

**PURIFICATION**  
Research & Exhibition

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## Introduction

In recent years I have been working on topics related to Post-colonialism in South America, as well as the conditions of immigrants in Europe. I was born in Argentina in 1977-middle of Dictatorship- and moved to Europe in 2009. The main interest of my work involves questions about my roots and personal stories of migration. This situation has been the engine of my art for the last ten years. Through my installations, I have tried to express or represent some certain facts, that have marked the post-colonial situation in Latin America and Europe over the last years.

The slavery and exploitation of illegal labor are common working conditions for many people in South America, especially for those located in the jungles and slums. The Indigenous culture -its languages, values and traditions- have begun to disappear and been displaced by Western culture. Here in Europe, on the other hand, I feel 'alien' to the territory of my ancestors, due to the fact that my family comes from European immigrants in Argentina. Illegal labor has been also a part of my life, having experienced the condition of 'otherness' in Europe. Therefore, this project reflects upon my personal experience in relation to the unfair conditions of labor in autochthonous communities, researching the concept of 'otherness' taken from Post-colonial theories. It is for this purpose, that my methodologies include self-reflection, parallelism and metaphor.

One of my purposes is to reveal those 'fake stories' used by the European acculturation in South America. I called these fake stories 'strategies', as they were used by the Colony for the reconstruction of a new National Identity in those countries. Therefore, convincing the Indigenous culture to adopt Western culture.

The parts of my essay are a metaphor of different stages of narcotic's production, best called 'mobile labs' of the Amazon jungle. I have taken this concept to tell my story and to build up the laboratory as final representation. The first stage of this process is to weigh and measure the ingredients, followed by a mixture of substances and chemicals. Once mixed, it proceeds to three stages of filtering and purification. Then, it is subjected to a press for semi-solid consistency and introduced into the oven to reach the compact state. The blocks will finally be packed with plastic film and adhesive tape, protecting them from adverse environmental conditions during transport and storage. Each chapter of this essay is also connected to the 'machines' constructed for my solo exhibition, following the same steps of **Purification**.

Through this essay, I wanted to broaden my concept relating three main aspects: the colonial strategies of domination in South America, my personal work experience in Europe, and finally the unfair working conditions in marginal societies. Each of the 'machines' constructed for my installation is functional, ready to be activated according to the different parts of the cooking process, and as a representation of a 'production line' in the system of labor. I also have chosen to wrap my body, as well as carefully chosen representative objects of the popular culture of South America, to finally pack them in cling film. As a result of this process of **Purification** I have produced the 'final products' ready to be consumed here, in the Western European countries.

## The Scale

The first step to cooking properly is to weigh an exact amount of ingredients and make sure the balance between them will result in perfection. The primary ingredients are normally provided by nature, the land. In South America, the land was considered the 'Mother' or 'Pacha-mama' by the Indigenous culture, but as property for the Western culture. The 'Motherland' was well respected by the autochthonous communities as they were cultivating and harvesting plants on a daily basis. The way original natives used to cultivate their land was always organic and without pesticides. Western societies later introduced Capitalism in the area, where imposing a new economic system, caused drastic changes. As Marx have put it, using the exploitation of workforce to produce in bigger scales.<sup>1</sup> So, the Latin American continent conveys two ingredients, the Western and the Indigenous culture, sharing the same space, the same 'Motherland'. This brings up my first question:

What could a balanced association between these two different cultures, look like?



Fig.1: The Scale, Purification Solo Exhibition, Rodrigo N Albornoz

By researching Post-colonial studies, my purpose was to investigate how the Indigenous communities managed to gradually express their 'otherness' or Alterity in front of Western European societies, and from the very moment of Colonization until today. The second point, and regarding to my personal situation, the way of expressing 'otherness' in front of Western culture has always been through my art, by getting rid of my frustrations and revealing them to the public through my art installations. Finally, my aim was to understand the concept of 'otherness', researching the current illegal conditions of labor in the coke's labs in South America. Therefore, I have chosen to focus on the illegal production of narcotics, as it is a great example of one of the main consequences of the colonial process of our time. Beyond the differences in class and social classification, people living in slums are working in these kind conditions: illegal housing, illegal healthcare, illegal working hours and without access to proper education. According to Post-colonial theories, this could be a clear and typical definition of 'the Other'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *The Capital*, 1867

<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978.

