

## El ombligo del mundo

The belly button (*ombligo* in Spanish) became for several ancient cultures a symbol of the axis that connects humans to the earth and to the sky, to the divine forces in nature, to life. Located in the middle of the body and being the connection to the mother, the belly button represents the (re)birth of humans, but also the center: the tendency to believe oneself to be the reference of the world.

The exhibition **el ombligo del mundo** borrows its title from this idea because it ventures into the realm of spirituality, taking as a starting point the ancestral relationship between spiritual practices and the earth (the soil). The objective of the exhibition is to offer a reading of the concept as the product of a complex net of histories, knowledges, ontologies, cosmopolitics, but also perceptions and subjectivities.

For centuries spirituality was associated to religion, but in the past decades a concept of it has developed outside of an explicit religious context, and is now concerned with a search for meaning, unity, connectedness and transcendence. Historically, this separation from religion has been traced back to Carl Jung, the first modern psychologist to acknowledge the spiritual side of human beings, associating its need to mental health. This emancipation from religion, however, is just a part of the bigger picture of Western History. The universality of truth that characterised the modern era, has been followed by the relativism of post-modernism, which in turn has paved the way for the development of individualised spiritualities.

Current spiritual practices often involve doing a collage of beliefs and rituals in which ethnic/indigenous practices are idealised, and in which the focus resides in the individual freedom, wellbeing and evolution of the person. This has been called “new-age or “modern shamanic spirituality”. However, even though the narratives of spiritualization of shamanism are presented as the expression of an alternative or decolonial thought, where spirituality would come to replace the materialism of a capitalist world, the principles of individual freedom, autonomy or personal progress, on which the positive valuation of this shamanism depends, are geared to the cultural logic of late capitalism. This is where the danger of idealising indigenous practices resides: not only does it open a door for appropriation and extractivism, but it hinders the actual possibility of learning from each other, of taking Indigenous thought as seriously as “our” science and gaining new perspectives on spiritualism and ecology.

If what we want is *a world where many worlds fit*, as the Zapatistas say, then making an attempt to embrace the complexity of indigenous thought is fundamental. The works of Maya Tz’utujil artists from Antonio Pichillá and Benvenuto Chavajay confront us with this challenge. **Antonio Pichillá**, who besides being an artist is an *ajq’ij* or spiritual guide in his community, performs in his video “Golpes y Sanación” (Blows and healing) a ceremony to call back the soul of a person who suffered a trauma. The ritual is usually carried out in the place where the traumatic event occurred, and as shown in the video, the *ajq’ij* hits the ground several times with a strap made exclusively for this purpose, as they speak to the energy of the affected person so that their soul might return to them. In their cosmovision, it is said that the soul was captured by the ancestors (the soil, the tree, the volcano...) and needs to be liberated so it returns to the body of the person.

In **Benvenuto Chavajay**'s picture, he presents himself as a man of corn (according to the Maya sacred book Popol Vuh, the divinities created humans from corn), displaying the “Menu of Corn” on the left side of his chest. He thinks of his skin as a sowing field, in which he tattooed all the words in Maya Tz’utujil that are associated with corn: from its colours and varieties, to the verbs that describe its planting and harvesting, as well as the dishes and ways of eating it. His artistic practice revolves around translating the silence of his ancestors into sensory experiences that convey the depth of his cultural heritage. He talks about embracing, from a place of tenderness, the (colonial) wound and the heritage.

The tattoo represents the sacrifice he makes to honour his ancestors. Resistance, for him, consists on “bringing his past to the future”.

The peyote ceramic sculptures made by **Extinto x Geoide**, represent another sacred plant and are present in the exhibition to remind us of the highly complex rituals associated to it by the Wixárika or Huichol communities in central Mexico. Peyote, a psychotropic, Mescaline containing cactus (*Lophophora williamsii*) has been overexploited due to its use as recreational drug (also very popular in new-age spiritualism), but Wixarika communities have also become the object of popularity among ecologists due to their romantic idea that these communities live in balance with nature. Trying to approach and actually learn from the complexity and the contradictions inherent to their cosmopolitics, might be of greater benefit to ecologists, as anthropologist Johannes Neurath explains in his text “Wixárika Polytheism as Ecology” as opposed to trying to “save them” along with nature.

A glimpse on the complexity and the “forgotten” side of indigenous spiritual practices is to be seen at **Felipe Castelblanco’s** video “Behind the Night” recorded in the Peruvian Amazon. Making visible what the forest hides, namely colours that cannot be perceived by our human eyes, the artist presents a world which is simultaneously magic and frightening, as is the spiritual world for the local communities. A forest where spirits take the form of plants and plants act like spirits, where sacred trees live, but also others that even when cut, cannot be possessed. Bypassing the simplicity of binaries, this nature is not good or evil, is everything at once and to relate to it, one must understand the environment differently.

The works by **Mazenett Quiroga** “Motherboard -Motherearth” and “Gente Serpiente” (Snake people) merge current technology with elements that reference pre-hispanic cultures: the snake as a sacred animal, handpainted in a bicycle tyre, and what seems to be a deity or mask made of computer motherboards. Their works investigate the interdependence of the so-called global North and South, by recalling the impact that colonial history has had on the environment. All at once they re-inscribe an indigenous imaginary in current technology and remind us of the all-permeating presence of technology in our lives. Seen from another perspective, “Motherboard -Motherearth” can also be read as “a reflection on ritual objects as technology”.

**Frédéric Bron and Judith Weidmann’s** work looks at the “space in between”, where a phenomenological approach to nature reveals the possible spiritual dimension of everyday rituals that bring humans close to nature. Located in the middle of the room, their work presents the audience with a series of interviews that resulted from the duo asking people to bring them to their favourite place in nature. By asking seemingly simple questions about their aesthetic experience when visiting their “nature spot” Bron and Weidmann manage to open a conversation that reaches a depth that goes far beyond a mere description of nature.

During the opening of the exhibition, we will share tamales prepared by artist **Paloma Ayala**, who as many other artists involved in this exhibition, have felt the urge to journey into their own ancestry, using their bodies to re-inscribe themselves back on the earth. Additional works for events as part of the program by Paula Baeza Pailamilla, Raquel Cecilia (Corazón Pictures) and Yana Lema Otavalo.

The logo and design of the space was made by Boca del Tigre (Perla Castañón) inspired in the temascal (a type of [sweat lodge](#), original from pre-hispanic Mexico. The word in Nahuatl means “house of heat”)

**el ombligo del mundo** is the third and last exhibition of the series “Earth is the heaviest element” which addresses the need to de-construct and re-construct our relationship to the earth, other humans and non-human entities. The exhibitions bring together the knowledge and practices of Latin American and Swiss artists and scientists, in order to suggest alternative ways of co-existing.

Curated by Adriana Domínguez.