and Rivera in the 1940s and 1950s and continue to uphold the narrative while also delving into the preoccupations in their later works. Their passion for Mexican culture and their love for each other at the end of their lives were a focus of the last few galleries, but they lacked the cohesiveness seen earlier in the show. On the final wall before the exit photographs of Diego and Kahlo are displayed together, while alive and then on their respective deathbeds. They serve to signal the end of the story.5

The cult of the artist remains strong in this exhibition and many common tropes regarding Rivera and Kahlo are apparent: the contrast between his public and her private works, her tragic life circumstances, and their tumultuous relationship. The exhibition eloquently addresses the issues in their art and the politics informing it, but these are overshadowed by the popular appeal of these two dynamic figures.

NOTES
3 Dina Comisarreco addresses the common misconception that Rivera’s artwork dealt solely with issues of history and politics. She argues that Rivera, like Kahlo, was shaped by early experiences that impacted his views on birth and death. These included the death of his twin brother at 18 months, his separation from his parents to live in the country at the age of two due to health concerns, and later the death of his first son in 1916. While it is unclear if works like Maternity and Sunflower were shaped by his life, there is further room for investigation. See Dina Comisarreco, “Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Tlacolula,” Woman’s Art Journal 17.1 (Spring-Summer, 1996): 14.
4 Frida Kahlo was the subject of articles in Elle Magazine in May 1989 and Vogue in February 1990. These articles focused on her style and featured models wearing then-contemporary fashions that were meant to capture the spirit of Kahlo. See Oriana Baddeley, “Her Dress Hangs Here: De-Frocking the Kahlo Cult,” Oxford Art Journal 14.1 (1991): 10-11. Dot Tuer in her catalog essay mentions Kahlo’s “cult status in popular culture,” however, there is no mention of the need to redress this issue. See “Of Passion and Painting,” 15.
5 There is one additional room at the end of the exhibition entitled “Honoring Frida and Diego” with three large Judas figures and Rivera and Kahlo as catins. This room, however, feels tangential to the main exhibition.

EXHIBITION REVIEW:
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THE RETURN OF A LAKE
MARIA THEREZA ALVES AT DOCUMENTA 13
CURATED BY CAROLYN CHRISTOV-BAKARGIEV
KASSEL, GERMANY
9 JUNE–16 SEPTEMBER 2012

Maria Thereza Alves’ The Return of a Lake (2012) might best be described as a documentary eruption. The artist has a story to tell and she deploys almost every technique of display available to do so. There are dioramas, documentary photographs, sculptures, paintings, newspaper clippings, a book-length catalog—even live specimens. Many of the representational modes seem appropriated from (or appropriate to) the venue itself: Kassel’s natural history museum, the Ottoneum. The work therefore manages to be about many things at once: the story itself, the significance of staging that story in an international art context and the evocative and highly appropriate “excess” of the communicative strategies.

Alves’ subject is the stunningly asymmetrical relationship between one man—the Spanish colonist Íñigo Noriega Laso—and the environment and people of Mexico’s Lake Chalco region.
who continued to be affected by his economic activities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These activities included draining Lake Chalco out of existence. For a time, Noriega was the second wealthiest man in Mexico, but it was at the expense of an entire ecological system and the indigenous people who depended on it. Eventually, the underground aquifer became so desiccated that the lakebed sank, with the paradoxical effect that although water is still being pumped to Mexico City, the area is now drawing additional fluvial water and the lake is beginning to return. But even its return is vexed; it is celebrated by some, but causing new problems for residents who have adapted to its absence.

In parallel with Noriega's exercise of force, there has been a battle over representation, fought on the same inequitable terms. Local activists recognize this and one of their strategies has been to build a museum. Alves' installation itself can be read as a counter-exhibition to the first representation of Íñigo Noriega Laso she saw. This was the Museum of Emigration, in his hometown of Colombres in Asturias, Spain. Housed in Íñigo Noriega's former mansion, it dedicates considerable energy to celebrating his colonial "success." Alves has an eye out for colonial propaganda. She has lived in Europe since the early 1990s, but was born in Brazil and grew up there and in the United States. She also lived in Mexico for eight years. In this case it was not difficult to read the exhibit against the grain. She writes, "One section is entitled, 'The Adventure of Íñigo Noriega' and boasts of his private army of 250 soldiers and yet no mention is made of what these men did to the indigenous communities who resisted..."1

Alves' installation features three centrally placed dioramas of the lake region, but in terms of its commitments this exhibition does not so much have a centre as a collection of equally important parts. Some are small, like the water-colour illustration of a series of rectangular green areas, set out in a grid on a lake. These are chupampas, a form of lake farming long used by indigenous peoples in Mexico, involving the creation of engineered islands on which crops are grown. Two walls are dominated by large, framed colour photographs of indigenous activists from the region. The subjects appear to be in locations of significance to them and they have clearly paused to pose for the photographer. Below these images, heavy fabric is draped against the wall, pulled up into peaks to suggest a mountain skyline. The juxtaposition between documentary photographs and the evocative fabric sculptures is jarring but effective.

