

“THE GIFT OF A DIFFERENT GAZE”:
A SOCIAL-ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINATION
OF COLLECTIVE MEANING IN HELEN ESCOBEDO’S
INSTALLATIONS, 1997-2010*

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ABSTRACT

At the turn of the twenty-first century ecocriticism has moved beyond its tradition of analyzing nature writing to integrate new forms of expression that shift visibility towards issues of temporality, environmental justice, and environmental ethics. This paper looks at the most recent open-space installations of Mexican sculptor Helen Escobedo, examining how her artworks act as physical and discursive interventions capable of disrupting encoded modes of modes of knowing about space and environment. These simulating installations are contextually conceived and situated in dialogue with the community where each piece was envisioned; they function as an assemblage of referential information bound to be reconstituted, reinterpreted and resignified by the observer. In doing this, Escobedo reveals a profound understanding that change and sustainable futures can only be envisioned when integrating ourselves with Others, un “*nos y otros que es un nosotros*” of communal experience.

KEYWORDS: Ecocriticism, Artistic Installations, Performance studies, Sustainability, Latin America.

«EL DON DE LA OTRA MIRADA»: UNA IMAGINACIÓN SOCIOAMBIENTAL DE CARÁCTER
COLECTIVO EN LAS INSTALACIONES DE HELEN ESCOBEDO, 1997-2010

RESUMEN

A fines del milenio, la ecocrítica ha superado su tradición analítica de *nature writing* para integrar nuevas formas de expresión que confieren visibilidad a cuestiones de temporalidad, justicia y ética ambiental. Este artículo analiza las instalaciones en espacios abiertos de los últimos quince años de vida de la escultora mexicana Helen Escobedo y observa cómo sus obras resultan ser intervenciones tanto físicas como discursivas que alteran los modos de codificación que asignamos al espacio y al medioambiente. Contextualmente concebidas, estéticamente estimulantes y situadas en diálogo con la comunidad donde se concibieron, estas instalaciones funcionan como un conjunto de información referencial destinada a ser reconstituida, reinterpretada y resignificada por el observador. De este modo, Escobedo revela una profunda comprensión de que todo cambio hacia un futuro sostenible solo pueden concebirse por medio de una integración colectiva, un “*nos y otros que es un nosotros*” de la experiencia comunitaria.

PALABRAS CLAVE: ecocrítica, instalaciones artísticas, estudios de performance, sustentabilidad, América latina.

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Human identity, imagination and storytelling were inextricably linked to the land, to Mother Earth, just as the strands of the spider's web radiate from the center of the web. (Leslie Marmon Silko)

Over the last four decades the politics of environmental discourse have become visibly entangled with cultural and societal transformations. Today, global change is increasingly understood as a complex, eco-social and systemic process, representing a shift from the dominant environmental discourse that had traditionally been associated solely with nature and science. Notwithstanding this almost exclusive focus on the natural sciences, the international community had explicitly entwined issues of culture and society in the concept of sustainable development as early as 1987, in order to reflect the inextricability of environmental problems from its social and cultural settings (WCED)¹. Indeed, these integrated visions of society-environment relationships can only be fully understood in their cultural contexts, and thus call for an empirical perspective that would be more inclusive of contested understandings of both culture and sustainability (Taylor).

The next few pages explore the installation works of the late Mexican sculptor Helen Escobedo (1934-2010) through the lens of ecocriticism, as a means to highlight how the unique expressive qualities of creative works can inspire an imagination across boundaries and differences, in an effort to identify novel ways of thinking about environment. The selected pieces date from the turn of the twenty-first century to the year of the artist's premature death in 2010, and are mostly outdoor installations that powerfully draw the observer's attention by transforming public space in unique ways. When this unexpected transformation intentionally integrates the plurality of cultural identities, as well as the voices and expressions of a continent's diverse people, such as in Latin America, we find ourselves faced by new ways of seeing or even new ways of knowing the world we live in.

Her installations, as representations of cultural practice, interact with and draw attention to the ecological context in which they occur. She explains: "My creative endeavor as an artist is connected to my ecological identity as a human being" (qtd. in Mansilla). Like unexpected events, her pieces erupt in spaces and invite the viewer to become aware of the meaning inherent to material space and its performative nature. Spaces embed particular modes of knowing, which tend to mediate people's actions. When Escobedo places recycled tires and umbrellas at the entrance of Costa Rica's San José National Park to create an image of an *arribada* (the mass egg-laying event of the leatherback turtle) with the same materials that cause the turtles' death at sea. *Por las tortugas* (*For the Turtles*, 1992) thus becomes an installation that intrudes in the public's perception of protected space associated

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¹ *Our Common Future. Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).



a national park, and creates a confrontation with the outcome of human neglect for the near-extinction of an ancestrally sacred animal.

