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Bilbao Yarto, Ana Edurne (2021) The Museum of European Normality:colonial violence, community museums, and practices of display. Museum Management and Curatorship. pp. 649-668. ISSN 1872-9185

https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2021.2001361

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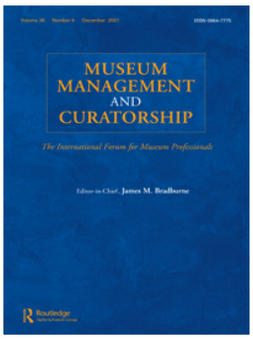

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Museum Management and Curatorship

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rmmc20

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To cite this article: Ana Bilbao (2021) *The Museum of European Normality*: colonial violence, community museums, and practices of display, Museum Management and Curatorship, 36:6, 649-668, DOI: 10.1080/09647775.2021.2001361

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2021.2001361

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MUSEUM MANAGEMENT AND CURATORSHIP
2021, VOL. 36, NO. 6, 649–668
https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2021.2001361

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The Museum of European Normality: colonial violence, community museums, and practices of display

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ABSTRACT

The Museum of European Normality (2008) is an immersive piece of installation art by artists Maria Thereza Alves and Jimmie Durham. The work is composed of maps showing migration patterns across Europe, images from books, magazines, videos, and other forms of documentation. Though presented as a serious study with facts and data, the installation is in fact a caricature of today's museums. In this manner, the work offers visitors a dislocated narrative of a museum experience by inverting the roles of object of display and spectator and by rendering visible uneven power relations implicit in the very act of display, an act that mostly employs the grammar of the coloniser. The immersive installation opens up the question of social justice within methods of display, teaching us that colonial violence may be contained in the very way of exhibiting. Against the backdrop of the framework introduced by this work, this paper provides an analysis of community museums in Latin America. I argue that these spaces have, over the past 50 years, articulated a variety of decolonial methods of display, which respond to the local communities' right to self-determination instead of to inherited colonial vocabularies.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 10 May 2021
Accepted 29 October 2021

KEYWORDS
Violence of display; community museums; Maria Thereza Alves; Latin America

The Museum of European Normality (2008) is an immersive piece of installation art by artists Maria Thereza Alves and Jimmie Durham. The work offers visitors a dislocated narrative of a museum experience by inverting the roles of object of display and spectator. The immersive installation opens up the question of social justice within methods of display by rendering visible uneven power relations implicit in the very act of exhibiting, an act that mostly employs the grammar of the coloniser. In this manner, the work teaches us that efforts to achieve social justice shouldn't be limited to restitution or due diligence in attribution or authenticity, but that colonial violence may be contained in the very way of exhibiting. Against the backdrop of the framework introduced by this work, and drawing on Alves' longstanding collaboration with a community museum in Mexico, this paper provides an overview of community museums in Latin America. These spaces have, over the past 50 years, articulated a variety of decolonial methods of

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display, which respond to the local communities' right to self-determination instead of to inherited colonial vocabularies, thereby appealing to what Boaventura de Sousa Santos refers to as 'democratic imagination' (de Sousa Santos 2014, 181) (Figure 1).

Community museums in the region have often adopted a mode of collective participant positionality,[1] which potentially counters what I will call a *violence of display*. Indebted to Dana Carlisle Kletchka's (2021) lucid account of institutional positionality among art museum educators I consider how participant positionality can be a key corrective epistemic strategy to the problematic modes of display underscored by *The Museum of European Normality*.

Through an embodied experience, *The Museum of European Normality* instigates in spectators a realisation of the power of cognitive justice, which, as de Sousa Santos repeatedly suggests in his book *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*, is the precondition to achieving global social justice. By cognitive justice de Sousa Santos doesn't mean a fairer distribution of scientific knowledge but a reclaiming and valuing of divergent forms of knowledges and an 'equity between ways of knowing' (2014, 237). As imagination is key in carrying out such recognition, he suggests two distinctive types: the epistemological imagination and the democratic imagination. Although these types can be analysed separately, De Sousa Santos is careful not to situate them as binaries since they 'belong together' (2014, 181). Each of these tools, I contend, elucidate Alves' installation and the work of community museums, respectively.

According to De Sousa Santos, epistemological imagination enables recognition via analysis and reflection upon practices (2014, 181). *The Museum of European Normality* shows how this form of recognition is transgressed by staging a violation through misrecognition as an artistic strategy. In parallel, De Sousa Santos suggests that the democratic imagination enables the recognition of diverse social agents and multifaceted practices (2014, 181) and this is potentially avowed through the work of community museums in Latin America.

Figure 1. Maria Thereza Alves and Jimmie Durham, *The Museum of European Normality*, 2008, Manifesta 7, Trento. Source: Pictures are courtesy the artist.

In this context, recognising diversity and multifaceted social agents and practices requires challenging museological binaries that are 'canonically coherent', to borrow Kletchka's term (2021, 129). Canonical coherence often depends on sustaining and affirming the relationship between the one who organises and mediates knowledge and the social agent on the receiving end of this knowledge. Community museums exercise democratic imagination by means of interrupting the positionality of such canonical coherency. According to Kletchka, through a process of disorientation, this interruption has the potential to 'create new spaces' (2021, 130), which can be fundamental in nurturing cognitive justice.

Part I: *The Museum of European Normality* and the violence of display

> The naturalization of the vitrine; pedestal; white, thick and protective walls; alarm systems; and armed guardians as the proper place for plundered lives is predicated on the protection of denuded objects' market value. As museumgoers, we are expected to recognize their unique value and thus partake in the rarefication of these looted objects, as if the people who created them are incapable of creating more of them and as if what they now create is valueless except as souvenirs. (Azoulay 2019, 319)

The Museum of European Normality was first presented in Manifesta 7, which took place in 2008 in Trentino and South Tyrol, Italy. The work was part of 'The Soul, (Or, Much Trouble in the Transportation of Souls') curated by Anselm Franke and Hila Peleg at the Palazzo delle Poste in Trento. The exhibition aimed to read Europe beyond its status as a geopolitical entity, and instead to inspect its 'soul', the construction of its identity. Amongst the works spread across the site were five 'miniature museums' described as 'sketches for possibly, imaginary museums' (Franke and Peleg 2008, 12). One of these projects was *The Museum of European Normality,* which comprises a combination of individual works by Alves and Durham alongside joint interventions for this commission.

