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The Novels of Elsgüer. Counter Narratives and Ecosystems of Corporeal and Virtual Displacement

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The Novels of Elsgüer: Counter Narratives and Ecosystems of Corporeal and Virtual Displacement

by Laura Acosta and Santiago Tavera



About the Artists

Laura Acosta and Santiago Tavera are a Colombian-Canadian artistic duo based in Montréal. Their collaborative practice forges an intersection between Tavera's investigation of video practices along with virtual and interactive environments in relation to the body, with Acosta's exploration of identity through performance and textile structures. Through this, they create immersive experiences and expanded performances that present narratives of displacement, belonging and embodiment. Their collaborative projects have been supported by the Canada Council for the Arts and Le Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, and presented in Canada and Colombia.

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Laura Acosta and Santiago Tavera

Elsgüer is not a place, it is a state of liminal consciousness. It is part of a reflection with a long lineage where textile, performance and screen make a body. An explosion of colors, textures, kaleidoscopic forms and dancing bodies: a new state of consciousness is drawn through several digital environments. Laura and Santiago offer an interactive experience as a study on the link we develop with our environment as an activator of new corporal, sensorial and social languages.

—Nuria Carton de Grammont

The Novels of Elsgüer is a series of 5 transdisciplinary installations co-created by Colombian-Canadian artists Laura Acosta and Santiago Tavera since 2017. The artists create immersive and interactive ecosystems composed of different audio-visual technologies, sculptural and material elements, and various approaches to performance. Each expanded scenography is referred to as an episode and presents a different exploration of the relationship between body and space from a decolonial perspective. The word *Elsgüer* is the Spanglish pronunciation of the English word “elsewhere.” This term alludes to the feeling of absence while being present, a sensation felt by anyone who has experienced displacement. This body of work uses this sense of dislocation to create environments and narratives that test the boundaries between body/space and viewer/performer. The artwork asks audiences to question their perception and position within a space.

In their compositions, Acosta and Tavera present the body as a polymorphic hybrid form that is in constant movement, transforming itself and the environment it is in. In this process, the artists reflect on their experiences of being BIPOC and queer

individuals, as well as the processes of diaspora. For them, the perspectives of these “other” bodies represent multiplicity, with the potential of transgressing and creating new sociocultural, political, and environmental patterns. Their installations are rhizomatic networks of lights, sounds, videos, textiles, and performances that submerge audiences within environments where one being can take on many forms and different spaces can exist within one site.

In 2021, Tavera and Acosta developed two episodes that directly question our individual and collective connection to the natural environment.

When the River Sings, Stones it Brings

What defines this work is the transition through different territories and processes of hybridization and oppression in constant mutation, as well as the notions of social, ethnocultural, corporal and gender representation. (Mariza Rosales Argonza, 2022)

When the River Sings, Stones It Brings is the first episode of the installation series, *The Novels of Elsgüer*.¹ This piece explores skin as territory, composed of layers of lived experiences and accumulated memories, which continuously shape and transform its topography. This work reflects on how our skin, similar to the natural landscape, bears the marks of the crossbreeding processes of colonialism and diaspora, as well as histories of both oppression and resilience.² This living membrane is then a terrain that transforms and adapts over time like a geographical ground.

The installation consists of a video projection mapped onto a large-scale inflatable textile sculpture, and a set-up of multiple screen monitors and spatialized sound. The videos in this piece depict macro images of skin textures captured in a shoot with three nude bodies covered in various gloss-like substances such as honey, oil, and Vaseline. The sticky bodies were intertwined to make a collective surface that was then digitally edited and manipulated to construct a new visual terrain. These close-up images of skin are blended with microscopic footage of mineral surfaces such as rocks and crystals. Together, these textures create an entirely new surface that feels biological and recognizable while giving a sensation of uncanniness and discomfort. The installation's soundscape provides a cave-like atmosphere of dripping wet randomized sounds that are automated to give the space a live and organic feel. Through this composition, the audience navigates an immersive landscape made up of amorphous moist forms that are beautiful and repulsive. Hair, crevices, scars, and folds of unidentified bodies become the landmarks of this abstract virtual topography.



Figure 1. Acosta, Laura, and Santiago Tavera. *When the River Sings, Stones it Brings*, 2021. Detail of installation in “Résonances du Réel,” Maison de la Culture Claude-Léveillée, Montréal, 2021. Inflatable textile and video installation. Photo courtesy of the artists.

Additionally, this work aims to bring awareness to human rights violations pertaining to people and territory that have taken place in Colombia and Canada. In Colombia, more than 50 years of violence has led to the cruel and unjust disappearance of countless social leaders and civilians who have appeared dismembered in rivers and other natural sites. Parallely, in Canada, the ongoing repression of Indigenous people is demonstrated by the mass graves of Indigenous children recently discovered in residential schools throughout the country. In the audio-visual experience, we reject how these painful brutalities have turned those missing individuals into bodies left to be forgotten within the landscape and aim to bring this reflection forward for the audience to ruminate on. This piece's flesh-like textures are alluring and grotesque to open a dialogue surrounding our connection to the natural land and our embodied histories. The title of this piece alludes to the idea that if a rumor is going about, it's because some aspect of this must be true. Similarly, colonialism's histories and structures undeniably impact our lineages and the environment, which cannot hide.



