The Enterprise
A conversation between Yilmaz Dziewior and Minerva Cuevas about her contribution to the series *Schultze Projects*

Yilmaz Dziewior: You work in a variety of media, ranging from action-based interventions in daily consumer routines to videos, installations, and large murals. In some of your works you deal with the exploitation of nature by multinational companies and the injustice associated with it. Initially when I invited you to contribute to our series Schultze Projects*, I actually thought you would do a mural. Was the anti-fascist relief by Isamu Noguchi for the marketplace in Mexico City a point of reference for you in your decision to use this medium, or how did the idea of a relief occur to you?*

Minerva Cuevas: I have been fascinated with Isamu Noguchi's mural since a long time ago. It is housed in a very popular market in the historical center of Mexico City near my studio. It is a treasure in plain sight in a dense commercial area, and it feels totally integrated with the people who use the market. It seems to me one of a kind in Noguchi's production, his first large work, half relief half sculpture, finished using the fresco technique. I totally understand how he identified with the muralist painters of the time. The market in 1934 was a post-revolutionary progressive model which included social areas and had the goal of bringing art to the people. I have never had the chance to "respond" to it formally because my work is based on contextual research that considers the final formal solution a strategy to complete a public aesthetic process. But while I was working from Mexico due to the travel restrictions of the pandemic, since it was not an option to paint a mural directly in the museum, I had to think of other possibilities to "build it," and that was when the idea of a relief seemed like a good solution. I was also influenced by remembering the Romano-Germanic Museum next door and how much I have wanted to make references to the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. In fact, I think some of Noguchi's works might have been influenced by Mesoamerican relief masks.
Many elements of *The Enterprise* have things in common with my other mural paintings: the use of corporate branding, animals as symbolic characters in an environment or a landscape. In this case it is a scene that connects elements from the past and present in the American and European continents and makes us wonder about the future of economic processes.
After seeing it finally installed, I am amazed to see how it also resonates with other works that are part of the museum's collection and architecture.

YD: The title The Enterprise *opens up many paths into different fields. In connection with the logos you use, it makes one think of international trade activities and the hegemony of economics. This is closely linked to the history of colonization and the impact it still has today. What was the reason for you to choose this title?*

MC: The title is connected to how the elements in the mural make the viewer travel in time and space as a nod to science fiction, which usually presents us with stories based on real elements, but with very imaginative possibilities. At the same time, as you mentioned, the title could be associated with colonizing expeditions, business organizations, and what the financial institutions represent. And lastly, it even connects to the fact of this being a very ambitious project that involved

great teams of people in both locations and was challenging in many aspects but very rewarding in the end. During the process we were joking about “teleporting” the piece, and in a way that is what happened as everything was solved digitally in Mexico and we gave it physicality in a workshop in Cologne.

YD: The images you use connect different times and cultures. They can be read on multiple levels, like for example the sculpture of a stylized bat in the left part of your piece. On the one hand it refers to the Mayan mythology of Camazotz and represents a bat god. The bat in Mesoamerica is also associated with night, death, and sacrifice. And of course in the time of COVID one is reminded of the beginning of the pandemic and the story of its origin from a bat. What were the reasons for you to choose the bat sculpture?

MC: Camazotz is a very important character in the Popol Vuh, a foundational sacred narrative of the K′iche′ people from long before the Spanish conquest of Mexico. It includes the Mayan foundational myth in which he is a messenger from the underworld in the form of a humanoid bat and brokers a deal between humanity and Lord Tohil, the patron god of the Mayan K’iche’. In general I chose him because of his strong presence, and he has influenced even foreign popular culture—for example, he is a Titan who appears in the graphic novel *Kingdom Kong*.

YD: The creatures in your tableau connect the different elements. We see a bat, an animal of the air; the fish could be a symbol for water, and the roots of the tree are connected to the earth. Some creatures, like the water dog Ahuízotl, connect two elements. Only fire is missing, right? Are the different elements of any relevance for you?

MC: Now that you mention it, in fact Camazotz is also related to fire, as in that foundational story in which mankind had to promise him their armpits and their waists in exchange for fire. I think also the Mastercard logo could represent the fire of the sun. Natural elements are deeply connected to the existence of natural resources, and therefore also to economic processes, so I think it is a logical consequence to perceive them as part of the mural through the myths. Maybe in the end true power comes only from nature? And this is recognized in those foundational stories?