Helen Escobedo's artistic production is a unique case within the generation of Latin American artists who were trained during the second half of the twentieth century. She is perhaps the most recognized sculptor of Mexico in the twentieth century, although not without facing hurdles in the art market of her country. One of the precursors of artistic installations in public spaces and Land art, she devoted a large part of her life to exploring the integration of art and space, on a large scale. As Octavio A. Trujillo, who interviewed the artist for the last time, explains:

siempre se adelantó a su tiempo; no sólo como artista sino también como gestora: fue la primera en montar una exposición de arte geométrico mexicano en 1957 en el MUAC y la primera también en realizar una exposición sobre problemas ecológicos en 1970. (92)²

She was also a forerunner of the artistic avant-garde, when between 1961 and 1978, she directed the museums and galleries of the Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), the National Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City, and was director of the latter at the time. of her death. It was there that, in May 2010, shortly before her death, she was honored in life with the retrospective exhibition *Helen Escobedo: A escala humana*. In the words of critic Graciela Schmilchuck, curator of the show,

[su obra] no es sólo una pieza en el espacio público, que abundan en la ciudad [de México], sino pretende generar espacio público, entendido éste como la posibilidad de todos de escuchar y ser escuchados, mirar y ser mirados; de ser alguien para y con nosotros. (*A escala humana* 2010)

For Escobedo, the artistic moment was an opportunity to represent, visualize, and raise awareness among the public about matters that she considered to be in the public interest (MUAC). The streets of fractured cities became a suitable space for dialogue about values and habits displayed in urban life. However, the tapestry of rules, conventions, and dominant interests that operate within our cultural grammar, can make it difficult to perceive what is in the public's best interest. Escobedo treated the natural space as a codified frame of communication which she juxtaposed to personal experience and reproduced in the work an illusory perception of it. Among the many examples of this type of artistic engagement, are *Acid Rain* (1992), *Collective Memory* (2001) and *Summer Fields* (2008). As a result, her broad artistic proposal reintegrated seemingly distinct spaces by disrupting the patterns of flow specific to each, with the ultimate aim of restoring (through the viewers'

² MUAC is the acronym for the Contemporary Art Museum of UNAM, Universidad Autónoma de México.



experience of her artwork) the interdependence of two concepts socially reinforced as binary opposites: the urban and the natural.

As cultural expressions, Escobedo's installations disrupt not only physical but also narrative landscapes that inherently embed and encode a series of ontologies. They propose an interruption of the predictable spatial continuum in which our everyday lives unfolds and create a discontinuous experience of the places we move through on a daily basis. This discontinuity aimed to interrogate and even overturn naturalized behaviors, including the way we relate to our immediate environment. In this context, the installations discussed in this chapter can be understood as interventions in public space and as such, represent a profound engagement with what it means to site performance in public. For the majority of people, public space implies behaving in a certain way, in order to follow culturally contoured rules. This particular *etiquette*, or behavior in public spaces, is deeply engrained within society, consciously or otherwise. Escobedo is aware of this social performance when she sites the later works discussed here outside the walls of the gallery, and looks for ways in which the everyday world can influence the way art is perceived and vice versa. In fact, Escobedo's installations are better described as "artistic interventions" that operate as a mirror of cultural practice and challenge universally accepted values, while raising ethical questions.

In addition, her sculptures have been characterized by their artistic response to the specific site that stimulates the creative act, as an expression of the existing relationship between being and surroundings (*ser-entorno*). Through the interruption of naturalized flows in public spaces, Escobedo finds the opportunity to reintegrate *ser* and *entorno*, such as when she causes the unexpected emergence of an object and resignifies its function. For example, in 1991 she made a river of rubbish produced at the public park of Chapultepec to compose the onsite piece *Negro basura, negro mañana*. Anticipating the weekend crowds at the popular Bosque de Chapultepec in Mexico City, Escobedo intervened on the population's weekend leisure with a river of solid waste.

Through her art, Escobedo combines optimism with nostalgia, and a sense of humor with cynicism, all directed at a visual reorientation that begins with a provocative experience. She reverses the expectations of the passersby as if by accident, by placing, for example, manufactured objects in a forest, as in *Acid Rain* (Fig. 1), in 1992, when she strategically positions dozens of blue umbrellas on the trees of a German park in order to protect them from acid rain.

Years later, invited to create an installation for an English park in Yorkshire, U.K., the artist critically addressed the symbolism of the domesticated English landscape by placing a series of objects on a field, where they appeared to burst into an otherwise spatial harmony. In *Summer Fields* (Fig. 2), the artist intervened in the uniformity of the grassland with metal structures that resembled summer hay bales. These bales burst into the space with warm tones of yellow and red that tame the visual disruption and invited a new lens on the practice of farming. Landscape and nature are often too divorced from the stories of people's lives. Escobedo's hay bales dissolved those conceptual barriers to alter the perception of the natural space, and drew attention to cultural practice. From a distance, they had an ephemeral quality





Fig. 1. *Acid Rain*. 1992. Wilhelm Lehbruck Museum, Duisburg, Germany.
Photograph reproduction by Maria Woolson, May 2010.



Fig. 2. *Summer Fields*. 2008. Yorkshire Park, UK.
Photograph reproduction by Maria Woolson, May 2010.

in the plastic harmony of the circles, ellipses, and transparencies. These installations did not speak of environmental crises, but rather offered the “gift of a different gaze”: a visual image that metaphorically intercepted by a sensory experience, prompted the observer, even if only for an instant, to ask why and what for.

