

Movie 2. Wonder & Veneration 2: The Puppet Makers.
Link: http://vimeo.com/83937494.
Format: .mov.
Duration: 12:54.
Description: During this production period in Oaxaca, artist duo Performing Pictures and the artisans of the Talleres Comunitarios de Santa Ana, Zegache worked to make the puppets of Maria and Santa Ana, patron saint of the village, and a stop-motion animation of the two figures. Additional material came from a workshop held with children of the town, asking them to draw and describe what Santa Ana meant to them.

Comunitarios and second, Performing Pictures, leading up to their collaboration. We then offer a brief description of the production of each of the three artworks, before turning to a longer consideration of the collaboration process. Against a backdrop of the various forms of collaboration within contemporary art, we examine the production practices and how they developed as the two groups worked together. Finally, we consider how producing these art works led to the expanded experience of aesthetics and belief among the artists, and with consequences for Zegache community beyond the institutional boundaries of the municipality and the church.

Movie 3. Wonder & Veneration 3: The Chapel Builders.
Link: http://vimeo.com/83943087.
Format: .mov.
Duration: 14:34.
Description: In May and June 2012, Performing Pictures' Robert Brečević and his cousin Đjani Brečević, a stonemason, worked with the artisans of Talleres Comunitarios to complete the first of a pair of chapels at the entrance to the village of Santa Ana Zegache, Oaxaca. This chapel was dedicated Santa Ana, patron saint of the village, and houses a solar-powered animation of the saint.

THE PLACE AND HISTORY OF TALLERES COMUNITARIOS

Santa Ana Zegache is in many ways a typical Oaxacan town, named in Zapoteco for its seven (zzh) hills (gachi) that rise out of the plain at the foot of the mountain La Teta de Maria Sanchez, and with a long history as a market center dating to the pre-Hispanic period.[7] The largely indigenous population is among the poorest in the country, dependent on subsistence-level agriculture. Most of its 3,000 residents speak, in addition to Spanish, either Mixteco or Zapateco or both. As in other communities in southern Mexico, micro industries based on local craft traditions have become important sources of income, and the Talleres Comunitarios is one such example (Figure 1a, 1b). Yet the local economy continues to suffer from underemployment, a primary reason for the high level of out-of-state and "transnational migration."[8] Both men and women commute for shorter and longer periods from Zegache to other Mexican cities, and every family has male relatives living and working in the USA.

At the center of the town stands the church of Santa Ana, a late-16th century Dominican structure with a dome supported by two stocky towers to resist destruction by earthquakes (Figure 1c). Thirty years ago, the church was in a tragic state of disrepair, with many of its religious artifacts threatened by the weather. The established Mexican painter Rodolfo Morales, following a tradition in the Mexican art world of "giving back" to the community, founded a center for training women of Zegache with the skills required to restore the church's murals and other valuable religious artifacts. Out-migration was at a peak, leaving the town with few men, and many women and children in need of support. A primary motive for Morales, in addition to restoring a cultural heritage, was to give women ("those who wait") the means to support their families. Work began in 1997, and continued after the artist's death, led by his colleague Georgina Saldaña Wonchee.

Figure 1. The municipality of Santa Ana Zegache is located in the state of Oaxaca in southern Mexico. (a) Most residents support themselves in small-scale agriculture (Nov 2011). Photo: Performing Pictures. (b) Street scene from Santa Ana Zegache (Nov 2011). Photo: Karin Becker. (c) The restored church in Santa Ana Zegache (Nov 2011). Photo: Karin Becker.

The abandoned residence of the local priest, adjacent to the church, had also fallen into disrepair, and over time this was renovated to become a generous studio space, with storage for the rescued artifacts that awaited renovation.

By 2004, the Talleres Comunitarios ("Community Workshop") was firmly established, and a few men were hired, to learn a craft that would give them an alternative to migration.[9] The men were most interested in learning carpentry and woodcarving, whereas the women focused on restoration and gilding. By the time Performing Pictures made its first visit to Zegache, 17 artisans were employed in the workshop, eight women and nine men. The primary objectives, as stated on the Talleres Comunitarios web page, are to give the community a greater awareness of its heritage, to provide a means for "people to support themselves without having to emigrate to the US, while at the same time learning skills and taking pride in saving their community's past: a past rich in artistic values."[10]

PERFORMING PICTURES ENTERS THE TALLERES COMUNITARIOS

In their work with Performing Pictures, Geska Brečević and Robert Brečević had spent several years exploring how interactive and responsive image technologies could be used in short films, often displayed in public space. They were always on the look out for interesting ways to box the films, so that the work itself would be understood as an object to interact with physically, not just a video projection. The narrative in each short film "snapshot" was built around a character placed in a specific setting who "performed" in response to a movement in front of the screen.[11] "Performing Pictures" refers to the artists' desire to make work that uses "responsive media, the sensors, to get into a dance, a choreography with the spectator,"[12] and suggests a commitment to creating participatory art. By designing for the "interplay of technologies and the texturing of communication" these artists explore the possibilities of performativity and an "embodied engagement" in the shifting relations their work involves.[13] Their background in theatre is also evident in their attempt to release the spectator from the passivity (following Ranciére) of merely being "fascinated by the appearance in front of him."[14]

This also points to their interest in exhibiting outside the usual art venues, in order to engage different publics in the "dance." Increasingly, commissions and opportunities to display their videos in conventional art venues became a means or strategy to legitimize their work as an art practice, which in turn facilitated funding for the work produced for other kinds of public space. Their first trip to Mexico provides a typical example. In connection with a visit to install a work in a museum in Cuernavaca, they had also obtained a small grant to examine local craft traditions, based on their interest in finding different ways to encase their films. Through a series of contacts and epiphanies, they ended up in Zegache to learn about the work of Talleres Comunitarios. As Geska later described the meeting:

> We were just stunned by the church and by the project, by somebody who really put culture and art at the heart of development, wanting to help this village by restoring people's self-esteem, restoring the soul and the heart of the village. Not just a utilitarian economic approach but making a shift in the story of the village.[15]

Robert and Geska were also fascinated by the small chapels, or "capillas," they saw along the roads, "outside the control of the churches, the patrons and urban plans."[16] Their later documentation includes photographs of many of these unofficial shrines (Figure 2), "improvised out of industrial materials, concrete and rusting corrugated iron, with shop-bought figures, a virgin studded with LEDs, a vase of drying flowers."[17]

They met with the Zegache artisans to present some ideas that would allow them to return to work together and were surprised at how receptive members of the Talleres were. Robert recalls that he suggested, "'Oh, it would be fun to do something together like, I don't know, moving video saints in shrines for the church'. It was almost half a joke, and people were like, 'Yes, excellent!'"[18] Without being fully aware of its implications, the Performing Pictures' artists were entering a situation in which a well-established syncretism

Figure 2. Performing Pictures, *Capillas of Zegache #1: Spider Christ*, 2011 (detail). Photograph, corroded tin. Performing Pictures/BUS, 2011.

supported an oppositional religious practice. The popular material forms of religious expression, found in the roadside chapels, home altars and grave decorations, often carefully tended, and characterized by an intensely additive aesthetic, are evidence of an everyday religious practice and popular ingenuity, not found in the pantheon of the Catholic Church.

Performing Pictures did recognize that they were entering a charged field in their own artistic practice. Within the contemporary art world, artists who engage with religious belief and spirituality are marginalized, unless their work is meant as a provocation to the entrenched power of religion. This "disconnect," as James Elkins describes it, between spirituality and contemporary art is reflected in the absence of modern religious art from museums and in the ways art schools steer their students away from producing such work.[19] In the context of the secularized art world, where religion is adjudicated to the private sphere, Robert and Geska understood that proposing digitally enhanced films of religious figures enacting rituals of belief was a provocative move.

They would also be engaging with a vernacular religious practice that was not their own. Although the Zegache artisans had accepted their proposal, Robert and Geska remained cautious and wanted to test the idea of animating a religious figure in an environment closer to home. They began with St. Christopher, the protector of travelers and the patron saint of Rab, the Croatian island where Robert's family originates. The work, titled *Movement no 6: To Carry A Child,* portrays the saint as he crosses a stream carrying a child on his shoulders who, in the legend, reveals himself to be the Christ (Figure 3). The screen was mounted in a small box, an antique Indian shrine not unlike the religious "nichos" they had seen in Mexico. It was first displayed in a small artist-run gallery in Stockholm in September 2009, the first in a series they chose to call *Transformaciónes*, setting in motion the static figures of saints. This was also the first time Performing Pictures referred to their work as "venerative artifacts," expressing respect for the layers of belief embedded in the traditional legend of this saint.[20]

A few weeks later, *To Carry a Child* was installed in the Église Notre-Dame de Bon Secours in Brussels (Figure 4). During the autumn, many visitors to the church offered prayers and left small emblems of belief at the niche (Figure 5). More secure in this new work as a form of "venerative"

Figure 3. Video still composite from Performing Pictures, *Movement no. 6: To Carry a Child,* 2009. © Performing Pictures/BUS, 2009.