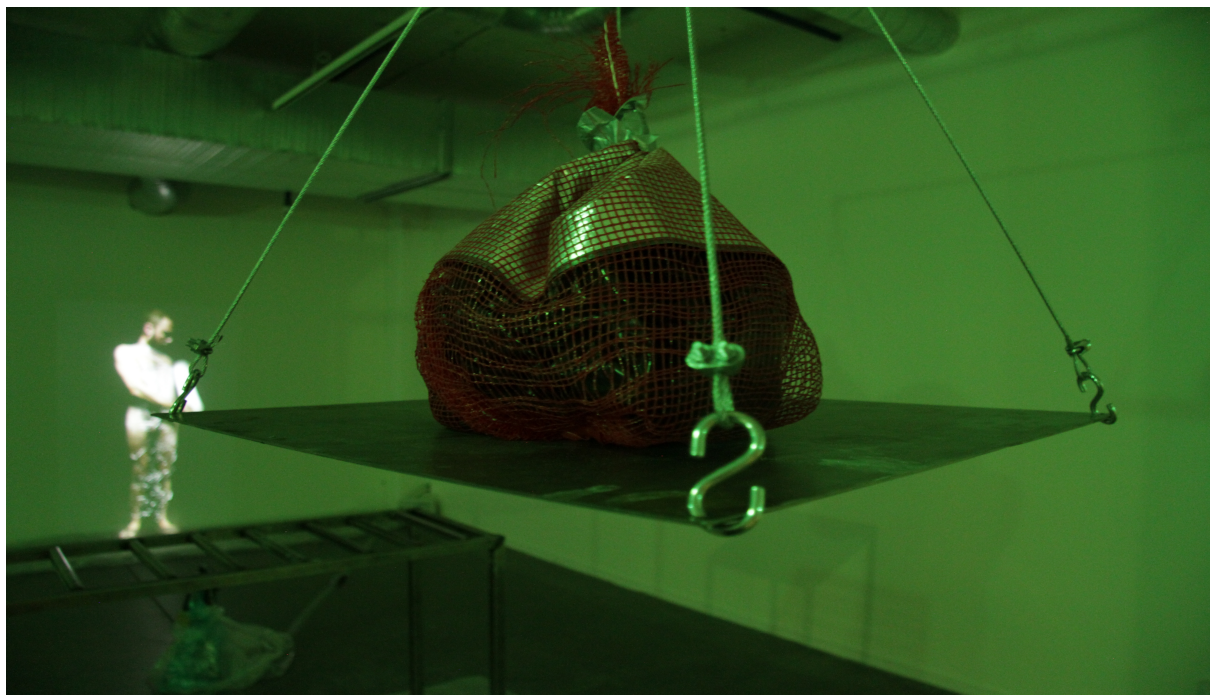
The position of 'the Other', can also be seen from the Global South perspective, evident in the Manifesto of B. de Sousa Santos, as follows:

*'We are all indigenous peoples because we are where we have always been before we had owners, masters, or bosses, or because we are where we were taken against our will and where owners, masters, or bosses were imposed on us. They want to impose on us the fear of having a boss and the fear of not having a boss, so that we may not imagine ourselves without fear'.<sup>3</sup>*

This paragraph of B. de Sousa Santos, is a good example of an expression of Alterity from Indigenous people against Western culture. The indigenous people telling the colonizers 'we were always here' before the 'bosses' arrived to the place. So, in reaction to the new landowners, those communities were pretending to keep their freedom and dignity. In that sense, my understanding of the beginning of the sentence is: 'We are all coming from the same land', alluding the human right of freedom and equality. Therefore, the expression of freedom and equality by indigenous communities, was the best way of manifesting 'otherness' in front of the colonizers.

The colonization of the 'New World' is not the first or the last movement, but it has shown to conclude its very own specific character due to the mix of cultures in South America. At this point, my second question is: What happens in such cultural encounters?

In my research, I could see that there are three types of possibilities in such cultural encounters. First, people assimilate a new imposed culture and forget their primary culture, called 'Acculturation'. Second, people put in balance the relevant aspects of both cultures, a fusion of cultures, called 'Transculturation' or 'Synthesis'. Or finally, people reject each other's cultures, called Segregation.<sup>4</sup>



**Fig.2: The Scale, Purification Solo Exhibition, Rodrigo N Albornoz**

I will analyze these terms from my own experience as immigrant in Europe. At my arrival in Sweden, I felt a great sensation of sadness. My sadness was connected to a confrontation with a new culture and different life forms. Such encounter had a great emotional impact on me. Being raised in a culture based on the collective, I found myself dealing with an individualistic civilization. Depending on my point of view, my experience can be either positive or negative. I believe that these both aspects can live alongside each other. These two aspects -positive and negative- has affected my approach to the people of Sweden. Positive at the level of the intellectual exchange, however on an emotional level, I found a great lack of connection.

