

**Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative
(De)Coupling as Discourse on the Global South
Friday, September 23, 2016, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum**

Ethnographic Turns, featuring presentations by
Guggenheim UBS MAP artists, **Ergin Çavuşoğlu** and **Javier Téllez**,
followed by a conversation moderated by **Pablo León de la Barra**,
Guggenheim UBS MAP Curator, Latin America

PABLO LEÓN DE LA BARRA

Hi everyone, thank you for continuing being with us. I am Pablo León de la Barra, and I am still the Guggenheim UBS MAP Latin American curator. The next session is artist-centered, so it's really about talking with the artists and seeing a bit of their work, and, through Sara Raza's invitation, rethinking what ethnography in relationship to the arts means today. We're going to have two speakers. Ergin Çavuşoğlu, which I hope I pronounced well, and Javier Téllez. Each one will speak and present their work for between ten and fifteen minutes. Ergin's biography, you have it on the paper, but I'll just give it a quick read. He's an artist who works in installation, painting, photography, sculpture, and video. He has had solo exhibitions at the Jon Hansard Gallery in Southampton, England; Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland; Kunstverein Freiburg, Germany; Ludwig Forum, Aachen Germany; PEER, London; and YARAT Contemporary Art Center, Baku, Azerbaijan. He has been included in numerous group exhibitions, and represented Turkey at the Venice Biennale in 2003. He was shortlisted for the Beck's Futures Prize in 2004, and in 2010 for Artes Mundi 4, one of the UK's largest art prizes. Çavuşoğlu lives and works in London, where he's currently professor of contemporary art at Middlesex University. Ergin, we're happy to have you here, and we welcome you to the podium.

ERGIN ÇAVUŞOĞLU

Thank you all for coming. Thank you Pablo for the introduction. Thank you Sara and the Guggenheim for this wonderful opportunity. So, central to my artworks are concepts that frequently explore ideas of place, space, liminality, and mobility, and the conditions of cultural production, which I've been examining in classical, modern, and contemporary guises through painting, drawing, video and sound installations, and sculpture. In this short presentation, I will introduce the contextual framework of my practice, and its broader capacity to examine socio-cultural terrains and human geographies. My works frequently engage with the in-between spaces of urban environments—airports, waterways, marketplaces, historical sites, and national borders. These are also places of mobility where ships, currencies, people, and time pass in disengagement with their geographical coordinates. Many of my early video pieces were filmed at night, when spaces become liminal and are redefined, creating a sense of demarcation.

Under the current tendencies of cultural institutions to declassify, depolarize, and furthermore to globalize artistic production, the artist as an ethnographer—which is the theme of this particular discussion here today—is a fitting position to be as someone observing and collecting data and artifacts from the surrounding human and geographical landscape. This is the instinctual response of the artist, with the aim of utilizing what is at hand, visible and tangible, and with an utmost urgency as if we're reliving Hugo Ball's Dadaist “perpetual state of rebellion and

emergency.” Artists nowadays inform their practices from a succession of sources that reflect reality in a kind of reciprocal awareness, but not necessarily always based on truth and continuum. The distinctive qualities and skills mastered by an ethnographer are not essentially at play in the artist’s sphere of interest. The claims of ethnography are that a study is defined by its functional, empirical, and impartial way of observing reality, and recording it. Hence, while examining culture and encountering objects of interest, the ethnographer analyzes their codes of signification and sometimes records their aesthetic values without bias, whereas objects of art are instilled with alternative subtexts and associations. In the context of art, found and appropriated materials often become as prescribed by Walter Benjamin, “outmoded”—out of place, and out of time. This detachment from reality relates to Surrealism, and its ability to “stimulate change,” not through theorization, but “experimentations,” as noted by Benjamin in his essay, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” from 1929. His enamored curiosity about the world, like an artist, allowed him to cross this threshold of “knowing” and provide more abstracted observations for mental and physical journeying, becoming what the anthropologist Michael Taussig calls a “master of non-mastery.” Taussig commented recently that “ethnography is fieldwork, and can’t be taught.” “How one does connect knowing with the unknowing?” he asks. I would like to think that “ethnographic turns” in art are methods for disentanglement from previous modes of artistic production. Someone who understood clearly the relationship between art, surrealism, and ethnography is anthropologist James Clifford. I’m just going to quote something very briefly here, where he talks about how modern surrealism and ethnography began with reality in question—deeply in question: “The surrealists were intensely interested in exotic worlds... Their attitude, while comparable to that of the fieldworker, who strives to render the unfamiliar comprehensible, tended to work in the reverse sense, making the unfamiliar strange. The contrast is in fact generated by a continuous play of the familiar and the strange, of which ethnography and surrealism are two elements.” Following Duchamp, Conceptual art in the 1960s also began with reality in question, and shifted the focus from the visual and the material to the idea and the thinking processes, which in turn provided the premise for the rise of the ethnographically-driven practices of the 1980s and 1990s in the West, and later in what we termed here the Global South, or the Southern hemisphere.