This immersive installation displays maps showing migration patterns across Europe, images from books, magazines, videos, and other forms of documentation. The work includes a display of an archival type by Durham. Upon leaving the installation, visitors find an anti-guest book with thousands of names of migrants who died trying to move to Europe or who are in refugee camps. Albeit presented as a serious study with facts and data, the installation is a caricature of today's museums. Amongst various other individual and joint works, the installation contains three works by Alves that I intend to consider in more detail: *Oculesics: An Investigation of Cross-Cultural Eye Contact*, *Tchám Krai Kytõm Pandã Grét* [*Male Display Among European Populations*] and *Fair Trade Head*.[2] Each of these works critically highlights three distinctive aspects of the very act of display, which – I argue – serve to denaturalise it. If the nature of display is concealed behind an imagined paradigm of 'European normality', does it risk perpetuating epistemic violence[3] through the act of exhibiting? A *violence of display* is rendered visible in these works through three specific gestures: the non-universality of the formats of exchange within the space of display, extractivist attitudes of display, and a disparity in power relations within display.

Oculesics: the non-universality of the formats of exchange

Oculesics: An Investigation of Cross-Cultural Eye Contact (2008) is an 11min, 11sec video in which the artist investigates eye contact codes. Through two male characters, the video

shows how Europeans perceive people who don't look them in the eye while having a conversation. One man embodies the 'European' and the other represents 'The Rest of the World'. Although a silent exchange of gazes is on display, the subtitles make visible to the viewer both men's thoughts. While the European man is worried about the other man avoiding his gaze, the man representing 'The Rest of the World' gets increasingly nervous about being stared at. The former has thoughts including: 'he is deliberately insulting me', ' … shiftily eyes … he is lying', and 'guilty: guilty of something' whereas the latter thinks 'it makes me nervous' or 'staring. Staring … like a predator hunting you down' (Figure 2).[4]

Beyond the obvious interpretation of the non-universality of codes of body language, the work exposes a lack of awareness on both sides as to what the crux of the misperception is. The characters participate in a flowing exchange without ever suspending judgment. The work is rewarding for the spectator, who can secretly rejoice for having grasped the problem, something that the men in the video have not yet accomplished. But, by means of being radically overt, it is only the work that enables the spectator to adopt such position. The very same spectator might be prey to the same misperception should s/he participate in an exchange of gazes with a stranger in the metro between stops. Our existence is populated with these micro moments of suspended awareness, which ultimately help shape how we perceive others. If only these micro moments were populated with artworks with subtitles that state the obvious.

Thus, as evident as the non-universality of bodily codes might be, this work shows that the suspension of judgement does not easily come as a consequence of these moments of awareness, presuming that they are not constant but sporadic. These behaviours could be extrapolated to reflect on modes of display: we engage in sensorial and intellectual exchanges with (mostly) objects that were meant (or not) for exhibition. At best, we might be aware that the space in which the exchanges take place is never neutral, but this awareness rarely prevents us from taking the format of the exchange itself for

Figure 2. Maria Thereza Alves, *Oculesics: An Investigation of Cross-Cultural Eye Contact*, 2008, video, 11min, 8 sec. Source: Pictures are courtesy the artist and stills from the video.

granted. In fact, most of us tacitly accept the format of the exchange as a shared code (staring, not touching unless asked otherwise, not moving too fast or not speaking too loudly, reading the tags, to name a few). Arguably, these conventions are only shared to the extent that they were inherited, not to say imposed. This speaks to what Ariella Azoulay refers to as the 'imperial modality of art' in her *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, where she asserts that 'imperial violence is not secondary to art but constitutive of it' (Azoulay 2019, 159), which is why we are able to identify objects as such. We have created art as a field of expertise and written its history filtered by imperial attitudes, a boundary that has delimited what is inside or outside its realm. This, for Azoulay, has prevented an engagement with the world that is shared with others, obfuscating and devaluating objects, practices, and practitioners who are subjected to 'hierarchical dichotomies of high and low, primitive and modern, art and ethnography, art and artisanal, canonical and vernacular, masterpiece and craft, original and copy, authentic and touristic, and art and nonart' (Azoulay 2019, 162).

One of the various implications of such dichotomies is that the nature of the objects that we often encounter for display, their makers, or their users rarely devised or participated in designing the conventions for the interaction, often because the exhibition space wasn't meant to be its original destiny. For Azoulay, this includes the series of practices and protocols established for handling and salvaging objects. Hence, as *Oculesics* teaches us, an unspoken violence arises when we assume all codes as shared. Furthermore, if they indeed happen to be shared, the reasons for this shouldn't be concealed behind glass. Assuming a universality of formats of display and exchange is in this manner a form of epistemic violence, a violence of display.

Tchám Krai Kytõm Pandã Grét: extractivist attitudes of display

The video work *Tchám Krai Kytõm Pandã Grét* [*Male Display Among European Populations,* 2008, 2min, 21sec] features Shirley Djukurnã Krenak, an indigenous anthropologist from Brazil who visits Europe for the purpose of 'investigating the custom of some European males to touch their testicles in public'. While church bells ring in the background, the researcher speaks to camera indicating to the viewer that she is conducting her investigation in a 'typical town in Europe' and that an informant has agreed to 'reveal some of the secrets surrounding this ritual'. She asks the male informant when and why it is important to touch his testicles, to which the man responds with some examples of specific situations, such as when someone says that another man is lazy or that another man has died. He suggests that this is done either to protect oneself from a similar fate or for a future fate 'in case of an empty hearse passing with no coffin'.[5] The researcher asks the man to show us how this is done, so he starts giving further examples, such as when a nun or a priest pass, when a black cat crosses the road, for good luck, or when one is to get married or getting a job, among others. After each example he brings his hands to his testicles and lifts them, repeating the gesture on several occasions. The anthropologist raises her eyebrows at the informant and finalises the recording by looking back at the camera engaging in a complicit gaze exchange with the spectator (Figure 3).