YD: The aforementioned figure of the dog, Ahuízotl, is a legendary creature in Aztec mythology. It is said to live in lakes and lure people to their deaths. What makes it so fascinating for you?

MC: Ahuízotl is a water dog connected to the rain gods and meant to be the guardian of the lakes. Spanish informants described the dog as having hands and feet and also a hand on its tail. Hernán Cortés, the Spanish conquistador responsible for the brutal conquest of the Aztec Empire in Central Mexico, reported to the Spanish kingdom that one of his soldiers had been killed by one of these creatures. The description of the animal is so strange that it might be connected to an extinct species living in the lakes of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco. This may be a reminder also of how all of what is now Mexico City was formerly lakes, and this animal was probably close to an otter. It has also been used in popular culture: in the children’s television series *My Little Pony* it is the archenemy in a fairy tale book.

YD: Tell me more about the figure seen from behind wearing only a loincloth. For me this figure is the clearest reference to indigenous cultures and ways of living.

MC: I am always very hesitant to use human characters in my murals, but this figure seemed both very beautiful and relevant to the concept, as he is a Macehualli, known as the commoner social class that economically sustained the Aztec empire. They were peasants, artisans, and traders, and had the obligation to pay tribute in the form of goods and communal work. They used to dress very simply with clothes made out of maguey cactus fibers. It was forbidden for them to use certain products like cacao, precious stones, and cotton. I chose him because of the beauty of the detailed back showing his spine and buttocks, but mainly as a reference to the labor needed for economic processes to happen and a reference to social stratification.

YD: Some of the replicas of pre-Hispanic symbolic Mesoamerican representations of deities you include in your relief are part of the collection of the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. What is your relation to this institution, and what criteria influenced your choice of these specific deities?

MC: The National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City is a trip into the past civilizations of the region, but for me it triggers amusement and curiosity about not only the symbolic value of the figures, but also their production—the humor and fantasy we can perceive in some of them. I wonder if we can call them replicas, because their symbolic value transcends the object. I have no intention to make a copy: the material is different, the scale is different. While working on the pieces it became clearer to me that I was not dealing with the appearance of the sculptural objects, but their presence. Every sculptural element is there to be able to invoke powerful forces, very much like the banks' logos, to be able to name them. Camazotz, the bat, would be like a Virgin Mary. Its material production is irrelevant; the important thing is to be able to perceive her in relation to the physical world and our beliefs. It blew my mind when I visited the Aachen Cathedral and saw inside it the names of banks included in the windows of the chancel.

YD: In some of your earlier works you dealt with the production and economization of chocolate. The abstract Mayan cocoa tree relates to these issues and to a time and culture when cacao was even a currency. Also the monkey from the Jama-Coaque culture on the right side of the relief could be seen as such a reference. These images were part of ceramic pots for cocoa, because the monkeys would eat the fruits of the cacao plants and spread the seeds after they digested them. In Cologne it also refers to the history of the Museum Ludwig, which was founded in 1976 with a donation by Peter and Irene Ludwig, whose fortune primarily came from the multinational production and sale of chocolate. How do you see these connections?

MC: I started my research on the value and social importance of cacao in 2013 while exploring the Weltkulturen Museum collection in Frankfurt. They have a vast collection of ethnographic objects in storage. I was interested in notions of value and the provenance of the objects, and I found there a currency collection donated by Commerzbank, including pieces of ancient Aztec hoe money, and they had the Commerzbank logo on stickers cataloguing them. That made me think about how also cacao was valued so highly by the Aztecs that it formed part of their monetary system. It was also

at that time that I learned to see capitalism as a cannibalistic practice. Nowadays crops in general play a very relevant role in the market economy connected to agribusiness. So either as a reference to the past or to the present, cacao is an example of transnational trade and colonization, which we can argue is a continued political process in the present. The origin of cacao is Mesoamerica. Most of the Mexican cacao production is exported to Switzerland and Belgium due to its higher quality, and the Mexican industry ends up using seeds from African countries, which are of lesser value in the market. Chocolate will always be bittersweet in light of its history.

Daily love and the capitalist way of life.
Cannibalism. Absorption of the sacred enemy. To transform him into a totem.
The human adventure. The earthy goal.

Oswald de Andrade, *Manifesto Antropófago*, 1928