Her unexpected interruption of the landscape’s apparent harmony was also a way to redefine pastoral characterizations of nature, to demonstrate how it is not an ontologically indisputable concept, unchangeable in its definition (Castree 12). Her work stimulates audiences to see *nature* in its fluid state, as both a materially concrete reference to the non-urban, and a discursive construction representing dominant ideas and practices within which the relations between society and nature unfold.

To capture the full expression of these types of works of art, the rest of the article employs an approach to ecocriticism that seeks to respond to the artwork itself. This can be understood as an emergent “hybrid” form of ecocritical analysis that engages the multidimensional complexities of environmental change and integrates perspectives from other fields of study. For example, this analysis pays close attention to the ways in which the artist connects the art object with the observers,



endowing them with agency in interpreting and projecting meaning on the art object, in keeping with performance theory. The goal of selecting a flexible critical frame responsive to complex dynamic landscapes is also achieved through an eclectic overlap of culture and nature that shifts visibility towards issues of temporality, justice, and inequality. This reorientation offers unique opportunities to readily understand the locally rooted meanings expressed in Escobedo's work, which is representative of a broad range of Latin American artists that expose tensions erupting from the continuous assault of globalized modernity on diverse cultural landscapes. Indeed, Escobedo's works are among the kind of artistic expression that precisely occupy a space between conflicting worldviews –artistic works that hold a tension created between a “global” coherence frequently conceived of in opposition to the “local” uniqueness of place and the place-based expression of the meaning of this artistic expression.

This kind of tension is seminal to the pluricultural nature of Latin America and generally manifests when cosmologies do not conform to the dualistic nature of Western dialectics, embodied in, for example, the nature-culture binary. In its way of expressing place, Escobedo's art impacts the observer through an aesthetic and the emotional quality of art, while simultaneously highlighting many of the costs of today's fast-paced societies: the associated planetary losses of diversity experienced in the last 50 years –loss in life forms, languages, customs and traditions. In other words, a fundamental loss of “desires and dreams has occurred deep down in the subconscious of societies” (Sachs, *The Development Dictionary* xviii) where art and the humanities can function as antidote.

To that end, a reappraisal of aesthetic sensibilities is necessary because by engaging the senses, artists can tap into the emotional makeup of people. Escobedo's works question established modes of knowledge about space, by eliciting in viewers a sensorial experience. She underscores plurality and confers to people an active role in completing her installations, intentionally placing the spectator in a participatory role that encourages a form of resistance to consumer culture. It is here that ecocriticism and sustainability become valuable frames of analysis, as they enable an interrogation of the dominant narratives about ecology and environment, while also addressing the role played by the politics of place and its colonial residue to ultimately embrace an ethics of diversity.

The artistic works here explored include *Negro Basura Negro Mañana* (1991), *Refugiados* (1997), *Memoria colectiva* (2001), *Hidrovochos* (2004), *Summer Fields* (2008), *El hoy de hoy* (2010) and her final work, *Exodus* (2009–2011). This exploration will bring to light the emergence of an aesthetic discourse that eventually encourages a reevaluation of the performative contours of society's relationship to the material world. In turn, the cumulative visual and experiential narrative emerging from these works takes shape as a sensory awareness of divergent thoughts that suggests the collectively possibility of a more eco-centric cultural identity, if ultimately, the public imagination shifts the social and environmental “unconscious” from dormancy to salience (Buell 22).



APPROACHING ESCOBEDO'S AESTHETICS AS AN EXPRESSION OF SUSTAINABILITY

Escobedo's work, when situated within the landscape of contemporary Latin American artistic representation, encompasses multiple discourses and complex relationships. This presents two primary challenges in interpreting her work: first, the continent's cultural plurality encompassed in her work, requires different frames of reference that the audience must place in dialogue with one another when interpreting her pieces; second, the topic of environmental change central to Escobedo's work, in multiple ways, involves the dynamic interaction of nature and culture, which works of art seek to convey. Traditionally, ecocriticism had evolved mostly as a readings of texts in the field of English literature known as nature writing, during the second half of the twentieth century, alongside the growing environmental consciousness and political mobilization that took place in the industrialized world (Barbas-Rhoden). It has been generally characterized as the study of representation that is concerned with the human-nature relationships from an eco-centered perspective (Glotfelty). From the view point of the Global South, which is that of much of Latin American art, the focus on sustainability allows ecocritical approaches to engage with the multi-ethnic and cultural complexity of the region, where concerns of social and environmental justice have increasingly moved into the foreground of debate (Barbas-Rhoden). In other words, social justice and environmental justice concerns have become seminal to Latin American authors and artists who, in engaging with environmental topics, confer a meaning and role to nature that differs from the tradition of nature writing in English literature, whose focus was a recovery of nature's meaning and imagination.

This difference in perspective is illustrated in Escobedo's installation *Memoria colectiva* (*Collective Memory*, Fig. 3). In this work, the artist engages the viewer with an image of death, calling forth the direct consequences of human actions on nature and creates a spatial mimic of a cemetery that recalls the ongoing deforestation of an entire continent. Playing with the artistic etiology of the *still life* mode ("naturaleza muerta" in Spanish), Escobedo inverts what a *still life* most often represents, as she transforms inert organic matter, or blackened tree branches, into a symbol of death. In the process, she cofounds the spectator's familiarity with graveyards and re-signifies the cemetery's image by situating the spectator in a direct confrontation with the dead trees that occupy the symmetrically ordered graves. The installation is meant to feel uncomfortable. On first impression, it may appear to be a humorous inversion; however, upon further reflection, the public can see this as symbolizing collective death which is now more intimately connected with the viewer. Ecological memory is summoned, but both image and title could also suggest another kind of collective memory, the *historic memory* pertaining to a recent Latin American historic context. In this sense, culture is positioned central to the ecological disaster, as social collective memory interacts with a new remembering of ecological trauma.

