



José Luis Torres
Autoconstrucciones





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Curators' Statement

Diasporic studies centre on notions of place, migration, and transnationalism. For José Luis Torres, originally from Argentina and now living in Québec, each installation is a study in personal locatedness and a temporary sense of place. Memories, shaped by Torres' personal recollections of housing and shanty towns in his native country as well as by his own architectural training, guide his structures. He uses but a few basic hand tools and fashions works out of recycled wood, doors, furniture, and the most common stud-grade lumber available at the local lumber yard — no fancy veneers or exotic woods, no table saws, not even a measuring tape. His installations and sculptures are a humbling intersection of art, labour, and politics; they are permeated by stories of migration, immigration, and diasporic flows.

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Let's dispose of something right off the bat. José Luis Torres belongs to a cohort and in the past ten years he has become one of its most accomplished representatives. His work bears comparison to a number of artists from a generation that spans the early 1950s to the mid-'70s, overlapping and outlasting the Baby Boom. A cohort is a statistical grouping bound together by a historical circumstance or defining characteristic. In this case, one of the defining features is "relational aesthetics," a term much in vogue of late. At one time, observes Boris Groys, "[t]he division between artists and spectators seemed clear-cut and socially established" and "artworks produced by artists were objects of aesthetic contemplation." But for the past century this "simple dichotomy" has periodically "collapse[d]" (Groys 14). The first major installment of that collapse was in Duchamp's Dada heyday, but there's been a long string of deliberately rigged breakdowns since then.

The distinction between artist and spectator, between the integrity of the work and the viewer's external perspective, was vigorously challenged in the 1950s and '60s. When Iain Baxter, one of the pioneering conceptualists in Canadian art, wanted to revitalize a historic career (he's now in his mid-seventies), he legally rebranded himself "Baxter&." The point of the ampersand, he explained to the *Vancouver Sun*, was to acknowledge the "unending collaboration with the viewer and the means to question the artist's role" (Griffin "'Ampersand Man'"). Baxter knows whereof he speaks: if you question the artist's role, you also end up questioning the specialized authorial product (the philosophical thing behind the name "art"), and soon we're moving into amorphous ontologies of the object. Relational art maps this process onto the exigencies and opportunities of the internet age. Relationalists dismiss the sanctity of the singular art work and embrace interactivity. Kantianism is disavowed; the moment of elevated encounter, centred on the object's formal beauty, is passé; the consumption of aesthetic sensations is replaced by a social networking model.

Torres shares broad affinities with relational ideas but remains rooted in traditional disciplines. In his native Argentina he earned degrees in sculpture and architecture, and went on to hold a ten-year position as a drawing and sculpture professor at the Fine Arts Academy in Córdoba, the country's second-largest city. Since coming to Canada in 2003, Torres has chosen to accentuate a dialogue with architectural processes. He has moved, he says, from "working within architecture" to "working with architecture" (Torres "Salut!"). A good deal of his output is still sculptural, but instead of situating the object within the bounded confines of gallery space or inserting it like a set-piece into a prescribed outdoor site, the sculptures spill out of buildings or attach to staircases and scale interior and exterior walls.

The term "sculpture" loses its precision, for the works are made from accumulated parts which are shaped into architectural sub-spaces that are free for public use. This is the relational component of his projects, picking up on the movement's hybrid ancestry in Happenings, Beuysian ideas of "social

sculpture,” and Institutional Critique (inclusive of treating buildings like bodies in the gross anatomy lab, as in the famous “building cuts” of Gordon Matta-Clark). Under relational aesthetics the artist stage-manages the elementary particles of society itself. He/she (one is tempted to invent a dual-purpose pronoun, not because of inherent sexism in the existing options but because the world seems to be getting more epicene by the day) facilitates people contact and thus dispossesses the gallery of its jurisdictional fetish — the artwork, which long served as the objective distillation (some would call it a hypostasis) of the gallery’s entire institutional purpose, as well as the artist’s creative ‘genius.’ The autonomous object declines in importance and the old idea of the exhibition space is repurposed to facilitate people flow. Curators and artists hang in the background after constructing open-ended settings or installations where audiences form themselves into spontaneous groupings.

Not only form, but now content, once considered an inner, intellectual property of the object — like the thought we hold in our heads — begins to lose its substantive nature. The old idea of meaning in art, which was traditionally tied to grand narratives and iconography, and then in the modern era to conceptual explorations, is farmed out to the audience, who aren’t expected to conduct themselves as rigorous decoders of the work’s sublime significance. Semantics takes flight; meaning is outsourced in all directions so long as its destination is some sort of fluid ‘community’ that finds itself happily participating in a gallery-hosted curry cook-out set up by Rirkrit Tiravanija.

I mention Tiravanija as an exponent of global horizons, which is the other big feature of the cohort. Of Thai ancestry, but Argentine-born (a diplomat’s son) and schooled in Canada, Tiravanija is a thoroughgoing relationalist. His place in the relational canon has been frequently cited by Nicolas Bourriaud, the movement’s theoretical guru. Tiravanija is noteworthy for being one of the first to enact his vocation as a professional nomad, hopping around the planet, liquidating the object and replacing it with a service-based conception of art praxis. On the whole, however, it’s not such a strange development. Digital media and cultural diffusion have overrun the globe. People swarm across the planet, tracing contrails and living in multiple time zones.