In a conversation with curator Candice Hopinks, Alves states that when she was living in Italy, she noticed that men were constantly touching their crotches. She wrote to her male European friends asking the same question that Shirely asked the informant: 'when

do you touch your crotch and why?' Her friends from the Nordic countries replied that they didn't do such a thing. However, she describes how in Portugal, Spain, or Italy 'there is a whole list of reasons. If a Catholic nun passes you, because she is celibate and you do not want to be, you touch your crotch. If a black cat crosses your path; if a friend says he was just fired from his job; if the mirror breaks, etc. There were more than forty responses … ' (*Fair Trade Heads 2016*). Alves further describes how, after seeing the work, an Italian curator was upset by her calling this gesture a 'European ritual'; Alves stated that the curator 'couldn't stand the fact that the word ritual would be connected to a European population' (*Fair Trade Heads 2016*).

The reaction to the work is as telling as the work itself. Alves explains how a ritual is an action that is repeated over and over, and this is an everyday occurrence in the streets of some European countries (*Fair Trade Heads 2016*). However, there are attitudes and vocabularies that although common practice when referring to non-European objects and peoples, cause discomfort when used to frame 'European normality'. Imperial attitudes not only become manifest in formats of exchange, but also in the way in which things are named and framed.

Tchám Krai Kytõm Pandã Grét highlights a second aspect of the violence of display described above, an extractivist one.[6] The spectator might encounter the work with a certain degree of humour. Yet, this humour poses a double bind. On the one hand, the

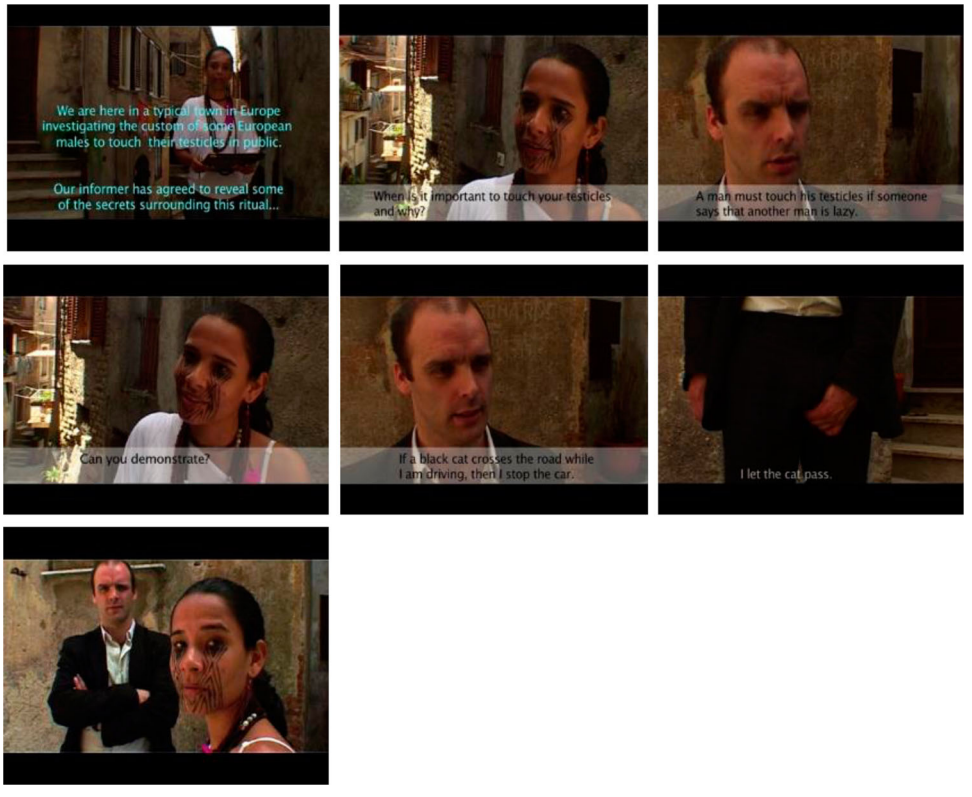

Figure 3. Maria Thereza Alves, *Tchám Krai Kytõm Pandã Grét* (*Male Display Among European Populations*), 2008, video, 2min, 21sec. Source: Pictures are courtesy the artist and stills from the video.

work is amusing only in so far as the situation presented remains an artwork, given that it wouldn't make the cut into what's considered an 'ethnographic object'. On the other, humour helps to lower the spectator's guard, guiding her to speculate what would happen if the roles in anthropological scholarship were indeed inverted, a strategy that prompts reflection. The work shows the white male as an object of study and the indigenous female as the one with the knowledge to investigate and the power to interpret what the informant is sharing. The informant appears somewhat naïve, not by nature, but by means of how he is addressed by the scholar. The scholar serves as a mediator between the informant's knowledge and the way in which this information reaches us in almost an extractivist manner. Macarena Gómez-Barris denominates this neo-colonial viewpoint the 'extractive zone', referring to how territories, peoples, plants and animals are perceived and reorganised as 'commodities, rendering land as for the taking, while also devalorizing the hidden worlds that form the nexus of human and nonhuman multiplicity … [facilitating] material and immaterial accumulation' (Gómez-Barris 2017, 5). The extractive zone translates all too well into conventional methods of display, even without considering why such objects are on display or how the objects reached the site of exhibition in the first place. Referring to artworks and collections, Gómez-Barris employs the term 'extractive art washing' to describe capitalist investment in culture, through which colonial relations and the stealing of natural resources become normalised (Gómez-Barris 2021).