Other walls feature equally unlikely combinations. Botanical illustrations are next to low relief models of the facades of Noriega's mansion and the Museum of Mexico City. The latter, a label informs visitors, is run by a descendant of Noriega, who, "says that he is a great man." There is a brightly painted low relief carving of Noriega himself. He is depicted from the chest up, with a haughty expression, despite the flames—hellfire, presumably—that rise up around him. The aesthetic language suggests a retablo, but it seems veneful rather than votive.

For her book, Colección de Divulgación (1987), anthropologist Margarita Loera interviewed a Chalco, Raymundo Martínez, and his grandparents, who were forcibly relocated by Noriega.2 He insisted that the interview be titled, "Íñigo Noriega Laso: The Destroyer of My Pueblo," but it appears in Loera's book as: "My Pueblo: Its History and Traditions." By retaining the word "my," the new anthropological title simultaneously appropriates and distorts Martínez's voice. Alves published the Martínez family interviews in her catalogue, restating the original title.

Each of the three irregularly shaped dioramas in the exhibit depicts an aspect of the lake. They are covered with small handwritten labels providing information about both its past and present. One depicts the lake bounded on one side by urban sprawl from Mexico City, as well as a

canal, which is really an enormous open sewer. On the far side of the lake two grey PVC pipes emerge from a large oval opening along the diorama’s back edge. The pipes—each marked with a blue arrow indicating that it pumps water away to Mexico City—snake up and enter the wall near the ceiling. As they rise with each joint and bend, they transition to larger and larger gauge pipes. When they reach the wall they have perhaps quadrupled in diameter. The effect is vaguely uncanny not just because of the lively twisting of the pipes, but because one would expect them to diminish in scale as they move away. Instead they grow toward the “real” scale of the gallery.

Another diorama depicts a different canal/sewer and is constructed on a larger scale. Labels state that the canal is elevated twelve metres above the local landscape and in heavy rains its deforested embankments cause flash floods, threatening nearby homes. The diorama is long and narrow; its shape is dictated by the canal itself and the lower-lying territory immediately adjacent to it. It takes a sharp turn at its centre and on the inside angle, the artist has included a cliff face that rises up at this location. On one end the cliff-side tapers away, leaving a narrow gap between it and the elevated canal. There are several tiny houses jammed into this shadowy crevice and the nearby label declares, “The poorest people live here.”

The final diorama focuses on the cone of the volcano, into which dives an enormous serpent, its tail flicking up toward the ceiling and terminating in a bundle of transparent fluorescent rods. Bright red ribbons decorate its back, contrasting with the shiny spun-black plastic mesh of
its body. In the catalogue, indigenous activist Don Genaro, who was involved in establishing the local museum, describes how the community appoints someone to guard and care for sacred spaces, including the volcano. Genaro says, "I always considered that protecting our patrimony was done for our Volcano, who is the Sacred Lord."  

Smaller but no less remarkable are the occupants of a fish tank that sits in a corner of the gallery. These are axolotl, a marvellous amphibian, about a foot long, with short legs and extravagantly decorative external gills. Native only to this region, they are near extinction in the wild due to pollution and loss of their primary habitat, Lake Chalco. As such, the amphibians function in the exhibition both as indexical signs of a unique species—a threatened survivor—and as a metaphor for the many regional particularities that may yet be lost or regained. 

All of this fluid movement through time, across boundaries of nature and culture, and conventions of display is not a sign of confusion. It is how things are. The present constantly traffics with the past. Nature is constantly read through culture and culture is constantly informed by nature (so many human-made "natural" disasters occur that we ignore their inextricable connection at our peril). And finally, no mode of display can contain or control experience absolutely or forever. Things erupt and return.

NOTES
2 Margarita Loira, Colección de Divulgación (INAH Gobierno del Estado de México, 1987).
3 Quoted in Alves, 178.