<sup>3</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Fernando Ortiz, *Transculturation*, 1947



Anyway, I must understand, that if I came to live in a place with a different culture than mine, I should adapt myself to a new culture, and not the other way around. So, starting from my personal experience as an immigrant in Stockholm, I am able to open up my perspective towards an integrated vision of the social side, where the problems of integration regarding the South American people, are relevant to the challenges I face in the Western countries, Sweden being one of them. The definition of the 'individual' and the 'society' poses to different forms of socialization such as: different language, codes or different working conditions, to name a few.

For that reason, was necessary for me, to have a notion of what makes Transculturation a theory of coexistence between two or more different cultures in the same territory. Therefore I read the book of Ángel Rama -an eminent Uruguayan critic- 'Narrative Transculturation of Latin America' published in 1982. Rama's final goal was to achieve a 'cultural balance' through a synthesis called Transculturation.<sup>5</sup> So, Rama was concerned with the maintenance of cultural difference and the defense of 'marginalized' culture -in terms of Post-colonial theory-. However, the Uruguayan critic proposes to transcend the cultural differences through a 'fusion of both cultures', as a way to preserve the originality of each culture through a synthesis, unifying the authentic and essential elements of each of them.<sup>6</sup>

In my opinion, to assess the elements of each culture, as Rama puts it, it depends on which cultural point I chose to view my subject. From my Western point of view, some elements of Indigenous culture such as food, construction, natural resources or cultivation of land, were more convenient in the process of Transculturation. On the other hand, the spiritual plants, indigenous art, natural medicine and some of the traditional rituals, temples, and ceremonies, were not as easy to incorporate in this new Westernized continent.

The representation of 'machines' in my work **Purification** also contains this synthesis, coexisting as a fusion of essential elements, the problematic of illegal production of substances in South America with my Western European education in Art. Therefore, the aesthetics of my sculptures allude to a mixture of flavors in balanced association between the 'abuse of labor' and the 'means of abstraction'.



Fig.3: The Press, Purification Solo Exhibition, Rodrigo N Albornoz

<sup>5</sup> *Transculturation* is a term used for the Cuban Anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, 1947

<sup>6</sup> Ángel Rama, *Transculturación Narrativa en América Latina*, 1985

## The Mixer

The second step to cooking well is to add the products in the right way. For that it requires the knowledge of which ingredient add first, second or third, bearing in mind not to cut the consistency of the substance. South American culture is a mixture of different kinds of civilizations and cultures. The Indigenous people ended up in a 'mix' after the colonization, inheriting different cultural assets based on the input of generations of European and Non-European cultural heritage.

The autochthonous culture was suffering -the years that followed the Colonization- a large 'cut' in their own identity. This was the product of imposing -in a short period of historical time- a completely new cultural system imported from Europe. This process can be called Acculturation following the same line of thought of Post-colonial theories. For example, the Mexican 'Aztecs' were the most difficult to convert to Catholicism. In this case, the colonizers invented all kind of fake stories or 'strategies' trying to acculturate them.



Fig.4: The Mixer, Purification Solo Exhibition, Rodrigo N Alborno

A good example of these strategies, is the story surrounding the painting 'Virgin of Guadalupe', which was painted by an indigenous artist in Mexico in the colonial times. This story is shown in the prohibit movie 'Nuevo Mundo'.<sup>7</sup> 'Nuevo Mundo' was eventually censored by the Mexican State for attacking its civil identity. This film shows how the indigenous people were tortured, enslaved and forced to accept the terms and laws of Christian morality. Against the impossibility of an immediate conversion of the Aztecs to Catholic laws, the Church developed a rapid strategy together with the Conquerors: the priest had to convince one culturally strong and influential artist from the autochthonous community, to create a fictional story and pretend it as a fact. For this purpose, they asked the artist to paint the 'Virgin Mary' with certain 'syncretistic' features.<sup>8</sup> The story they asked him to tell, was to convince the other Aztecs that he had seen an apparition of the Virgin on a hill. Indeed he did and one day, when the community of Indians was assembled, the artist appeared, screaming and shouting, saying that he had seen the Virgin Mary appears in front of him and that he had painted her as he saw her. This fake story grew stronger in the community and ended up by murdering the artist to keep the secret. Nowadays, 'Virgin of Guadalupe' is the most venerated 'Virgin of Mexico' and the rest of South America.

