UNPACKING MEXICAN MEDIA ART (PT.1):

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM, TECHNICAL OBJECTS, AND TECHNOLOGICAL DISOBEDIENCE

Doreen Ríos

INTRODUCTION

The Mexican media art scene is often characterized by its foundation in self-taught artistic practices, fostering interdisciplinarity within its core and propelled by the artistic community itself.[1] Despite some institutional support in the country, particularly during the early 2000s, these forms of artistic expression have largely been neglected in art history and criticism which has led to the collapse of many of these institutional spaces, programs, and funding opportunities.[2]

My hypothesis suggests that this neglect stems from the elusive nature of the term "media arts," as pointed out by colleagues,[3] as well as a lack of understaining ot the situated nature of some of these artistic practices and their use of technical objects.

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[1] For example, see Erandy Vergara's *Electronic Traces: Archaeological Perspectives of Media Art in Mexico* (2016), Carlos R. Guzmán's Master's thesis on Mexican Technoscientific Arts (2000-2015), Fernando Monreal's book *Machines to Decompose the Gaze: Studies on the History of Electronic and Digital Arts in Mexico* (2020), and Cecilia Castañeda's research on tactical media presented in *Cuánto Tiempo Lleva Todo Esto Derramándose sin Desbordarse* (2021), a book I co-edited with Ricardo Domínguez.

[2] Significantly, initiatives such as the establishment of the Centro Multimedia at CENART, the curation efforts of Príamo Lozada and Karla Jasso at Laboratorio Arte Alameda, the Cyberlounge (2000-2009) directed by Arcangelo Constantini at Museo Tamayo, events like the international electronic arts festival Transitio_mx (2005-2018), and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2007 have played key roles in shaping the Mexican media art scene.

[3] This is part of broader conversations around (new) media arts internationally and can be see through the work of curators Sarah Cook and Steve Dietz, particularly in their 2005 exhibition *The Art Formerly Known as New Media*, as well as in Cook's scholarship as seen in her essay *Murky Categorization and Bearing Witness: The Varied Processes of the Historicization of New Media Art.* Additionally, Christiane Paul's work on the topic, specially in *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond: Curatorial Models for Digital Art* a book she edited in 2008. Similarly, Beryl Graham has also produced various research on the topic in texts such as *A small collection of categories and keywords of new media art* and the 2014 book *New Collecting: Exhibiting and Audiences after New Media Art* edited by her.

One of the most unique cases I have found within this missing history is that of, what I have named, the chatarrerx artistic community. Although this essay's purpose is not to delve into the specifics around this community or the rationale behind their name, it is essential to note two key characteristics that are relevant to connect their artistic practice with a broader historical context of refusal, and disobedience. Firstly, members of this community are predominantly self-taught artists who rework various technological tools, referred to here as technical objects. Secondly, they primarily utilize e-waste and discarded materials to produce their work.

In order to understand the role of the chatarrerx artistic community, it is important to know that in the particular case of Mexico there is a culture of technological consumption deeply rooted in an ethos of repair and vernacular appropriation of what is at hand. We find this in socio-commercial establishments such as the Plaza de la Tecnología as well as in community-led makerspaces[4], and artistic practices that actively engage with the reworking of technical objects, increasingly in the 2000s in works designed to perform artistic agency in response to extractivism and the postcolonial condition.[5]

However the histories of artistic practices rooted in these ideals are far from new and can be traced all the way back to the end of the 19th century in what were the transitional years into the Mexican Revolution with figures such as the Flores Magón brothers and José Guadalupe Posada, further on in the Muralist movement and their insistence on opening the black box and

[4] A collaborative workspace that provides individuals with access to tools, equipment, and resources for creating, inventing, and tinkering. It's a community-oriented environment where people of all ages and skill levels can come together to explore their interests in various fields such as electronics, robotics, 3D printing, etc. I chose this terminology instead of "fablab" since Fablabs originated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Center for Bits and Atoms (CBA) and adhere to specific principles outlined by the Fab Foundation.