So-called 'ethnographic' objects are presented for museumgoers to consume. Such objects are not there for what they are but for what they might represent; they are there on behalf of a predetermined type of knowledge that was previously organised, classified, and therefore recognised as there for our taking. Our most reliable witness to this is the history of display itself that according to David Carrier started with the cabinet of curiosities (Carrier 1987).[7] Oliver Impey and Arthur Macgregor trace the links between colonialism (or what they describe as 'the discovery of the New World and the opening up of contacts with Africa, South-East Asia and the Far East' (1985, 2)) and the origins of display practices in Europe. A detailed overview of the range of categories used to classify often 'exotic' objects is provided as a shared territory between art, non-art, and the natural sciences (Impey and Macgregor 1985, 2). Ever since, the nature of the foreign objects, the makers, or the users were unlikely to be participants in the articulation of those classification schemes. For the most part, those hidden worlds that Gómez-Barris refers to are concealed and the life between human and non-human multiplicities is inevitably reduced to an object of display that is there for our benefit.

This very logic of display in which knowledge is previously mediated and classified is inseparable from epistemic violence. For instance, Joshua Chikozho historicises how most museums in Africa emerged during colonialism and how military and administrative colonial authorities rendered the organisation of local knowledge important and inventorying and classifying became key to identifying local resources and maximising their exploitation (Chikozho 2015). Furthermore, they believed that knowledge about the local communities, their languages, traditions, and their practices could facilitate the subjugation process (*Museum 2014*). This doesn't mean that there was not an interest in material culture before colonisation in Africa, but he asserts that this 'was never organised in the western sense of display as we find in museums today' (Chikozho 2015, 50). Thus, in my view, the problem with our extrativist methods of display is that users and

makers of such objects risk being rendered into abstract entities themselves. In consequence, their identities and ways of living are devalorized by how they are framed. The way in which the scholar spontaneously raises her eyebrows towards the end of her interview with the informant in *Tchám Krai Kytõm Pandă Grét* is a key moment in the video. The subtle gesture invites the spectator to position herself in front of the informant, whose knowledge appears to live outside the framework of what is considered worth learning, but not worthless enough for us to think that we don't have the right to observe it.

Fair Trade Head: a disparity In power relations within display

Fair Trade Head (2007) is a work that invites Europeans (particularly English, French, German, Spanish, and Portuguese) to participate in a head exchange programme. This invitation is Alves' answer to a restitution controversy in 2007 at the Rouen Museum, where in response to petitions by the Maoris and the government of New Zealand, the museum started the process of returning a tattooed Maori head from their collection. In pre-European times preserved heads belonged to the families of the deceased and were only brought out during sacred ceremonies (*Mokomokai: Preserving the Past 2015*). The tattoos identified connections with ancestors and having them was a sign of social status. Another instance in which heads were preserved and displayed in Maori societies was for tribal enemies killed in battle to be ridiculed or reviled. The preserved heads became valuable trade items in the nineteenth century amongst European and North American collectors (including museums), who would pay large sums of money for them, often funding ammunition and firearms for local battles (*Mokomokai: Preserving the Past 2015*). As these items were in high demand and the communities needed to defend themselves, they started to tattoo their own slaves and prisoners to then sell them. The Museum of Rouen recognised that 'some of these remains may have been the result of barbaric trafficking that led to people's deaths in order to supply nineteenth-century museums' (*Māori Head*, 2009). The restitution process started by the museum gained support from the Mayor of Rouen who considered this an ethical gesture. However, the French Ministry of Culture tried to stop the process and brought legal proceedings against the Mayor for trying to 'illegally remove an artefact of the French cultural patrimony' (*Fair Trade Head 2007*). In the end, the Maori head was returned to New Zealand in 2011 (Figure 4).

Alves' work consists of two lambda-prints of 100×100 cm each. One shows a white woman's head with facial tattoos and a cut pattern in her neck. The other image displays a text printed over human skin. The text provides a timeline of events behind the restoration controversy and towards the end, it explains the dynamics of the invitation:

> Emilie from Lille is the first European to participate in the *Fair Trade Head* exchange program by donating her head as a symbolic proxy of the Maori head held by her government, France … Emilie's head will be held in a 'keeping place for remains' and will return to her descendants in France when the French government assumes its ethical responsibility by returning the Maori's head to his descendants in New Zealand. Europeans (particularly the English, French, German, Spanish and Portuguese) wishing to participate in *Fair Trade Head* can contact for further information zerynthia@zerynttthia.it. (2007)[8]

Fair Trade Head negotiates with the spectator by extending an invitation to participate in the head exchange programme. Such invitation goes beyond the exercise of inverting specific situations, and instead prompts reflection on both the ethics of display and the spectator's

Figure 4. Maria Thereza Alves, *Fair Trade Head,* 2007, 2 Lambda-prints, each 100 × 100 cm. Source: Pictures are courtesy the artist.

role in the exhibition space. Who has the right to display what and who has the right to see what's displayed? And how, in each case, are these rights acquired? These are some questions that signal towards a disparity in power relations within display, which as this work shows, are not widespread. Most significantly, *Fair Trade Head* strips the museumgoer of the protective shield of mere spectatorship. Can spaces of display thrust us towards complicity? To what extent are we partaking, enabling, or perpetuating a violence of display with our sole presence? The work does not point fingers or cause discomfort by means of triggering collective guilt amongst spectators. In extending an invitation, the work draws direct awareness to the spectator's role within the dynamics of display. Instead of calling for a relationship in which the subject tries to engage with or make sense of the object (an option which is indeed available) *Fair Trade Head* serves as a subtle reminder that dynamics of display cannot simply be detached from dynamics of spectatorship, thereby prompting the question of what it is that enables us to inhabit such positions in the first place.