All phases of Escobedo's works involve complex dynamics. Conceived in relation with a context and aesthetically stimulating, her installations are situated





Fig. 3. *Memoria Colectiva*. 2001. Parque ecológico Xochitla, México
 Photograph reproduced by Maria Alessandra Woolson.

in dialogue with the environment and community where they are envisioned. For Helen Escobedo, an effective dialogue guides the aesthetic act. The artist explains:

I arrive with no preconceived ideas. My inspiration evolves as I familiarize myself with the spirit of the place, with its light, its people, its particular reality. The piece may be interior or exterior, ephemeral or permanent, but it is always strung together with the voices and echoes of its particular surrounding environment. (Escobedo qtd. in Cuellar *Instalaciones*, my translation)³

Escobedo's desire to reflect the "voices and echoes" of a piece's particular surrounding aligns with the role that the sustainability paradigm assigns to culture, because to sustain humankind in the only planet we know is not merely to "survive," but to sustain the conditions in which we can flourish as human communities, which is to say, to flourish as complex cultural beings. In this light, culture ceases to solely be an aesthetic experience that cultivates the mind, it also becomes a way of living in the world shared by a group of people. The implication of culture with regard to issues of growth and consumption can therefore not be overstated (Hajer 8). Considering the current evolving ecological phenomena as a consequence of capitalism's material expansion, confirms once again the need to interrogate the validity of discourses about sustainability that while relying on scientific knowledge and technical solutions dismiss contextual aspects of culture. Environmental change is indeed concerning, but it is also symptomatic of a broader problem, which has been described as a *crisis of modern knowledge* (Leff, *Discursos sustentables*). Escobedo defies the subjective separation of object and nature that conditions the cultural

³ "Llego sin ideas preconcebidas. Me inspiro al familiarizarme con el espíritu del lugar, con su luz, su público, su realidad particular. La obra podrá ser interior o exterior, efímera o permanente, pero siempre está hilada a las voces y los ecos de su particular entorno." (Helen Escobedo qtd. In Cuellar *Instalaciones*)



lens, and in doing so, she confronts modern knowledge and many of its normalized binaries. She does this by enabling the imagination to embrace a fundamental transformation in contemporary social structures with an aim at facilitating shared experience, or what the artist called: “*Un NOS y OTROS que es un NOS-OTROS*” –a *we* that integrates with others, a form of “*us & others*” that is a whole and in each piece comprises community (Escobedo, *A escala* –my translation).⁴

Looking at these installations as objects in performance that engage space and the public offers a cultural reflection on contemporary life. At the same time, a critical reading that engages the public’s eco-environmental imagination disrupts the appropriation of rhetorical spaces and impact the perception of reality. The idea of *performance* is employed here independently from that of dramatized text; rather, performance is that which observes the dynamic flux that occurs between social and aesthetic drama (Schechner; Taylor D.). In turn, this perspective invokes an appreciation of the visual and physical elements of *rituals* inherent to social groups, which can surface cultural practices and give rise to opportunities for change (Babcock).

A sustainability lens recognizes the need to integrates multiple domains of knowledge in order to address complexity, for which the focus lies at the intersection of natural and social systems. Its inclusivity is of great value for approaching contemporary issues, but also represents a significant challenge. At odds with the dominant organization of knowledge, it requires an appreciation for the interactions across broader domains of knowledge and must address matters of equitability (Kelly).

From the point of view of sustainability, Escobedo’s artistic voice is a call to examine “eco-logical” dynamics of the present. For ecocriticism, sustainability brings an affirmation of the interdependence and of the co-evolution of culture and nature by suggesting that we embrace difference to overcome otherness and, in doing so, accept an intergenerational ethical obligation. For a humanities lens that refers to a multi-ethnic continent,

Sustainability, it turns out, has pulled us all back from our scattered modernity to face the ancient questions of civilization: What is a good life and how do we sustain a good life for ourselves and future generations on the only pale blue dot that we know of that can sustain life? (Kelly 44)

In many pieces, Escobedo confronts modernity and the enduring materialistic perceptions of what represents a *good life*. The 2008 installation *El hoy de hoy* (Today’s Today, Fig. 4) was composed of recycled computers that sit at the foot of a giant motherboard. The artist transforms virtual, abstract, and aesthetically clean symbols of digital technology (such as the hidden motherboard of a computer) into visible artifacts that challenge spectators to face excessive consumption and contend with the enormous amount of material waste that results from the digital age.