High-tech capitalism seems to have an inexhaustible genius for earth-girdling gadgets, and these gadgets (the web, the smartphone, the satellite, the passenger jet) have depleted older styles of experience. Affect has waned, Fredric Jameson famously argued, and historicity has thinned out. Jameson’s postmodernism was Marxism reheated for turbo-charged times, but he had a point: our transportation and communications technologies have sapped the profundity from older experiences of nostalgia and geographic dislocation. With Torres, questions of homeland and emigration are subject to an ambivalent interrogation. Mnemonic attachments are rendered oblique and emptied of their expressionistic potential. While he and Tiravanija have little in common in terms of their practice, their membership in the same cohort stems from the points just outlined.

As a rule, postmodern artists have become rootless cosmopolitans and perhaps the least entitled people to speak about deeply-felt attachments to ancestral places. They thrive on the neoliberalism of the art market and their self-declared horizons are international. Yet if the artists in the cohort still hang on to a sense of place, it’s usually because of identity politics or camaraderie with an ideological constituency. “Postmodernism” is an old and stuffy concept by their count; they see themselves as

nomadic figures, migrants tooling their way across a post-national planet, crying politically correct tears about the uniform culture of worldwide capital or lambasting the shrinking ‘white’ bourgeoisie for the colonial sins of its ancestors. Openly or not, these artists relish opportunities for post-colonial moralizing, and yet, while decrying the wars and economic troubles that displace people from their homelands, they themselves accrue vanguard careers from the same.

Torres was born in 1968, the very year in which Graciela Carnevale locked an opening-night audience into a gallery in Rosario, Argentina, daring them to break out in an act of spontaneous countercultural revolt. Torres is now in early mid-career and shares attributes with a handful of others from his generation. These include Oscar Tuazon, a grunge-era Seattle native now based in Europe; the Cuban duo of Marco Valdés and Dagoberto Sánchez, whose group name “Los Carpinteros” indicates something of their aesthetic ethos; and Arne Quinze, a Belgian native, who pals around with Rem Koolhaas and makes wooden “stilt houses” often coloured an exuberant neon red. Compare a photo from a Torres exhibition to any of these and you’re bound to find formal resemblances. But it’s two older figures, both born in the early 1950s, who stand as proper forerunners. One of these is Tadashi Kawamata, a widely acclaimed name on the international scene, and the other is Richard Greaves, a ghostly recluse stowed away in the Appalachian seigneuries of southern Québec.

Kawamata is a globe-trotter who styles himself the Zugvogel (German for “migratory bird”) of the art world, flying between homes in Tokyo and Paris, and touching down for residencies in major venues. He is renowned for his parasitic scaffolding projects, which resemble nests, platforms, and temporary shelters inserted onto buildings or wedged into urban nooks across the world. A simple Google search will pinpoint outward similarities between Kawamata and Torres. But while Kawamata is an urbanologist backed up by a team of engineers and assistants, Torres tends to work solo like an intrepid bower-bird. His quasi-architectural installations and sculptures, built out of commercial-grade lumber or furniture cast-offs and reclaimed wood, are actually closer in spirit to Greaves.

Torres lives in Montmagny, on the south side of the St. Lawrence, just downstream from Québec City. He describes his neighbourhood as a transition zone between town and country. Greaves hides out in the same geographic region but keeps far from the madding crowds. His wooded, forty-hectare plot has become a wilderness studio for several “anarchitectural” experiments. The estate is populated with fantastic buildings pulled together out of wood and rope. “Cathedrals,” “sugar houses,” and “memory palaces” rise from among the trees like ramshackle apparitions adorned with household antiquities and roadside scraps. The dereliction is magical and uncanny, fusing childhood recollections with the mad elations of the mystical loner. Greaves studied theology in another lifetime long ago, and one senses an eremitic imagination at work. He builds as it suits him and apparently moves from house to house, living like a pilgrim in his own demesne.

Greaves has been a fertile influence on Torres, leading him toward a rethink of accepted architectural formats. The principle of asymmetrical construction, learned from Greaves, is a mainstay of the work he’s done since arriving in Canada. But Torres is a much more public artist than Greaves. His installations are meant to be socially traversable. Greaves spirals into himself like a Yeatsian gyre, but the turnings of Torres’ art are outward, in keeping with the global horizons of the relational/



migrational cohort. There's also a deep, ardent fund of political populism seeping through his constructs, much of it having to do with north-south relations in the Americas. This aspect rises into open view only intermittently, yet its presence is unassailable and grows out of his decision to leave Argentina. Multiple causes factored into the emigration, including long shadows from "The Dirty War" that terrorized the country in the 1970s and '80s, and the debt crisis that erupted at the beginning of the new millennium, climaxing years of turmoil under several administrations.

