

César Cornejo: Art that Reimagines the Past, Present, and Future

By Jan Garden Castro

Artist César Cornejo ponders our existence on earth. He translates socio-political issues in his native Peru into art that has international contexts and applications. His projects simultaneously raise consciousness about contemporary art, build community self-esteem, and propose new revenue sources.

Cornejo's ideas seemed remarkable before Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and movements worldwide began to protest economic disparities between the top 1% and the other 99% of each country. Cornejo has pro-active solutions to help disadvantaged communities grow stronger through the arts -- new ways that interrelate culture, architecture, art, and social engagement. The artist's main projects, his accomplishments as an educator and arts activist and his international education demonstrate Cornejo's increasing importance on the global art scene.

One ongoing long-range project is creating *The Puno Museum of Contemporary Art*. Puno, a 12,000-foot altitude mountain village nestled on Lake Titicaca is impoverished and remote. Historically-significant Inca and pre-Inca Tiahuanaco, Colla, and Pucará cultures originated here, and tourists still make their way to this remote part of the universe. Working collaboratively with Puno residents, César helps them finish building a room in their traditional houses; for an agreed-upon period, they use this as a gallery showing contemporary art. The Puno museum project, initially funded by New York-based Creative Capital, allows residents to improve their dwellings, exposes them to contemporary art, and encourages interactions among tourists and visitors, city residents, and artists with varied backgrounds. Three of twenty-five stated goals of this program are:

To transform the city of Puno into a living museum in which the city as well as the residents are part of the exhibition.

To create programs which allow the museum to play an important role in the local socio-economic development.

To create programs that value environmental and ecological aspects in the region.

Cornejo's art and architectural skills and his hands-on approach to implementing this plan, house by house, merges artisan tradition and innovative design. The new museum, as part of the house, improves and interacts with its other spaces. The house museum offers anthropological, cultural, and economic exchanges on many levels – and in many directions. As the artist told Jade Dellinger:

Puno effectively is a forgotten town; it suffers from the lack of basic infrastructure, and the locals live with very limited resources. Every winter it remains common for children to die from the effects of extreme temperatures, malnutrition and poor housing conditions. Yet, this suffering is minuscule compared to the centuries of exploitation suffered by the local population since the Spanish conquest in the 16th Century. To create a

Museum of Contemporary Art in Puno is an acknowledgement that Puno deserves special attention after having been neglected for such a long period of time. More importantly, I think that it could also act as a catalyst and conciliator among the people, generating possibilities for development of the community and situating it in an international context while raising their self image and creating confidence about a better future... The museum proposes to utilize the platform of the tourist industry to promote the idea of the Museum at an international level – thus, earning Puno a name and place in the contemporary art world.

Cornejo's full interview with Dellinger is published in *Primera Entrega*, a catalog on this project. It also features an essay by Gabriela Salgado, "The museum as an exercise in human exchange." Salgado discusses the Puno project in relation to historical antecedents, including Gerardo Mosquera's idea of a decentralized museum in Belgium and the theories of Argentine philosopher Enrique Dussel. The home's inhabitants, the architect (in this case, Cornejo), the artists exhibiting work, and any visitors to this historic region exchange ideas. The Puno project has also been profiled in exhibitions in New York, San Francisco, Miami, and in Lima, Peru.

For the December, 2011 Miami Art Basel Fair, gallery Lucia de la Puente features Cornejo's sculptural models. These show traditional houses with radical additions. The models address social injustice, spatial distortions, and other layers of fiction and reality. In contrast to The Puno Museum of Contemporary Art, his models show ways that modern architecture can be out of step or radically different from existing environments. The models show the radical nature of adding forward-looking, foreign ideas to traditional Puno architecture. At the same time, the models are collectable, inventive suggestions – aesthetic objects that are both self-critical of the Puno project and are also sophisticated shapes made of aluminum and other innovative materials -- materials that contrast with the handmade brick houses of Puno. In addition to the models, Cornejo's *Calamina* Drawings –named after the corrugated metal commonly used for roofing in shantytowns – are laminated paper molded to resemble *calamina* with drawings showing the reality of Puno. The artist's mission includes:

Making art that interconnects art, architecture, and human interactions;
Helping to reform communities by proposing positive small scale models; and
Creating art that bridges hard realities and futurist visions.

For another project in 2005, Cornejo created *La Cantuta* to commemorate the July 18, 1992 kidnapping, torture, and murder of nine students and a teacher at Universidad Nacional de Educación Enrique Guzman y Valle (also known as La Cantuta) by a government death squad. Their bodies were found buried at the outskirts of Lima, and Fujimori government officials were later tried and convicted for this crime. However, a planned public monument was never built, and even 13 years after these murders, it was

radical to use art to publicly mourn this loss of life. Cornejo's project involved more than a thousand participants, including students, professors, and relatives of victims, making 60,000 black paper flowers to commemorate *all* victims of violence in Peru. *La Cantuta* consisted of nine flower-covered student desks and one teacher's desk in a setting landscaped with the black flowers. In creating art that involved over 1000 people remembering the dead and that permitted commemoration during a repressive period, the artist took great risks to bring the collective memory of the murdered students and teacher back to life. It was also a metaphor -- a microcosm about mourning lost lives -- for a nation that is still afraid to mourn the huge losses of life in its violence-filled history.

Cornejo's additional notable projects include *Menhirs I and II*, *The Labyrinth*, *The Same Old Story*, *Public Sculptor* and *q.e.d.*

1. *Menhirs I*, 2001 and *Menhir II*, 2008 are permanent monoliths up to sixteen feet tall that were created for sites in Portugal and South Korea. They evoke ancestral monuments bridging past, present, and future.