⁴ “Un nos y otros que es un NOS-OTROS que en cada obra es comunidad.” (*A escala humana*)



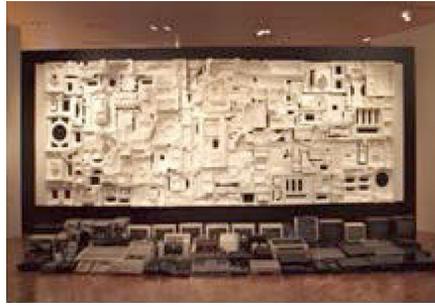


Fig. 4. *El hoy del hoy*. 2010 (original 2008). Museo de Arte Moderno, 2010.
Photograph by Maria Alessandra Woolson.

This kind of cultural mirror offered by the installations functions as an expression of the contingency of everyday life, defying the conventional *logic* that upholds today's consumer culture. As an aesthetic experience, Escobedo's installations makes sense of these tensions.

AN AESTHETICS LANGUAGE OF COLLECTIVE MEANING FOR THE IMAGINATION

Escobedo began experimenting with large structures in public spaces early in her career, but it was not until the 1980s that she clearly engaged in a more explicitly eco-centric discourse. Her sculptures and installations, by their very nature as objects, reconfigure and refunctionalize the space where they are placed. But space is hardly neutral. To intervene in public space is to challenge the limits and specificity of what is considered public and the experiential knowledge stored in it. Our lives are mediated by objects that guide an endless circulation of images and rituals, including an "enormous accumulation of performances" (Debord 1). When these performances are repeated, they result in a series of conventions and epistemologies that become the foundation of people's interactions with place and with each other. Escobedo's installations engage the public with the materiality of spaces, and can then reveal the performative nature of spaces, as the public's responses inform us of social attributes and social behaviors. Rather than replace authentic life experience with representation, Escobedo's artworks are displayed in public environments and surprise the observer with a kind of social happening.

For example, *Negro basura, negro mañana* (Fig. 5), was composed of a river of solid waste that measured approximately 100 meters by 3 meters and was made up of ten tons of garbage that are regularly produced at the Chapultepec park on a single day during the weekend. Displayed early on a Saturday morning with the initial consent of the municipality, the spectacle attracted immediate criticism, as





Fig. 5. *Negro basura, negro mañana*. 1991. Parque de Chapultepec, D.F. Mexico.
Photographs reproduced by Maria Woolson.

passersby were confronted with this ultimate product of modernity that that, in the public's eyes, had seemingly been a municipal oversight. Even the authorities reacted with disgust to the installation (Schmilchuck). The next day Escobedo covered the rubbish with metal mesh and painted the objects black, which created a conscious distancing between "garbage" as an artistic material and the *abject* waste yielded by a symbolic cultural system.

Considering the *abject* from the point of view of psychoanalytic theory as that which precedes the formation of the object, or a kind of mental predecessor against which the subject will recognize self and object (Kristeva), one can further observe how, as a *pre-object*, the abject conditions the way the object will be perceived. The public's rejection of waste is therefore subconscious (and perhaps inevitable) but nonetheless elicited by the exhibited artwork, and thus represents an incongruence between this ultimate product of consumption (material waste) and the construed perception of "cleanliness" in images and spatial arrangements that treat litter as *abject*. This response not only fails to recognize how garbage is immediately connected to habitual consumption, it also exposes how the aesthetics of "clean" that are part of the modern project of capital growth have become naturalized. The response thus exposes the fragility that exists between urban refuse and the modern-symbolic "clean litter" of urban environments (Moore).

As artistic representation, Escobedo's installations are subjective expressions meant to stimulate a sensory experience in the viewer. They are also encoded within a dynamic semiotic system and contextually framed by referential relations (Hall 21). But the work of art is a communicative phenomenon in which meaning is produced, exchanged and mediated by the interaction of language, auditory and visual images, which encode beliefs and values (ibid.). For example, in *Negro basura negro mañana*, Escobedo recognizes cultural codes in the choice of solid waste as the





Fig. 6. *Hidrovochos*. 2004. Ciudad de México.
Photograph reproduced by Maria Woolson.

artwork's substrate. Then, she subverts the substrate by a transubstantiation of the garbage itself, in an ironic reversal of functions: from waste to the artistic material that will then constitute a symbol of waste. At the same time, this encoding is subject to a "decoding" by the spectator that as a *referent* completes the meaning of the piece. Indeed, her open-air installations are assemblages of referential information bound to be reconstituted, reinterpreted and resignified by the viewer. Her creativity evolves from the balanced attention she affords to the content of the themes she exposes and to artistic form itself. Rather than conceive the pieces as objects of concrete visibility for the spectator, they are intended to stimulate participatory processes that connect the viewer with a symbolic cultural heritage. In this manner, her vision of an artistic piece includes a transfer of agency, as signification resides in the collective shaping of the experience.

Hidrovochos (Fig. 6) was an installation in which Escobedo intervened downtown Mexico City, with the iconic *vocho*, a most important symbol of Mexican popular culture. Regarded as the most popular car in history, the VW Beetle represents in Mexico the "people's car" (Soong 2). More than demarcating a class topography, the *vocho* has projected a sense of pride, self-realization, or, at least, of cultural identity for many Mexicans. *Hidrovochos* came about as part of the binational project "Agua-Wasser" involving Mexico and Germany, on the occasion of the International Symposium Aquapolis (2002). The artist contributed to a public debate about water by designing and setting in motion 20 ecological green taxis or *vochos* transformed into virtual sailboats. These *vochos* adopted a path laden with historical meaning, yet unknown to most inhabitants of the DF, as they circulated through what had been the waterways of Tenochtitlan, asking passengers: "What do you do for water?" (Escobedo *A escala*).