<sup>7</sup> Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMgUOPqdNP8>

<sup>8</sup> *Syncretism*: Art movement in South America, followed the years after the Colonies, mix of European and Indigenous aesthetics.



In my work **Purification**, my strategy was to show the same 'Virgin' wrapped in clingfilm as a symbol of consumption. I wanted to strip the Virgin of all religious significance, showing her as a market product, exportable and ready to be consumed. In my video performance, my naked body was wrapped in plastic too, as an object of consumption for the Western European system of labor. Finally, this form of packaging is what Indigenous people working with drugs are using to protect the product against adverse climate conditions.

Therefore, the mix between 'fake stories' of acculturation, my body as an 'object of consumption' and the special way 'the product' is packaged after being cooked in those labs, made me continue my studies to the next step of this process, the Filter.



Fig.5: Wrapping, Purification Solo Exhibition, Rodrigo N Albornoz

## The Filter

The third step to cooking well is to filter the ingredients. The filter will collect impurities and excess of the product. The Indigenous culture used to filter grains, leaves, nuts to keep the nutritional parts and discard the shells. After colonization, a process of filtering cultures took place in this 'New Continent'. This filtering process remains until today. The original traditions of the indigenous people were filtered by the lens of the European culture, in a progressive way and through domination. The old languages, rituals, and ceremonies are almost extinguished at the present moment. The filtering of cultures during the colonies, gradually put the Indigenous culture in a position of inferiority.

In relation to Post-colonial theories, this comments are in Homi Bhabha's discussion of 'mimicry'. The colonial strategy of power/knowledge seeks the inclusion of an authorized 'good' native, with a view to excluding 'bad' natives.<sup>9</sup> The 'inclusion-exclusion' as a filter, is also an implicit issue in the working system in Europe, respecting which immigrants are allowed to work and study and which ones are not.



Fig.6: The Filter, Purification Solo Exhibition, Rodrigo N Alborno

I will mention another strategy of domination that was put in place in the New Continent. In the town of Puebla, Mexico, at the top of 'Pyramid of Cholula' a Catholic church was constructed. This church, also known as 'Tlachihualtepetl', was built in 1594 after the Conquest of Mexico and in the midst of the Evangelization of Aztecs. In just one hour, they were able to kill 3,000 indigenous people in the area, about ten percent of their population. All with the purpose of evangelizing and eliminating what was manifested against. This temple was built due to the famous defeat that Cortes and his troops had in the well-known 'Noche Triste' -Sad Night-, when the 'Virgen de Los Remedios' appeared to the famous Spaniard after the defeat. Finally the story claim that the Virgin threw earth in the eyes of the natives during a fight in the Sad Night. Thanks to this 'help,' she is also called Virgin Conqueror. Despite the violent acts of 'Cortes' and the awful need to eliminate everything that did not obey their Catholic rules, they could never eliminate the pyramid. The size of the pyramid was so big that people confused with being a mountain. There are many reasons to believe that the construction was a way to impose the Western culture literally on top of the Indigenous culture.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Bhabha, Homi, *Postcolonial Criticism*, 1992

<sup>10</sup> Unknown, *Gran Piramide de Cholula*, 1999



After my trip to Peru, I was able to understand even more aspects of cultural Syncretism. The influence of Western art on indigenous traditions is common in the Museums over there. I took a picture of a painting portraying the 'Incas Kings' and 'Catholics Kings' together, trying to marry the daughter of the Incas with the Prince of Spain -to expropriate the land of the Incas-. In the painting is also possible to see, the Incas Kings with monarchical characteristics.



Fig.8: Artist Unknown, Museum 'Pedro de Osma' Lima Peru.

Therefore, it is after this process of understanding, that I can write in depth about my work with art. I have been given the opportunity to travel back to South America, meeting my Latin roots and finally expressing it through the creation of **Purification** installation. My work refers to modes of illegal production of drugs that continue causing problems in my country today. And my way of demonstrating these facts has been through the awareness of the phenomenon, reversing the situation towards myself, adopting the position of 'otherness', from my immigrant position in Europe. Coming myself from South American culture and having lived through the many problems of terrorism, corruption and exploitation of primitive cultures, my art has always been a way to get rid of my frustration. I am far away from being able to solve these problems, but my intention is to reveal the hidden causes of them by telling these stories to the public. I have also put myself in a similar situation, submitting my body of being exploited by the Western European system of labor.