In the years preceding his move Torres roamed through Europe and Latin America, until finally settling in Montmagny. He married a Québécoise and they started a family that now boasts two daughters. During those drawn-out, pre-marital wanderings, somewhat Borgesian and perhaps Bolañoesque in scope, he came to the realization that "man lives désabrité ("without refuge," "exposed to the elements") and has no proper place where he feels at home" (Torres "Salut!"). Torres quips that his wife is of *pure laine* ("pure wool") ancestry, using a well-known Québec idiom that refers to deep-reaching French-Canadian roots. As to his own origins, these get the underplayed treatment but still manage to infiltrate the art in the form of allusive titles or the deceptively simple materials that he uses over and over again.

In 2004 while holding down a landscape-artist residency in Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, Torres produced his *Temps et boue* (*Time and mud*) series. These were outdoor sculptures based on pre-industrial construction techniques practised across the world in arid climates.¹ Known as the "rammed earth" or *pisé* method, it consists of a few elementary steps. Layers of moist clay, reinforced by gravel, lime, or straw, are compacted between wooden casings that can be taken away as soon as the dried walls are able to stand alone. The result is a durable, environmentally sustainable architectural format that affords a remarkable degree of thermal stability within the dwelling. The works at Saint-Jean-Port-Joli were possessed of an abstract solemnity meant to summon the cultural "tracks" or "footprints" that globalization tends to "erase" (Torres "Salut!").

This "Time and mud" theme was revisited in 2008 when Torres installed *Continente* at Galerie MAI (Maison, arts interculturels) in Montreal. With its polemical programming policy, MAI is a relational aesthetics/global diaspora hot point if there ever was one. Torres invited audience members to help him construct several geometric solids out of compacted Montmagny farm earth. Ranging in height, the finished works were laid out like an urban skyline and available for viewing from an observation deck. When "perched on high," says Torres, spectators were able "to survey the installation and retrace their steps, noting the physical and aesthetic trail they left behind" (Torres "Hello!!!"). Paying homage to his cultural roots, Torres included a video component displaying native Argentines conducting burial rites and excavating soil for use in building construction. When the exhibition reached its terminus, the work was dismantled (as is the case with most of his installations), leaving only the documentary evidence. One of the photographs shows a chunk of densely-packed soil rising up like the four-square base of an obelisk. It's little more than a stump, measuring 1.5 cubic metres, but the effect is monumental, as in the earth casts for *Time and mud*.

In both instances — at Saint-Jean-Port-Joli and in Montreal — Torres was designating symbolic continents extruded from the planet's sub-aquatic crust. But he was also pushing into



phenomenological territory: by structuring the pieces so that some of the wood casings were still stuck to the compressed soil while others had fallen away, audiences were left with a Heideggerian "unconcealing" effect. A culturally manipulated object, a "sculpture" or "installation" becomes the setting for the disclosure of ageless telluric truth. The titles of the works, *Time and mud* and *Continente*, embed a double meaning: earth as a container, a sheltering ground that sustains and envelops life; and the earth as an extensive land mass, a large contiguous territory carrying a name.

The definition of continents is notoriously unscientific, and the different ways of mapping the earth, from the sixteenth-century Mercator projection to Buckminster Fuller's *Dymaxion* maps, have some relevance for the way in which Torres orchestrated the MAI installation, with that final top-down view after all the soil packing was done. The *Dymaxion Map* projects the earth as an icosahedron rather than a sphere: a twenty-sided Platonic solid that allows a more geographically faithful rendition of the sizes of the planetary land masses. It lays out the continents in a lengthwise arrangement that resembles one of those doctor's wall charts of the gastro-intestinal tract, allowing us to trace an L-shaped route from Patagonia to the Cape of Good Hope (taking a right-angled turn at the Himalayas). Unfolded, the map has the same sharp edges that featured in the casings for the MAI sculptures.

It's not likely that Torres was thinking of Fuller's projection as he and his audience co-operated on *Continente*, but we shouldn't shunt aside Borgesian happenstance when it comes to metaphors



of surveyance and memory. The world is full of strange gardens and forking, spatio-temporal pathways. There's a Dymaxion effect in Torres' career path over the past ten years. The self-exile from one end of the Americas to the other and an expanding list of exhibitions in almost every major Canadian city (with the exception of anything west of Alberta) attest to continuity as well as rupture. Torres is, in his own words, "desterrado — torn from the earth" — but he also "accept[s] the enigma" of starting over again in mid-life (Torres "Saluti da Québec!!!"). Memories of origins and homeland are encrypted at the core of the work, but these never spill over into open nostalgia, nor do they halt the progress of self-discovery.

Most of the commissions executed between 2004 and 2012 have been ventures into transitional living. Each installation proposes resolutions to questions of displacement; each addresses the hazards and the promises of the nomadic state. The installations are architectonic exercises. They deal with the simplest, most concrete concerns of the architectural venture: the building materials, the principles of construction, the demarcations of space, the sizing and serviceability of a structure (what are its dimensions, is it sturdy and accessible, is it made for public use?). Metaphorically, Torres reflects on the process of dwelling and departing, uprooting and resettling. But this metaphoric component would remain largely private and non-relational without its material vehicle — plain old wood held together by nails and deck screws.