Hidrovochos is ephemeral, a kind of art that "lives only in the present" (Phelan 146) and relies on the public to complete the piece, which they do by reclaiming through intuition places and spaces of a distant time. Conceptually, the installation recalls a lake city of floating gardens (Tenochtitlan) transformed into an underground desert, with a kinesthetic temporal circulation of a picturesque





Fig. 7. Photograph by Maria Alessandra Woolson-August 2012.

mediatized figure. The green *vocho* thus alters the space not only as an iconic figure of ecological awareness but with a symbolic cartography, unknown to many city dwellers. Escobedo explained the ephemeral qualities of this installation by saying, “there is no permanence. For example, I could ask you if you have seen ... Mexico City, which is not exactly as it was, and we, human beings, much less ... Then, permanence is fiction” (qtd. in Mansilla).

Hidrovochos is an aesthetic expression turned experience. The public interacted, interpreted and assigned meaning in response to the installation’s proposal to reflect about how humans distort the world.⁵ Mexico literally buried its water to build its colonial, and then modern city, denying it for transportation and precluding it from being part of a collective identity. Carried out in a fragmented city whose fast motorways are designed to transport nine million people, this type of experiment/experience questions our way of moving within unchallenged epistemologies, where the materialization of the natural environment have become natural habits that were facilitated by a visual consumer culture and the outsourcing of nature. In Escobedo’s words, her work is conceived

towards the integration of the object and its environment –at a human scale– its urban landscape and its natural landscape; I conceived the volume as a measure between man and the surrounding area. (qtd in *A escala*)⁶

⁵ Today, several years after the ecological Volkswagen taxi – or *vocho* – was banned from circulation in Mexico City (DF), a main location of Escobedo’s green *hidrovochos* in the main city square enjoys similar eco-bicycle-turned taxis that are shaped like the one-time installation to take passengers to their destination. (Fig. 7).

⁶ “Por la integración del objeto a su ambiente – a escala humana – al paisaje urbano y al paisaje natural, es decir concebía el volumen como medida entre el hombre y el área que le rodea.” (Escobedo qtd. in *A escala humana*)





Fig. 8. *Refugiados* (Refugees). 1997. Moorweide Park, Hamburg, Germany. Photograph reproduced by Maria Woolson (*A escala*, 2010).

Years earlier, in *Refugiados* (Fig. 8), Escobedo confronted perceptions of “otherness” in a manner that provoked the environmental unconscious while seeking to develop it. The project was envisioned openly, as the meaning of the piece should stem from and adapt to the dynamics generated with the public. The experience began one morning when one hundred and one large structures of hay that resembled human figures and represented foreign refugees appeared at Moorweide Park, Hamburg, Germany⁷. The artist placed a single unit, numbered 101, in isolation to signify “those who have not yet arrived, but who will come” (Escobedo *A escala*). Subsequently, the hay sculptures were left on the green to interact with passersby and those deliberately visiting, in an interaction intended to transform the initial objects into an experiential crafting of communal meaning.

By using anonymous figures, Escobedo exposed how the identity loss that is experienced as a result of a person’s spatial dislocation can have a dehumanizing effect., as migrants leave a “place” of origin that has defined both collective and individual identities, and find no cultural referents in their new space. As an art piece, this installation should be seen as dynamic and transient, two ephemeral qualities that Escobedo conferred to the piece when she selected a fragile, biodegradable material for its assembly and the impossibility of permanence for its display. As explained by Reynoso-Pohlenz, what led Escobedo to the choice of materials was a decision to create “ephemeral installations that she called *installation art*, made out of organic waste (branches, trunks, and dry leaves, among other materials), put outside in public recreational spaces” (85). In the case of this piece’s material, the brittle hay used to sculpt the silhouettes was not only perishable and difficult to mold; upon

⁷ In 2004, Escobedo reproduced a version of this installation with 61 hay figures dressed in rags that appear to be walking in the same direction, for the exhibit *Children Refugees*, organized by the German Foundation ACNUR (*Deutsche Stiftung für UNO-Fluechtlingshilfe*) and presented together with Sebastião Salgado’s photographic series about mass displacement. Escobedo’s puppet-like figures have no faces or other details to differentiate them from one another.

falling it integrated into the grass covering the ground of the park, yet its tan color continued to stand out, which could be interpreted as difference in integration.

Those who would interpret this installation as eco art might pay particular attention to its ecological components. For example, the selection of hay, a *natural* or biodegradable material, makes this work an environmentally responsible form or art. The connotation of the figures might also stand out, as they evoke foreign, intrusive, in motion, depersonalized, dehumanized, among other things; and the integration of hay (or lack of) into a grassy field can be interpreted as metaphors of recent migratory phenomena. Yet, if we focus on how the work involves viewers in the particular spatial and temporal context of a Hamburg park, the installation encouraged viewers to reflect about their own community relationship between human perception and public referent, between the empathetic capacity of humans and the self-serving indifference inscribed in public space where bodies coexist without necessarily interacting. From a broad perspective centered on sustainability, this kind of spatial contextualization of phenomena (here, individuals' relation with others) through the self-reflection proposed by the installation seeks to reacquaint the observer with the ethics that guide daily interactions.