Over the past two decades, there have been some major changes in the ways contemporary art is produced and disseminated on the global stage. Examining the properties of contemporary art, Hal Foster, in his last book, said that “it is too early to historicize this art, but perhaps not too early to theorize it.” And this is a quotation from the Foster’s *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*: “Broadly speaking, what we are witnessing nowadays is the kind of arbitration between making and thinking. The thinking, in this respect, is a specialized act, something like knowledge visualization.” Here I am very much in accord with Deleuze’s views, expressed in an interview from 1987, that, quote, “to have an idea is not a general thing... Sometimes an idea in painting, in a novel, in philosophy are evidently not the same thing.” Furthermore, “ideas should be treated as types of potentials that are already engaged in one or another mode of expression, and are inseparable from that mode of expression.” However, of course it also correct to say—I’m quoting here from Clifford—in cultural life, no field of social or artistic research can long remain indifferent to influences or provocations from beyond its disciplinary boundaries.” Of course, he made this comment in relation to Surrealism. He was looking at the period between the two wars, so I’m recontextualizing that talk, and relating it to art practices nowadays.

Relating to these ideas of entwining the disciplines of human and social sciences, literature, and art, I would like to introduce briefly my most recent project, which evolved over a prolonged period of time, and took several years to produce. It is a single-channel video installation titled *Desire Lines: /Tarot & Chess/*, from 2016, with accompanying paintings and reliefs that were developed alongside the film, and used as props during the production. I would also like to mention here about the more specific relation between my practice and literature. I frequently work with non-fiction and fiction texts in the development of my projects in various forms and contexts. Sometimes, I produce cinematographic and theatrical adaptations from these writings, and often texts institute concepts, or these ideas are seated within the main body of the script, and act as forms of conceptual clarifications. The Russian film director Andrei Tarkovsky, in his book *Sculpting in Time*, said “the scenario dies in the film. Cinema may take dialogue from literature, but that is all—it bears no essential relation to literature whatsoever.” Similarly, the patterns of literary references in my works no longer function as storytelling devices, but allude to the deconstruction of the narrative element of an image or object, and comment on contemporary art at large.

I'll just introduce the project very quickly, for a couple of minutes, and then I will show you a selection of slides from the actual video piece. *Desire Lines /Tarot & Chess/* reveals the universal patterns of human behavior and their relationship to past, present, and future, observed through the prism of literary expressions articulated by Italo Calvino in his book *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* from 1973. Calvino's book portrays an encounter of travelers who tell their adventures using tarot cards instead of words. The interpretations of the cards in the book allude to classic tales such as Faust, Oedipus, and Shakespearian narratives such as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*. In Calvino's book, “through the sequence of pictures, stories are told, which the written word tries to reconstruct and interpret. In *Desire Lines /Tarot & Chess/*, the stories are told by a sequencing of images and fragmented speech. The characters, after losing their way in a forest, and their ability to speak, all arrive at a castle. The Castle-Keeper is the only person who can vocalize their stories. Each guest uncannily resembles a character in the classic Marseille tarot set of cards. The sequence of the cards placed in one row composes one story, and laying over them another set, vertically or diagonally, constructs another one.