Figure 4. Dedicating *Movement no. 6: To Carry a Child,* 2009, (wooden shrine, video, sensors) in L'Église Notre-Dame de Bon Secours, Brussels (Sept 2009). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 5. Visitors to L'Église Notre-Dame de Bon Secours in Brussels, watch the figure of St. Christopher in *To Carry a Child.* Note the photograph left by a previous visitor on the door to the shrine (Nov 2009). Photo: Performing Pictures.

practice, rooted in history and tradition, they felt they could handle its religious content with respect for the beliefs they expected to encounter among their collaborators in the Talleres Comunitarios and their community. They returned to Zegache in November with a proposal to carry out another work in the series *Transformaciónes*. The aims of the project were "to create universal images that build upon the relation with the spectator, and at the same time uphold cultural uniqueness through translations of a traditional expression into new media."[21]

THE VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE COMES TO ZEGACHE

The representation of the Virgin of Guadalupe is Mexico's most popular religious and cultural image (Figure 6). Each year on December 12, the legend of Maria appearing to a young Mexican peasant is celebrated throughout the country, and old photographs of the local festival in Zegache show a young boy in the role of Juan Diego, kneeling before a girl dressed as the dark-skinned Maria.[22] This early and widely celebrated example of syncretic religious practice struck the Performing Pictures artists as an ideal starting point for working together with the Zegache artisans. The well-established iconography of the Virgin of Guadalupe was particularly appealing: the figure of Maria against the arch formed by her deep blue robe, and the vision—that they wanted to materialize—of the brilliant red flowers in full bloom in mid-winter.

Figure 6. The Virgin of Guadalupe as she appears in one of the many street shrines in Santa Ana Zegache. Photo© Performing Pictures./BUS.

Figure 7. Preparing the robe for the Virgin of Guadalupe (6 Nov 2009). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 8. Material used during the electronics workshop at the Talleres Comunitarios de Zegache (Nov 2009). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 9. Ninety-seven stars were embroidered with gold thread, each with a LED-light in the middle controlled by a Lily Pad Arduino (Nov 2009). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 10. Three of the artisans at work at the courtyard of the Talleres Comunitarios de Zegache (Nov 2009). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 11. Carving the ornaments on the doors of the shrine (Nov 2009). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 12. Applying 12 K gold leaf to the shrine (Nov 2009). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 13. Eddie takes the rose arch Geska has prepared out of the car on the day of the film shooting (Nov 2009). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 14. A 50-meter rail was prepared for the apparition of the Virgin (Nov 2009). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 15. Geska and Mari, who plays the Virgin, with the arch of roses. The shooting took place at the mountain La Teta De Maria Sanchez (Nov 2009). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 16. Mari, as the Virgin on set at foot of the mountain La Teta De Maria Sanchez, where the shooting took place. (Nov 2009). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Their proposal was to build a platform mounted on a 50-meter rail track that a woman posing as Maria would stand on. As the platform was pulled forward, "Maria" would look up from her folded hands to meet the viewer's gaze. Mari, one of the artisans, was selected to be the Virgin. A local seamstress, Juanita, and two local women who were skilled at embroidery, were hired to make the robe, and together with Geska, they sewed conductive threads and LEDs into the fabric

Figure 17. Painting of the shrine required several layers. (Nov 2009). Photo: Performing Pictures.

connected to microcontrollers for the blinking lights (Figures 7–9). To design the box or niche, they looked at the forms of the small chapels in the church sanctuary, and discussed the alternatives with the Talleres artisans, who then took over the construction and painting (Figures 10–12).

They tested the platform and rails in the courtyard, filming different artisans who sat on the platform and were drawn forward at different speeds. The setting they had selected for the film itself was an open field, with the mountains in the background, as in the original legend. The day of the actual filming turned out to be one of the

Figure 18. The finished installation, *Movement no. 7: To Appear*, 2009. @ Performing Pictures/BUS 2009.

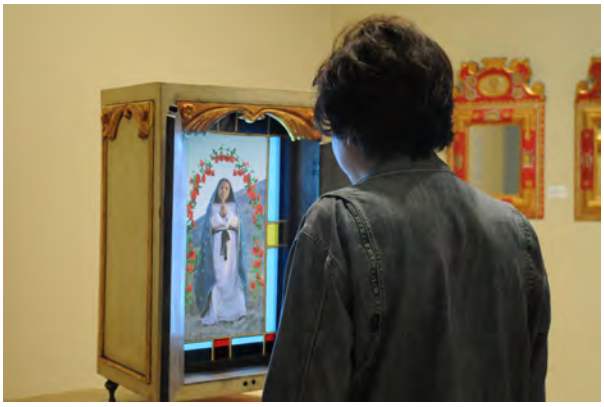

Figure 19. *Movement no. 7: To Appear* on display at the gallery Casa Lamm in Mexico City. (Nov 2009). Photo: Performing Pictures.

hottest of the year, and the photographic documentation shows the entire crew working in the 40° heat, as they mounted the platform, arranged the large silk flowers on the arch, and drew Mari forward through it, toward the camera (Figures 13–15). The animation required that the movement be repeated many times, with Mari standing under the arch as first the individual flowers and then the arch itself disappeared in the final take (Figure 16). This process was then reversed in the editing, so that the flower-decked arch gradually appears over the figure of Maria. The painted niche was completed (Figure 17), and the edited film and sensors were installed just in time for the work to be sent to the opening in Mexico City (Figures 18, 19).