Escobedo's work not only captured the imagination of the observer. Her artistic expression was informed by a deep understanding that that nothing in our environment is static and that our impacting it adversely is the result of daily interventions and processes, like those that ensued at Moorweide Park after the hay figures were positioned in the space. In fact, the community struggled to make sense of the diverse responses to the work from visitors, including the acts of vandalism and destruction at the hands of adolescents who terminated the project two weeks before its scheduled conclusion. This aspect of Helen Escobedo's installations is perhaps the most novel: as mentioned earlier, their meaning is not predetermined and results from interaction and dialogue with the audience. The successive interventions on the part of the public coalesced as a collective expression, and her art was transformed into a *nos-otros* (us and others: we) of the communal experience she envisioned (Escobedo *A escala*). In this way, while the dialogue may have had a beginning and an end, the meaning that was produced lived on.

EXODUS, A CONCLUDING PARAPHRASE OF MODERN EVENTS

The emergence of locally rooted meaning from Escobedo's installations exposes tensions that exist between the human stories that make a place unique and the homogenizing impact of global modernity. *Refugiados* and *El hoy de hoy* or *Acid Rain* posit how the modern imperatives of growth and consumption have an impact on urban communities from Europe to the Americas. As modernity manifests in the form of global uniformity achieved through market goods, modes of production and preferred practices, the politics of place come into conflict with rules and conventions that perpetuate ideas of growth upheld by conventional views of development. Conversely, Escobedo's aesthetic language personalizes experiences of place and gives the conflict a humane dimension.



Contemporary urban experiences are constantly choreographed by images, slogans, and consumptive practices, which qualify the spaces we move through daily, endowing them with a performative component. This was a significant aspect of Escobedo's installations in public urban spaces which appropriated the modes of knowledge associated with these familiar spaces as in *Negro basura, negro mañana* or *Hidrovochos*. These and some of her other pieces may not have always been perceived as works of art, and their symbolic signifiers may not have been sufficiently explicit for the public to interpret them; however, her method of engaging artistic codes rendered the pieces attractively expressive and fundamentally thought-provoking. Often making her art with marginalized and discarded raw materials, her aesthetics turned space into a metaphor that illustrates an enriched reality, and even after the brief ephemeral encounter ends, the experience can be retained by memory. During Escobedo's 2010 retrospective *A escala humana*, a placard offered the following closing thoughts about the legacy of her work:

Perhaps Escobedo's place, par excellence, is not the physical space or the object, but rather that on which experience and collective memory is constructed; it is there where her work leaves its mark, accepting loss and fugacity.⁸

Her work suggests introspection and points to the meaning that resides in collective experience. But this meaning is not entirely self-evident. At first encounter, a piece tends to elicit a viewer's projection of their own experiences onto the object. Similar to performance art, the individual takes elements of what is represented and, in the process of making sense of it, recycles these objects to project his or her own experience onto them (Abramovich). This possibility stems from the artist's choice of a specific context to frame the object or the symbolic inversion carried out in a piece, which enables spectators to intercept personal experience, and can transform the installation into a collective cultural reflection of ethics and values.

To conclude this exploration of Escobedo's installation work, I have selected *Exodus*, a 2009 installation that synthesizes of her earlier works and crystallizes a legacy of the artist's concern for the contemporary human condition. The most powerful human story of place that motivated her art and was a constant concern for Escobedo during the latter years of her life was the displacement of hundreds of thousands of migrants who wandered across the globe due to war, famine, and natural tragedies. In this light, twentieth- and twenty-first-century migrations provided an opportunity for Escobedo and her spectators to reflect on how various critical phenomena converge in the present-day tragedies of famine, natural disaster, and armed conflict over land or control of resources. The resulting continuous disruption and dissolution of communities attests to our contemporary socio-environmental crisis and to the inadequacy of the current modes of production.

⁸ "Quizás el lugar por excelencia de Escobedo no sea el espacio físico ni el objeto, sino aquel donde se construyen la experiencia y la memoria colectiva, ahí aspira a inscribir la huella de su obra aceptando la pérdida y la fugacidad." (*A escala humana*)





Fig. 9. *Exodus*. 2009. Mexico City and Ixtepec, Oaxaca. *La jornada*. March 2011.

Global dynamics of production and consumption are experienced as a form of attritional devastation and slow violence descending on large portions of the world's most vulnerable populations, including migrants from rural and indigenous communities. This modern slow violence, "anonymous, starring nobody" (Nixon 2) is vividly expressed in the silent pilgrimage of the crouched bodies staged in *Exodus*. The one hundred and one faceless figures clothed in shreds, paraphrases the displaced hundreds of thousands forced to wander the globe to ensure their survival. Nixon's notion of violence closely resembles what Jean Franco identifies as "the anxiety over modernity defined and represented by North America and Europe [that] all too often set governments on the fast track [of development] that bypasses the arduous paths of democratic decision making while marginalizing indigenous and black people" in Latin America (2). Franco's analysis of the explicit and implicit cruelty of modernity interrogates the roles of modern technologies and modern thought that have coerced societies to accept high levels of state-sponsored violence against other human beings. In the words of Enrique Dussel,

