



STUDIES OF THE AMERICAS

# APPROPRIATION AS PRACTICE

Art and Identity in Argentina

Arnd Schneider





Research for the Websites and their creation was supported by the *Consejo Federal de Inversiones* (CFI), a federal agency which promotes investment in the provinces. The projects by Ximena and her business partner Germán Trench aimed to promote, as they put it, "our autochthonous heritage" (*lo nuestro, lo autóctono*) by sponsoring local artists and artisans, and documenting their work on Websites and making them available to the public. However, their work does not just consist in transferring images of indigenous art and crafts to the Web, but also making computer technology available in the provinces, helping local museums, and organizing art and crafts fairs.

Ximena Eliçabe commented on how she saw the use of multimedia complementing and enhancing artistic practices and the diffusion of knowledge:

This is why I found it interesting to work with multi-media, including CD Rom, because you can present your work in intuitive ways, and people can search for it in aleatory ways, not just with one way of thinking and a lineal version, but in an intuitive fashion it allows them to access different levels of information according to their interest. It also meant to take advantage of the fascination the new technologies produce.

Ximena's art is informed by global locations, experiences and practices. She is based in Argentina and has travelled to Cuba to participate in a workshop with a Bolivian woman (who lives in Switzerland) to learn a technique by Amazonian Indians to dye feathers. She has travelled with her sister, a photographer who lives in Barcelona, to Chiapas and stayed with EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) rebels and Maya groups and investigated textiles as symbols of rebellion. She also studied with artists and theoreticians of indigenous cultures and their influence in the arts, such as Alfredo Portillos, and with César Sonderegger. Thus she embodies the example of a "global" artist, working from her base in Argentina, cooperating with local artists and theoreticians, adopting a variety of technologies of appropriation (travel, collecting, performance, the Internet), engaging in multisited work, and disseminating local work on a global scale.

Her example is also indicative of a new, younger generation of artists whose political views and actions appear to become more arbitrary and change rapidly with specific projects and circumstances. In addition, political ideologies of class and armed struggle that would have characterized the 1970s are dissolved and substituted with ethnic and identity discourses.

### The Transubstantiation of the Indigenous

With the following example I would like to show that an interest in indigenous topics can be pursued in media radically different to those presumed to be "traditional" artistic ones, and is not tied to direct references and one-to-one transferrals of indigenous symbols, and their material representation in conventional media.

Anahí Cáceres has been one of the principal promoters of digital and web art since these new technologies were introduced on a large scale to



Argentina in the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> In 1998, she founded [www.arteuna.com](http://www.arteuna.com), the first Argentine Website dedicated to art, reviews, literature, and avantgarde music. Run only by herself and a partner who looks after the technical side, it was initially completely self-financed and by 2000 had about 16,500 visitors. More recently, the Website has been sponsored by the Buenos Aires city government. Cáceres also directs the laboratory for digital art at the art school Ernesto de la Cárcova. Her background is in fine arts, but she left painting and other "material" techniques almost entirely in 1995. However, the art she produces on the computer can also acquire a physical presence, for example, by being printed on silk screens.<sup>10</sup>

Anahí Cáceres had already an established track record of working with indigenous cultures. Many of her artworks of the 1980s and early 1990s were inspired by Mapuche culture, and she had done research on some aspects of Mapuche ritual. Till 1994, Cáceres used performance, installation, and sculpture to appropriate elements from Mapuche culture, the Araucanian Indians living in Patagonia and Southern Chile. In her youth, Cáceres lived in Chile, and again settled in Temuco, Southern Chile for four years, from 1986 to 1990. With her work, especially in the areas of performance and installation, she intended to throw new light on the ritualistic connotation of art amongst the Mapuche, and rediscover these for contemporary art. In her published investigations into the ceremonial and *mise-en-scène* character of Mapuche ritual, such as the *Nguillatín*,<sup>11</sup> she sets out her approach, with an innovative usage of the terms "ceremonial art" and "installation" (Cáceres 1992). On the one hand, she transposes the term "installation" from contemporary art to speak about the shamanic performances of the *machi* (shaman) amongst the Mapuche, and the construction of a *rewe* (a kind of altar, or ritual post<sup>12</sup>) as a ceremonial space, and on the other hand, she applies "ceremonial art" to characterize her own artworks, for example, in the 1992 series "Kiñekura—Primera Piedra."<sup>13</sup>

In our conversations (Cáceres 1993, 2000), Anahí Cáceres emphasized that she understood her installations as private ritual that leaves the realm of the everyday, and investigates the meaning of objects and their positioning in space. According to Cáceres, the installation is therefore related to and yet different from tribal rituals (such as those practised by the Mapuche), which involve the whole of the community. Since 1994 Cáceres has turned entirely to digital art and in our interview in 2000 she explained the reasons:

I see digital art related to engraving, not in terms of the technique or the range of engraving, but in offering possibilities of massive dissemination. More than anything else, I am interested to work with the internet, because it allows you to print artworks with a plotter, make CDs, or show them as videos or in an installation. But the internet for me is comparable to the move from an elitist art to a democratic art after the invention of the printing press.

