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# Beneath the Second Skin. Mayan Textiles and Bodies in the Art of Manuel Tzoc Bucup and Sandra Monterroso

*Sebastián Eduardo Dávila*

## **Abstract**

Starting – and in conversation – with two contemporary artists who collect, modify, and display ‘traditionally’ woven textiles while dealing with their female, Mayan heritages, this article approaches pre-hispanic body concepts accessed through everyday experiences and met by (neo-)colonial practices in today’s Guatemala. For the performance *Piel* (2016), Manuel Tzoc’s full-body suit acts out a central concept in so-called Mayan hermeneutics: that of textile as the body’s second skin. In *Columna Vertebral* (2012-2017), Sandra Monterroso rolls up various textiles together to form a column. Resembling pre-hispanic stelae, the installation preserves *saberes* (knowledges/wisdom) impossible to ‘decipher’ fully. Moving from the body’s surface (*Piel*: skin) to the idea of its interiority (*Columna Vertebral*: spinal column), I offer a situated understanding of the material, fleshly relation between bodies, subjects and textiles, that has the potential of knowledge and memory transmission, and that cannot be understood solely in representational or semiotic terms, for instance through language.

**Keywords:** Mayan hermeneutics • Mayan textiles • second skin • body’s interiority • decipherability

## What languages does the body speak?

This first question may sound a little too broad or abstract – and it is. In the following pages, I will depart from the art of Manuel Tzoc Bucup and Sandra Monterroso, in order to explore particular emergences, transformations and relations of bodies and subjects, especially when they come into contact with textiles; a materiality present in both their art practices. While each of the encounters with their work remains particular, in both cases my thinking has been nourished and indeed fuelled by the artist's interviews, conducted during my recent stays in Guatemala. We will see that in theory, textiles evoke similar questions to the materiality of the body. With the term 'art practices' I intend to include what happens during the production, exhibition and reception of artworks both within and beyond the sphere of contemporary art. The terms 'body' and 'subject' are far more open-ended, not only because of the vast research on them, but because each of us, necessarily, has a personal relation to them. I want to respect this openness in order to allow for particular subjectivities and especially bodies to emerge or become with every contact, without prescribing these in advance (cf. Manning 2007). The dividing line between subjectivity and body is anything but clear-cut. What is more, to talk about subjects is to talk about bodies, and the other way around. For the purpose of this article, I will focus on the bodily dimension – of language, subjects, artistic and more-than-artistic practices, and theories.

And what about the language of textile? When saying 'textile', in what follows, I will mainly have *cortes* in mind; approximately two-meter wide skirts woven and worn especially – but not exclusively (Pancake 1991, 50-51; Otzoy 1996, 13) – by women in many Mayan regions of what we now call Guatemala. I will do so because in their sculptures (Sandra) and performance (Manuel), it is this garment that the artists deploy. However, when asking broader questions in theory, e. g. in relation to language, I will be constantly taking the risk of overriding textile traditions and techniques like those behind the *cortes*. This is a risk also present in regard to the socio-historical context of postwar Guatemala in general, itself marked by – but not restricted to (González Ponciano 2004, 113-115) – the colonial power divide between indigenous and non-indigenous populations, among others the '*ladinas/os*'. When dealing with these tensions, I myself wish to be guided by the artists' perspective – both encountering their work and drawing on our interviews. It is in this spirit that I want to react to decoloniality as a theoretical – and more or less political – framework, i.e. not by defining art practices as decolonial or not, but by thinking through them and with their practitioners, as well as with Emma Delfina Chirix García and other Mayan theoreticians of the body and of textile. I want to connect the latter's work to theories from different contexts and traditions, simultaneously producing a new

tension: between Mayan “ways of thinking and of doing”<sup>1</sup>, and western notions of the body, as dominant here as there (cf. Dussel 2008; cf. Grosz 1994). Let me be more precise: How to explore the similarities, as well as differences between Mayan, female<sup>2</sup> understandings of bodies and the work of Moira Gatens, Elizabeth Grosz and Mayra Rivera, without subsuming one context or tradition into the other? On the one hand, both Grosz and Rivera write towards an understanding of bodies – and fleshed – in terms of material or surface relationality, relevant to textile and close to the multidimensional and fleshly dimensions of Mayan concepts such as the ‘second skin’ and ‘complementarity’. On the other hand, what has been called “indigenous epistemologies” or “Mayan hermeneutics” (Macleod 2011, 29-30) – especially when it comes to the primacy of experience – may contest the subjugation of the body by an individual subjectivity, persistent in dominant epistemologies, as well as in Moira Gatens’ work.

