



Why We Do This: Flesh and Concrete, Mexico City

by GUY FONER, 2012
COMMENTS



David Cruz, *Quemar el tiempo en agua gris*, 2012, still from video installation. (Unless otherwise noted, *Flesh and Concrete* images from fleshandconcrete.net.)

With [Flesh and Concrete](#), Jaya Kara Brekke and Julio Salazar have organized an art exhibition with ramifications well beyond the aesthetic. The exhibition, the [winner of apexart's Franchise Program](#), was conceived in reaction to the construction of the Supervia, an intrusive highway being built through Mexico City for the purpose of ameliorating the brutal traffic experienced by residents and white-collar workers of Santa Fe, an important business district and affluent area of the city. Despite the very specific subsection of the population that would benefit from the Supervia—people with enough money to have a car and pay the toll, who live in Santa Fe—the highway is being built at great cost with public money, and it has displaced many less affluent people from their homes. Many of these poorer, long-standing neighborhoods have now been destroyed. The inevitability of the highway is, at this stage, a given.

The efforts of Brekke and Salazar stand in the face of this inevitability, determined to not let this project—"one," they say, "of so many infrastructure mega-projects built the world over"—go by unnoticed.

The exhibition space, an abandoned concrete building overlooking the Supervia, is the geographical center for more ephemeral programming, including [walks](#), presentations and bike tours. There is an informative and articulate text written by the curators. Since apexart awards funding based on strength of proposal, it should be no surprise that [winning submissions](#) are generally very good.

We visited the city recently and were able to make it to the opening. We were staying close by, which meant a lot; in Mexico City, distances are long and getting from one place to another can be difficult. *Flesh and Concrete* is situated near the start of the Supervia, by necessity and to its benefit. It is far away from most galleries and art centers, and it takes a commitment to make it there.

We walked to the exhibition space, the last stretch along the path of the highway under construction. No one noticed it. In sprawling urban environments, the existence and consequences of construction generally don't get a second thought; it just seems normal. Human-scale perception can't do justice to the impact on the landscape. To someone more familiar with the city it might have looked different, but to us, it looked like something that belonged there, another roadway, this one layered on top of the others. We had just passed through a shopping center with a Krispy Kreme and a McDonald's, so a large-scale public works project didn't seem that out of place. It was another comfortable sign of modernity.



Ale de la Puente, *espacio (en...)*, 2012, advertising banners, installation view in elevator shaft.

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...the structure, examining light, transparency,

When we arrived at the opening, a young woman assumed we were part of the crew, since they seemed to know everyone who was coming. She handed us [brochures](#) and gave an overview of the exhibition. We assumed she was the curator; she had a command of the material and appeared to be very invested in the exhibition. She was a volunteer. Upstairs, we saw the crew, a few guys were setting up smoke machines and the electrical for a couple installations, while others put up rudimentary drywall barriers, to at least bring notice to the wide-open elevator shafts.

It's a mystery how the organizers were able to get such an ideal space for this show. Brekke told me that they had originally wanted to have the exhibition on the highway itself, while it was being built. They had some productive talks with the construction company, but soon it became apparent that it wasn't going to happen. Critically, the exhibition space needed to have a "material relationship" to the Supervia; it was important that a viewer engaging the space would be forced into a contextual and corporeal engagement with the Supervia, which could really only happen in close proximity to the construction. They eventually found an ideal location, a raw space, an "unfinished building, abandoned for twenty-something years," overlooking the construction site. When we visited, for the opening, it was after dark. From the roof you could see the entire city, which is massive and dense. Construction crews on the Supervia continued their work.



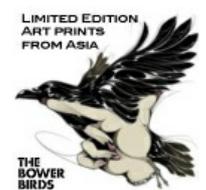
Francisco Ugarte, *We are not afraid of ruins...*, 2012, smoke and light, installation view.

The six artists in the exhibition were chosen because they were genuinely interested in the project. They're all from Mexico and work in Mexico City. The work is site-specific installations, all of them invoking an elemental quality that adds to the sense of place. [Erick Diego](#) suspended flower pots under daylighters as the visual component of a discordant sound installation. The audio was a mashup of two sets of recordings Diego had done, one of city traffic and one of a river. The source material is appropriate, as the building stands between the highway and the Magdalena River. A floor above, [Francisco Ugarte](#) used colored lights to illuminate the forgotten, graffiti-filled spaces of the building. Spare and atmospheric, it was successful as it was, though the smoke machines would later be part of this.

Things became a little more heavy-handed (in the sense that the installations were more obviously "art") the higher up we went. All of it, though, never tried to be something greater than it was; it was always in a relationship with the building and the Supervia. One floor had a fire pit filled with smoldering charcoal; in the corner, David Cruz had tucked a video of himself on the roof for 24 hours, a self-portrait of exposure. His predicament was a stand-in for the "urban condition," only here without diversion or means of escape.