...

There is still a lot of resistance among artists against digital art. A bit of prejudice, also. Without the smell of turpentine, without the physical contact with the material, without making yourself dirty, it's not art! I don't agree. Because



I got myself dirty for 25 years; making engravings, I breathed in acids, and washed off oil paint from my hands, and I can tell you, it's a mess to wash off engraving ink! I know all that. I don't shun it for the digital, it's rather that after having practised all those techniques for many years they facilitate things—even in digital art.

...

It was an abrupt change. [In 1994] I stopped exhibiting, and started studying software programmes. I had never touched a keyboard before. I studied by myself, and didn't produce work to exhibit for two years. But I was still around, producing images with the computer.

...

*A.S. When I first met you in 1993, you made little paper sculptures inspired by Mapuche culture.*

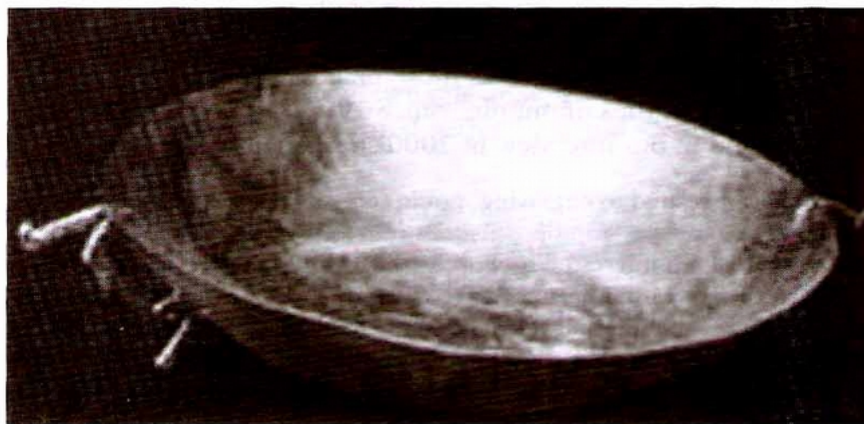
Anahí Cáceres: Yes, for *you* my move to digital art must appear as a big change. Many people told me that. However, other people I socialised with during these two years, who saw me continuously, realised that there was the *same theoretical thread* running through my work.

...

The theoretical part stayed the same. What changes is the technique to realise a material or an immaterial object. I have texts I wrote on indigenous cultures which speak of the *immateriality of the object*. When I didn't have the computer yet, I tried to reach a synthesis. I was very interested in the use of hand-made paper, wooden branches, and wire. I wanted to see the "digital" structure of the material, not the narrative of fabrication, but the pure language of the material (. . .) the silence of the paper, the silence of the wooden branches, the silence of immateriality [figures 71–74].

...

I have Mapuche roots on my father's side, and he researched our family's history in Chile. So, maybe there is an "oedipal" reason for my interest in indigenous cultures, but then it became generalised, detached from my person. It became more universal, detached from specific symbols and signs.



**Figure 71** Anahí Cáceres photo of *Yiwe* Malleco, Chile, which was reproduced by Anahí Cáceres for the project YIWE-YIWEb during the residency at Franklin Furnace/Parson Design Center, Performance DCTV, New York, 2001. Courtesy of the artist.





Figure 72 Anahí Cáceres, *Ngillatun*, 1992. Courtesy of the artist.