The Museum of European Normality denaturalises three distinctive aspects of display that are often taken for granted, including our very role as spectators. Arguably, uneven power relations implicit in the very act of exhibiting emerge as forms of epistemic violence, or what I call a *violence of display*, which emerges from the explicit negation of what De Sousa Santos refers to as the epistemological imagination. A violence of display unfolds as a form of cognitive injustice in the sense that non-Western forms of knowledges and practices are rarely legitimised through the experience of organising and spectating display. Institutions don't often cater for those publics 'located at the other side of the colonial difference', as put by Rolando Vázquez (Wevers 2019). In fact, as seen throughout this section, cultural institutions have played a significant role in conceptualising and perpetuating such divide, one in which some have the power to represent others by 'classifying them, speaking about them, but not serving them and considering them as spectators: they are the ones that are seen, not the ones that are privileged to see' (Wevers 2019).

However, display can also be a powerful means for social justice. In what follows, I argue that, in opposition to the violence of display discussed above, community museums across Latin America and the Caribbean represent instances in which display

can safeguard communities from physical and epistemic violence. Whereas the previous section considered how a violence of display diminishes epistemological imagination as a key component of cognitive justice, this section aims at exploring the importance of democratic imagination in unsettling canonical practices that can potentially set one, among many other, possible foundations towards an 'equity between ways of knowing' (de Sousa Santos 2014, 237) (Figure 5).

Alves herself has established a longstanding collaboration with the Museo Comunitario del Valle de Xico, located in the municipality of Chalco in Mexico City. The space opened in 1996 with the aims of defending the Xico community's indigenous identity and of safeguarding pre-colonial artefacts. In 2012, she presented the installation *El Retorno de Un Lago* [*The Return of a Lake*] at dOCUMENTA 13. The multifaceted project comprised a publication, a recreation of a chinampa (a pre-Hispanic island-like hydraulic structure that facilitates the growing of crops) in collaboration with the communities surrounding the lake, and an installation exhibited in Kassel of a model that drew on methods of display articulated by the community museum.[9] This project was Alves' response to the community's petition to give visibility to the story of their inhabitants. *El Retorno de Un Lago* expressed the implications of the man-made desiccation of the lake now known as Tláhuac-Xico in 1908 by a Spanish immigrant looking to appropriate the land below the lake (which till then had been used communally). Although celebrated today in his native Spain for this gesture, the desiccation of the lake has brought about devastating consequences for the 24 indigenous villages and towns surrounding the lake, including earthquakes, constant flooding, contamination of water, cracks that endanger people's houses, and land subsidence, among many other issues that directly affect the Xico community today.[10] The work investigates the current social and ecological consequences of colonial practices such as land appropriation. It expresses how past gestures have deprived contemporary communities of dignified livelihoods, something that The Museo Comunitario del Valle de Xico continues to fight for today, even in the midst of constant government threats and aggressive actions against the space and their staff.

In 2020, Alves published a book/community project titled *Thieves and Murderers in Naples: A Brief History on Families, Colonization, Immense Wealth, Land Theft, Art and the Valle de Xico Community Museum in Mexico*. The book recounts how large sums of money that were confiscated from Mexico (and in particular from the inhabitants of

Figure 5. Maria Thereza Alves, *El Retorno de un Lago* (*The Return of a Lake*), 2012, installation commissioned by dOCUMENTA 13, Kassel. Source: Pictures are courtesy the artist.

Xico) ended up in Naples when a descendant of Hernan Cortes married into a Neapolitan family in the XVII century. The publication also recounts the history of the community museum, including its recent closure. Alves begins and ends the book with a request: instead of engaging in symbolic acts of colonial reparation payments, she proposes that two members of the Museo Comunitario del Valle de Xico 'be invited every year for a research and artist-in-residency grant of six weeks at the Villa Pignatelli Cortes in Naples' (Alves 2020). Beyond Alves' potent gesture of rendering transparent the negation of epistemological imagination through her work of installation art, this later gesture begins to speak to De Sousa Santos' notion of democratic imagination, which implies an infrastructural acknowledgement of diversity within agents and practices (Figure 6).

In this same spirit, also in 2020, Alves started working on her project *Son del Pueblo* as a response to the museum's request for support against what the community considers the illegal closure of the museum's premises by local authorities. The work invites contributors around the world to create works of ceramics that are inspired by any item from the museum's collection of pre-Hispanic pieces. Users send pictures of their creations to the artist, who posts them on her own Instagram account as well as on the museum's website and social media channels.[11]

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Part 2: community museums In Latin America

The complexities entailed in offering a clear-cut definition of community museums stem from the fact that they are tailor-made organisations that respond to the needs of specific communities. Unlike traditional museums, community museums are built for, and their agendas are envisioned by, the very inhabitants of the community in which they are

Figure 6. Maria Thereza Alves, *El Son del Pueblo/Of the People,* 2020, series of ceramics with different dimensions. Source: Pictures are courtesy the artist.

located. Thus, each of them responds to distinctive needs and has unique structures for self-organisation. However, some shared aims of these spaces include: the safeguarding of local heritage through self-governance, the development of self-knowledge and identity formations, the strengthening of creativity and articulating local modes of expression, the drive of keeping immaterial heritage and practical knowledges alive for future generations, and the creation of bridges of exchange with other communities (Morales and Camarena 2009, 15). Instead of offering a precise definition, I will present a brief historical overview of how these organisations emerged in Latin America that will be followed by a section dedicated to analysing some of their working methods and strategies of display, the key concern of the present paper.