SANTA ANA MOVES THROUGH THE TALLERES

In contrast to the Virgin of Guadalupe, whose image and legend are shared throughout Latin America, Santa Ana stands quite literally at the center of Zegache, as protector of the town and its residents. Performing Pictures' second proposal to the Talleres Comunitarios was modeled after a statue in the church, portraying Santa Ana as a mother, teaching her young daughter, Maria, to read the scriptures (Figure 20). This collaboration lay closer to local beliefs and the meanings of the saint in a community that lived with her name and her image on an everyday basis.

For this animation, instead of a living model, the figures of Santa Ana and Maria were carved and painted by the workshop artisans, following

closely the form and aesthetic of the statue (Figures 21–26). Juanita, who had helped sew the robe Mari wore as Virgin of Guadalupe, was brought in to make the dresses for the two figures. She actually made two sets of clothing, one in the bright fabric usually used for saints' robes in churches, on gravestones and in private homes, and a second in the subdued colors of the carved statues. In the end, Geska decided the figures should be dressed in the colors of the painted statues in the church (see Figures 20 and 26a). A studio was made where Robert carried out the animation, as the figure of Santa Ana first looked upward, then put her arm around her daughter, directing young Maria's gaze to the book where her future as Mother of God is inscribed (Figure 26b).

Figure 20. The altar and statue to the patron saint of Santa Ana Zegache in the town church. This statue, of Santa Ana teaching her daughter Maria to read the scripture, was the model for the 2nd collaborative work (Nov 2011). Photo: Karin Becker.

Figure 21. Lau, one of the Talleres artisans, is carving the cedar head of the figure of Santa Ana (15 Nov 2011). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 22. Eric, another Talleres artisan, is carving the hands of the Santa Ana figure (16 Nov 2011) Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 23. The head of the Santa Ana figure is getting a pair of glass eyes (17 Nov 2011). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 24. The first layer of classical egg tempera painting is always a foundation of white (18 Nov 2011). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 25. Monica and Armand are about to start painting the next layer, adding details to the faces, feet and hands of the figures (21 Nov 2011). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 26. (a) Monica and Geska are touching up the final details of the figures of Santa Ana and young Virgin Maria (25 Nov 2011). Photo: Performing Pictures. (b) Robert executes the animation of Santa Ana (25 Nov 2011). Photo: Karin Becker. (c) The Santa Ana animation is installed as an iPhone app for its first viewing at the party hosted by Performing Pictures and the Talleres Comunitarios (27 Nov 2011). Photo: Karin Becker.

The work took 10 days, and the animation was completed just in time for the party the night before the Swedes returned home. The figures of Santa Ana and Maria were placed on a platform in a corner of the courtyard, to preside over the festivities. Robert had installed the animation in an iPhone that was passed around among the guests (Figure 26c). At this point, everyone knew Performing Pictures would return, and that plans to build a chapel were underway.

A CHAPEL FOR SANTA ANA AND ZEGACHE

The following spring, Robert returned to Oaxaca with his cousin Đjani Brečević, a skilled stone carver from Croatian, with plans for building the first of two small chapels in brick and stone by the road leading in to Santa Ana Zegache (Figure 27). The work would be done together with the Talleres Comunitarios over 3 weeks, from mid-May to early June. On their first day in the town, Robert and Đjani accompanied the mayor to inspect the proposed site (Figure 28). The land was actually owned by one of the town's two Protestant families, and since the alternative location across the street would require removing some trees if the solar panels were to work, the mayor agreed to help make the necessary arrangements.

A day-by-day account of the process was put up on the Performing Pictures' home page, with photographs and Robert's colorful anecdotes and descriptions of the many festive interludes that were part of this project.[23] Robert and Đjani located the stone and brick they would need and the Talleres artisan, Antonio Ambrocio Salvador

Figure 27. The drawings for the kinetic chapel dedicated to Santa Ana, patron saint of Santa Ana Zegache (29 May 2012). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 28. Stonemason Đjani Brečević and the mayor of Santa Ana Zegache map out the land the municipality has acquired for the chapel (29 May 2012). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 29. On the sixth day of building the chapel, Talleres artisans Christian and Eric work on the foundation (1 June 2012). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 30. Christian lays the brick, as the chapel begins to take form (2 June 2012). Photo: Performing Pictures.