[5] By postcolonial condition, I mean the socio-political, cultural, and economic circumstances that emerge in regions or nations following the end of colonial rule. It encompasses the complex legacy of colonialism, including the lingering effects of colonization on institutions, identities, power structures, and cultural norms. The term highlights the ongoing struggles and challenges faced by formerly colonized societies as they navigate issues such as identity formation, economic development, social justice, and political sovereignty in the aftermath of colonialism. (Bhabha, 1990, 2004; Fanon, 1967, 1968; Spivak, 1988, 1999)

showing the workers who produce all goods, followed by the radical collectiveness of the Los Grupos generation, finally arriving to the chatarrerx artistic community.

This paper looks into potential routes to explore these neglected histories by introducing a framework of action and three key terms: historical materialism, technical objects, and technological disobedience. It is important to say that this is just a first approach to building this history and it is aimed towards exploring key concepts from within critical theory, and postcolonial studies.

I. HISTORICAL MATERIALISM, IDEOLOGY, AND ART

> "(...) because he (Francisco I. Madero) is humiliating in blood and fire, Mexicans who want liberties, so as to please the scientists, landlords, and bosses who enslave us (...)"
>
> Emiliano Zapata (1911), *Plan de Ayala*.

When Emiliano Zapata and his companions pointed the finger at the "scientists, landlords, and bosses who enslave us" in the Plan de Ayala (1911) it is important to note that they weren't inherently opposed to science, ownership, and labor. Rather, their rebellion was directed against the colonial forces that dictate the validation process of who can produce science (or knowledge for that matter), who can own land, and who can benefit from labor. In other words, their resistance was aimed at challenging the systemic oppression that was now perpetuated by former fellow revolutionary, Francisco I. Madero.

In order to understand the significance of the Plan de Ayala within the broader context of the Mexican Revolution, it is essential to understand the circumstances in which it was written.

This political manifesto was drafted by Emiliano Zapata and launched on November 25, 1911, as a response to Francisco I. Madero's failure to implement the agrarian reform after overthrowing dictator Porfirio Díaz in the first half of the Mexican Revolution. The plan demanded the return of lands to the people, specifically indigenous communities and farmers, and the redistribution of land taken by powerful landowners. It also called for the resignation of Madero and the recognition of revolutionary leaders as the legitimate representatives of the people. The Plan de Ayala became a key document in the struggle for agrarian reform during the second half of the Mexican Revolution.

It is important to mention that the Plan de Ayala was primarily distributed through printed pamphlets and flyers, as well as through word of mouth and oral communication among the rural communities of Mexico. This mode of dissemination is very much connected to culture, printing technologies, and vernacular production aligning with Marxist historical materialism[6] emphasis on understanding history and social change through material conditions.

In exploring this connection through a postcolonial lens, invoking the insights of Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci and his conception of historical materialism becomes imperative. Gramsci's framework provides valuable perspectives on how power dynamics, cultural hegemony, and social change intersect. His conception of historical materialism recognizes the importance of economic factors in driving historical change, but he also emphasizes the significance of cultural and ideological factors.[7] In particular, he introduced the concept of hegemony, which refers to the dominance of a particular group's worldview or ideology over society as a whole. Gramsci argued that ruling classes maintain their power not only through

[6] See for example Engels, Friedrich and Marx, Karl. (1848). *The Communist Manifesto*.
[7] See for example Gramsci, Antonio (1992). *Prison Notebooks*. Columbia University Press.

coercion but also through the dissemination of their ideas and values, which become accepted as *common sense* by the rest of society.

Unlike classical Marxists who saw economic relations as the primary determinant of social structure, Gramsci believed that culture and ideology played a crucial role in maintaining the status quo. He argued that the ruling class maintains its dominance by establishing cultural hegemony, whereby its values and norms are presented as universal and natural, thus obscuring class interests and perpetuating social inequality.