Projects of modernization were built on the colonial structure of separation. Not only culture but skin color was a problem as long as civilization was identified with whiteness. For modernity, the barbarian is at fault for opposing the civilizing process, and modernity, ostensibly innocent, seems to be emancipating the *faults* of its own victims. (9)

*Exodus*⁹ (Fig. 9) represents this coercion into *modernity* that is entangled with the anonymous, dehumanizing nature of today's migratory experiences. It also represents the personal loss that ensues from placelessness, through the sense

⁹ *Exodus* was supported by an Urban Pedestrian Art program from the Ministry of Culture of the Federal District.



of “not belonging” (Buell). In fact, to speak of identity is to affirm collective beliefs and performances that unify a group. This installation was an urban art intervention composed of 1.8-meter-tall marionettes made of cement, rebar, scraps of cloth and wire mesh, which re-signified the space at the Plaza Juárez Historic Center of Mexico City in November 2009, interrupting the metropolis’ normative histories and stories of this familiar landscape. Recalling the symbolically charged number of figures in *Refugiados*, the exhibit travelled across Mexico to Faro de Oriente, Tláhuac Forest, Plaza de Santo Domingo, Faculty of Architecture of the National University and the Plaza Hidalgo, Coyoacan. As the final stage of an artistic journey that began with *Refugees*, the itinerant exhibition continued to exist after 800 miles and 19 months of travel, finding refuge in the Isthmus of Oaxaca, under the name of “South Exodus.” Positioned at the Hermanos en el Camino shelter in Ixtepec, an important landmark in the defense of human rights of Central Americans and the fight for human mobility, the installation’s destination was strategically located at a site where approximately 500 000 people emigrate every year –100 000 of them never arriving at the Mexican-American border.

Short of performance art, Escobedo’s *Exodus* sparks a vivid conversation with its viewers, prompted by images of itinerant bodies, inevitably leading us into a dialogue with the artist’s enunciation of a pressing contemporary topic. In her own words, Escobedo explains:

I’m a visual artist; everything I feel in my gut, I have to get out in three dimensions, and I almost always deal with human problems in life, ecology, water concerns me enormously. Migration has changed the country, something terrible we see among those who come from the south to cross over and among our own people, looking for a better life or more money to send to their relatives. It’s a terribly sad situation. (Hernández Escobar 86)

Escobedo’s confrontational engagement with migration poses a challenge to the ethics (or the lack of ethics) upheld by a world conceived under the abstraction of modern life, one that can be interrogated by an ethics of sustainability in today’s globalized world. In other words, the sustenance of human populations and the sustained health of the biophysical earth depend on rethinking and reshaping current resource appropriation practices, while realigning the ethical visions and values we assign to our actions. Such a revision depends on the social imagination shaping those visions and the persuasive force of words and images through which many of society’s relations are mediated. While these works interrupted normalized collective perceptions in everyday life, they simultaneously provoked a visual and spatial correspondence followed by an inversion of their symbolic meaning, which was in itself perceptual and critical, subjective and concrete. In this context, the social imaginary, seen as the site of mediation of social and ecological relations, prompts the realization that her artwork not only reflected circulating discourses but also had the power to transform the imaginary and the discourses it mediated.

As the public reconfigured her pieces and re-functionalized space, the resulting transformational and disquieting aesthetic upends the conceptual dichotomy



between subject and object while reconceptualizing the relationship between material nature and symbolic culture through the valuation of the human stories held by place, land, and other surrounding life forms. Indirectly, this validation of place-based stories further legitimizes the understanding of nature as a living being held by multiple cultures in the region, whose actions and interactions with the surrounding environment are holistic, integrated, and eco-centric. Her works allude to cultures whose traditional practices are attuned to the cycle of life, where identity resides in an emphasis on community with a shared common goal for the common good.

Escobedo's art integrates the plural makeup of Mexican lived experience. As Lawrence Buell pointed out, "nature has been doubly *otherized* in modern thought" (20); it has been objectified and commoditized through the lens of Cartesian rational thought, but also romanticized as pristine and external to modern urban life. A transformational aesthetic of the natural world as suggested by her pieces, provokes fundamental questions of meaning, identity, and purpose when juxtaposed with the impacts of globalized economic expansion and the related, uprooting of populations from their natural surroundings. These relational dynamics generate an important line of questioning inherent to the complex, hybrid form of ecocriticism proposed in these pages, given that, in the case of Latin America, globalization continues to cause widespread dissolution of collective identities, social solidarity and traditional practices (Buvinic et al.).

As a proposal that explores modes and forms of knowledge capable of pointing to a sustainable future, the aesthetics of Helen Escobedo's works intrude in the physical anchoring of memory, although not through antagonistic strategies to expose acts of environmental degradation. At a time when overwhelming evidence of the ecological disruptions, climate change, resource depletion and urban growth cause a devastating alarm that leaves the public's imagination with a sense of powerlessness, these works stimulate a powerful discourse that is both consciously and subconsciously necessary. Her art reveals patterns of normalized behavior that naturalize excess as a necessity and confuse reason with common sense. Escobedo's artistic representations bring visibility to important issues while raising consciousness and reorienting perspective.

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