2. The *Labyrinth Series* (each about 5 x 5.5 x 2 meters) "is influenced by Zen design and architecture," Cornejo notes. "The sculpture represents infinity in two ways: we see space as material, as part of the structure of an infinite number of curves. The lines are supposed to be horizontal but start deforming to show how space and shape interact. In a way, my three-dimensional form reinterprets works from my Peruvian background – the *Nazca Lines*." Peru's abstract and figurative *Nazca Lines* are geoglyphs etched into its southern desert between 400 -650 A. D. They have a powerful effect when viewed from the air; their origins and meanings are still a mystery. According to Felicity Hogan, Independent curator and Program Officer at New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA):

The Labyrinth series prominently displays the artist's technical ability and prowess in building objects. The labyrinth is built up with several struts of curved wood with gaps in between and thin metal uprights that support the shape. Placed in interiors or exteriors, these sublime, poetic pieces embrace spatially whatever environment they are placed in. The ancient history of the form, its inherent symbolism, and its connection to minimalism are implicit. With grace, elegance, and simplicity, the artist defines the relationship and dynamic between space and form.

3. *The Same Old Story*, 2004, for the V Bienal del Barro held at the Museum Lia Bermudez, Venezuela. the 5th biennial of the barro, Venezuela, addresses the educational system in Latin America.

4. *Q. E. D.*, 2007, was presented at the fifth S Files Biennial at El Museo del Barrio, New York. Using transformers, electric lights, and wood, *Q. E. D.* demonstrated how different light outlets change the intensity of light; the same light bulb burns brighter if it is directly plugged into an outlet. This is a metaphor for issues including clarity of communication and translation from one language to another.

5. For *Public Sculptor*, 2010, at Art Omi's International Residency Program in New York

state, Cornejo relates, “I inserted myself inside a brick tower and interacted with the public who fed me and talked with me. The piece filled the gap between the public and Omi’s sculpture park while redefining the relations between the public and the sculptural object.”

Felicity Hogan notes,

*Another facet of Cornejo's work is his use of humor and irony. While based in the UK, he did a series entitled **Sculpting the Canvas**, 2006. These brightly-colored, wavy forms made of wood and covered in fuzzy fabric were placed in everyday locations: inside the local supermarket, a parking lot, beside a motorbike, or in front of a London Red Bus. These had formal connections to minimalism; each placement conveyed the absurdity of the interaction of art and public space. Cornejo tries to take art out of the white cube institutions and to offer people unscheduled art experiences in their daily lives.*

One further dimension of César Cornejo’s art is his visionary grasp of ways that society may use art and architecture to benefit its citizens. In this, he follows Peru’s leading poet, César Vallejo (1892-1938), who wrote movingly about the human condition in *Poemas humanos*. One poem that begins “Considerando en frío, imparcialmente” and then offers a series of poetic observations about human frailty to end thus:

That the shadow that was born with me
waits for a movement from my body so that
she can, lovingly, repeat it
That the silence of a couple is love’s voice
looking for a mouth to shelter in
and that those who don’t understand each other
don’t have words but leeches on their tongues
That, between its teeth, the wheel of fortune chews each failure
and that the devil sits smiling beside me drinking his shit
Remembering that tomorrow, tomorrow morning,
the sea could start to crumble my limbs of sand and
remind me that, at the same time,
I don’t remember anything, except perhaps a womb

-- from *Rio Silêncio*, 2004. Translated by Stefan Tobler, 2007

Vallejo’s nuanced images of shadows, silences, misunderstandings, and memories constitute our existence on earth, and his keen sensibilities are close to Cornejo’s visionary ideas about forming new relations between humans, art, and built environments.

Cornejo was born in Lima, Peru, in 1966. During his undergraduate studies in architecture at Ricardo Palma University in Lima, the Peruvian sculptor Carlos Galarza Aguilar (1926 – 1991), one of his professors, was an important influence on Cornejo’s approach to interconnecting sculpture and architecture. Aguilar had ideas about fusing

architectural design with an expression of Inca architecture, and he encouraged students to make sculpture like buildings and buildings like sculpture. The ideas of Frederick Kiesler (1890-1965)-- whose *The Endless House* proposes merging architecture and sculpture – is another important early influence on Cornejo's work. Kiesler's theories about inter-relations among space, people, objects, and concepts were far ahead of his time.² Cornejo earned Masters and Ph.D. degrees at Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music. His fluency in many languages and cultures has contributed to his global aesthetics and perspectives.

Cornejo lives and works in Brooklyn, Florida, Peru and UK. He has received awards and residencies from institutions including Creative Capital Foundation, New York Foundation for the Arts, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Center for Book Arts NY, Sculpture Space, British Council, Henry Moore Institute and Ministry of Education of Japan among others. He has participated in group exhibitions including: V Bienal Barro de America in Venezuela, The S-Files at the Museo del Barrio in New York and 2008 Busan Biennial in South Korea among others. He is assistant professor at the School of Art and Art History of the University of South Florida, Tampa. Cornejo's website HYPERLINK "http://www.cesarcornejo.com" www.cesarcornejo.com presents fuller views of his major art work and his activities, including his upcoming March – June 2012 exhibition in the monumental atrium at The World Bank in Washington, D.C.

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Cornejo's 80-page report on The Puno Museum of Contemporary Art for Creative Capital is online at Blurb.com. The New York Foundation for the Arts plays a role in accepting contributions for this project.
² Kiesler directed the Laboratory for Design Correlation at Columbia University's Architecture Department from 1937 to 1943.