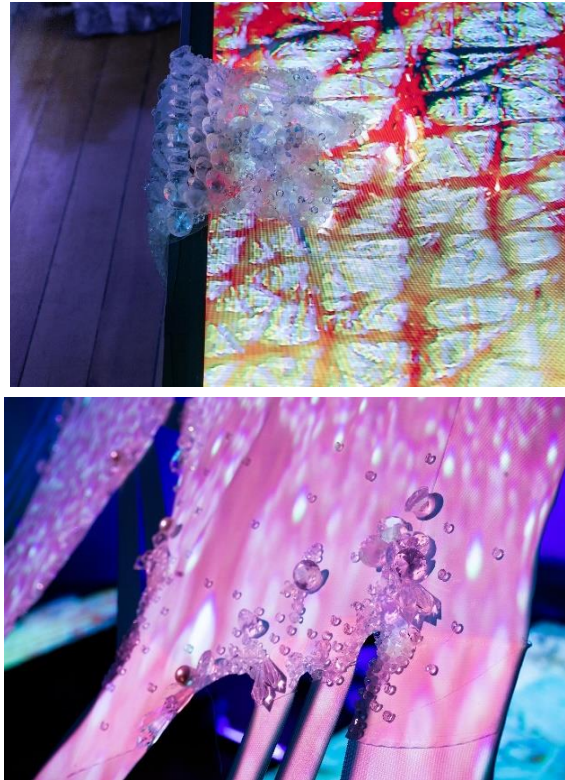


Figure 2–4. Acosta, Laura, and Santiago Tavera. *When the River Sings, Stones it Brings*, 2021. Detail of installation in “At a distance - from within,” *Projet Casa*, Montréal, 2021. Inflatable textile and video installation. Photo by Abraham Mercado.

Acosta and Tavera show how a body and a landscape are parallel in that each entity carries its idiosyncrasy and identity within its physical features. This exploration gives way to a deeper questioning of how we relate to the natural environment: how it shapes us while we, in turn, impact it. To have a detached and unconscious relationship to our surrounding environments is to deny that we are an integral element in the ecosystems we are inherently part of.

Camouflaged Screams

The Acosta-Tavera duo insists on the importance of connection, exchange and community . . . Thus, fostering relationships and belonging, rather than extraction and destruction, could encourage a shift in paradigms and help lay the first foundations for new worlds and new ways of thinking. (Cécilia Bracmort, 2021)

Camouflaged Screams is the fourth episode in *The Novels of Elsgüer*.³ It is an interactive and immersive installation exploring the (a)symbiotic relationship between humans and nature. The title of the work refers to how a tense and atrophied relationship between the body and the environment can lead to notions of repression. Even as the natural environment shows signs of being unable to sustain our capitalist, colonialist, and

extractivist ways of living, the screams of the land and the affected communities by the climate crisis go seemingly unheard. This audio-visual experience calls for a conscious relationship with the natural environments surrounding us.



Figure 5. Acosta, Laura and Santiago Tavera. *Camouflaged Screams*, 2021. Optica, Centre d'Art Contemporain, Montréal, 2021. Immersive and interactive installation. Photo by Paul Litherland.

As the audience enters this installation, they are immersed inside a scenography of large-scale panoramic video projections that depict landscapes of autumn foliage in Quebec, Canada. The accompanying acoustic ecology is a composition of spatialized sounds from nature. Within this virtual scenery, amorphous textile characters appear, moving sensuously in ornate camouflaged gowns throughout the videos in the space. In the installation, there is also a physical composition of lights, natural tree branches, and plexiglass surfaces that, combined with the video projections, create a surreal landscape between digitality and materiality.

As the audience explores this 360°, immersive, dream-like atmosphere, they can alter both the imagery and sounds of the installation through a network of ultrasonic sensors programmed to measure the distance between them and the video projections. The projected natural landscapes fade to darkness when viewers engage with this

video/sensor setup. The textile figures covered in camouflage patterns come to the foreground, howling as if reaching out to the audience from the video. The more that the spectator moves their body, the more the fragmented forms and alarm-like hollers become amplified. These new layers of image and sound stay active for the duration that the viewer chooses to interact with the built-in sensors. When they step off, the space returns to a calm landscape. In this virtual ecosystem, the viewer becomes a performer and an agent of transformation as their presence and actions impact the environment around them. This complex art piece opens up the possibilities for experimentation with expanded cinematic work and augmented audio-visual experiences.



Figure 6. Tavera, Santiago, and Laura Acosta. *Camouflaged Screams*, 2021. Optica, Centre d'Art Contemporain, Montréal, 2021. Immersive and interactive installation. Photo by Paul Litherland.