(usually called Chiquis), arranged for it to be transported to Zegache. Most of the work at the chapel site was done by the men, mixing the mortar and laying the brick walls in the hot sun (Figures 29–31). In the meantime, work in the Talleres studios on other parts of the project ran parallel to the on-site construction. Carving the stone pedestals (Figures 32, 34), charging the solar panels (Figure 37), making the wooden doors (Figure 38) and the cross for the roof, and assembly the AV-system for the animation (Figures 39, 40) were all done in the shade of the studio. Preparations for the annual Corpus Christi festival occasionally interrupted the work (Figures 33, 35), but by Day 12, the first of the two stone pillars was mounted on the chapel (Figure 36). Finally, the dome was painted in the same deep blue as used on the church, the final decorations were mounted on the roof, and the chapel was ready for the "opening." A few curious, villagers stopped by that evening to look it over (Figure 41).

The well-publicized opening was attended by many people from the town, including members of the local municipality, a couple of cultural journalists from Oaxaca, as well as most of the Talleres Comunitarios. A group photograph taken that day shows the project's participants, plus a few of the Talleres children and additional friends from the town. Mari, who had been filmed as the Virgin of Guadalupe, is on the right with her arm resting against the chapel.[24] The next day the priest from the nearby town of San Antonio came to preside over the dedication. The local priest, who had been invited first, had declined, which led to speculation that he considered the chapel to be a municipal work. The people who attended

Figure 31. On the 8th day, the work continues under a scorching Oaxacan sun (3 June 2012). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 34. On the 12th day, Đjani prepares the pattern for the side of the first pillar (9 June 2012). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 32. The 11th day chapel building finds Đjani continuing his workshop in stonemasonry while Mari watches (8 June 2012). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 35. The Corpus Christi festivities force the chapel builders to take a break (3 June 2012). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 33. Women enter the church of Santa Ana with flowers in preparation for the Corpus Christi ceremony, as the chapel construction continues nearby (8 June 2012). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 36. Đjani mounts the first of the two lime stone pillars onto the chapel (9 June 2012). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 37. By Day 18, the solar panels are being readied to run the video installation inside the chapel (13 June 2012). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 38. Back in the Talleres studio, Mich works on the wooden door for the chapel. The door features a peephole, through which visitors can see the animation (14 June 2012). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 39. The digital photo frame with the animation of Santa Ana is ready to be mounted inside the chapel (15 June 2012). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 40. Day 20 and Robert is preparing the electronics for the chapel (15 June 2012). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 41. In the dusk of the evening before the inauguration and blessing of the chapel, only the last decorations on the cupola are missing. Two women of Santa Ana visit the chapel (15 June 2012). Photo: Performing Pictures.

Figure 42. After the inauguration, Juanita, the seamstress assisting with the clothes for the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Santa Ana figure, visits the chapel with her two children (17 June 2012). Photo: Performing Pictures.

were eager to look inside the small structure and see the revolving figures (Figure 42).

THE MEANINGS OF COLLABORATION

In recent decades collaborative and participatory practices have proliferated in the art world. Making art is of course always collaborative, relying on the skills and knowledge of a range of participants, even if they remain unacknowledged in the final work. Today these practices go under different names such as participatory art, relational aesthetics, collaborative art, dialogic art, or situated art, with little common understanding of which modes of art production are distinguished by the different terms. Different artists, curators and theoreticians advocate their own models and debate others.[25] For example, Nicolas Bourriaud coined the concept of "relational aesthetics" to elaborate on how a selected group of artists produced social encounters and communities in art spaces.[26] Another take on these practices alludes to the ways in which artists team up with each other and local people to do projects.[27] In order to situate the collaboration in Zegache within this larger set of practices, we briefly describe the internal collaboration among the artists/artisans within each group, then turn to the forms collaboration took between the two groups, before turning to the ways the collaborative practices between Performing Pictures and Talleres Comunitarios included and affected others in the Zegache community.

The initial proposal for doing a project together was based on a fairly straightforward exchange of skills and knowledge of production, which may have been based in each group's history of internal collaboration. Within Performing Pictures, Geska had more extensive knowledge of scenery and costume design, as well as experience coordinating diverse projects developing simultaneously. Robert's contributions were focused on film, animation and digital compositing, developing the sensors used in their work, and programming. Among the Talleres, the women had the longest experience with painting and gilding, led by Mónica Galván Cruz, a founding member of the group. The men, who had joined the Talleres a few years later, worked primarily with carpentry, although some had also gained painting skills. Chiquis coordinated and led the men's work. This division of labor followed local custom, where women and men rarely work side by side outside their own families. Although there were no rules governing this within the workshop, the women preferred to work separately from the men, in the dust free indoor environment of the studio, while the men usually worked in the courtyard.