In Gramsci's view, historical materialism must encompass not only the economic base of society but also its superstructure, including culture, ideology, and political institutions. He saw the struggle for hegemony as central to the class struggle, and he emphasized the importance of intellectuals and cultural workers in challenging dominant ideologies and building counter-hegemonic alternatives.

Gramsci argued that:

> *But at this point we reach the fundamental problem facing any conception of the world, any philosophy which has become a cultural movement, a "religion", a "faith", any that has produced a form of practical activity or will in which the philosophy is contained as an implicit theoretical "premise". One might say "ideology" here, but on condition that the word is used in its highest sense of a conception of the world that is implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life.* (written between 1929 and 1935, published posthumously in 1947)

Applying Gramsci's perspective on historical materialism, it is possible to enhance our understanding of the socio-political significance of the Plan de Ayala within the Mexican

Revolution, revealing its dual role as both a political manifesto and a cultural artifact. By disclosing the intricate relationship between culture, technology, and vernacular production, precisely because it reveals the ideological asymmetries between the hegemony, epitomizing the status quo, and postcolonial acts of disobedience, embodying the resistance.

II. ON TECHNICAL OBJECTS

In his book *The Black Technical Object: On Machine Learning and the Aspiration of Black Being,* (2023), Ramon Amaro approaches technical objects as tools imbued with technological, social, and cultural significance. These tools may include digital devices, algorithms, data sets, and other elements of computational systems. Amaro's perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness of technical objects within broader socio-political contexts, particularly in relation to issues of race, identity, and power dynamics. While Amaro does not offer a precise definition of the technical object, given the unfolding of this research, it becomes evident that his conceptualization is influenced by the work of philosopher Gilbert Simondon.[8]

Similar to Ramon Amaro, Simondon's seminal text *Du Mode d'existence des Objets Techniques* (1958) has been instrumental in shaping my understanding of the technical object. According to this book, technical objects are tools that emerge from a process of individuation, where they evolve from an initial state of potentiality to a more differentiated and stable form. These objects are characterized by their integration of various components and their capacity to mediate between humans and their environment.

[8] In Chapter 7, titled *A Correction of Metaphysics and the Concept of Black Substance*, the author draws on Simondon's research, particularly in his analysis of the process of individuation, which he analyzes extensively. Additionally, the author references Simondon's definition of the concept of "pathological." Both of these concepts are later on put into tension while he addresses “the process of becoming Black and the aesthetics of Blackness.” (p. 224)

According to Simondon, the process by which technical objects gain individuation is through transduction. The transductive process involves the integration of heterogeneous elements into a coherent whole, as well as the emergence of new structures and functionalities that result from their interaction. In this way, as the technical object interacts with its surroundings, it undergoes continual adaptation and modification, shaping and being shaped by its context. This ongoing process of interaction and feedback contributes to the technical object's individuation and evolution over time.

Simondon distinguishes between two modes of formation of the technical object: abstract and concrete. Abstract technical objects are a primitive form of the technical object in which "each theoretical and material unity is treated as an absolute that has an intrinsic perfection of its own that needs to be constituted as a closed system in order to function." (1958, p.14) In other words, abstract technical objects are the conceptual or theoretical aspects of technical systems. They exist at the level of ideas, designs, or plans before they are implemented or instantiated in physical form. Abstract technical objects encompass the principles, theories, and mathematical models that guide the creation and development of concrete technical objects. They are often expressed through diagrams, blueprints, algorithms, or other symbolic representations.

Conversely, concrete technical objects are the physical manifestations or embodiments of technical systems. They are the actual tools that are constructed and put into operation in the real world. Concrete technical objects embody the ideas and principles of abstract technical objects but also incorporate material properties, components, and functionalities. They interact with their environment, users, and other technical objects, exhibiting behaviors and characteristics that emerge from their physical instantiation. It is important to mention that this transductive process

continues to evolve as the technical object becomes in contact with new environments, new users, and new technical objects.