Four years ago, when Gallery Connexion in Fredericton was washed out of its digs by an overflow of the St. John River, it offered Torres a 'homeless' residency while a new location was being scouted. He responded with a set of constructions entitled *Nomadic Landscape*, the first of which was installed outdoors in 2009 and the second in 2010, when the Gallery could at last offer him an indoor venue at its current location. The work in both settings was free of hewn earth and the labours of cultural memory. In flooding out the Gallery, the planet had spoken and there was no need to totemize its elemental authority. Torres decided to elaborate the ad hoc ways in which we inhabit space and set up 'home' environments in the midst of perpetual flux. In the outdoor half of the residency, he built walkways, benches, and tunnel-like niches that served as playground hangouts for visitors of all ages. The indoor residency resembled a home-construction work site that subdivided the gallery into a labyrinthine thicket of permeable 'rooms' and passageways.

These off-beat adaptations of indoor and outdoor space would be familiar to any do-it-yourself home renovator or woodworker with a flair for tree houses. After ten years of going at it, Torres has become prodigiously inventive with a small handful of basic materials. Softwood planks of pine and spruce, cut to standard sizes, are his staples. While he scopes out an installation site, envisioning the engineering caprice he's about to perpetrate, the gallery orders a bulk-quantity of factory-fresh planking and plywood sheets, and supplies the tools (usually a cordless drill and a circular saw). Then Torres gets down to business, patterning the Home Depot readymades (i.e. the wood units) into innumerable configurations, not unlike the multiplication of a few loaves and fish into a meal for five thousand.

But Torres is also a great recycler capable of improvising from the other end of the production process. The manufacturing economy begins with raw materials worked up into commercially available



Borders

products, which then end their lives as dumpster-quality relics (old doors, chairs, patio parts, headboards, window frames, mirrors, tarps, light fixtures, and so on). Where would modern art be without capitalism's debris? The avant-gardes are well known for their scrounging ways and the lowly, *sermo humilis* style in which they disguise their ambitions. In the late summer of 2011 Torres pulled together an installation at Artcite Gallery in Windsor, Ontario. It consisted of scraps and salvages donated by locals. A call was put out and people responded by rummaging through their basements and garages. Once rescued, their off-loaded junk re-emerged as a fluidly diffuse obstacle course that wove around a divider wall and reached toward the gallery's ceiling vents. As with *Nomadic Landscape* at Fredericton, visitors idled among the makeshift accumulation, simply enjoying the connective hodgepodge or perhaps catching remote iterations of Merzbau and *arte povera* aesthetics.

It's too bad that the installation carried the blandly grandiose, one-word title *Borders*, presumably meant to reference the international boundary separating Windsor and Detroit. Had the installation been more topical about this adjacency, or made some reference to the upcoming anniversary of the War of 1812 (a war that started with American troops invading Upper Canada across the Detroit River), the title may have had some significance. As it is, it merely echoed the title of Torres' exhibition in North Bay earlier in the summer: *Fronteras*. My point isn't that Torres reused the same label in two different locations. Both shows, after all, were premised on reprocessing discarded materials. And one can appreciate that Torres, who moves along haltingly in English, functions as a four-track polyglot in Latin languages: Spanish and French are mother tongues, and he's more than capable in Italian and



Fronteras

Portuguese. But I get peeved by the fatuous artspeak that filters into everyone's 'discourse' — my own included. Who hasn't been guilty of reaching for rhetorical resonance through nebulous nouns, noun phrases (e.g., "The Abject Body"), and other linguistic twists and sophisms?

The titles *Borders* and *Fronteras* are among the more harmless instances of this, but they prove that the disease is transnational and settles deep into our communication patterns. In his artist's statement for *Nomadic Landscape*, Torres wrote that the exhibit

represents a way of inhabiting space: wandering, migration, and exile . . . [W]e are continually in transit, leaving and returning home . . . This experience allows us to contemplate mobility not in terms of the melancholic aspects of leaving home, but instead in its positive dimension, the way it stimulates discovery, settling in comfortably into new and old spaces. (8)

So here we have a case of the obligatory artspeak. One can imagine Torres paring down to something even more glib, and presumably pithy: "Mine is a Deleuzian art of transience, nomadism, and self-discovery, always eschewing The Melancholy." There's no doubt that these are his central themes, and I've had recourse to this same terminology throughout the essay, but the problem with this kind of language is that it's become the court idiom of every Dick and Jane in the intelligentsia, from the sniffiest curator down to the young avant-garde yob playing air guitar in a relational installation. The 'discourse' lacks not meaning, but tactility. It rides along with an air of middle-brow aloofness from what it's really trying to say.

In June 2012, two years after *Nomadic Landscape*, I wrote to Torres, asking about the consequences of leaving Argentina. His response was tuned to a slightly-flatter, ordinary-language frequency:

[p]olitical instability in my country influenced the decision to emigrate, but also changed my artistic perception... those who left Argentina [sic] allowed me to demystify various aspects of my artistic production and start experimenting... The adventure of leaving the country [sic] leaving a career built for a long time to restart again, to resumption, to reinventing [sic]. Impermanent dwellings, furniture limited, management of the components of life or survival, restricting objects to basic necessities. The beginning was very hard. (Torres “Salut!”)