This situation, in turn, has given me sufficient awareness to be able to challenge the audience in the same way, by adopting a similar position of 'otherness' when they entered my laboratory of **Purification**. The purpose of this laboratory is to clarify the filter, created by Western European history, which has historically treated these facts of domination as 'alien' or 'background' to its culture -in Postcolonial terms-; when in fact they are just a consequence of the process of Western Acculturation of the Southern countries.

## The Press

The fourth step of the process of Purification, is to press the product in the right way. The pressure will give a compact texture, important for packaging and commercialization. The Indigenous cultures use to pack their food for storage and reservation, before the arrival of the winter. They used to pack their food, preserving their nutritional qualities, similar to the way of mummifying bodies. A constant pressure, violence, and slavery was common those days to put the indigenous people to work the land for the Colonizers. The new landowners of the place kept the people working day and night, only for food and shelter, on the same camps they were working. The history of this kind of abuse of labor remains today. Indigenous people are currently living in marginal societies -slums or favelas- and without any possibility of being part of 'modernity'. Therefore, having no other possibilities of work, they must work for the narco's labs.



Fig.9: The Press, Purification Solo Exhibition, Rodrigo N Albornoz

Working under illegal conditions was my experience of being 'the Other' in Europe, after having been part of the labor system by cooking in restaurants to support my art studies. I could see and experience with the physicality of my body, this kind of abuse of workforce, which can exist as normal and accepted condition in Western capitalistic societies. Being myself part of this kind of companies -that do not fulfill their legal promises in relation to worker's rights- was the best way to research my topic. It seems that Western culture has always been aware of the business benefits over human welfare. It is at this point, that I highlight the vision of power abuse by the Capitalist system and its fake promises. So, back to my project, the Press is not a sculpture or artwork to satisfy the society of wealth, neither is it a product of the market or a museum piece. I don't see myself as an artist working for the church or upper classes. This Press is rather a machine, which can be activated by the force of human labor, like the rest of the machines in this laboratory. People who enter this lab must think that they could even work for it.

Therefore, my installation is inviting the public to take the uncomfortable position of those workers, those who do not have a better option in life. Anyway, isn't a real, mobile, production laboratory in the jungle or slum, but rather a representation of its social function. As an activator of questions, related to unfair conditions of work, working class, discrimination towards Indigenous cultures and supervision of workforce by the use of weapons.

All my life I was able to learn the Western culture, studying its philosophy, art, history and religion. Since I was a child, I was educated in this way, even after being born in a country as Argentina, full of different kind of Indigenous cultures. I was finally accepted to work and study in Europe, but my education regarding 'clash of cultures' in colonial societies, was practically null or limited. That's why, **Purification** has a very big meaning for me, representing the way colonizers were trying to 'make the aborigine pure' through imposing a new culture and knowledge by 'civilizing or educating' then, and finally eliminating the ancient cultures of the place. I also wonder, if the Europeans were the ones who arrived to the 'New World', they should have been able to adapt to Indigenous cultures and not the other way around. As I did when I came to Sweden. So, regarding Post-colonial theories, my question is: Who is 'the Other' in South America today?



## The Heater

The fifth step for cooking a good meal is to heat the ingredients. Cooking food over an open fire was the traditional way for Indigenous cultures. Most of the food prepared today is using electric devices -as the oven built for my show-. Anyway, the use of an open fire was also a symbol of power and respect for the tribes, they considered fire coming from the Sun as the Father. The use of fire was also the way of introducing fear into the Aboriginal tribes during the process of Evangelization driven by the Colony. I will mention the Inquisition as another good example of those strategies -Catholic Church together with the Kingdom of Spain- used to convert people into completely new cultural values, alien for them and imported from Europe.



Fig.10: Purification Solo Exhibition, Rodrigo N Albornoz

In many occasions American bishops -like Manso or Zumarraga- were those who possessed the powers of the apostolic inquisitors. If the new territories discovered in South America were like a continuation of Castile and Spain, it was normal and logical that the same inquisitorial courts could be established in them, as was done in the Canary Islands, between the years 1550 and 1570. The petitions of the Inquisition began to arrive to Spain precisely in favor of the establishment in the Indies (America) of those permanent tribunals of the Holy Office, which depended on the Supreme Court. Finally, the civil authorities began to intervene more and more in the inquisitorial matters. Therefore, an specialized staff was needed for this work. Already in 1547, Tello de Sandoval from Mexico -having himself the title of inquisitor- wrote to the monarch: 'I have warned of the need in this land of the Holy Office of the Inquisition'.<sup>11</sup>