The first story presents the tale of the Knight, who sets off for a shady meeting in the forest. He's ambushed and hanged by his feet. A passing stranger, the Water-Bearing Maiden, saves him. He makes love to her, but the ungrateful knight hastily leaves the maiden and rushes off in the pursuit of lost fortune. Instead, he loses himself in the forest, before finally arriving at the castle. The second story is that of the alchemist. One day he's visited by the Devil, who offers him the secret he has been longing for. Guards block entrance to the city of gold. The maiden and her six-year-old son from the fleeting encounter with the knight in the forest challenge the guards to enter the city. At the knight's wedding reception, the boy appears carrying a sword. A struggle ensues, that will leave the knight bleeding and possibly dead. The boy makes his way, and he soon enters the castle speechless, disoriented, searching to understand his own destiny, as so many others have done before him. The mixture and contrast between history and contemporaneity in the storyline and the characters lend themselves to simultaneously present the narrative in a kind of linear fashion, as well in a more abrupt way, thus interpreting scenes that happen across time and place in an absurd harmony. This is highlighted further by the universality of the themes explored in the film. I'd like to show you a very short excerpt that will

try to visualize what I just said. Unfortunately, we don't have time to show you the whole film, but maybe on another occasion.

[screening of excerpt from *Desire Lines /Tarot & Chess/*]

PABLO LEÓN DE LA BARRA

Thank you, Ergin. Our next half of the couple of the afternoon is artist Javier Téllez. Javier uses film, video, and installation to question definitions of normality and pathology. He has participated in numerous group exhibitions around the world, and has had solo exhibitions at the Power Plant in Toronto, Museu Calouste Gulbenkian in Lisbon, Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, S.M.A.K. in Gent, San Francisco Art Institute, and Kunsthaus, Zurich. He also participated in the PS1 International Studio Program in '93, and the Whitney Independent Studio Program in '97. In 1999, he received a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship. Javier Téllez lives and works in New York.

JAVIER TÉLLEZ

Thanks Pablo for the invitation. Thanks Sara, thanks Christina and the Guggenheim staff. When I received the invitation to be part of this panel, called "Ethnographic Turns," I thought, what could be better than to show you a film I made with the Raramuri people, which uses an LP as a leitmotif? The film is *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* and it's my latest work. I will show excerpts of the film and read a text I wrote, but before I have to warn you that since the film is based on Artaud, and he once said all writing is pig shit, you should not take the text I will read too seriously, and concentrate instead on the moving image.

To Have Done with the Judgment of God (2016) is the second part of a trilogy of film installations I made focusing on Artaud's visit to Mexico in 1936. The first installation, titled *The Conquest of Mexico*, was exhibited at Documenta 13 in Kassel, in 2012. It was inspired by Artaud's notes for a play of the same title that he proposed in the Theatre of Cruelty, prior to his travel to Mexico. Almost eighty years after Artaud's initial journey, we followed his route, and filmed two of the rituals described in his book, the ritual of the Tutuguri, and the ritual of the peyote (Jikuri). *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* takes its title from the radio play that Artaud made in 1947 for the Radiodiffusion Française, a piece censored at the time, due to its contents, which were deemed obscene by the Radiodiffusion director. The original text includes many references to the Rarámuri people and their rituals, the most important being a poem inspired by the ritual of Tutuguri. Antonin Artaud, like Andre Breton, Malcolm Lowry, D.H. Lawrence, Sergei Eisenstein, and other artists and writers who traveled to Mexico in the first half of the twentieth century, visited the country in search of otherness through indigenous culture. Artaud's main objective was to find a sacred culture, rich in ritual and myth, which might offer an answer to the crisis of European consciousness. This quest for a direct experience of the sacred links him to an imperative that he shared with his peers in the European avant-garde, that which James Clifford has called a "post-symbolist poetics of displacement."