Brief History of community museums In Latin America

In 1971, the resolutions taken after the 10th General Assembly of ICOM (Grenoble from the 29 August – 10 September) signalled that the traditional concept of the museum was on the verge of elapsing, especially the conception of the museum as a space dedicated to preserving cultural and natural heritage through the accumulation of objects. Apart from other resolutions concerning the illicit transfer of cultural property, the ethics of acquisition, and the duty of museums to tackle environmental deterioration, the subject of service to the public was noted as a key concern: 'the museum-visiting public is not necessarily the total public which the museum should be serving'. In order to address this concern, museums were urgently called to 'undertake a continuous and complete reassessment of the needs of the public which they serve' (*ICOM's General Assembly*, 1971). Hugues de Varine (ICOM director 1965–1974) recalls that during the event 'speakers from Africa and Latin-America expressed strong feelings about the cultural specificity of non-European continents and people, and their need to develop independent museum models' (de Varine 2005, 53). Such concerns surfaced given that European museum models were imported and didn't necessarily address local needs. Developing independent museum models represented the first step towards the recognition of 'different knowledges, perspectives, and scales of identification and relevance' that De Sousa Santos attributes to the role of the epistemological imagination as a tool for recognition (2014, 181). In this spirit, as a response to African and Latin-American speakers, a roundtable was organised in Santiago de Chile the following year (May 1972) with the aim of discussing the role of museums in the Latin American context. Representatives of different kinds of museums who worked in different areas of their institutions attended the event. Discussions took place in the form of an interdisciplinary workshop where specialists with various ranges of expertise participated. During the event, participants realised that their museums were doing little to address unprivileged members of their communities.[12] Further discussions were profoundly informed by such considerations that at the same time helped strengthen the concept of the ecomuseum, previously sketched by de Varine and George Henri Rivère (the first director of ICOM from 1948 to 1965), who was inspired by the Scandinavian open-air museums and by the opening of National Parks in France in the late 60s (Hubert 1985, 186). The notion of the 'integral museum', an educational space that would be at the service of the community while considering its cultural, natural, and social environments, was also envisaged in Santiago. The general resolutions of the Roundtable focussed on cultural development in the rural environment and the

development of agriculture, the contemporary problems of urban development, scientific and technological development, and life-long education that addressed local realities (Do Nascimento, Trambe, and Assunção dos Santos 2012).[13] Following the Roundtable of Santiago, there was a proliferation of ecomuseums in Europe and Latin America, better known as community museums in the latter. Due to space constraints, I won't elaborate at present on the differences and commonalities of these two concepts, but de Varine, Peter Davis, and Teresa Morales Lersch have all addressed this in their work.[14]

Although these museums had been present in different countries in the region from around the 1970s, in the year 2000 they founded a regional network: the *Red de Museos Comunitarios de América*. At its inception, organisations from Bolivia, Venezuela, Panamá, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico participated. They were later joined by organisations from Brazil, Colombia, Chile and Perú.[15] Many of these spaces emerged after local communities found archaeological artefacts that they sought to protect and maintain access to, resisting having to see their heritage behind glass, in faraway cities, and in places where wouldn't normally visit in the first place. Heritage is not only a strong component of the (often indigenous) communities' history or their sense of identity, but it can help them demonstrate their connection to their land and their territory. In some cases, these museums have aided groups of people in asserting their land rights, making these organisations crucial devices to protect communities from abuse and dispossession (Morales Lersch 2019, 41). These are examples of how cognitive justice requires an enacted acknowledgement of non-Western agents and practices that De Sousa Santos identifies within the realm of the democratic imagination.

Whereas Dana Carlise Kletchka investigates the importance of positionality within museum educators, Lorna Cruickshanks and Merel van der Vaart explore the impact of positionality on audience participation in collection-based museums.[16] These two studies demonstrate the importance of rendering transparent the act of mediation by situating the role of the mediator. In the latter study, positionality is seen through the lens of agency, authority, and urgency, in which the mediator reflects on how individuals relate to collections, on what kind of value is given to different voices surrounding the process, and on the significance of accountability towards participant communities (Cruickshanks and van der Vaart 2019). Indebted to these studies, in what follows I will explore how community museums reorient the role of mediation towards an exercise of self-determination. This means that the communities' location, their conception of time, values, views, and traditions influence not only an understanding of the world but a determination for this to become visible through the act of display. Through processes of self-governance, self-interpretation, community consultation, and collective decision-making capacity, communities engaged with these museums are constantly exercising a collective participant positionality, which I define as the practice of situating and recognising the position of stakeholders as both valuable and fundamental in generating localised display practices.

Working methods that inform display strategies

Other important characteristics exercised by community museums, or at least by those belonging to the network, are the importance of developing structures of self-governance, collective processes of self-interpretation (including developing research methods

and display strategies), and the importance not only of community participation but also of the inhabitants' capacity for decision-making (accompanied by community consultation) (Figure 7).

The Museo Comunitario de Mulaló, located in the Municipality of Yumbo in the department of Valle del Cauca, Colombia was set up by an Afro-Colombian community that envisaged one of the very first community museums in the country. In the 1980s, preparations began for opening a museum that would be dedicated to the figure of The Liberator, Simón Bolívar. Initially, the museum displayed objects donated by the community. The storyline had The Liberator as a central figure and it narrated his brief stay in the region, his love affair with a local enslaved person, and imagined adventures with his horse (Ortiz Cuero 2016, 184). Inhabitants started questioning this discourse since a community museum should also include their own histories, feature their ancestors, and speak about their everyday life. Thus, the museum underwent a discursive transformation process, not only changing its name but aiming to featuring the local spirit: the fate of the now free village of Mulaló and the acknowledgement of the ethnic rights of its inhabitants as a black community, whose practices, rituals, and their right to own land were only recognised in the Colombian constitution in 1993 (Ortiz Cuero 2016, 185). The museum also highlights the importance of slaves in the process of independence and acknowledges immaterial heritage, such as processes for food preparation, as knowledge worth preserving. The Museo Comunitario de Mulaló has served as a living example of a conscious shift towards self-determination via a continuous emphasis on self-interpretation. Although participation is constitutive of this process, a decision-making capacity is imperative to self-determination. Morales Lersch and Cuauhtémoc Camarena insist that although partnerships and collaborations with external stakeholders such as academic advisors, public and private institutions, local associations, and authorities are important, it is the community that holds the decision-making capacity in community museums (Morales and Camarena 2018). Display decisions taken from within serve here as political tools that support the safeguarding of memory, as mechanisms to protect dignity and ways of living, and as reminders of the community's capacity for action, all crucial in their defence of homogenisation processes dictated by global economies.