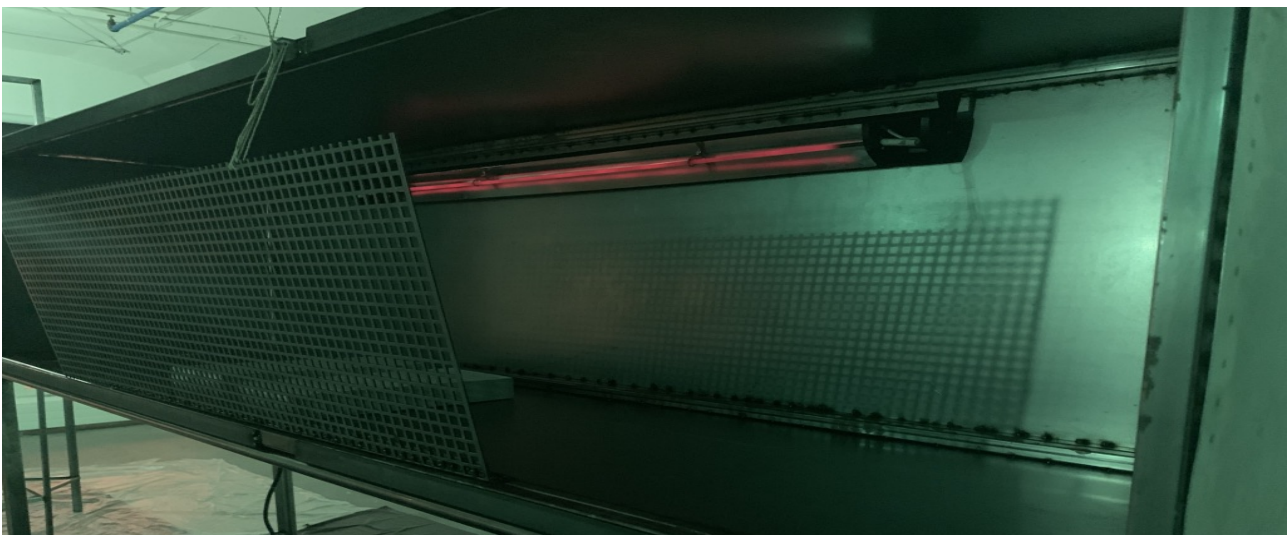
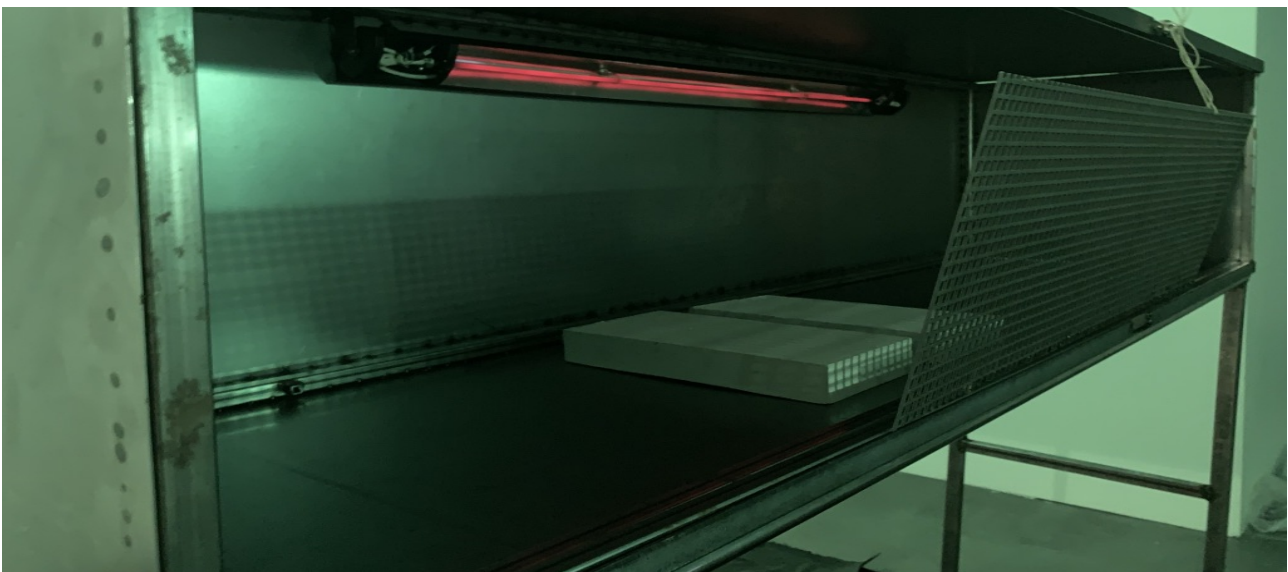
The implementation of Inquisition was not only with the purpose of eliminating those 'sinful' Indigenous people, but rather to make great impact on the tribes, doing those tortures in public. In this way, they hanged the Indians in crosses and set them on fire in front of the crowd. Fire, death, and torture was the symbol of power and domination in colonial times, and it's still being used today in South America as a way of controlling the people who work for the coke's labs.