Both groups also saw the importance of a work as grounded in its production, and this appreciation for the process provided a base for mutual understanding. As Hine observed, for Performing Pictures, "production isn't a final phase, after some higher creative process, it's a perpetual state of being."[28] This *modus operandi* appealed to the artisans' practice of working simultaneously on several projects, and focusing on their individual areas of expertise where needed. These "experts" also would show their colleagues how to carry out simpler aspects of the work, making the entire process more efficient.[29] A consequence of this way of working, as in the Performing Pictures' production and in contrast to the usual patterns of the contemporary art world, is that none of the artists were making a claim on any single work as their own.

The clearly defined areas of expertise within production were the foundation of the initial collaboration between the two groups, characterized by a polite formality, and clear explanations. In the early stages, first names were not used, and the Talleres artisans addressed their European colleagues as "patron/a." Direction and intention were provided by demonstrating how a task was done, and by using drawings and gestures, since the artists did not share a spoken language. This became particularly evident during the building of the chapel. In the accompanying film, we can see how Chiquis, following Đjani's careful non-verbal demonstrations and corrections, quickly learned to adapt his wood-carving skills to the stonemason's tools, and was soon able to chip out the patterns himself. He in turn was able to direct the stone-carving and construction of the second chapel.

Along the way, new materials were introduced: when several members of the Talleres were dissatisfied with the artificial hair that they had bought for the figure of young Maria, they convinced their colleague Ofelia to let them cut a lock of her hair for the figure (Figure 43).

Figure 43. Monica was not happy with the synthetic hair bought for the figure of Maria, and convinced fellow artisan Ofelia to donate some hair. Chiquis holds the scissors (Nov 2011). Photo: Performing Pictures.

In another example, Geska had put together a series of photographs she had taken of the rusted metal surfaces in the gates and walls of the village, thinking that these might be an alternative to constructing in wood (Figure 44).[30] The Talleres artisans later followed her ideas and began making the small doors out of various recycled materials, especially appealing since wood is so hard to come by. These examples point to what has been labeled the "art of negotiation" in collaborative art,[31] resulting in changing forms of social interaction among the participants, and the introduction of new materials in the production.

Conducting workshops was another, slightly more formal way of collaborating during the production of each project. Again, this was part of the tradition of the Talleres' hosting of visiting artists, as a way of expanding their knowledge and skills.[32] Robert held workshops on lighting, animation, and pinhole photography, adapted to the technology available in the simple studio environment of the Talleres (Figure 45). Geska showed

Figure 44. Recycled corroded tin. Left figure: Photos Geska made of different Zegachean textures. Right figure: Performing Pictures *Los Nichos Siete Mogotes*, 2013 installed at Centro Fotográfico Manuel Álvarez Bravo in Oaxaca © Performing Pictures/BUS.

Figure 45. The creation of each artwork was to a large extent done in workshop form. Here Robert is conducting a workshop in microelectronics in November 2011. Photo: Performing Pictures.

the seamstresses how to attach the LED lights into the mantel they were making for the Virgin of Guadalupe. Đjani's workshop on stone carving is another example. Since the workshops were usually open to all members of the Talleres, the film footage often shows men and women working in close contact with each other, in contrast to the established gender divisions generally observed in the studio. This also occurred when men were involved in painting the hands and faces of the Santa Ana animation figures that they had carved. This shift appeared to take place without conflict; the painting had to be done in the more dust-free environment where the women had been working.

During the Santa Ana production, Performing Pictures also hosted a 2-hour workshop for children in the village. The 30 young participants were asked to draw a picture showing what Santa Ana meant to them, referring either to the town or to the saint. Some children drew birds and flowers, others drew scenes from the town including the church and the hills ("mogotes") the town is named after, a few drew religious figures, including Santa Ana and the Virgin of Guadalupe, and still others drew pictures of their family members and pets. At the close of the workshop, each child was filmed, holding up and explaining the drawing he or she had made. As parents came to pick up their children, many of them stayed to talk and ask questions. It was apparent that they were curious about the work of the Talleres and their collaboration with these Swedish artists.