There’s a change of key here and it hints at the tough kernel of truth concealed in that word “melancholy” (from the *Nomadic Landscape* artist’s statement). Everywhere in his work, Torres hails the human ability to improvise with whatever means are at hand. It’s the old self-reliant spirit of adventure and adaptation, worthy of the legendary gaucho and the pistol-packing Franciscan alike. Outwardly, this means that he avoids reveries or reflections on the life left behind (“the melancholic aspects of leaving home”). Yet the works remain charged with sublimations of exile. There’s no ideological stridency to speak of, yet the user-friendly dereliction of the reused parts hints at the political unconscious of an entire continent.

One of the first topics that Torres brought up when we met at the *Borders* exhibit was Eduardo Galeano, the great Uruguayan critic of gringo hegemony in the western hemisphere. It was the late summer of 2011 and the zeitgeist was starting to speak. In May, Artcite had hosted a talk entitled “Cuba’s Evolving Socialism,” given by the Cuban Consul General from Toronto; and now in September the Occupy Wall Street crowd was just starting to raise a fuss. We sat in a Starbucks discussing Galeano’s position as keeper of cultural memory and his sweeping perspective on tensions between Latin, Anglophone, and Native Americas. We also discussed Hugo Chávez, who made a ceremonial show of presenting Galeano’s *Open Veins of Latin America (Las Venas Abiertas de América Latina)* to Barack Obama when the two met at a summit in 2009.

After Torres again mentioned Galeano in a follow-up e-mail, I went back and re-read *Open Veins* (it had been over twenty years since I’d written seminar papers on the likes of Galeano, Gramsci, or György Lukács). The book’s subtitle is indicative of its author’s thesis: *Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*. *Open Veins* is a layman’s screed against the Anglo-Yankee economic imperium in Central and South America. Galeano argues that modern capitalism has intensified, and diversified, the cycles of blood-and-plunder that began with the first post-Columbian conquistadors. The polemic sweeps from country to country in an interplay of denunciations that rise to levels of poetic fury. Ulysses S. Grant, the United Fruit Co., and the IMF are condemned within one and the same template.

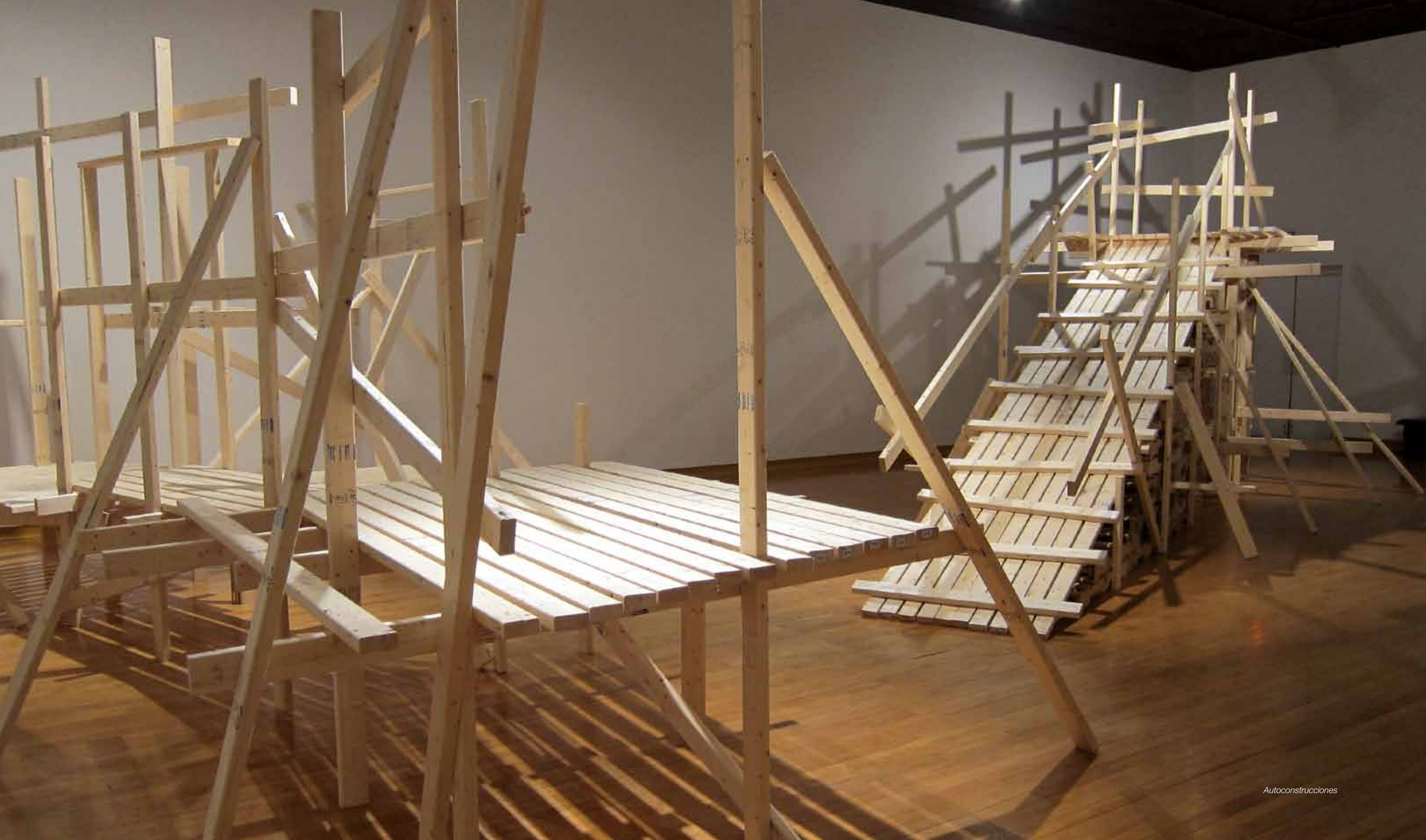
On the political spectrum, Galeano’s volume occupies a place somewhere between Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* and Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, although it preceded both. But all three are relentlessly provincial in their moralism. History is a shattered terrain pitted with ironies and sinkholes. The problem with high-minded ideals is that they’re fed by a steady stream of moral impurities which gives them their kinetic thrust. Where would Galeano’s narrative fit Plutarco Calles and the anti-Catholic pogroms of 1920s Mexico? Whose veins are being bled by the Castro dynasty?