However, it is also Gatens who brings us back to language as a productive way to approach the body in what seems to be a clear definition of its situated, socio-historical dimension. This one is both formed by and forming particular bodies:

The imaginary body is socially and historically specific in that it is constructed by: a shared language; the shared psychical significance and privileging of various zones of the body (for example, the mouth, the anus, the genitals); and common institutional practices and discourses (for example, medical, juridical and educational) which act on and through the body. (Gatens 1996, 12)

In this quote from *Imaginary bodies*, the body is both, a passive surface of inscription (“on”), as well as a vehicle that is enacted (“through”). Not only here does the author make use of the language-metaphor (Gatens 1996, vi-vii, 12, 98, 105); she also describes how in “modern” western societies, different bodies to the norm are “assimilated” or “included” into a normative language that accommodates their difference via a restrictive vocabulary – a repertoire of terms inherent to languages. According to the author, the reason why the attempt of “women and others” to address their issues is condemned to failure resides in the fact that they lack a language of their own – meaning, I would say, one emerging from their bodily experience and that is heard. But how could such bodily language be thought of other than as metaphor? Does it follow a fugitive movement towards a non- or pre-discursive realm – whate-

<sup>1</sup> “Qana’ojib’äl - qab’anob’äl, es decir, nuestra forma de pensar y nuestra forma de actuar” (Chirix García 2019, 147)

<sup>2</sup> By using the word “female” instead of “feminist”, I follow Gladys Tzul, who has described the problems of subsuming the struggles of indigenous women to feminism as a category with its own genealogy (Tzul Tzul 2019).

ver that may be? And more importantly, is it compatible with the language of textile – a materiality that not only can be read but must be felt with more than one sense, maybe even with the whole body? These are questions arising from a specific time and place, as well as from a specific body.

## On the surface of the second skin: Manuel Tzoc Bucup's *Piel* (2016)



Fig. 1: Manuel Tzoc Bucup, *Piel*, 2016, performance. Photo: Fabrizio Quemé. Courtesy of the artist.

I wasn't present on the 22nd of October 2016 in Ciudad de Guatemala's main square for the performance of *Piel*. However, when I did first see it in 2019 as documented on video, I was accompanied by the artist and poet Manuel Tzoc Bucup, whose body occupies not only the centre of the city, but also the centre of the performance. One could affirm the latter in regard to any work of so-called "body-art" (cf. Jones 2012). Nevertheless, in the case of *Piel* ("skin"), the artist's body not only acts as a vehicle or medium in the realm of art, but becomes a site for the inscription, transmission and transformation of his Maya-K'iché' ancestry, and of the legacy of his mother (Tzoc 2016). These epistemic and mnemonic processes happen via the material relations between the body's skin, Mayan textiles and non-indigenous clothes during a few simple, but profound acts.

On the video, Manuel moves forward in a straight line while taking off his clothes, one piece at a time (fig. 1 and 2). Fully naked, he slowly begins to approach what seems to be a lump of purple fabric, lying on the floor. Only after picking it up does it become clear what it is: a full body suit made out of textile woven in what could be an indigenous technique. He fits every body part into it, one by one, up to and including his face until he is fully covered by the fabric (fig. 3 and 4). Then he stays there, and for quite some time, surrounded by public buildings like the massive national palace – inaugurated 1943 under the rule of Jorge Ubico ("El Palacio Nacional de la Cultura de aniversario, a 76 años de su edificación" 2019) –, a huge national flag, and an ever-changing audience. At the end of the video he just lays on the bare concrete, curled up in and as a textile-suit, only to stand up again at the very end.



Fig. 2: Manuel Tzoc Bucup, *Piel*, 2016, performance. Photo: Fabrizio Quemé. Courtesy of the artist.



We watched *Piel* in Manuel's home and studio a couple of streets away from there (Tzoc, Manuel. 2020. Conversation with the author, June; Tzoc, Manuel. 2020. Conversation with the author, February 12.) Alternating between exchanges on the everyday, e.g. our differing experiences while growing up with a homosexual desire, he touched upon the circumstances under which the performance took place, or rather was forced to take place. Manuel had been dealing more intensively with his Mayan ancestry when his mother Lucía Micaela Bucup Elías passed away in 2016. For the artist, the performance began when his father gathered their sons and daughters to hand over to them 'traditionally' woven textiles from their mother, who had kept and worn them even after the family's migration to the capital from the Maya-K'iché' area of Totonicapán. I said "even after" because many indigenous women change their clothes for western ones after entering the capital's harsh environment. (Macleod 2011,



Fig. 3: Manuel Tzoc Bucup, *Piel*, 2016, performance. Photo: Fabrizio Quemé. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 4: Manuel Tzoc Bucup, *Piel*, 2016, performance. Photo: Fabrizio Quemé. Courtesy of the artist.

95-97; cf. Camus 2002, 319 ff.). Like bodily features and language, clothing is but one of the means through which indigenous women are marked as such, for instance by the state-authorities and in national discourse, but also in everyday interactions. These markings have an historical depth, taking into account the national history of becoming-white, e.g. through politics of whitening, such as the promotion of European immigration that took place between

1871 and 1944 (González Ponciano 2004, 111-112, 125-126). As a child, Manuel was also laughed at because of how his mother dressed, an experience he has worked with in his poems (Palacios and Worley 2019, 178-181). He inherited several of her clothes including many *cortes*: roughly two meter-wide skirts that are folded around the women's upper waists. He then went and asked tailor Beatriz Leche to transform these textiles into a suit that would cover up his whole body, similar to the way in which the Zentai-suits of Japanese tradition stick on to the bodies' surface when wearing them. And so she did.