In these workshops and in particular the children's participation, the social environment in the studio clearly emerges, with other members of the community often participating. This is most evident in the three films. Unlike many artists who work transnationally, Performing Pictures did not visit Zegache to oversee how a project was developing.[33] Instead, they located themselves in Oaxaca for the duration of each project, together with their young daughter, and often brought other colleagues and family members with them. They participated in many of the everyday activities including meals, shopping, childcare, birthdays, funerals and different festivities that are part of everyday life in the Talleres studio and in Zegache. Daily routines evolved, and the occasional crisis that occurred —such as a piece having to be re-done, or a woman having to bring her children to work because of violence at home—were acknowledged and accommodated, without disrupting the ongoing flow of work in the studio. This pattern was familiar to the Talleres, and also consistent with Performing Pictures' prior production as based in communal processes and work-based kinship.

The artists' collaboration, within the framework of this expanding social environment, paved the way for a movement of their work into the public space of Zegache. This engagement between the artists and civil society grew out of the production process that lay at the base of each of their projects, and resulting in the final work considered here, a solar-powered chapel built on public land. The mayor, in approving their proposal, had mentioned the potential for other applications of solar energy in the village. The broader ramifications of artistic collaboration can occur in such situations, as Declan McGonagle has noted, when the art becomes "viral" as artists negotiate their way in social and public spaces wherever they are commissioned to do a work.[34]

The chapel and its twin across the road have apparently become part of vernacular religious practice and belief for residents of Zegache. Fresh flowers are placed on the Santa Ana chapel by members of the Talleres, and other townspeople appear to have taken on this devotional practice (Figure 46). A report is also circulating in the village that some people have witnessed a beam of light extending from the small chapel up toward the night sky. These practices suggest that the chapel has entered into the local pantheon of significant sites of religious devotion and experience.

Figure 46. The chapel now has a twin chapel on the other side of the road, featuring the other patron saint of Santa Ana, El Dulce Nombre (15 Nov 2013). Photo: Performing Pictures.

CROSSING BOUNDARIES OF AESTHETICS, EXPERIENCE AND BELIEF

In his "genealogy" of the efforts toward collaboration within contemporary art, Boris Groys argues that they must be seen as "attempts to question and transform the fundamental condition of how modern art functions—namely the radical separation between artists and their public," that resulted from the secularization of art, giving art—and the artist—a new status.[35] Addressing this separation between art and its public was certainly an impetus for Performing Pictures, building on their intention to engage the spectator physically, and their sense that they were entering new territory by asking their public to respond to a religious figure moving toward them on the screen. The Swedish artists wanted the work to be well received by the indigenous people of Zegache and hoped it would assume a place in their informal religious observances. Although they expected to exhibit and distribute the work in other venues, it first had to "make sense" in this local context. They had always seen aesthetic production as a catalyst for making new sense of the world and contributing to self-esteem. Ordinarily, however, the value of a religious-based artwork derives from the artist and the public participating in the same religious community.[36] In this case, the Talleres artists and their mutual affiliation with the religious community of Zegache were essential, but Performing Pictures' presence opened up new

possibilities for communication between the Talleres and other residents of the town.

Ranciére suggests that we understand "aesthetic acts as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political activity."[37] How does this resonate with the collaborative experience of these two groups of artists and the works they created?

Each of the three works is recognizable as an aesthetic expression of both Performing Pictures and the Talleres Comunitarios. The thread from Performing Pictures' previous work is evident in the form of the animation, on a screen housed in its own case or box, and responding to the movement its viewer. On the other hand, the images of the saints—their facial expressions, gestures and clothing—and the niches that frame them are based in the religious and vernacular aesthetics of the Talleres' work.

Creating work together also became a process of exchange. For Performing Pictures, this began as they pushed the edges of their own practice toward the animation of religious figures, and displayed their work in religious settings. The responses that they found most rewarding went beyond the physical engagement and "dance" called forth by their previous work to include expressions and signs of belief. They drew increasingly on Mexican vernacular religious iconography, moving gradually closer to the forms they encountered in Zegache, by the roadside, in the local cemetery, in home altars and in the church. Some of these forms they introduced in turn into the practice of the Talleres artisans, who began to broaden the range of material they used in their work to include recycled metal and electric circuit boards. Drawing on the skills of observation and replication that had been a foundation of their internal collaboration, the Zegache artisans quickly acquired new techniques, such as stone carving. They also began to expand the sphere of their work beyond the studio and its clients into public space with the construction of local chapels. Encouraged by Performing Pictures' example, they also expanded the Talleres Comunitarios web site with presentations of themselves and their work. They also expanded their prior use of Facebook.

Through these mutual interventions, both groups were moving outside their previous frameworks of aesthetic practice. For Performing Pictures, this was a conscious move beyond the forms and venues that frame the work of contemporary art. The engagement with their spectators became more physical, as the line between the creator and the performance became less clear. The makers of the work were also appearing in the work, as in the Virgin of Guadalupe, and the viewing experience required corporeal contact, for example leaning forward to see the illuminated saint in the chapel. For the Talleres, the obvious shift involved applying an expanded range of skills previously used in restoration to creating new objects. More significant, however, was their move out of the studio, to create works in the community of Zegache, and for a public outside of Mexico.