This dual condition becomes evident in Amaro's research, particularly in his examination of the systems underpinning the development of digital tools and, specifically, of machine learning. Amaro approaches the study of machine learning from two angles: a functional examination of its operations and a theoretical exploration with the goal of understanding its potential impact on reshaping Black being. Among the questions he poses in his research, I would like to highlight the following one where, inspired by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, he asks: "what if the Black technical object were to take a right of refusal to racial perception, and aspire to be that which is out of reach of the negating factors of race?" (Amaro, 2023, p.15)

In Amaro's view, it is possible to challenge and subvert existing power structures, including those rooted in racism and sexism, within a technical object by tactically[9] acting upon the individuation process while being aware that "the individual[10] is always incomplete and finds themselves continually involved in new processes of becoming". (Amaro, 2023, p.224) In essence, he challenges Simondon's concept of individuation by suggesting that this process is never complete. I would even go as far as to suggest that technical objects can continuously acquire new characteristics and even develop new sensibilities through interventions in their transductive exchanges.

III. ON TECHNOLOGICAL DISOBEDIENCE

[9] I consider the notion of the tactical versus the strategic to be essential here, since it acknowledges the fact that these possible ways of acting upon the technical objects can only be used for a limited period of time before being co-opted by the powers that be. Echoing Michel De Certau insights in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) where he suggests that while strategy adheres to political, economic, or scientific logic, tactics are inherently contextual. They capitalize on specific situations to disrupt norms, ingrained within everyday life where their effectiveness stems from their adaptability and ability to exploit circumstances for both combat and pleasure.

[10] And technical objects for that matter.

> *Through continuous disassembling, repairing, fragmenting, and using objects to their convenience, they ended up disregarding the signs that make Western objects a closed unit or identity. The Cuban is not intimidated by the authority emanating from certain brands like Sony, Swatch, or NASA. If it's broken, it's fixed. If it serves to repair another object, it will be taken, in pieces or entirely. Disrespect for the consolidated image of industrial products translates into a process of deconstruction: fragmentation in materials, shapes, and technical systems.* (Oroza, 2012)

In 2009, artist and ethnographer Ernesto Oroza introduced the concept "technological disobedience" to describe the vernacular practices of reappropriation, reuse, and reinvention of technologies that emerged during Cuba's Special Period in Time of Peace[11]. His book *RIKIMBILI: A Study on Technological Disobedience and Some Forms of Reinvention* (2009), explores this phenomenon, focusing on the case study of the 'rikimbili.' Initially, ‘rikimbili' referred to vehicles crafted by attaching a gas motor to a bicycle, a practice that became widespread in Cuba during the 1990s. Over time, the term evolved to encompass all vehicles constructed from various parts. As part of his research for this book he also created a virtual *materioteca*[12]*,* an archive featuring images and descriptions of newly assembled objects resulting from technological disobedience.

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[11] The Special Period in Time of Peace (Periodo Especial en Tiempo de Paz) is a term used to describe a challenging period in Cuban history. It began in the early 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba's main trading partner and source of economic support. With the dissolution of the Soviet bloc, Cuba lost significant subsidies, leading to severe shortages of food, fuel, and other basic necessities. Altogether with the embargo imposed by the USA since the 1960s, the island nation faced a profound economic crisis marked by widespread poverty, rationing, and hardship. The Special Period forced many Cubans to adapt to a new reality of scarcity and austerity, profoundly impacting all aspects of life on the island. For more information please refer to Hernandez-Reguant, Ariana (ed.) (2009). *Cuba in the Special Period : culture and ideology in the 1990s*. New York : Palgrave Macmillan

[12] Oroza coined the term "materioteca" to describe his experimental virtual library, blending the Spanish words "materia" (matter) and "biblioteca" (library). This name reflects his primary focus on archiving physical objects.