<sup>11</sup> Maurice Birkel, *The Inquisition in Latin America*, 1999



I come from a country where the feudal lords and territorial leaders have ruled for centuries. Those 'Oligarchic' families have imposed their laws through economic domination and violent exploitation. The mining labor, the indiscriminate felling of trees, the reproduction of animals and the cultivation of lands. Later on -with the arrival of Capitalism- the displacement of indigenous tribes through territorial domination, completely extinguishing their cultures. In the present moment, these tribes are 'in-out' of the economic system, as they are being used for the agrarian exploitation of coca leaves. These societies are treated without basic human rights and exploited as slaves under armed supervision. The politicians get paid 'under the table' for the 'bosses of fear', who are still trying to keep their business at all costs. So, the political corruption extends and lasts for decades until today.<sup>12</sup>

The use of the oven is something I learned from my work experience in the kitchen. The temperature, the cooking time, the humidity, are the main factors to cook a great meal. But the oven is also, one of the latest stages of the production of cocaine after the block was pressed. The compact and solid block coming out of the Heater will allow its transport and storage.



**Fig.11: The Heater, Purification Solo Exhibition, Rodrigo N Albornoz**

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<sup>12</sup> 'Bosses of fear' is a term used by de Press Media in South America, related to the narco dealers.

## The Product

Once the block was cooked, the packing is done with plastic film and adhesive tape, preserving the product from adverse environmental conditions. Thus facilitating its transport and distribution. The final product is valuable as "Gold". The alchemical process begins with cheap material, leaves, gasoline, cement, and above all, with a low paid job. The process of production involves traditional spiritual knowledge -of those ancient communities- together with their force of labor. The product is finally packaged and commercialized to the Western centers for consuming.

So, if the 'the Other' is the autochthonous culture who was living for thousands of years on the land, displaced by the Western culture, which took the position of the established culture in South America today. What happens if the history was the other way around?



Fig.12: The Product, Purification Solo Exhibition, Rodrigo N Albornoz

The 'supernatural powers' of the coca leaves -used by autochthonous communities for spiritual realization or medicinal purposes- remains questioned by Western cultures. During my days in Peru, I could research the effects of coca leaves by chewing them. I was sick the first days of my arriving at Lima, when one friend -a direct descendant of the Incas- gave me coca leaves as a medicine. The power of the plant really worked out in my organism and I recovered immediately after that. The following days, I found myself buying coca leaves in the market and chewing them every day. Far away from being any kind of drug, the plant just helped me to recover my forces and deal with the weather of the country. I also found the Colonial discourse and Post-colonial theory referring to this kind of spiritual knowledge as this:

*When Marxists encounter locations such as these, featuring social groups that do not mobilize along class lines, or whose collective life features gods, spirits, and supernatural agents in worlds that have yet to become disenchanting, they have tended to relegate such phenomena to the realm of false consciousness and to the time of the pre-political, viewing them as anachronistic relics of another time.*<sup>13</sup>

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13 Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial theory*, 1993



Fig.13: Video performance, Purification Solo Exhibition, Rodrigo N Albornoz. Link: <https://vimeo.com/315543992>

'We are all the indigenous people of the Amazonia working with the drugs' expressed a native from Amazonia, after having an interview in a documentary I watched one year ago.<sup>14</sup> These people have not many other chances of work since the arriving of criminality to the place. The opportunities to work in the cities -nearby those areas of the jungle- are very limited, and the need for money is something important after the arriving of Capitalism to the place, but also rare for those communities accustomed to live from natural resources.