## The Mayan concept of the second skin

It could seem redundant to state that the suit serves as a second skin; in a way, all clothing does. However, a closer look into the particularity of Mayan textiles as they are woven and worn mostly by women throughout Guatemala would suffice to understand the weight of such metaphor; one that has been expressed by Emma Chirix and Morna Macleod. Looking back at the interviews gathered in *Nietas del Fuego, Creadoras del Alba*, the latter author describes second skin as the extension of an otherwise intimate identity: that of the wearer's Mayan ancestry. It is consciously practiced by many Mayan women, who for example wear the *traje* ("attire") in racist, precarious and even dangerous contexts (Macleod 2011, 26, 97-101, 114, 118). During the 1980s, many indigenous communities were forced to flee to Mexico and other places, where they often couldn't resist the pressure of changing their *cortes* for trousers, and their *huipiles* ('traditional' woven blouses) for western shirts, in order to study or find a job. These years were marked by heavy state-repression, part of an internal armed conflict that lasted more than three decades and left circa 200,000 dead and 45,000 disappeared, and during which a genocide against indigenous peoples took place mainly under the rule of Efraín Ríos Montt (Nelson 2015, 2-3). For those who stayed in Guatemala, and whose communities were targeted by the state's counter-insurgency tactics, wearing the *traje* even became life-threatening. Being identified as part of the Mayan peoples marked as 'communists' or 'insurgent' could mean a death sentence. Nevertheless, some of the women interviewed by Macleod, while knowing the risk, just couldn't do differently. They could not bring themselves to take off the *traje* because under it they felt secure – despite the paradox. How can the same textile signify both exposure to violence and protection? The answer must lie in the affect<sup>3</sup> involved in weaving and wearing it, impossible to theorize fully. For instance, women that had been left widowed during war, started to weave again as a practice of suturing the wounds caused by war and dispossession" (cf. Macleod 2011, 82, 98-99). Chirix describes how weaving may become the practice not of producing clothes, but of beautifying the bodies' second skins. (Chirix García 2019, 154-155) Instead of hiding their ancestry in order to pass as non-indigenous, these women take the responsibility over each other's textile-bodies while openly carrying them further. To borrow Moira Gatens' vocabulary: They maintain an own textile-as-body language that survives upon or beneath dominant ones<sup>4</sup>. However, spoken out in a dominant body-language, the second skin can also become an imprisoning concept. In *A finger in the wound*, Diane Nelson discusses the figure of the Mayan woman as "prosthetic" for nationalistic and some Mayan dis-

3 I am using the term affect to refer to that which is "transmitted below the threshold of conscious perception, manifesting as bodily tension and relaxation" (Papenburg 2017, 19).

4 Also Elizabeth Grosz speaks about colonizing notions of the body in natural sciences that simultaneously determine and oversee particular bodies (Grosz 1994, x).



courses that ascribe to women the responsibility of safeguarding traditions – of the nation or the ancient past – as part of their reproductive labour (Nelson 1999, 128, 170-171, 181, 277-279, 302-303). Within this context, the *traje* becomes “almost isomorphic with the Mayan woman who weaves it and wears it” (Nelson 1999, 171); a marker of female indigeneity as homogeneous. Needless to say, neither the cultural and political movement of indigenous resistance known as *Movimiento Maya* (cf. Nelson 2015, 49-50), nor the women’s positioning therein are homogeneous. On the contrary, the notion of ‘guardians of traditions’ and women’s relation to formerly western forms of feminism remain part of controversial debates (cf. Macleod 2011).