This points to an expanded field of the aesthetic and to culture as a space for social interaction, beyond traditional locations for art and aesthetics. Their collaboration challenges the representative paradigm in fine art and its politics, opening up the creative process to a broader participation and empowerment.[38] Opening the Talleres' studio was also critical to this move. Previously little understood by the broader Zegache community that carried suspicions of a place where men and women worked side by side, as community members and their children saw and participated in the work, the shared cultural field expanded. The presence of Performing Pictures in the community was also a factor in this process. As they participated in the everyday life of the Talleres, and were often seen in Zegache, Robert and Geska and their family became more familiar, less strange, to other townspeople. This larger social environment provides a context where it becomes possible, in the words of anthropologist and curator Patricia Tovar, to combine "cultures and sensibilities in order to produce objects that cross sense borders and knowledge systems."[39]

Of the many borders that have been crossed during this ongoing collaboration, the most significant was the first chapel, built with municipal support. The second chapel, 2 years later, was built by the Zegache artisans themselves; clearly a democratic intervention in the life of the community. However, unlike the kinetic chapel that Performing Pictures built in Croatia,[40] neither the little Santa Ana chapel nor its twin can be viewed as sites of healing and reconciliation. Rather, they make visible the ongoing struggle between the municipality and the power of the church, in

which the mayor appears to be exploiting the popularity and resources of the Talleres Comunitarios (with its support from abroad) to expand his own position against the local clergy. Significant here is the criticism from the pulpit, accusing the Talleres of "selling out" the cultural heritage of Zegache, and the church is also rumored to have expressed an interest in reclaiming the artisans' renovated studio as a residence for the local priest.

Against the backdrop of this traditional struggle between religious and political institutions, the collaborating artists and artisans in Zegache have succeeded in producing a novel form of political activity, grounded in and expanding upon popular religious forms. Political struggle is not always or only a rational debate between multiple interests. It is also "the struggle for one's voice to be heard and recognized as the voice of a legitimate partner."[41] In this context, the power of the religious forms indigenous to Oaxaca cannot be underestimated. "Produced from many years of complex intermingling, conflation and layering of signs, practices and beliefs deeply embedded in everyday life," Kristin Norget argues, they remain "an important resource for resilience and resistance."[42] The three works created by Performing Pictures and the Talleres Comunitarios, culminating in a chapel at the entrance of the town, continue to draw on this power. They witness to the continuing power of art, aesthetics and belief to carry meaning in contemporary societies where people struggle to be heard as they carry on their everyday lives.

Notes

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8. Lynn Stephen, *Transborder Lives. Indigenous Oaxacans in Mexico, California, and Oregon* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 19–20.
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13. This aspect of Performing Pictures work is addressed in Andrew Morrison, et al. "Designing performativity for mixed reality installations," *Form Akademisk* 3, no. 1 (2010): 123.
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18. Ibid., 163.
19. James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2004). See also Boris Groys, "A Genealogy of Participatory Art," in *Introduction to Antiphilosophy* (London: Verso, 2012), 197–9.
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22. http://euroaxaca.org/zegache_stories (accessed January 9, 2014).
23. http://performingpictures.se/node/113 (accessed January 14, 2014).
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29. This way of working was noted by a designer who led a micro-electronics workshop for the Talleres. See David Cuartielles, "You may all Play Music, but you are Not a Band – On Collaboration, Skill Learning, and Our Education System" (2012) http://medea.mah.se/2012/05/you-may-all-play-music-you-are-not-a-band/ (January 1, 2014).
30. The photographs were for a set of nichos that later appeared in a Performing Pictures' installation in 2013 "Los nishos siete mogotes" (the niches of the seven hills).
31. David Butler & Vivienne Reiss, eds., *Art of Negotiation* (Manchester: Cornerhouse, 2007).
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33. Axelsson & Becker, "Between Places. The Artist's Work and the Work of Art."
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35. Groys, "Genealogy of Participatory Art," 197–8.
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37. Jacques Ranciére, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004/2013), 3.
38. Ibid., 10.
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41. Slavoj Zizek, "The Lesson of Ranciére" in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. Jacques Ranciére (London: Bloomsbury), 66.
42. Kristin Norget, "Decolonization and the Politics of Syncretism: The Catholic Church, Indigenous Theology and Cultural Autonomy in Oaxaca, Mexico," *International Education* 37, no. 1 (2007): 91.