The organization, production, and commercialization of drugs is also aware of the potential problems with the Authorities. Therefore, they must secure the place by "arrangements" with the police, military forces, and politicians. Nowadays- in the jungle of Amazonia- there are two groups working with drugs, the Guerrillas and the Paramilitaries. The first of them with Left ideals and the second of them with Right ideals, fighting for the territory of production. Many peoples, especially the indigenous ones, are dying every day because of the 'business war' between the Cartels. This Cartels are armed organizations, which are expanding as a virus throughout the South American continent, as the Colony did. The narco-traffic take advantage of those forms of exploitation of labor during the Colonial times, but above all it's great Capitalistic business, which involves the big power's based especially on the political corruption of those South American countries. This consequence has also created a source of danger for the southern society as a whole, and is so widespread throughout the continent, that it is very difficult to eradicate, as is poverty. That's why, the illegal production system is based precisely on the poverty and lack of work of those countries, supported by political corruption and illegal commercialization of weapons.

My work Purification does not intend to solve this situation, but rather to create awareness of this fact through expose it in Europe, which is one of the places of greatest consumption of the Product, especially among rich and famous. That's why my solo show Purification has as a final corollary, posters in the bathroom with lines of the Product crossing Swedish's celebrity magazines.

14 Link to documentary: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKKKijVf0Gg>



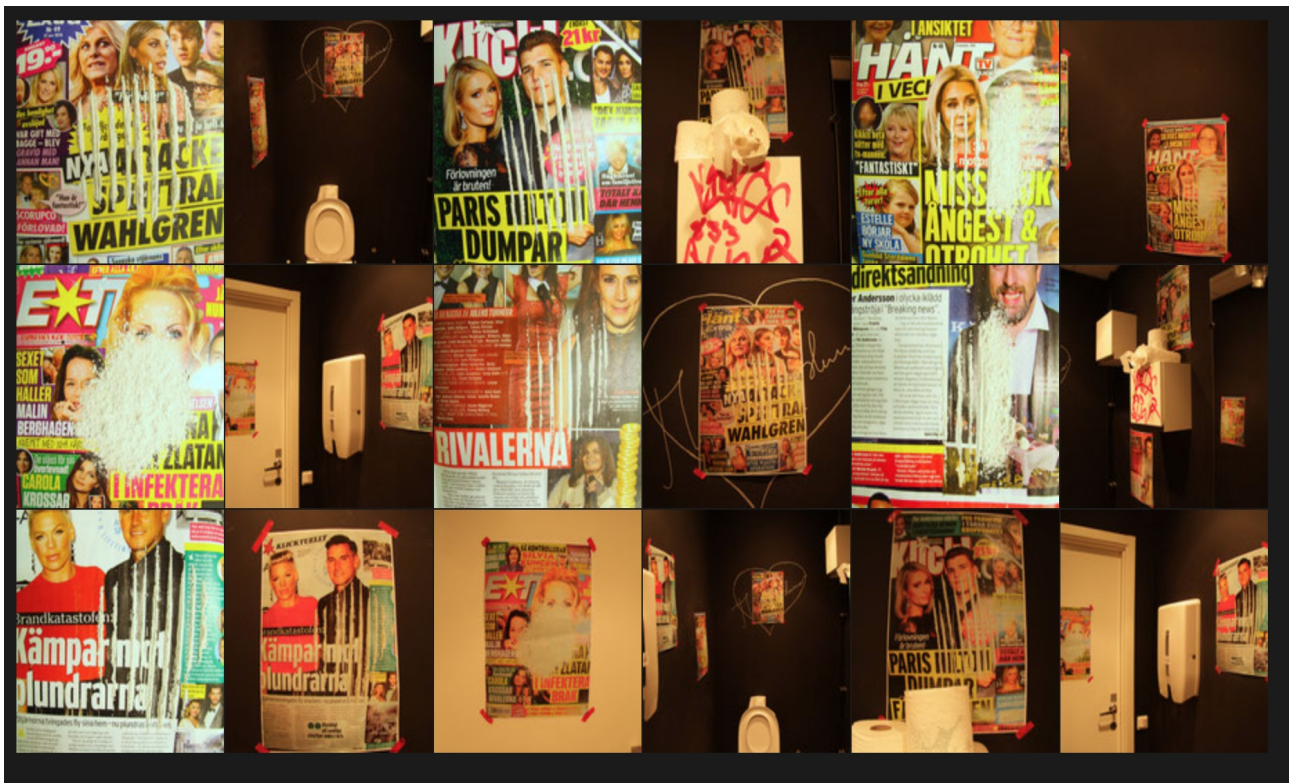


Fig.14: Magazines, Purification Solo Exhibition, Rodrigo N Albornoz



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