Oroza's perspective resonates within Mexico, reflecting a tradition of repairing, repurposing, and reclaiming objects that aligns with our cultural approach to various technological devices. We often pass these devices between family members, using them until they're completely worn out, exchanging them with others when we no longer need them, disassembling them to create new devices, and more. Such practices are evident not only in socio-commercial spaces like the Plaza de la Tecnología[13] as well as in community-led makerspaces[14] and artistic practices.

Interestingly, a term that can embody these practices is that of vernacular production (Oroza, 2009). In the work of philosopher, literary theorist and feminist critic Gayatri Spivak, although she rarely uses the term in itself, she argues that the vernacular is a crucial site of subaltern expression and resistance against dominant discourses and power structures. Spivak advocates for a recognition of the complex ways in which subaltern groups navigate and negotiate their identities and agency through their everyday practices, languages, and cultural forms.

By paying attention to the vernacular, Spivak suggests that we can gain deeper insights into the lived experiences and struggles of subaltern communities within postcolonial societies.[15] As she carefully explains in regard to the foreclosure of the native informant "(...) when I say that the Other as Subject is inaccessible to Foucault and Deleuze. I am thinking of the general nonspecialist, nonacademic population across the class spectrum, for whom the episteme

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[13] Plaza de la Tecnología can be translated as Technology Mall. It is a socio-commercial space that opened in 1987 in Mexico City and has since spread to other cities in Mexico. Here, retailers sell refurbished devices, purchase obsolete technologies and e-waste, offer services to fix and hack gadgets, and install pirated software.

[14] A collaborative workspace that provides individuals with access to tools, equipment, and resources for creating, inventing, and tinkering. It's a community-oriented environment where people of all ages and skill levels can come together to explore their interests in various fields such as electronics, robotics, 3D printing, etc. I chose this terminology instead of "fablab" since Fablabs originated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Center for Bits and Atoms (CBA) and adhere to specific principles outlined by the Fab Foundation.

[15] See for example *Chapter 3. History* of her book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999).

operates its silent programming function." (Spivak, 1999) In other words, she's talking about those who produce and disseminate vernacular knowledge.[16]

Technological disobedience emerges as a resistance to the project of modernity. As it confronts the civilization process that sought to exterminate the vernacular production through the domestication and extermination of the *calibanesque* other. In this sense, it is possible to find a trace between colonial epistemic violence and technological disobedience as a tool for postcolonial resistance.

CONCLUSION

The question now becomes: What does art have to do with historical materialism, technical objects, and technological disobedience? This paper, of course, doesn't reflect the complexities and interweaving of the missing histories of media arts in Mexico. Rather, it proposes to acknowledge a set of initial terminologies that respond to the intuitions that ground my research proposal.

The artistic community that I'm interested in exploring is one that hasn't been named officially just yet, however I'm referring to them as *chatarrerxs*. The name I'm proposing here means scrap dealers and has often been used pejoratively in reference to the artistic practice of those who work with reappropriation techniques that include the *savage* act of pulling machines apart and/or exorcizing their intended goals by misusing them. Similar to how various thinkers and revolutionaries have reclaimed derogatory labels, such as Caliban, as well as many marginalized groups including, but not limited to, feminist, queer, and indigenous communities,

[16] In this context, when I refer to the term "vernacular," I am highlighting colloquial language, social practices, and cultural expressions, in other words: knowledge specific to a particular socio-political environment. It is crucial to note that I am not assigning a hierarchy to different forms of knowledge, nor am I seeking to validate Western standards regarding what constitutes appropriate modes of knowledge production.

this group of artists has adopted the term *chatarrerx* in a less solemn manner to refer to each other.

Moving forward, what I propose is to claim a name and a space for artistic practices rooted in technological disobedience within art history. A history full of misrepresentations but also of a lot of strategic absences. However, it is important to mention that we can't talk about disobedience without touching base with various artists who have sought to resist, reclaim, and even weaponize the postcolonial condition.

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