And what of the Chávezista regime itself, lending its moral support to the iron-fisted theocracy in Tehran; or Galeano, for that matter, now happily ensconced in Caracas, where he acts as a consultant to teleSUR, a media channel that keeps in lockstep with the Chávez ruling agenda? General Videla, former head of Argentina’s right wing junta and lead architect of the country’s “Dirty War,” deserves the severest legal punishment for authorizing tortures, murders, and child confiscations. Recently, at age eighty-six, he was handed a fifty-year life sentence, thus capping the grim struggles of the Abuelas and all the others who sought justice. But how — to cite just one example — do we resolve the axis of influence that runs from the fascist leftism of Norberto Ceresole to Chávismo’s sanctioning of anti-Semitism?

In July 2012, the online UK edition of *The Guardian* gleefully reported that “[s]ales of *Das Kapital*, Marx’s masterpiece of political economy, have soared since 2008, as have those of *The Communist Manifesto* and the *Grundrisse*” (Jeffries “Why”). Now isn’t this beguiling? Marxists crowing over record sales — isn’t it a little bit like Islamists praising the democratic process, which grants them the power they need to adopt restrictive constitutions and disestablish secularism? We live in an unsteady world rife with ideological cooptation. While postmodernists proclaim (kerygmatically) that everything is socially constructed, Marxists preach the scientific inevitability of the coming capitalist extermination, and post-colonialists catechize us with victim histories. It seems that people can no longer own their own experiences without falling into lockstep under identity labels. The current, world-wide economic crisis is reviving stock stereotypes where plutocrats run roughshod over the poor. Caricatures are coming to life again: the fat-bellied Mr. Moneybags capitalist is a one-percenter in league with an imperialist Uncle Sam, or, worse yet, a hook-nosed Zionist banker; together, they’re still exploiting Third World coolies, who now reappear as Chinese proletarians churning out goods for Walmart, or university graduates who can’t pay off their student loans. Under whatever leftist stripe — Occupier, Amnesty Internationalist, or Liberation Theologian — Marxism has become the moral conscience of modern times.

The Guardian article came to its dénouement with a question: “[d]oes reading Marx and Engels’s critique of capitalism mean that you thereby take on a worldview responsible for more deaths than the Nazis?” Stuart Jeffries, the article’s author, waved away the question with a smug, dogmatic smile. He cited Eric Hobsbawm, the recently deceased Marxist historian, arguing that the age of “private appropriation” must give way to “social management on a global scale.” Nearly fifty years after Garrett Hardin’s famous article, it seems there’s a new solution afoot for that old tragedy of the commons; and that Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mao, Che, Ceaucescu, Pol Pot — none of these names can adulterate the pure good of Marxism. But Jeffries’s question deserves to be met on its own rhetorical terms, for it answers itself, word for word. “Yes, dear author, you’re quite right; reading Marx and Engels is exactly what you say it is: pickling your brain in a worldview that abolishes individual property but not the all-consuming state, that replaces money (currency) with government-issued vouchers, and that indeed did kill more people than German and Japanese fascism combined.”

In May 2012, Torres installed *Autoconstrucciones* at the Thames Gallery in Chatham, Ontario. The centrepiece of the exhibition was an ascending ramp that terminated in a narrow perch between the gallery floor and the mezzanine concourse. The ramp was accessed by a curving boardwalk that



proceeded from one of the staircases linking the gallery’s two levels. In one aspect, the set-up was fun to navigate. It was a pleasure to scale the ramp and feel the muscles tensing in one’s legs. But there was another register to contend with, corresponding to the topic of passages and dislocations. Torres devises installations so that audiences are free to interpret their meanings through physical encounter. Watching two elderly visitors move cautiously across the boardwalk but refrain from trying the ramp, I thought of the way we grope through unfamiliar environments. My own descent from the top was a side-footed action that struck me as somewhat akin (but in reverse direction) to Dante’s ascent of the hopeful hill in the first Canto of the *Inferno*. I was amused to find that the side scaffolding on the ramp protruded planks in a way that threw cruciform shadows on the gallery’s largest wall. But *Autoconstrucciones* wasn’t a mock-up of Golgotha or a Ziggurat causeway, though it did, perhaps, pay unconscious homage to El Lissitzky’s *The Lenin Tribune* (1924).

A few days after Torres and I stood at the top of the platform, watching people move about the installation, he sent me a Galeano citation:

Utopia lies at the horizon. When I draw nearer by two steps, it retreats two steps. If I proceed ten steps forward it swiftly slips ten steps ahead. No matter how far I go, I can never reach it. What, then, is the purpose of utopia? It is to cause us to advance. (quoted in Torres “Saluti”)

Capitalism is sick; only socialist progress can cure it. That’s what Galeano is saying, peddling the old utopian lie that Jacques Ellul demolished in his 1975 book, *Trahison de l’Occident (The Betrayal of the West)*. Utopia, said Ellul, has always been a rationalist temptation. The utopian impulse is often mistaken as a spasm of escapism or an overflow of the unbridled imagination. It’s no wonder that the Galeano passage is all over the internet as one of those stand-alone quotable quotes. But this only makes it an anodyne sentiment, a species of kitsch, whereas it might actually be incentivizing us to pursue something far worse. Ellul describes the utopian vision as the work of a totalitarian muse, as a fatal misapprehension of the powers of reason. Too often, he observes, utopias have been dedicated to “the narrowest kind of moralism” (151). Utopia is a delirium of the disciplinary intellect. The quest to perfect social relations is particularly dangerous in the industrial phase of history. The West has betrayed itself by trading away reason for technocratic rationalism; and “madness,” Ellul argues, thus sits “enthroned at the very heart of western efficiency” (168).

Thankfully, there’s another angle to the Galeano passage, which is the real reason that Torres cited it. This is the phenomenological angle, centred on the life-projects of the individual, not the monolithic brutalism of the collective. Everyone knows that utopia is the mirage that melts away as you reach to seize it, but that’ll never stop us from living in our own little parallel realities or projecting ourselves into subjunctive states. The phenomenologist observes that we’re always in two places at once — in the spatio-temporal now and in that other, intentionally-shaped space of memory, imagination, or next day’s much-anticipated appointment with a lover (or a mildly dreaded dinner with a boring work colleague). Such ‘utopias’ bubble up in the gap between two phenomenological coordinates. By definition, utopia isn’t real. The word means “no place,” or, if we want to philologize it in the name of happiness (reading the “u” as an “eu”), it can mean “blissful-nowhere-place.”

That’s surely the reason that Torres makes his past an invisible prologue to the work. Why doesn’t

he bog us down in open nostalgia or make topical references to his errant years abroad prior to settling in Québec? Because, as he says,

[n]omadic full-time mobility is for me a relationship with the world . . . Wandering becomes liberating way of meeting contexts [sic] social norms variable from one place to another, using the movement to invent my own values, to experience homelessness. (Torres “Saluti!”)

In the dizzying world we now live in, with its information glut and so many people constantly transiting in all directions, who can keep memory intact? Who has the patience, or the incentive, to savour the psychological oozings of one’s own life?

Looking back at the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, one attributes depth and authenticity to experiences of migration or stateless wandering. If these treks were spurred by war or injustice, they take on a special aura. Migrations, forced or otherwise — from Nauvoo to points West, or away from Cherokee homelands, or between Sicily to Ellis Island — were huge uprootings trailing tears of permanent departure. But Skype and Google Streetview have been digitally downsizing McLuhan’s global village. More than ever, people are being flung in different directions at a faster and faster rate. As distances have become more easily reversible, migration and memory have been deprived of their melancholic time-space protensions.

As states of body and soul, they were once practically Odyssean in their pathos. Going on a trans-oceanic journey was once a big deal. Leaving home as an emigrant was a life-changer. But the same technologies that centralized and unified modern polities are now destroying the uniqueness of states and have started mashing cultures together on a planetary level. Is this a case of technology proving Marx right, but without the consequences that he predicted? Who knows (as yet), but it’s long been obvious that the West is experiencing this contradictory dynamic deep within its home front. The tragic aura associated with the diasporic soul or the refugee-nomad has crossed over into a celebration of anyone boasting non-Caucasian ancestry. Multiculturalism has granted “the other” an empowered status. The unwholesome business of identity politics has made everyone into a self-attested minority, so much so that the marginalization of working class whites now apparently cries out for recognition (as spelled out in the BBC’s Enoch Powell documentary of 2008). The truth is that most people in the West no longer feel fully at home in their world unless they see ‘diversity’ on their streets and on their screens. In this brave new age, departures and displacements, stories of homelands lost, and voluntary or involuntary exile seem to belong to a time when the world was bigger and communication lags were greater.

Late in 2011 Kawamata went dumpster-diving at a Parisian charity house and reclaimed thousands of furniture discards that he turned into a multi-room installation at one of the city’s major galleries. Suspending his salvages from the ceiling, he created an ‘underwater’ perspective resembling the tons of waste flooding the Pacific after that year’s Tohoku earthquake. The quake was followed by a massive tsunami that threw up hundred-foot waves and triggered a nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima power plant. Kawamata’s installation was a compelling mimesis of what the watery main has wrought, but a more captivating image of how the sea disgorges itself was presented by Torres in July 2012. He installed *Ce qui nous entoure (Que nos rodea / What Surrounds Us)* at ARTsPLACE



...res
odea - Around us"

in Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia, an Anglicized Acadian settlement on the other side of the Bay of Fundy, across from St. John. Assembled from donated lumber, construction site cast-offs, and driftwood, it visualizes the sea as a peaking, churning waveform that might as well be a cyclone laid out on its side, corkscrewing our eye through the gallery and out the window. The wave loops and pitches against ceiling and side walls, cutting the room with a torque action that seems to give free rein to the tensions structuring Torres’s career.

The tensions I’m talking about are formal and conceptual rather than thematic. Plenty has been said already about emigrating and staking out new identities. And about ideological and phenomenological utopias. Not to mention the facilitating of happenstance relations for those avant-garde groupies or curiosity seekers who like to idle around artist-run centres and other such sites. All that’s in this work, too, if you really want to look for it. But what’s perhaps more central is the tribute paid to Greaves and the surpassing of that same debt. Greaves is the anarchitectural guru who taught Torres the avoidance of right angles and the defiance of gravity, which this work dishes out like a coiled energy burst. *Ce qui nous entoure* evokes the oscillations of a wave as it roils about and washes through space-time coordinates. The work is, by all definitions, a sculpture, but it is also an aggressive gesture that unfolds, and, in one manner of speaking, eviscerates the white cube from within. It propels itself beyond the category of sculpture and acts across the lines of genre: not solely assemblage or installation or mimetic form, but a stirring repudiation of static, architectural space.

I find the installation exuberant and a touch remorseless, perhaps because its marine theme acts like a rip-tide on my own memories of homelands lost and found. I remember arriving in Canada in November 1968, landing at Halifax’s famous Pier 21 with my brother and parents. We were still technically boat people, a small company of immigrants fresh from an ocean voyage. Our ship was the SS Cristoforo Colombo, a Genoese-made liner that was then past its midlife, but took us safely over from Venice. Up until my later thirties, when I was finally, and near-completely, Canadianized, a core level of my being still yearned for *un retour au pays natal*. The memory raptures for her wartime Malta, which Vera Brittain describes at the beginning of the “Tawny Island” chapter in *Testament of Youth*, were mine, but their locale was in another part of the Mediterranean, more to the north but within range of the same climatology.

I still dream of the fig trees and pine-scented cemeteries that shelter under the Dinaric terraces of Croatia’s coastline. But whenever the dream strikes, whenever the relics that crowd my psyche spark up with yearning and regret, it’s not that hard to go online and book a flight. In cultural terms, I used to see myself as a migratory castaway, but that’s all frayed away by now. Ancestral memories no longer have the capacity to ferment. They’re simply atrophying, fading out undramatically as time passes and technology collapses distances. By heading back we never really revisit the magic dimension of our origins. If there’s a God and/or such a thing as retroactive causation, perhaps the posthumous life promises such eternal returns. As it is, though, we find ourselves on a series of stairs for which we do not know the extremes.

Lorenzo Buj practices peripatetic scholarship across multiple locations in southwestern Ontario. He is affiliated with the University of Western Ontario and the University of Windsor, and teaches courses in art criticism and art history, as well literature and linguistics.



Borders

Notes

1. Examples can also be found in northern regions; see St. Thomas Anglican Church, a nineteenth-century structure located in Shanty Bay, Ontario, on the eastern outskirts of Barrie.

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Temps et boue (Time and mud)

José Luis Torres: Autoconstrucciones

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Cover: *Autoconstrucciones*

List of Works

Autoconstrucciones

wood

Thames Art Gallery, Chatham, Ontario, 2012

Ce qui nous entoure (Que nos rodea / What Surrounds Us)

wood, plastic, glass

ARTsPLACE Artist-run centre, Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia, 2012

Fronteras

reclaimed wood, cardboard, plastic, glass

WKP Kennedy Art Gallery, North Bay, Ontario, 2011

Borders

reclaimed wood, cardboard, plastic, glass

Artcite Inc., Windsor, Ontario, 2011

Nomadic Landscape

reclaimed wood, cardboard, plastic, glass

Gallery Connexion in Fredericton, New Brunswick, 2010

Continente

wood, earth/cob, video

MAI Gallery, Montréal, Québec, 2009

Temps et boue (Time and mud)

wood, earth/cob

Artist-run centre Est-Nord-Est, Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, Québec, 2004



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