De Sousa Santos sees initiatives like this as alternatives to global capitalism and thus emphasises the importance of valorising them as systems of production (2014, 180).

Figure 7. The Museo Comunitario de Mulaló in the Municipality of Yumbo in the department of Valle del Cauca, Colombia. Source: Courtesy of the museum, approved by Esmeralda Ortiz Cuero, the museum director.

Projects like community museums often resist ideas of infinite economic growth and rampant exploitation of resources, and although De Sousa Santos refers to initiatives of varying scales, he highlights the work of microinitiatives organised by marginalised social groups. He describes their efforts in building regional economies grounded in solidarity and cooperation. These 'pockets of solidarity production', as he calls them, 'broaden the principle of citizenship beyond the narrow limit defined by political liberalism', thereby aiming at constructing a more just society (de Sousa Santos 2014, 181). Pockets of solidarity and novel political horizons are generated through spaces such as the Museo Comunitario de Mulaló, which are shaped and strengthened by the community holding the capacity for decision-making.

Decision-making is the culmination of community consultation, which is a common curatorial process before deciding methods of display. The founders of the Red de Museos Comunitarios created a document with advice on how to develop a community museum.[17] Recommendations include valuable and detailed information on: implementing processes to assist community consultation, finding methods to reach consensus, searching for resources and developing alliances, managing the museum collectively, finding a building, achieving economic development and sustainability, participating in networks, or devising research processes and designs for exhibitions (Morales and Camarena 2009). In practice, these elements constantly overlap. For example, exhibition research and design proposals require the participation of diverse age groups from within the community, for which consultation processes and sessions to discuss proposals are organised.[18] Teams composed of members of different age groups are invited to submit and justify exhibition proposals, which not only include themes but also ideas on how visitors would circulate in the exhibition space (Rodríguez Silva and Mata Palacios 2016, 75). People sometimes contribute by building display materials and furniture. Some museums partner with local schools to conduct curatorial research, which fosters participation from younger members of the community.[19] There are various types of research conducted, depending on the selected theme. Research agendas may include bibliographical consultations or archival investigation, but the research that relies on oral histories is especially prominent in these museums. For instance, community representatives of the Museo Comunitario Hitalulu of San Martín Huamelulpan in Tlaxiaco, Oaxaca in Mexico decided to exhibit their archaeological artefacts, but also to focus on traditional medicine.

Members of the community carried out interviews with traditional healers and the exhibition display, among other things, offers advice and techniques on how to appease the offended land by making offerings and saying special prayers for the land to 'free the spirit of the afflicted person' (Morales Lersch and Camarena Ocampo 1999, 91). Plants and herbs are often displayed. In this way, local practices are recognised and presented as valuable knowledge that is not imposed by academic entities but informed by everyday practices of the community. The explicit recognition of local practices of display as forms of valuable knowledge sits in opposition to the extractivist attitude of display exposed by Alves' work *Tchám Krai Kytõm Pandã Grét*. As discussed in the first section, this video work is critical of how social agents are rendered into abstract entities themselves inviting for a devalorized perception of their identities and ways of living. The Museo Comunitario Hitalulu's decision to focus on traditional medicine with a

localised research-led approach aimed at the opposite: to reclaim and give visibility to a type of knowledge while celebrating and acknowledging social agents who produced it.

The network also organises workshops as a knowledge-sharing strategy. To cite one example, in 2010 a member of the network based in Mexico went to the *Museo de la Revolución Salvadoreña* located in Perquin, El Salvador. She organised a workshop to help the community put together a project that relied on oral histories. The project had started some years ago and youngsters from the local school participated in a workshop. On this occasion, the event was dedicated to offering training to schoolteachers and other people from the community who were interested in collaborating with the museum. The workshop aimed at having a general discussion on the importance of oral histories and personal histories, as well as at developing a research project. Participants narrowed down their areas of interest to two main subjects, each of which had a team dedicated to it. The investigation consisted of interviews with members of the community. The two outcomes were a mural drawn in pencil that represented the history and the production of mezcal (a local beverage), and the other was an architectural model that represented the history of Perquin (*Taller de Historia Oral 2010*, 9). A similar workshop took place in the neighbouring community of Jocoaitique. Youngsters and adults from this community conducted their research on migration from El Salvador to Honduras and one of the outcomes was also a mural (*Taller de Historia Oral 2010*, 10).

Though these museums use a great variety of techniques and objects for display, murals are a consistent medium. There is a well-documented history of the importance of mural painting in the Americas in the first half of the twentieth century and on the influence of these techniques during colonial times for the purposes of evangelisation. However, as art historian Beatriz de la Fuente asserts, mural painting had a prominent presence in pre-Columbian societies (de la Fuente 2002, 13–14).[20] It is arguably not surprising, then, that mural painting is one of the preferred mediums for display in community museums. Murals are not only a direct way to connect with what they represented for our ancestors, but the medium also provides an opportunity to work collectively. Due to its scale, mural painting allows for members of the community to work simultaneously on a single artwork. This not only feeds the idea of collective creation and creativity but also helps to demystify the inherited imperial concept of the artist as the genius creator of masterpieces.