These new forms of primitivism clearly opposed the exoticism of the nineteenth century, and proposed an aesthetic of difference that often includes anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist stances in their discourse. This approach opened a critical space that predates a transformation with ethnographic practice which emerged much later with Michel Leiris and the college of

sociology, and Jean Rouch's film practice. In *To Have Done with the Judgment of God I* commissioned a Rarámuri-language version of Artaud's entire radio play, and collaborated with a local radio station to broadcast it across the Sierra Tarahumara, in the state of Chihuahua in north Mexico. The film documents the reception to the broadcast, and captures glimpses of the everyday life of the Rarámuri people. Segments of footage depict the rocky landscape of the Sierra Tarahumara, which Artaud described in great detail in his text *The Mountain of Signs*. Throughout the film, images of this fantastic, or hallucinatory landscape are accompanied by a soundtrack composed of Artaud's glossolalic texts, and noises extracted from the original radio play, recorded in the LP that I mentioned at the beginning. *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* raises questions of our identity, language, otherness, and altered states of consciousness. I will show you next the two clips from our film. The first clip will document the transmission of the radio play and the second clip will illustrate two very important rituals of the Rarámuri cosmogony. The first ritual is the Tutuguri, which is the ritual of sacrifice, or potlatch, which is done for the benefit of the family and the community; the second is the rite of peyote, which has rarely been filmed before.

[screening of excerpts from *To Have Done with the Judgment of God*]

PABLO LEÓN DE LA BARRA

I think it's really interesting to see these two different bodies of work that share an interest in really questioning what the ethnographic turn could mean today. And in moving forward from the critique that Hal Foster made twenty years ago, of artists using ethnography as a way of working or not working with the other. So maybe the question should, for both of you, be what do you think has changed in artists using ethnography in their practice today? And what would be the ethics today of someone incorporating it into his or her own work, like both of you are doing in different ways?

ERGIN ÇAVUŞOĞLU

From my point of view, the ethnographic turn hasn't changed. It is an approach, it is a method of thinking and working with the other, or with the surrounding human and geopolitical landscapes. But what has changed is the way that, in the context of this particular exhibition and the MAP project, we can see that it's a little bit more evident in art from peripheries, and it could be categorized as having some kind of influence and position itself within the ethnographic turn. There have been many other turns happening, a lot of them to do with indigenous art, and what I have termed the *indigenaity turn*. But these are institutional concepts, and I don't think they should necessarily affect the way artists think about approaching these particular subjects.

JAVIER TÉLLEZ

Perhaps Hal Foster text has been slightly overrated. I don't think Foster's text offers anything beyond what James Clifford did in *The Predicament of Culture*, beyond applying it to a very local scene, which is in New York a scene associated with the *October* journal. I remember now this poignant piece that David Hammons made some years ago, when he stamped an issue of *Artforum* with the text "TRIBAL ART." So in the same manner we should try to reverse ethnography, and apply it to the intelligentsia of the New York academy. We should then start to study this tribe in detail—their particular jargon, their rituals and the kinds of habitats they inhabit. For me, what is really important is to understand a notion of the exchange of

subjectivities, which is often excluded from this discussion of ethnography. This exchange made possible, for instance, the amazing body of work of filmmaker Jean Rouch, which has been very influential for me. We should contest the idea that you have a meaningful exchange with the other, beyond dynamics of power, which anyhow are not as fixed as we think they are. In my case, during the process of making *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* we were part of the ritual of the peyote, and that immediately changed our position as pure outsiders. It's not that we became the other under the effects, but we were no longer what we were before. We were not in Kansas anymore, as Dorothy says in *The Wizard of Oz*.

ERGIN ÇAVUŞOĞLU

Yeah, but it's very important, as I mentioned earlier, to talk about where these ideas are situated and whether they derive from ethnography or other humanities or social sciences. As long as they somehow belong to the institution of art, then that it is fine. Hal Foster's critique is more about pseudo-ethnographic approaches on both sides, about artists behaving as ethnographers, and ethnographers behaving as artists. From that point of view, I think his critique is still very much valid. What has changed is the breadth of practice, and I think we can elaborate on this in many terms. Multiculturalism, institutionalization, globalization, and so on, are all part of the same thing. It's about permutation. What permeates a particular context or idea into the domain of art?