One floor of the building was completely dark, but open to walk through. My companion noticed small piles of rubble and dirt everywhere we looked; someone had taken the time to neatly sweep up its years' accumulations. I suspected that so minimal an intervention would be too much to pass as an installation; I guessed it was either a vacant floor or something in progress, something more intrusive. To us, the vines coming in through the windows were accidental, a fitting intrusion by mother nature. We couldn't see it, but this was the stage for an installation by Daniel Monroy Cuevas, hidden in darkness. From images, later, I learned he used refracted natural light to alter the experience of the space, creating a site-specific video installation that links the intangible qualities of the outside environment with the architecture. Outside, blinding construction lights shone endlessly.

The length of one elevator shaft was lined with those triangular plastic flags you see at an open house for a new condo desperate to sell units. [Ale de la Puente](#) has appropriated them as a symbol of gratuitous construction; not for need, but for profit. The largest crowd was gathered around [Diana Quintero](#)'s installation of birds' silhouettes. Perhaps the most accessible work, it was hopeful in spirit and visually beautiful, adding lightness to the ensemble. Everywhere we went in the building, we found reminders of modern life. Every unfinished apartment seemed identical, and identically transformed by the disrepair; what once were closets,



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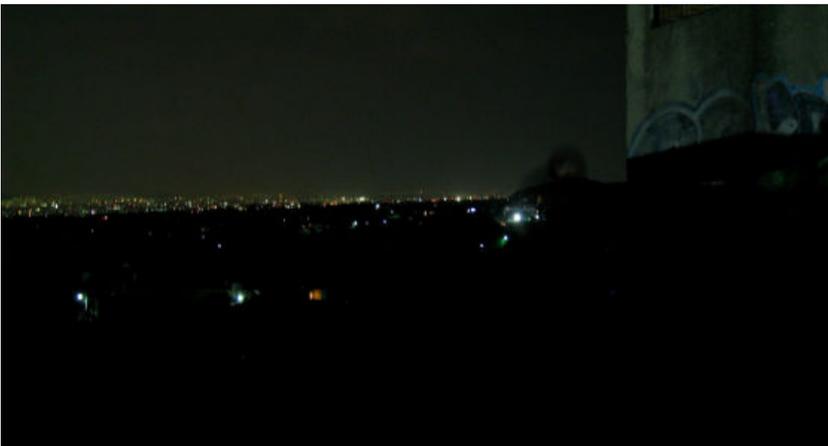
now, at night, became repeating dark voids. Importantly, the installations only occupied small portions of vast floors, leaving space to walk and think.



Left, Erick Diego, *Flores de Concreto*, 2012, sound installation; right, Diana Quintero, "Vuelos," 2012, installation view. (Left image, GF; right image found on Twitter.)

The Supervia is a singular event for Mexico City, but it is also a stand-in for high-profile infrastructure projects all over the world, the kind of projects that politicians, policymakers, and moneyed interests deem to be in the "greater good." For people like this, decision-makers and bureaucrats, it doesn't matter if the damage to the earth and established communities is long-term; they instead look to short-term "success"—even if this success is presumptive at best.

Brekke and Salazar, the exhibition's organizers, spent a long time seeking out input from as many different people, from disparate backgrounds, as they could, to approach a comprehensive view of the effect the Supervia has had on Mexico City and its inhabitants. The exhibition and its related [programs](#) and texts are informed by their "field work," their outreach to local residents, academics, artists, architects and activists. They are in the process of producing a book that they hope will unify these wide-ranging and hard-to-classify investigations.



View from the rooftop, *Flesh and Concrete*. (GF)

My default position is that art, at its best, serves no obvious purpose. Mexico City is a great place to be disabused of opinions like these. *Flesh and Concrete* is political and aesthetic in scope, and part of what it is doing right is the message: the highway does much more harm than good; it can hardly begin to solve the transportation riddle in this massive city; it will exist and operate at a human, ecological, and financial loss. The installations are mostly oblique, and it's up to the viewer to make the connections. As Brekke and Salazar have acknowledged, the art, although "grounded in specific aspects of the consequences of the Supervia," is not there to "explain" anything—instead, "we have text for that."

What is amazing about *Flesh and Concrete* is that it flattens so many things disagreeable about art and makes them irrelevant: everything they have done is perfect, from the building to the art and the surrounding programs. I know some of this only through the documentation, but the excellence is self-evident. It was achieved the only way possible: passionately, persistently, and thoughtfully. It is like reality, in that nothing seems out of place. Just as the Supervia will quickly take its place in the landscape of the city, *Flesh and Concrete*, in its brief incarnation, seems to be in the right place, its existence somehow necessary. The interaction between art and reality is subtle, and all the more meaningful for it.

Flesh and Concrete ran from April 19th to May 17th at Periférico Norponiente, Blvr. Adolfo Ruiz Cortinez #3380, Edif. B, Mexico City.



Daniel Monroy Cuevas, *Perférico #3380*, 2012, still from video installation.

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