With the use of motion sensors, the projected digital landscapes become an interface between the camouflaged bodies and viewers, inviting us to become intra-active participants and performers in constructing our own virtual relationship with narratives of 'camouflage consciousness' (Levin) and wider body-socioenvironmental justice issues. (Shauna Janssen, 2021)



Figure 7. Tavera, Santiago, and Laura Acosta. *Camouflaged Screams*, 2021. Optica, Centre d'Art Contemporain, Montréal, 2021. Immersive and interactive installation. Photo by Paul Litherland.

We explore the concept of camouflage through allegory to draw on ideas of positioning rather than concealing (Levin, 2014). If our presence is so powerful towards our surroundings, then the act of consciously positioning and choosing how we represent ourselves within a space becomes a political act that defies colonialist performativity. Using this concept of camouflage is, therefore, also a nod to the experience of the “other”—the queer, immigrant, divergent, BIPOC body that is always in the process of conscious adaptation to their surroundings in order to belong. Through this work, camouflage becomes a tool for both survival and empowerment within social, cultural, political, and virtual spheres.

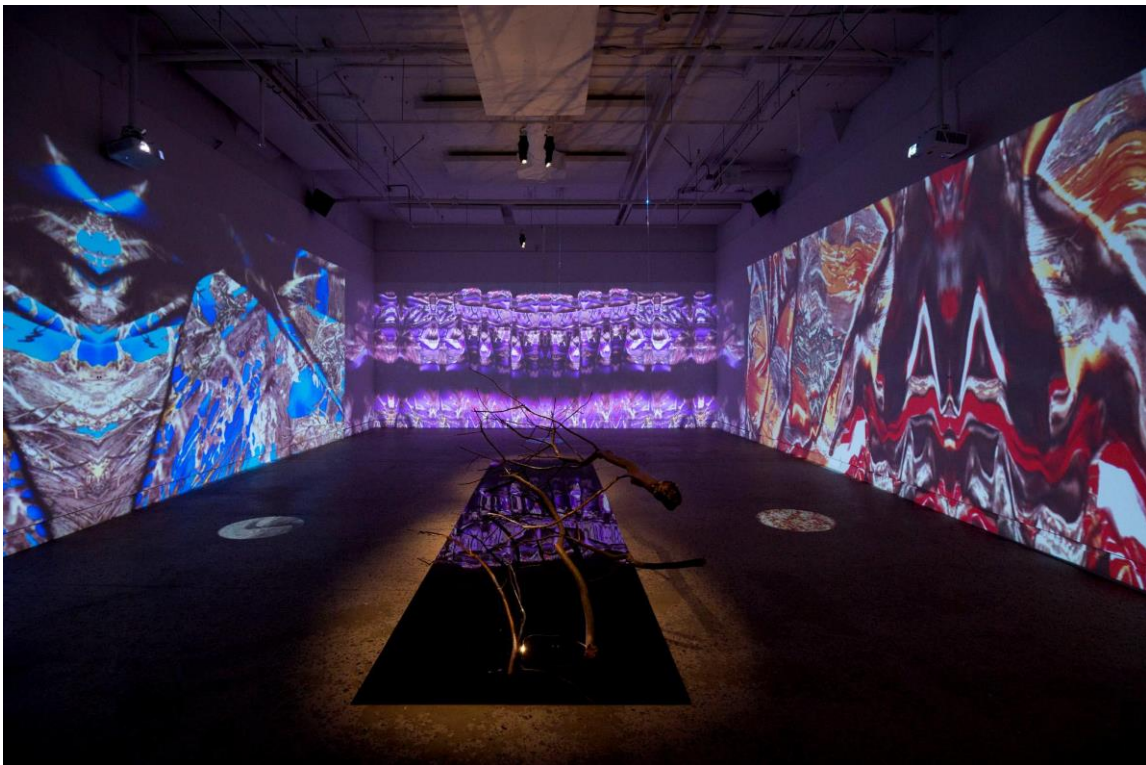


Figure 8. Acosta, Laura, and Santiago Tavera. *Camouflaged Screams*, 2021. Optica, Centre d'Art Contemporain, Montréal, 2021. Immersive and interactive installation. Photo by Paul Litherland.

In the Anthropocene, humanity's reluctance to take accountability for our repercussions on the natural environment, and each other, is directly demonstrated in the climate crisis we are living through, as well as global traumatic events such as the Covid-19 pandemic. These immersive and interactive audio-visual experiences open up a dialogue surrounding the idea of developing a conscious relationship with the territories we inhabit. They ask the audience to reflect on how our existence and actions

are not singular isolated events, but, rather, an integral part of a non-hierarchical, equitable, network of living things.

Notes

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² Video documentation of episode 1 installation: <https://vimeo.com/675704548>.

³ Video documentation of episode 4 installation: <https://vimeo.com/559254560>.

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