Therefore, I see this form of collective creativity as an exercise of the democratic imagination. Referring to the work of translation between knowledges, De Sousa dos Santos suggests that cognitive justice can be generated through the creation of meanings and directions that, albeit precarious, short-ranged, or uncertain, could be radical, shared, and concrete (2014, 234). By being shared and concrete in nature, these murals allow for meanings and directions that, as he argues enable 'the conditions for concrete social emancipations of concrete social groups' (de Sousa Santos 2014, 234). Decolonial attitudes are not solely found in big museums reflecting on their own collections, but also in how peoples in post-colonial contexts pave the way for self-determination through small gestures, including their display strategies.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, the act of display was considered both as an act that risks perpetuating epistemic violence and as a gesture that is able to safeguard specific communities

from social injustices. A *violence of display* is rendered visible through the three works from *The Museum of European Normality,* each of which demonstrates the violation of epistemological imagination by artistically exposing three distinct ways of misrecognition. As a corrective counterstrategy, collective participant positionality and its significance in the context of display is linked to identity formations and land rights via the work of community museums in Latin America. These small-scale spaces exercise democratic imagination by means of methodologically recognising an 'equity between ways of knowing', which is for De Sousa Santos at the heart of achieving cognitive justice.

Such conceptual dichotomy invites further considerations directed specifically towards display beyond a mere act of craftmanship. Forms, processes, and responses to displays are arguably as significant (or more) than mere spatial configurations in so far as, for better or for worse, they articulate discourse from within or on behalf of a given community. Either as a colonial or as a decolonial gesture display is able to institute, thus partaking in processes of subjectivation. Consequently, I argue that any attempt towards decolonising museums shouldn't be limited to restitution or due diligence in attribution or authenticity, but should give serious consideration to the very mechanism of exhibiting.

Notes

1. Luis Sánchez refers to positionality as 'the notion that personal values, views, and location in time and space influence how one understands the world … gender, race, class, and other aspects of identities are indicators of social and spatial positions and are not fixed, given qualities. Positions act on the knowledge a person has about things, both material and abstract. Consequently, knowledge is the product of a specific position that reflects particular places and spaces.' (Sánchez 2010). In this context, I refer to collective participant positionality as the practice of situating and recognising the position of stakeholders of community museums not only as valuable, but as fundamental in articulating localised display practices.
2. For a detailed account of all works present on the exhibition and for video transcripts see Grechi (2012, 45–70).
3. Epistemic violence is according to Gayatri Spivak, a colonial style of silencing that consists on inflicting harm through discourse. See her (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? *Die Philosophin*, 14 (27), 42–58.
4. Quotations in this section cite the unspoken dialogue between the two characters in the video work *Oculesics: An Investigation of Cross-Cultural Eye Contact,* 2008, 11min, 11sec.
5. Quotations in this section cite the dialogue between the two characters in the video work *Tchám Krai Kytõm Pandã Grét,* 2008, 2min, 21sec.
6. In their article 'Extractivism and resistance in Latin America and the Caribbean', María Villareal and Enara Echart Muñoz define extractivism as 'an accumulation modality based on the large-scale exploitation of natural resources for export purposes, without concern for the impacts of its practices or sustainability' (Villareal and Echart Muñoz 2020). Although the term is frequently used in the context of the exploitation of natural resources, it is in this context employed to refer to the exploitation of knowledge and cultural practices. Later in the text, the term is contextualised in this manner by referring to what Macarena Gómez-Barris calls 'the extractive zone.'
7. Cabinets of curiosities, also known as *Wunderkammer* or *Kunstkammer,* are considered the predecessor of the modern European museum. They emerged during the Renaissance and were rooms in which rare objects from the cultural or the natural world were collected and displayed by aristocratic elites.

8. Quotations in this section cite the text printed in one of the two of two lambda-prints that constitute Alves' work *Fair Trade Head* (2007).
9. On Alves' request, Don Genaro Amaro Altamirano (the founder of the museum and chronicler of the Xico Valley) was invited to Kassel to give a public talk on the lake's desiccation. Upon his return and after consulting this with the community, contemporary art became part of the museum's agenda.
10. For more information on *El Retorno de un Lago* visit: http://www.mariatherezaalves.org/works/the-return-of-a-lake?c=.
11. For more information on *Son del Pueblo* visit the museum's social media channels: https://www.facebook.com/MuseoComunitariodelValledeXico/ and https://www.instagram.com/museocomunitariodelvalledexico/.
12. For more details see Teruggi's (2001) account in his The Round Table of Santiago (Chile), *Museum International*, 53 (4), 15–18.
13. Among other recommendations was the creation of a Latin American Association of Museology (ALAM) which would be dedicated to attending regional needs instead of replicating methods from Western countries.
14. See de Varine (1996, 2), Davis (2008), Morales Lersch (2019, 41).
15. For more information on this network visit https://www.museoscomunitarios.org/redamerica.
16. For more details see Cruickshanks and van der Vaart (2019).
17. The document is not intended as an instruction manual but as a flexible set of recommendations that could be adapted to local needs.
18. For more information on the importance of assemblies of elderly members of the community see Rodríguez Silva and Mata Palacios (2016, 56).
19. For instance, the Community Museum MÄÄTSK MËJY NËË in San Juan Bosco Chuxnaban, Quetzaltepec, a Mixe community in Oaxaca, Mexico worked alongside the secondary school to conduct research on the history of local agrarian struggles. For more information see T. Morales Lersch. (2019). Community Museums: Telling a Story, Building a Future, *op.cit.,* 44.
20. 'Mural painting amongst pre-Columbian Mesoamericans not only had aesthetic ends: it was also a space for historical relationships, documentation of battles and dynasties, representation of cosmogonic views, chronicle of everyday life, an account of flora and fauna with symbolic character, as well as a witness of the knowledge of what happens in the celestial sphere'. Translated from Spanish by the autor. The original Spanish version reads: 'la pintura mural entre los antiguos mesoamericanos no sólo cumplía un fin estético: también era relación histórica, registro de batallas y dinastías, representación de concepciones cosmogónicas, crónica de la vida cotidiana, recuento de la flora y la fauna de carácter simbólico, así como indicadora de la sabiduría acerca de lo que acontece en la bóveda celeste'.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Maria Theresa Alves for her generous contribution to this research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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