

DIGITAL LATIN AMERICA

516 ARTS

516 CENTRAL AVENUE SW, ALBUQUERQUE

DIGITAL LATIN AMERICA IS AN EXHIBITION WHOSE FOUNDATIONS REST ON

technological and intercultural hybridity and the meshing of languages—both spoken and digitally coded. In this show, not only do you find an esoteric investigation into the lost languages of the Quipu tribe of South America, there is also the *lingua franca* of smartphones' interactive media, straightforward digital video, and other forms of coded electronica—that vast cascade of zeros and ones to which we are all tethered, willingly or not. All the work in *Digital Latin America* is political in nature, either directly or obliquely, and the underlying political thrusts have a broad range, emphasizing many of the cultural, geographic, economic, or social conditions to which we all are linked, no matter what part of the Americas we're from. The issues raised in this exhibition are now part of our collective identity in a wired world, even if we don't all possess the same kind of cell phone. And apropos of that, because I don't have a smartphone I missed out on some pertinent experiences, especially in William Wilson's installation of photographs *Talking Tintypes*.

Wilson's four large tintypes are lush with rich tonalities. They also exude a certain level of irony from the combination of an old-fashioned form of photography with contemporary digital processes that allow Wilson's images to literally "speak"—the photographs have an audio component that can be activated with a smartphone. Wilson photographed singer and songwriter Nacha Mendez; choreographer Rulan Tangen; the poet Demetria Martinez; and violinist Carla Kountoupes. However, as beautiful as these photographs are to look at, I missed out on an important aspect of the work—Wilson's attempts to showcase and preserve cultural stories from his select group of indigenous protagonists.

There was another set of native speakers who could be heard through ordinary headphones, however, in Amor Muñoz's piece *Maquila Región 4 (MR4)*. There are several parts to this work: a hand-built wooden cart that can be attached to and moved by a bicycle, two hand-embroidered

cloth diagrams of electrical circuits, matrix bar code insignia to be read by a smartphone, and a video that unfolds the parameters of this multilayered work—part performance piece, part documentation of work for pay, part informal dialogue with the workers involved. And then there is the matrix barcode that serves as a portrait of each person who worked on a piece of embroidery for money. Muñoz's business model was a mobile cart pedaled through neighborhoods as he searched for workers who would blend high-tech electronic circuits with artisanal handcraft. Using conductive threads, each worker engaged in a traditional craft that had the ability to convey information well beyond the realm of the purely visual. These schematic textiles were not meant to be decorative items but links to the global world of commerce and our ubiquitous interconnectivity. Besides being conceptually complex, *MR4* was a kind of celebration of human labor and individual identity in a world run amok with disembodied, meaningless chatter driven by endless streams of digital code.

The installation *Pica* focused on Paula Gaetano-Adi's attempts to learn English by literally eating her words. The artist used a Spanish-English dictionary and every day she cut out a word from the book, memorized it, slowly put it in her mouth, then chewed and swallowed it. Accompanying this piece is wall text stating: *Pica: a behavior beyond accepted cultural traditions, consisting of constant (for more than one month) ingestion of inedible substances, which are inappropriate for that developmental stage or age (American Psychiatric Association, 1994 DMS IV)*. The installation itself was simple: a video monitor showing the artist performing the eating of language, a dictionary on a shelf, and headphones. Gaetano-Adi's ritual ingestion of words brings the whole idea of *logos* into a

more corporeal realm. Here, the word is made flesh in a simple act of eating visual symbols that are abstract in their meaning yet become concrete in the deliberate process of their transubstantiation.

In this exhibition, with all its extremely clever, thoughtful, and complicated electronic underpinnings, it isn't hard to single out the most captivating piece of all—Javier Villegas's *Herbaceous*, an interactive video projection that reads the physical presence of a viewer standing in front of the screen and transforms that person into a leafy portrait—as if the viewer had been interpolated and then reconstituted into an aggregate of leaves still retaining an essential face and figure—enough to be recognized as that particular individual. The computer program for the interactivity assembled each portrait on the fly. It tracked your every move and turned arms into branches or legs into tree trunks and your face into a very intriguing arboreal mirror of yourself that hung suspended as part of a tree in an unchanging background image of a generic landscape. Villegas's brilliant algorithms—he's an engineer by trade—provided a playful and thoroughly enchanting interlude in a show marked by a variety of intense experiences that were definitely rewarding if not always easy to surrender to.

—DIANE ARMITAGE

Left: Paula Gaetano-Adi, *Pica*, video of performance, 2009

Below: Javier Villegas, *Herbaceous*, interactive video still, 2012