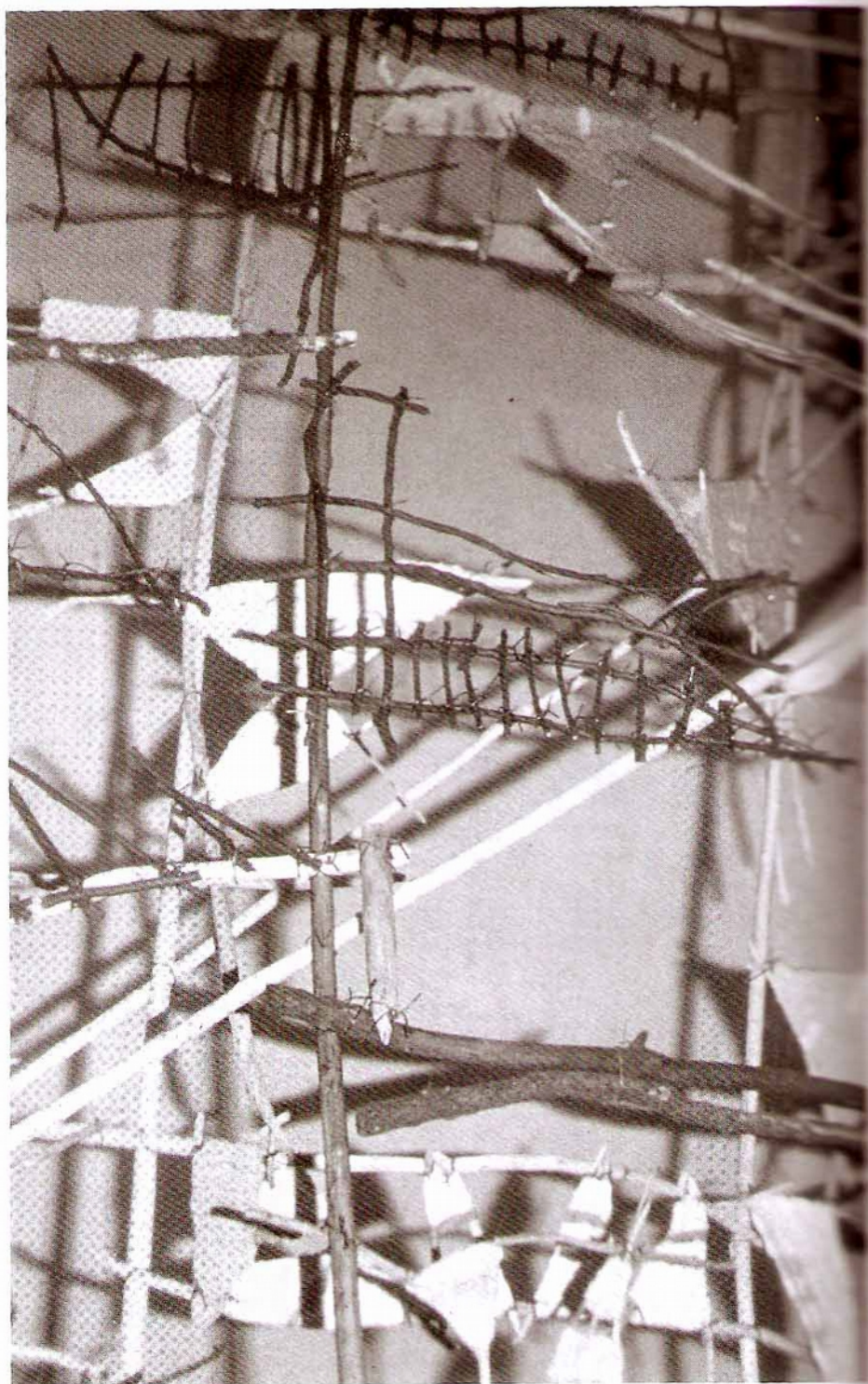


Figure 73 Anahí Cáceres *El gran quipu*, 1992. Courtesy of the artist.