JAVIER TÉLLEZ

Foster's is of course a highly Eurocentric model. I mean, if you see his texts "The artist as an Ethnographer" and "The Return of the Real," you will see that many of the artists he focuses on are white Americans, with few exceptions. I would be more interested in reviewing artistic practices that were produced within the periphery like Juan Downey's, for instance, or Hélio Oiticica's encounters with the favela. What would this bring to the discussion of art and ethnography at the centers? Or better: Why was this excluded from the discussion at the centers? I think it is very important to think about this.

PABLO LEÓN DE LA BARRA

I guess there's something that this work of yours brings into the discussion. It's a film that I co-commissioned together with Javier's gallery, Clinton & Koenig, that was shown here in New York in your exhibition, but also in the SITE Santa Fe Biennial in New Mexico. New Mexico is a highly contested territory in that it was and still is an indigenous territory. It's a place where many of the native indigenous cultures are very protective about their own rituals and objects. In many cases, they have legally gone to the limit of not showing objects, or not allowing objects to be shown in museums, to not allow rituals to be filmed, or even reclaiming the rights to those images. One of the cases was Aby Warburg's trip, in the late 1890s, to Hopi Territory in New Mexico. He describes some of the rituals he witnessed, and this is still something highly contested today, in that particular territory. On the other hand, Javier goes south of this border that exists now, which separates these different indigenous groups and the Rarámuri. He used Artaud as a way of getting in, and gaining access to these different rituals, and used peyote as a way of not being an outsider, of entering this in-between territory. All these questions of otherness come back to the very basis of the MAP project, according to which we as curators were originally asked to present that other culture, or our cultures, to New York audiences. But new questions arise from practices and projects like these, which continue to question this in-

between space, or this space where other possibilities or other kinds of change are still allowed. I don't know if you have anything else to say, or if somebody from the audience has a question or a comment?

QUESTION

Hi. Thank you for the presentation. My name is Fan. I am a PhD student in Spanish and Portuguese at NYU. I'm interested in the Global South and multiculturalism because I compare and research the intersections of Asia and Latin America. One thing I'm curious about is the name, "the Global South." I wanted to hear both sections, the previous section on multiculturalism, and then the one on ethnography, before asking this, but I think in my experience, the Global South evokes for me an attempt to bring in more voices from regions or traditions with less representation. But then the ironic thing is, in "Global South," the term "south" is opposed to a "north." I think what's interesting about art and art film in museums is that the space isn't necessarily limited to a text. There are non-verbal ways to express the ideas, which maybe opens up more of a space to get away from. How do we talk about places and traditions without as much representation without always having to refer back to a framework of the South as opposed to the North, or the East as opposed to the West? Is that something that was part of the discussion when you were creating this program, and the name of this program, and what are your thoughts on how the museum, especially the "mapping" project, addresses that?

PABLO LEÓN DE LA BARRA

We discussed a bit of that yesterday, I don't know if you were here. Sara Raza naming the symposium "(De)Coupling" has to do with trying to avoid these kind of North/South/East/West antagonisms, and trying to find these other spaces of action. These other territories that open beyond borders, specifically in the times we're living through now, become much more important. There is, as we discussed yesterday, a need to rethink what "Global South" meant, and what it means today, as it is being reused. I think we're in a post-Global South moment. At the time it was used as a way for non-aligned countries to develop frameworks of exchange, be they commercial, technological, or cultural. There were also different historical exhibitions, from the Havana Biennial to different pan-American, pan-African, and pan-Middle-Eastern exchanges and connections. But it becomes necessary to re-review this, and I think both of the topics that Sara brought up, and which maybe she'll want to talk more about at the symposium today, are rethinking what multiculturalism means, and asking what speaking of the other and being the other mean. This will really help expand these territories, or help create what I call in-between spaces, where hopefully we can find more ways of negotiating and creating other spaces of action. I don't know if you guys want to say something else? Thank you everyone, thank you Javier, Ergin. Thank you everyone for your patience.