### The body-as-surface, intercarnations

If the term second skin is treated and felt by Mayan weavers and wearers of the *traje*, it is also dangerously close to the reduction of female indigeneity to it, ‘the mayan woman’ becoming herself a marker within dominant body languages. But what about the first skin — a large body-organ that seems to serve as window between the inside and the outside of the body? The question of skin is a question of both, the body’s superficiality, as well as its flesh. In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz develops a corporeal theory of feminism taking distance from referents who hierarchically divided the body from the mind or the soul such as René Descartes, and who set loose a reduction of women to their bodies, thought of as inferior (Grosz 1994, vii-viii, x, xiii, 5-10, 115-121). Her answer is not one of fleeing the body towards the immaterial, but of taking it as the very framework of, for instance, subjectivity. Following the author, within dualistic theories, immaterial qualities such as consciousness or the soul are imagined in the body’s interior. She thus re-locates them on the body’s skin. Grosz’s “outside-in” discussion of corporeal subjectivity does not stay with the analysis of the “social, surgical, epistemic and disciplinary” inscriptions on the body’s surface — here the question of the superficiality’s very constitution would remain unanswered. Moreover, her “body-as-surface” does not reveal or express intentionality or depth, but rather is articulated as a “set of operational linkages with other things, other bodies” (Grosz 1994, 120), allowing these things and bodies to constitute each other mutually. This very much reminds me of Mayra Rivera’s characterization of the relations between bodies — of persons, collectivities, and the Earth — on the level of each flesh, or what she calls “intercarnations” (Rivera 2015, 1-2, 8, 12-13, 19ff., 144-146). Similarly to Grosz, for whom the pre or non-discursive qualities of bodies, such as their “forces” are crucial for understanding the complexity of textuality or body-writing, for Rivera it is the “textures” and “rhythms” of flesh that enable linkages to happen. Precisely these qualities make it impossible to read the body as a sign or a symptom of some hidden, individual entity, in either Rivera’s intercarnations or in Grosz’s body-as-surface. Here it is necessary to highlight the difference between flesh and the body, in order to reveal their mutual constitutions. Following

Rivera, unlike flesh, bodies are always already thought of as self-contained, complete entities: “Between the body and flesh there are always words” (Rivera 2015, 8); i.e. the linguistic understanding and categorization of bodies — e.g. coming from the state — is molded out of and has effects on the bodies’ very materiality: flesh.

## Textile-body relations, subject transformations

Manuel’s performance *Piel* brings the bodily qualities of textile as it is woven and worn to the fore, and he does so in the middle of the central square where every Sunday weavers from various places sell *huipiles* and *cortes* for lower prices to both, indigenous and non-indigenous buyers. To weave, sell, buy, wear and cease to wear indigenous textiles all pertain to the everyday enactments and negotiations of Mayan heritages; a process amplified and complicated after migration to the capital (cf. Cumes Simón 2014, 80-81; cf. Camus 2002). The artist intervenes in these textile activities, transforming his mother’s *cortes* into a suit and wearing them as a man. But if we are to take superficiality as subject constituent seriously, then it is Manuel’s very subjectivity that is at stake in *Piel*, ready to be transformed or (re-)molded through a set of bodily acts.<sup>5</sup> To take off his trousers and shirt means here to leave something behind that is material (fabrics) as it is subject-constituent: the process of ‘*ladinización*’ to what not only his family, but many Mayan have been subject to when entering the city and other public spheres conceptualized as non-indigenous. ‘*Ladinización*’ means to become ‘*ladina/o*’, a process of forced, yet unreachable assimilation; the category of ‘*ladinidad*’ principally meaning to not be indigenous (Casaús Arzú 2018, 236-237; cf. González Ponciano 2004). Standing still for a while, his naked body is in direct contact with the main square, materially linking the intimate and private with the public and national, manifested for instance in the prominent flag. This historically charged, architectonically fixed setting not only surrounds him, but also everyone’s gaze on him, including mine via the laptop’s screen. But before I begin to read his body with a dominant language, for instance that of the nation-state, the artist’s accommodation into the full-body suit contests any such reading, letting loose a set of associations such as – and this one is the most important – the second skin. Unlike Moira Gatens’ “through” quoted above, the body is neither represented here, nor enacted as a vehicle for something else. By this I do not pretend to question the function of Manuel’s body-textile as carrier of Mayan heritage(s); what I want to get at is the transformative aspect of such carrying. In *Piel*, the artist’s body really acquires a second skin. As a consequence, this textile-body, simultaneously personal and collective, has effects on the artist’s subjectivity.

5 I am reminded here of Erin Manning’s reading of Gilbert Simondon’s concept of “individuation”, because of the similarity it holds to this notion of subjectivity as becoming: “Individuation is conceptualized as a vehicle that allows being to become, not as matter or form or substance, but as a tensile system, oversaturated with its own potential” (Manning 2007, 90 ff.).

I dare to say this after reading Manuel's poems that deal with the struggles of un-learning both '*ladinización*' and the heterosexual norm, simultaneously embracing homosexuality and femininity, and (re-)linking with his Maya-K'iché' ancestry. For instance, the poem *KAT WAJ\** (*\*te quiero en idioma maya k'iche'*) (Tzoc 2019, 9) reads:

Hay una mujer que observa los colores de su  
p'ot<sup>6</sup>  
a través del espejo  
y sueña  
esa mujer no está acá  
no está allá  
se pregunta por los hilos del camino  
pero el mismo espejo le responde  
que el origen está fracturado  
que se contiene en la sangre  
y se refleja en la piel de la memoria.

In English (Tzoc 2019, 9; my translation):

There is a woman that observes the colors of her  
‘po’t’<sup>7</sup>  
through the mirror  
and she dreams  
that woman is not here  
is not there  
she asks herself for the threats of the path  
but the mirror answers her  
that the origin is fractured  
that it is contained in the blood  
and that it reflects in the skin of the memory

Although Manuel's conceptualization of *Piel* did not include gender-aspects (Tzoc, Manuel. 2020. Conversation with the author, February 12), to (re-)link via the material memory of his mother, i.e. the textiles that her body wore as a second skin – or as in the poem: “the skin of the memory” – is a movement toward both femininity and indigeneity. Against the grain of an understanding of decoloniality in steps (cf. Mignolo 2012, 27), what I am describing here is a moment of simultaneity and

6 “qüipil o blusa en idioma maya k’iche”

7 “güipil or blouse in the maya k’iche’ language”

multiplicity, both regarding de- and re-linkings, as well as levels of subject-constituency, e.g. gender, sexuality, race, class (cf. Lugones 2010). I am reminded here of Olivier Marboeuf, who problematized the linear periodization accompanying certain approaches to decoloniality, proposing instead “a single movement, being present in flight. [...] Removing oneself doesn’t mean disappearing” (Marboeuf 2019, 8). Taking distance from an epistemological focus on decoloniality – the question of knowledge production from a formerly colonized locus of enunciation, e. g. a specific body – is important here in order to concentrate on the subject’s becoming, not only through discourse, but through bodily and textile processes.<sup>8</sup> To become a textile-body through wearing the material memory of his mother, as well as the *saberes* (knowledges/wisdom) woven therein since pre-colonial times, is analogous to what Diane Nelson and others have called “becoming Maya” e.g. through language learning – a bodily activity of ontological relevance (Nelson 1999, 157-159). We have already seen how important everyday activities such as weaving and wearing are for Mayan (self-)conceptions, and we will soon learn how they are connected through the body. Manuel Tzoc has also explicitly dealt with the struggles of learning about the past through linguistic knowledge in some of his poems, for instance, the title of the poem *Kat Waj\** and of the book *Wuj* are expressions both borrowed from Maya-K’iché’, *Kat Waj* meaning “Te quiero” (“I love you”) and *Wuj* “libro” (“book”) (Tzoc 2019, 9; my translation). However, what I have been concentrating on are the bodily, subjective processes at stake in *Piel*; processes that include the lost or acquisition of bodily and textile memories, as well as of the ancestor’s knowledge. Here it is the non-discursive dimensions of these materialities that come to the fore, in other words: the textures, forces and rhythms of bodies and textiles as they relate to one another superficially. Manuel transforms the pain caused by many dispossessions, actively entering a skin charged with memories and *saberes* – of his mother and his ascendance.

Now let’s go back to two authors, already mentioned. When dealing with the invisible and unknown aspects of flesh, Mayra Rivera takes a move beneath the superficiality of skin using, interestingly, a textile metaphor: “[My body’s] complex fabric is woven by multiple entities that live and act in my body, by the sedimentation of past events, the constant flow of elements in and out of it” (Rivera 2015, 155-156). She not only means here the influence of human and non-human actors during the life-span of a body’s flesh, but also of bodies of the past to which it materially relates to: that of the ancestors. Rivera’s notion of ancestral “sediments” (Rivera 2015, 110, 114, 152, 155-156) as the unconsciously carried, partially accessible past full of medical, nourishing, and emotional memories of one’s “community” – a word not further specified – seems to be close to Emma Chirix’s perspective on the Mayan women’s bodies as

8 Walter Mignolo insists in the epistemological construction of ontology, and the need therefore to engage with epistemology within decoloniality (Mignolo 2018, 147-150). Nelson Maldonado-Torres deals with the colonality of Being, and with decoloniality in (trans-)ontological terms (Maldonado-Torres 2010).

access point to the past (Chirix García 2010, 52). Through living bodies like hers, the latter author carefully traces back both memories of the gendered violence suffered by the grandmothers since colonial times, and their “life, resistance and energy”, as well as of the grandfathers.

### And beneath: Sandra Monterroso's *Columna Vertebral* (2012–2017)



Fig. 5: Sandra Monterroso, *Columna Vertebral Roja* and *Columna Vertebral Amarilla*, 2017, sculptures of wood and cotton textile, exhibition view from the Trienal de Sorocaba, Brazil 2017. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 6: Sandra Monterroso, *Columna Vertebral Roja* and *Columna Vertebral Amarilla* (detail), 2017, sculptures of wood and cotton textile, exhibition view from the Trienal de Sorocaba, Brazil 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

There are three versions of *Columna Vertebral*, an installation series born out of Sandra Monterroso's research process, officially beginning in 2012, but that actually goes back to the artist's teenage-years, when she first learned about her Maya-Q'eqchi' heritage shortly before her grandmother died (Monterroso 2012-2017a; Pompidou 2019; Monterroso, Sandra. 2019. Conversation with the author, May; Monterroso, Sandra. 2020. Conversation with the author, February 27.) Having migrated to the city from the area of Alta Verapaz, her grandmother had ceased to speak her indigenous language, not passing it on to her children and grandchildren – until she was about to die. Hearing her grandmother speak in a language she herself could not understand was a revealing experience for Sandra, who since then has explored her female, Mayan ancestry within and beyond her artistic praxis. In doing so, she enters a subjective transformation,

consciously abandoning her construction as '*ladina*' towards what she calls "mestizaje indígena". To be *mestiza* in this sense would mean to not subscribe to the homogenizing implication of *mestizaje* as the 'mixture of cultures', consciously connecting instead with one's indigenous ancestry, negated until now by the concept of the '*ladina*'. It was in this spirit that the series *Columna Vertebral* was created after the artist's journey to the place her grandmother came from, where she got to know and visited members of her family. She was focusing on the *cortes* characteristic of





Fig. 7: Sandra Monterroso, *Columna Vertebral Roja (detail)*, 2017, sculptures of wood and cotton textile, exhibition view from the Trienal de Sorocaba, Brazil 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

the area; woven, worn, stored, transported and sold also by the women in her family. She not only learned about these techniques, but borrowed many of the finished skirts; a negotiation documented in a blog (sandramonterroso 2012) that accompanied the exhibition of the first installation in 2012: a column built out of 87 *cortes*, rolled up tightly and built up in lines, of three to five skirts each, one on top of the other. Sandra added two of these monumental forms (fig. 5-7) – made out of an otherwise light and thin material – in São Paulo (Labra 2017), and in Paris (Weir and Lasvignes 2019). Their red and yellow color are by no means accidental, but part of a larger collection across time, indeed a constellation – not completed yet – of six columns, each pertaining to a moving direction in Mayan ‘cosmovisions’, encompassing but not reduced to the cardinal points (Monterroso 2012-2017b)<sup>9</sup>. For instance, the color red pertains to the place where the Grandfather Sun rises. Besides the overall color though, it seems impossible to further explore each of the skirts’ material constitution, e.g. its length, technique, and weaving patterns. They are wrapped up too tightly.

If the second skins of Manuel Tzoc’s mother were once displayed all over his bodily surface, the skins rolled up here are transformed into another body organ, another part: a spinal column – the installation’s very title. This new formation is simultaneously a transformation of the surroundings of the exhibited work, the visitor now entering the interior not of a museum’s building, but of a – human? – body. As a foundational and fundamental institution of the nation-state that almost serves as its metonym (cf. Bennett 1995, 141-142, 148ff.), the museum does not house the column selflessly. This one rather becomes its structural support, one based on the labour of so many indigenous men and especially women, whose work has been naturalized and whose agency has been rendered invisible. For instance, Aura Cumes has dealt with the indigenous house made or ‘*servienta*’ as the figure of a reproductive worker who is crucial for society’s functioning, but who does not figure in official discourses because of the dubious conditions she is requested to work in. In this context, not the museum’s but the family’s home serves as metonymy of the nation-state (Cumes Simón 2015). Sandra herself has referred to the installation as simultaneously a monument and an anti-monument (Pompidou 2019), similar to pre-hispanic stelae such as that of Quiriguá, that addresses indigenous female workers as the guardians of

9 She cites the study *Cosmovisión Mayab*’ (Matzir Miculax 2009) therein.

tradition, a role personally experienced both as a weight and an honorable responsibility (Monterroso, Sandra. 2020. Conversation with the author, February 27)

## Bodily surfaces and interiority

However, *Columna Vertebral* also brings together two physically detached elements into one and the same form: the skin and the vertebral column – itself an assemblage of bones with a structuring function, otherwise surrounded by many layers of fluids, muscles and tissues. It is this juxtaposition, or this turning the body inside out that intrigues me most, because it resonates not only with Mayra Rivera's, Elizabeth Grosz's and Emma Chirix's different notions of material, surface relationality, but also with the bodily dimensions of art practices I have been dealing with. I am less interested in the representative function of depicted bodies and body parts, for instance through metonymy, than in something similar to what Rivera ascribes to poetics after Édouard Glissant: "a practice of engaging the world, in which one risks of being transformed" (Rivera 2015, 4). Arguing against dualistic notions of the body as a self-contained entity and the equivalent of a likewise delimited mind, soul or subjectivity, Grosz also turns the body inside out, bringing the organs and other body parts to the surface in order to explore their links with one another and with others (Grosz 1994, viii, 6, 9, 13, 27, 115-117). Interestingly, this is a movement necessary for her outside-in discussion of bodies and subjectivities. There she renders the very idea of a stable body expressing a stable, interior subject obsolete, and paves the way for the exploration of many possible relations between unknown, irreducible dimensions, and integrations, cohesions, fragmentations and reorientations of body parts and of bodies. By "unknown" dimensions she means neurophysiological and psychological processes, but I immediately have to think about Rivera's notion of ancestral sedimentations. Also the latter author describes various elements of corporeal constituency that reside within and outside of the body's flesh, and that constantly traverse it (Rivera 2015, 36-37, 65, 75, 96). She does so making use of the textile-metaphor quoted above. Like the bones in Sandra's *Columna Vertebral*, Rivera's flesh-as-fabric is located no longer solely on the skin, visible to everyone, but in the body's interior. In other words, and as Peter Moeschl has shown from a medical perspective and a surgical praxis; bodily interiority, otherwise imagined as depth, is no more than a set of surfaces (Moeschl 2000, 294-296). Moreover, the notion of the flesh-as-fabric contests the very idea of a self-contained body as the house of an "inner man" or a "sensing self"; the body itself residing in the world in a model similar to "a set of Russian dolls" (Rivera 2015, 75) – one self in one body in one world.

## Mayan hermeneutics of the body, in tension

In her linguistic, historical and archeological exploration of pre-hispanic body concepts, Chirix also argues against a self-contained body (Chirix García 2010, 51-52, 170). According to the author, for the Maya-Kaqchiquel, a person's relation to collectivity and the cosmos is a bodily one, so that the body cannot be understood as an ordered collection of body parts building one stable whole. *Ranima*, for instance, is a body part where feelings and reasoning reside. It is translatable to the soul or the heart, although it is felt in the stomach's mouth. Unlike those enlisted by Moira Gatens – “the mouth, the anus, the genitals” (Gatens 1996, 12) – this is a body part both material and immaterial, impossible to delimit, either with the tools provided by western epistemologies, or with a surgical scalpel. Articulated in everyday speech, it links persons with each other and with animals, plants, and even seemingly ‘inanimate’ entities such as textile, who all have a *ranima*. This could be seen as one aspect of Mayan complementarity, a concept carefully approached by Morna Macleod (2011, 123-133). Citing a normative definition, she states that in complementarity, “everything, including men and women, constitute important parts of the cosmos” (Macleod 2011, 123; my translation), only to remember the impossibility of any stable definition a few lines later. In what she calls Mayan hermeneutics, experience is not only the materialization of concepts, but must be their premise. Although dualism informs it, every part having a counterpart, complementarity cannot be reduced to a dichotomous – i.e. mutually exclusive – thinking. This is a crucial point, especially when it comes to male and female relations – a highly contested subject in Mayan debates, showcased by Macleod. Indeed, there are many critiques to complementarity – or ‘chacha-warmi’ in the Andean context (Paredes 2014, 78-83) – as affecting women both within (Cabnal 2010, 14) and outside (Gatens 1996, xi, 30 ff.) Guatemala. Mayan complementarity is a multi-dimensional concept nurturing and nurtured by material relations that cannot be prescribed, but are always experienced as situated.

## More-than-discursive qualities of bodies and textiles

So far, I haven't addressed the question of the body's and textile's languages head on. Between the lines though, I have been following Elizabeth Grosz who, while dealing with bodily inscription and textuality, points out the necessity of thinking about what lies outside or beyond speech and the representative, communicative functions of languages and texts; an outside she further associates with the flesh's very materiality, i.e. its capacity to resist discourse (Grosz 1994, 116-119)<sup>10</sup>. Without forgetting actual representations in textiles – e.g. *cortes* and *huipiles* – within

10 Grosz's take is comparable to Jessica Bolt's move away from representation and towards performance and the body in what she calls a theory of art practice: “Such a materialist account of creative practice questions both representational theories of art and the contemporary pre-occupation with the understanding of art as a sign system” (Bolt 2004, 149).

Mayan and non-indigenous environments and discourses, I have explored various transformations of skins and other body-parts through their material, superficial interaction with textiles. Body language has to be understood here not as the one-to-one expression of a subject's idea, need, or desire – again, the body as vehicle –, nor as a systematized sign-system, but as the way in which bodies receive, carry on, communicate and transform ancestral knowledge, as well as memories both personal and collective. These are unconscious processes partially accessible via (art-)practices, as well as through linguistic, 'archeological' and historical analysis that take bodily experience as a method – I am thinking of Emma Chirix's work now (Chirix García 2010; Chirix García 2018; Chirix García 2019). And they are subject to multiple, yet particular transformations, for instance through sewing as a healing praxis in the case of the widowed women after war, and through textile re-composition, enactment or covering up in the case of Manuel Tzoc and Sandra Monterroso.

Approaching what has been theorized as the pre- or non-discursive dimension of bodies, I have alternated between different qualities, such as textures, rhythms (Rivera 2015), and forces (Grosz 1994). But isn't this a paradox: to theorize the non-discursive with words and in discourse? Indeed, I think that this movement towards that which stays unknowable – without transforming it into the unknown that is potentially known, to borrow words from Erin Manning (2007, 53) – has to be understood as a necessarily incomplete process, i.e. a process of getting close to something without defining it fully. Interestingly, many anthropologies and ethnographies of the Mayan *traje*, as well as broader textile theories seem to follow a similar move, for instance using the very same words to describe what the language of textile might be. Here is one example: When dealing with the function of textiles as everyday "silent witnesses", Maxine Bristow points out that textile, while "written into the structure of society like a language, [...] is a language that is essentially non-discursive" (Bristow 2012, 45). Thus, textile cannot be deciphered like a sign system, but is accessed through many senses, especially through touch (cf. Mitchell 2019, 7). This in a way contests the capacity of textiles to be read, a process solely requiring vision – or so one may think. In other words: the body's materiality acts as the very premise of textile's language; without touch there can be no epistemic or mnemonic transmission beyond representation or factive communication. Now the question of communication between the body and textile is somewhat obsolete, because these are not two divided, abstract entities. Rather, the material, textural relation between particular textiles and bodies or body parts is one of transformation, where they constitute each other mutually. Ultimately, this is a relation relevant for subject-formations.

## On decipherability

I have shown this in regard to the notion of the second skin and Manuel Tzoc's process of becoming a textile-body. That he does so not with his mother's *huipiles*, but with her *cortes* is significant, because of the different interpretations of these textiles by weavers and wearers, but also by anthropologists and ethnographers alike. In fact, while stressing the semiotic complexity of the blouses that do include figures and other signs, many scholars (cf. Hendrickson 1995; cf. Otzoy 1996) claim that Mayan textiles can, and in fact are deciphered as signs – indirectly problematizing abstract theories of textile like the one I just quoted. Working on what Carol Hendrickson called “the basic vocabulary of the Traje Indígena” (Hendrickson 1995, 33) with the help of diagrams and drawings, some of these authors try hard to uncover all meanings and semiotic levels therein. Others, like Irma Otzoy and Barbara and Dennis Tedlock, hint at the unknowable and unstable qualities of textile I am more interested in. When dealing with Maya-K'iché' intertextuality, the Tedlocks trace rhythmic phenomena such as syncopation; the alternation of the rhythm's flow in textile-colors and speech-utterances (Tedlock and Tedlock 1985, 130-139). Unlike that of animals, the human body is not explicitly depicted in the textiles they analyze, but implicit in terms of the weaver's bodies, as well as potentially fulfilling the composition when wrapped therein as the wearer's bodies. Finally, it is Otzoy who, in a short study of the *traje*, most profoundly deals with the bodily perspectives of weavers and wearers like her who “write in tongues” (Otzoy 1996, 27) – an intriguing metaphor, itself related to language (Otzoy 1996, 25 ff.). First, she makes clear that the representative and semiotic elements of the *traje* are written upside down, so that they can be read – indeed! – by the wearer and not necessarily everybody else. Second, she addresses the thoughts, feelings and emotions woven into textiles and felt by wearers; a textural transmission that is affective and non-discursive. Third, looking back at the histories of textile in the Maya K'iché' sacred book or Popol Vuh, she describes how not all animals can be represented in *huipiles*, because of what could happen to the bodies wearing them, for example being stung by the bees depicted therein, a reference to one of the stories of the book (Popol Vuh 2019, 232). The animation of the depicted bee once again highlights the importance of bodily experience in Mayan ways of thinking and doing.

Having briefly addressed Chirix's search for the body in archeology and material culture, now it seems relevant to go back to her encounter with the pre-hispanic past via stelae and other heavy remains; an encounter involving both knowledge and affect. If Chirix is looking for the experience and practices of the body therein (Chirix García 2010, 173-74; Chirix García 2019, 154-155), then what is the function of the visual analogy between the *Columna* and the stela of Quiriguá to which Sandra Monterroso herself refers to (Monterroso 2012-2017a)? Like the archeological



move in theory, the very personal relation to ‘one’s own’ ancestry that is yet lying so far behind has been described by Diane Nelson, who herself visited Quiriguá as part of a Mayan language workshop, and who described the ways in which the stones spoke to the workshop participants, many of whom are actively seeking to (re-)link with their Mayan heritages (Nelson 2015, 232-245). That the stones speak is not to be understood here in mere representational or communicational terms, e.g. through pre-hispanic myths carved in the stone, but as an affective, textural relation between surfaces; that of the speaking stone and of the listening body. I am reminded here of Hortense Spillers’ formulation of the “hieroglyphs of the flesh” (Spillers 1987, 67), even though it refers to another context – that of (post-)slavery in the US: a mechanism by which the many markings on the captive or enslaved body’s flesh are transmitted throughout generations. Like the carvings of the pre-hispanic stelae, these are markings felt but only partially decipherable, if at all. And textile? In fact, the *cortes* of the column are rolled up now, barely identifiable as woven in Mayan techniques to the knowledge-seeking eye – e.g. that of the anthropologist or ethnographer, and in this case myself. Withdrawing from the possibility of deciphering them fully, *Columna Vertebral* preserves and indeed highlights the unknowable dimension of these particular textiles, and asks us to imagine another kind of – situated, material, surface – approach to them. To unroll them and wear them would necessarily mean destroying the column, spreading it onto bodies that move in all directions, but that share the memory of former contacts, with weavers, wearers, the artist, and of course with one another.

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