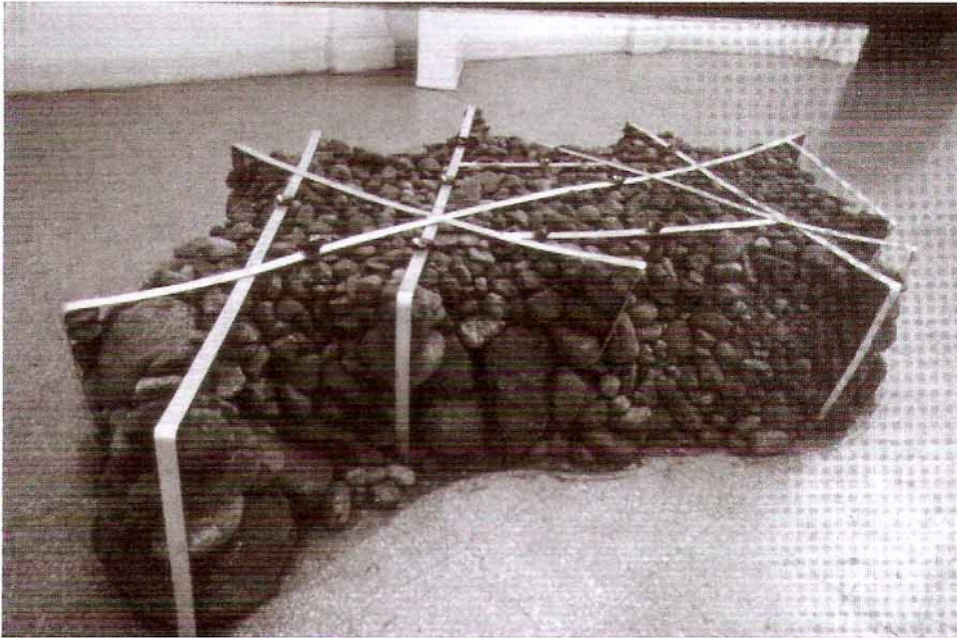


Figure 74 Anahí Cáceres *Primera Piedra (Energía)*, 1992. Courtesy of the artist.

More recently, Cáceres carried out a virtual performance at the Parson Design Center in New York, where she handled a Mapuche ritual cup, *Yiwe*, with remote sensors (see <http://www.arteuna.com/talleres/Caceres/proyecto2001.htm>, and figure 71).

To sum up, Anahí Cáceres' work shows powerfully how artists can abstract from a direct transferral of symbols from indigenous cultures, to arrive through digital art, at a work of synthesis. Even in digital art she finds an original inspiration with her work on indigenous cultures, and her theoretical concerns with the "immateriality" (or spirituality) of the object—though still rooted in the material representation and reproduction of work (via silk screens and other means).<sup>14</sup>

### Against Amnesia

My final example in this section is Mónica Girón, who was raised in Patagonia of Swiss parentage and is represented by Buenos Aires' leading gallery, Ruth Benzacar Gallery. She studied in Switzerland, and exhibits internationally, in the United States, Europe and Argentina. In her series *Ajuar para un conquistador* (Trousseau for a conquistador) (figure 75), Girón made knitted versions of a large number of objects from Patagonia, both of the animate and inanimate environment. Her work criticizes the land-taking process in the Argentine South, following the Campaign of the Desert in the late 1870s. The subsequent transformation of Patagonia (especially in the Andean areas) into a tourist idyll, was accompanied by the complete suppression of indigenous people and, having forced them into reservations, the



"A superb ethnography of Argentine artists who feel as much alienated from their European roots as disenchanted by the Western cultural project, and are refashioning a new Argentine identity through the aesthetic appropriation of contemporary and pre-Columbian indigenous cultural expressions."

—ANTONIUS C. G. M. ROBBEN, Utrecht University, Netherlands

"Arnd Schneider's methodologically innovative study, *Appropriation as Practice*, makes a key contribution to the exciting reconfiguration of the anthropology of art that is underway at present. This is the most sustained ethnographic analysis of contemporary art yet undertaken by an anthropologist, and its nuanced accounts of identity and appropriation are important beyond the Argentinean case that is focused on here."

—NICHOLAS THOMAS, Professor of Anthropology, Goldsmiths College

"Arnd Schneider changes the way we think about national identity construction by analyzing the spaces that link the indigenous and European imaginaries in Buenos Aires. Using an approach that combines ethnography, archeology, and art history, *Appropriation as Practice* looks at artists rather than the objects that they produce. In doing so, Schneider touches on topics like globalization, ethnicity, and anthropological research techniques. In the end Schneider's book goes well beyond the questions of artistic production and identity construction by proposing new theories and methods for analyzing 'otherness.' It is this range that makes *Appropriation as Practice* required reading in numerous fields including Latin American Studies, Anthropology, Cultural Studies, and Ethnic Studies."

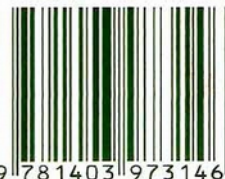
—JEFFREY LESSER, Winship Distinguished Research Professor of  
the Humanities, Emory University

Jacket photo by Arnd Schneider

palgrave  
macmillan

ISBN-13: 978-1-4039-7314-6

ISBN 1-4039-7314-6



9 781403 973146

www.palgrave.com

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA