

"Se compran colchones..." Informal Labor and Contemporary Mexican Art

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This article explores the intricate relationship between informal labor and contemporary Mexican art, tracing its evolution from the 1970s to the present through selected works. Informal labor, a significant socio-economic phenomenon in Mexico, encompasses unregulated, precarious forms of work that sustain millions of individuals while shaping the country's cultural and urban landscapes. Artists such as Francis Alÿs, Eduardo Abaroa, Gabriel Kuri, and Mauricio Limón de León have found in the dynamics of informal labor aesthetic elements that inform their artistic strategies.

The analysis begins with the artist collectives of the 1970s, which challenged institutional elitism through street exhibitions and community-based interventions. It then examines how later artists like Alÿs and Abaroa incorporated the precariousness of informal work into their creative practice. In the mid-2000s, Mauricio Limón de León proposed a more transparent relationship with informal laborers, integrating their strategies as a way of analyzing current Mexican society.

Keywords: informal labor, Mexican contemporary art, Francis Alÿs, Mauricio Limón de León, Los Grupos.

Introduction

“Se compran colchones, tambores, refrigeradores, estufas, lavadoras, microondas. O algo de fierro viejo que vendan” (“We buy mattresses, drums, refrigerators, stoves, washing machines, microwaves, or any scrap metal that you have to sell”). This is the chant that residents of Mexico City are accustomed to hearing blaring from loudspeakers mounted on car rooftops as they drive through the streets at all hours of the day. Sung in the unmistakable voice of María del Mar Terrón, the recording has become part of the city’s urban soundscape. María, like many other Mexicans, makes a living by buying and reselling anything she can collect from the streets—household appliances, abandoned office furniture, or scrap metal.

Hours later, residents and tourists alike may hear another signature cry—“The gas, the gas”—set to the beat of electronic music. The voices belong to informal sellers of gas cylinders who, unaffiliated with any service company, move from house to house offering their merchandise.

At night, just before falling asleep—or even while already asleep—you might be roused by yet another familiar announcement echoing through the streets: *“Ya llegaron los ricos tamales oaxaqueños”* (“Your delicious Oaxacan tamales have arrived”), advertising a specialty from the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca. These *tamales*—steamed corn parcels wrapped in banana leaves or corn husks—are a beloved traditional dish. But if the announcement wakes you and you are not in the mood for tamales, there is always another option for comfort food: a late-night quesadilla from a street stall, lovingly prepared by a *señora*—a respectful Spanish term for a mature woman—who cooks and serves on informal food stalls with warmth and authority. Her stall might be located just across from a funeral home, where even mourners—despite their grief—gather to eat, reminded that hunger does not pause, not even in mourning.

All these types of labor—purchasing and reselling goods, offering services, or selling food—fall within the framework of informal employment. The International Labor Organization defines informal employment as “all remunerative work (i.e., both self-employment and wage employment) that is not registered, regulated or protected by existing legal

or regulatory frameworks, as well as non-remunerative work undertaken in an income-producing enterprise. Informal workers do not have secure employment contracts, workers' benefits, social protection, or workers' representation."¹

According to Inegi (National Institute of Statistics and Geography) data from 2023, 55 percent of the Mexican population works informally.² At the same time, OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) reports that Mexicans work 2,226 hours per year. As one of the most labor-intensive countries in the world,³ it is therefore not surprising that the urban landscape of large cities such as Mexico City is shaped by informal labor: selling food and fruits, repairing things, polishing shoes, and more.

Informal labor—characterized by its precariousness, adaptability, and ingenuity—offers a rich source of aesthetic inspiration. Its inherent qualities of improvisation and resilience resonate with the experimental and unconventional strategies of contemporary artists like Eduardo Abaroa, Francis Alÿs, and Gabriel Kuri. These artists draw on the visual and performative language of informal labor—street vending, makeshift construction, or public space negotiation—to challenge traditional notions of artistic production and value.

Since the 1990s, Mexican art's engagement with informal labor has gained traction on the global stage, reflecting a broader interest in globalization, precarity, and urbanism. Works by Abaroa, Alÿs, and Kuri have been featured in major venues like Documenta, the Venice Biennale, and MoMA, where their focus on informal labor speaks to global issues of economic inequality and urban survival.

1 International Labor Organization, "Resolution Concerning Statistics of Employment in the Informal Sector, Adopted by the Fifteenth International Conference of Labor Statisticians," January 1993, https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40dgreports/%40stat/documents/normativeinstrument/wcms_087484.pdf.

2 Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), "Medición de la economía informal (MEI)," press release no. 824/23, 2023.

3 Marcus Lu, "Visualizing Annual Working Hours in OECD Countries," *Visual Capitalist*, July 31, 2023, <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/annual-working-hours-in-countries-2023>.

Los Grupos (1970–1986)

In the 1970s, a group of Mexican visual artists formed collectives that gave rise to a significant cultural movement known as Los Grupos, marking a pivotal chapter in the relationship between informal labor and artistic production. Collectives like Grupo Suma, Fotógrafos independientes, and Tepito Arte Acá rooted their practices in Mexico City's urban fabric, engaging directly with working-class communities and informal laborers. Moreover, with many of their members coming from working-class backgrounds, Los Grupos had an intimate understanding of the struggles of informal labor. This perspective informed their rejection of elitist art institutions and their embrace of collective, accessible, and politically charged practices. Their aim was to create art that reflected the realities of Mexican society marked by deep social unrest, mistrust in government, and political repression.⁴ Throughout the 1970s, the country experienced growing economic inequality, censorship, and surveillance.⁵

Los Grupos emerged within a broader context of Mexico's socio-political landscape shaped by the 1968 student movement, which marked the beginning of cultural transformations. These shifts became evident in legal reforms and the cultural practices of groups and individuals, emphasizing collective work and the re-signification of public space. As Mexican essayist and cultural analyst Carlos Monsiváis noted, the reclamation of streets and public spaces aligned with the 1968 student movement, representing a democratic affirmation with a fundamental demand for change.⁶

The artistic output of Los Grupos sought to identify alternatives to the models established by government cultural policies⁷ and to explore

4 Just a few years earlier, on October 2, 1968—under President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz and amid preparations for the Olympic Games—a student demonstration in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas was violently suppressed, resulting in a massacre that likely claimed hundreds of lives.

5 Fabiola Camacho Navarrete, “Construir sentido en la búsqueda de los lenguajes. Entrevista con Víctor Muñoz,” *Casa del Tiempo* V, no. 52 (2018): 41–47.

6 Carlos Monsiváis and Eugenia Huerta, *Historia mínima de la cultura Mexicana en el siglo XX* (Colegio de México, 2010), 429.

7 During this period, the government implemented special programs to support certain types of artistic production, including initiatives for “the new Mexican cinema” and financial aid for artists and intellectuals. However, these programs were criticized for their arbitrary nature and political objectives. See Bernardo Mabire, “Echeverría y el nacionalismo tercermundista,” in *Políticas Culturales y Educativas Del Estado Mexicano de 1970 a 1997* (El Colegio de Mexico, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvhn08ch.7>.

alternatives to the conventional art market. Instead of producing works solely for galleries or museums, Los Grupos organized urban interventions, street events, and community workshops.

Interventions in Public Space

El Grupo Suma (The Suma Group), active between 1976 and 1982, was formed following a visual experimentation and mural painting workshop led by Ricardo Rocha at the San Carlos School in Mexico City. The group included Mario Rangel Faz, Gabriel Macotela, Santiago Rebolledo, and Oliverio Hinojosa, among a total of eighteen students.⁸

At the request of the school management, Ricardo Rocha agreed to teach a mural class in his workshop, prompting him to revisit a program he had initially devised. In dialogue with the students, they decided to reinterpret the concept of the mural as a public act, introducing a more contemporary perspective. The students extended the parameters of their project beyond the conventional fresco mural into the streets of Mexico City, where they could engage with the urban environment and observe the reactions of passers-by.⁹

El Grupo Suma's artistic interventions staged in spaces like the Paseo de la Reforma and metro stations directly critiqued cultural exclusion and the precariousness of public space.¹⁰ Their objective was to facilitate an encounter between the works created by the students within an academic context and a broader public audience. Furthermore, they sought immediate feedback on how their ideas and images resonated with a diverse public.¹¹ By using the street as a stage for their actions, they blurred the

8 Olivier Debroye and Cuauhtémoc Medina, eds., *The Age of Discrepancies: Art and Visual Culture in Mexico, 1968–1997* (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Turner, 2014), 218.

9 Álvaro Vázquez Mantecón, "Los Grupos /// 1994 Álvaro Vázquez Mantecón," YouTube video, 59:32, posted August 15, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oldsZiduk5s>.

10 Olivier Debroye, and Cuauhtémoc Medina, *El Arte de Mostrar El Arte Mexicano: Ensayos Sobre Los Usos Y Desusos Del Exotismo En Tiempos de Globalización (1992–2007)* (Promotora Cultural Cubo Blanco, 2018), 100.

11 An important moment for the collective was their invitation to participate in the *X Biennale des Jeunes de Paris* in 1977. Assigned as curator, Helen Escobedo chose to present artist groups rather than individuals. In the context of the Biennial, *Grupo Suma* created an extensive installation inspired by the iconography of a religious altarpiece, incorporating a variety of testimonies, images, and found objects that evoked aspects of urban life in Mexico City.

boundaries between the work of the artist, typically confined to the academy and the studio, and the work of the everyday citizen in public space.

Social Mobilization

The integration of informal labor into the artistic practices of Los Grupos was facilitated by the social mobility of Mexico's middle and lower-middle classes,¹² which maintained cohesion through collective art practices. A prime example is the group Tepito Arte Acá, based in Tepito, a historic Mexico City neighborhood known as the Barrio Bravo ("Fierce Neighborhood") and renowned for its vibrant street markets, pirated goods, and centuries-old working-class traditions. Despite its association with crime, Tepito represents resilience and creativity, making it a fitting base for the Tepito Arte Acá collective.

In September 1973, Tepito Arte Acá organized its inaugural exhibition, *Conozca México, visite Tepito*, at Galería José María Velasco.¹³ The event featured works by artists Daniel Manrique, Julián Ceballos Casco, Armando Ramírez, Francisco Centeno Buhaira, Gustavo Bernal, and Francisco Martín Mata. Rather than presenting conventional artworks, the exhibition recreated elements of Tepito's daily life within the gallery space. Installations simulated local homes, street scenes, and markets, incorporating sound, color, and material culture that reflected the neighborhood's vibrant identity. *Conozca México, visite Tepito* bridged visual art with literature, theater, and popular culture, turning the gallery into a site of lived experience, and transporting "the daily lifestyle of the inhabitants of the neighborhood

12 Between the mid-20th century and the mid-1970s, the proportion of Mexicans identifying as middle class increased significantly. According to a study cited by Miguel Székely, around 1950 roughly 10% of the population considered themselves middle class (with approximately 3% upper class and the remainder living in poverty). By the mid-1970s, these proportions shifted to 25% middle class and roughly 60% in poverty, with the remaining 15% in the upper class. See Miguel Székely, "Pobreza y desigualdad en México entre 1950 y 2004," *El Trimestre Económico* 72, no. 288 (4) (2005): 913–31, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20856882>.

13 Since its founding in 1951 as one of Mexico's few *galerías populares*, the Galería José María Velasco has served as a crucial cultural outpost in Tepito. Originally conceived as part of a mid-century state effort to democratize access to contemporary art, the gallery gradually evolved into a public art space deeply entangled with the life and struggles of the surrounding community. See Guillermina Guadarrama, *La galería José María Velasco. Un espacio público de promoción cultural en Tepito* (CONACULTA – INBA, 2013).

of Tepito into the world of art, as one could see installations with neighborhood toilets, clotheslines with underwear, bird cages, flowerpots, and interior courtyards with all their sinks.”¹⁴

The event opened with the attendance of approximately 1,500 local residents, who felt connected to the exhibition because their daily lives were reflected in the artworks, transforming the gallery into a site of reunion between art and the community.

The exhibition, in addition to presenting an artistic vision of the Tepito neighborhood, also sought to challenge the prejudices and stigmatized representations associated with this area, which by the 1970s was widely known as the smuggling hub, referred to colloquially as *fayuca*. Artistic creativity became, and continues to be, a distinctive feature of Tepito.

Photography served as a key medium for Los Grupos to engage with urban spaces, creating intersections between artistic practice and diverse forms of labor. In 1976, Fotógrafos Independientes—a collective including Adolfo Patiño, Alberto Perdón, Miguel Fematt, and Rogelio Villarreal, among others—was formed to challenge the elitism of the art world. The group adopted unconventional modes of presentation, embracing an everyday aesthetic to connect with the public and mirror the visual language of informal labor. This approach disrupted the institutionalization of art by embedding it in popular contexts. The photographs often depicted themes of inequality and social struggle, resonating with the urban environments in which they were exhibited and redefining both the symbolic and economic value of artistic work.

As Rogelio Villarreal noted in his interview with Vázquez Mantecón, the group’s members, despite their differing perspectives, were united by their middle- or lower-middle-class backgrounds. This shared social context shaped their street-oriented vision, deeply rooted in popular culture, and underscored the interplay of personal experience, class, and creative expression in their work.¹⁵

Fotógrafos Independientes organized one hundred street exhibitions between 1976 and 1984, displaying photographs in a manner reminiscent of garments hung on clotheslines in an open-air setting. Between 1976

14 Eiji Fukushima Martínez, “Las Paredes Hablan con Tepito Arte Acá,” *Diseño en Síntesis*, no. 47–48 (2012): 98.

15 Vázquez Mantecón, “Los Grupos.”

and 1981 alone, the group held between 22 and 24 travelling exhibitions, beginning on April 8, 1976 and culminating in May 1981. These exhibitions took place in various locations across Mexico City, such as Tepito, La Merced, the Casa del Lago, the Museum of Modern Art, Bellas Artes, the Hemicycle a Juárez, and Xochimilco, among others. By moving around the city through different urban and popular spaces, the group aimed to bring photography directly to the public.

Precarity and Consumption

By 1977, approximately ten artist collectives were active in Mexico City, reflecting a vibrant and dynamic contemporary art scene. Recognizing the need to support innovative modes of artistic production within the national context, the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA, or National Institute of Fine Arts) established the Sección Experimental (Experimental Section) as part of the Salón Nacional de Artes Plásticas (National Salon of Fine Arts).¹⁶ This initiative, which ran from 1977 to 1979, aimed to provide a platform for both established and emerging collectives to explore avant-garde practices, thereby enriching Mexico's cultural landscape.

The introduction of the Sección Experimental in 1977 was a strategic response to this shifting artistic paradigm. By providing a dedicated space for experimentation within the framework of a nationally recognized event, it not only legitimized these novel practices but also facilitated their integration into Mexico's broader artistic discourse. The initiative attracted several established collectives and also gave rise to new ones, including *Peyote y la Compañía*, which emerged as a significant contributor to the experimental art scene.

Peyote y la Compañía, named after the nickname of its founder, Adolfo Patiño, was a collective that coalesced during the Sección Experimental.

16 The Salón Nacional de Artes Plásticas, organized by the INBA, was a prestigious annual exhibition that served as a cornerstone of Mexico's visual arts community. Established in the mid-20th century, the Salón was designed to showcase the nation's leading artistic talent, promote contemporary art, and foster dialogue between artists, critics, and the public. Traditionally, it featured works in conventional media such as painting and sculpture, which were evaluated by a panel of experts, with awards conferred to outstanding contributions. By the 1970s, however, the rise of experimental and interdisciplinary practices—such as performance, installation, and conceptual art—prompted the INBA to adapt the Salón's format to accommodate these emerging trends.

Composed of several members from the Fotógrafos Independientes, a group known for its innovative approaches to photography, Peyote y la Compañía distinguished itself through its interdisciplinary practice and critical engagement with socio-economic issues. Their work frequently explored themes of economic precarity and the dynamics of consumption, reflecting the socio-political realities of late-1970s Mexico.¹⁷ These themes resonated with the broader context of the period, characterized by economic challenges and rapid urbanization, which profoundly influenced cultural production.

In 1979, Peyote y la Compañía presented their seminal work, *Art-espectáculo: Tragodia II*, as part of the Salón Nacional de Artes Plásticas' Sección Experimental in Mexico City.¹⁸ This installation-performance, a hallmark of the collective's practice, embodied a critical engagement with the socio-economic transformations of the era, particularly the encroaching influence of global consumer culture. The work consisted of a pyramidal altar, reminiscent of a Day of the Dead *ofrenda*, adorned with an eclectic array of consumer objects. These included stamps, unpainted drawings, prints, old frames, photographs, broken mannequins, small *milagros*, flag fragments, sugar skulls, images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and flowers, among others. The assemblage, evocative of Claes Oldenburg's *The Store* (1961), was marked by the artists' interventions, which imbued the objects with subversive meanings through sarcastic inscriptions and visual modifications.

Unlike earlier works by Los Grupos, which often focused on localized socio-political issues, *Art-espectáculo: Tragodia II* transcended parochial concerns to address the tensions between global and local cultural dynamics. The work's critical stance was particularly evident in its treatment of imported consumer goods, predominantly from the United States, which featured prominently in the installation. As art historian Olivier Debroise observes, the pyramidal structure, covered with modified commercial products, served as a critique of U.S. cultural imperialism. The artists' interventions—including images and phrases that mocked consumerist excesses—highlighted the pervasive influence of foreign goods on Mexican society, foreshadowing the economic and cultural shifts that would intensify in the subsequent decade.¹⁹

17 Debroise and Medina, *El Arte de Mostrar*, 99.

18 Debroise and Medina, *The Age of Discrepancies*, 234.

19 *Ibid.*, 208.

The collective's focus on societal transformations, including the emergence of new labor forms and the growing dominance of imported products, proved prescient. By the 1980s, Mexico's market became increasingly saturated with U.S. goods,²⁰ a trend that culminated in the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. The influx of foreign products, characterized by superior quality and competitive pricing, reshaped consumer preferences, often at the expense of local industries. As a result, many Mexican companies faced insurmountable challenges, leading to widespread closures or acquisitions by foreign entities. This economic reconfiguration contributed to rising unemployment, underemployment, and the expansion of informal labor markets—phenomena that Peyote y la Compañía's work anticipated with remarkable clarity.

Informal labor, with its uncertainty and resilience, is far more than an economic phenomenon in Mexican art—it serves as a wellspring of aesthetic and cultural meaning. Los Grupos' urban, activist practices in the 1970s laid the foundation for this discourse, which artists like Abaroa, Alÿs, and Kuri have since expanded into global conversations.

Precarity as Creative Methodology

Created between 1991 and 1993, Eduardo Abaroa's *Obelisco roto portátil para mercados ambulantes* (Portable Broken Obelisk for Street Markets) is a sculptural installation that engages with the socio-economic dynamics of informal labor in Mexico. Measuring 499 x 211 x 211 cm, the work is constructed from a metal frame and plastic film—materials identical to those used in the assembly of stalls in *tianguis*, the traditional Mexican street markets. The term *tianguis*, derived from the Nahuatl word for marketplace, reflects a historical continuity from pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica to

20 Between 1970 and 1990, Mexico transitioned from a closed economic model with low and highly regulated imports, to one based on free trade, marked by record levels and a wide diversity of imported goods. Throughout these decades, the United States remained the main supplier of goods imported by Mexico, given the geographical proximity and growing economic integration. In 1970, Mexico imported just \$2.46 billion in goods. At the end of the 1970s, imports increased rapidly: for example, by 1979, they reached \$12.086 billion. There was a spectacular leap at the beginning of the 1980s, surging to \$28,462 billion in 1981, driven in part by the oil boom and foreign debt. "Resumen Del Comercio México," WITS, accessed April 30, 2025, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/es/Country/MEX/Year/1990/Summarytext>.

contemporary urban contexts. Abaroa's installation is a deliberate reinterpretation of Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk* (1963–1967), a monumental sculpture measuring 749 x 318 x 318 cm— one and a half times larger than Abaroa's work. While Newman's obelisks occupy prestigious sites such as the atrium of the Rothko Chapel in Houston and the esplanade of the University of Washington in Seattle, Abaroa's obelisk was strategically placed on wheels in a marketplace along Avenida IMAN in Mexico City, embedding it within the everyday environment of informal commerce.

Obelisco roto portátil para mercados ambulantes employs a material isomorphism, replicating the structural components of *tianguis* stalls— metal tubes and plastic sheeting—to evoke the physical and economic realities of street markets. This choice of materials not only grounds the work in the vernacular aesthetics of informal trade but also underscores its mobility and adaptability, qualities inherent to the *tianguis* economy. By reimagining Newman's monumental, static obelisk as a portable, market-bound structure, Abaroa subverts the modernist reverence for permanence and institutional prestige, redirecting attention to the transient and precarious nature of informal labor.

The work engages with the contradictions embedded in Mexico's informal economy, which serves as a critical site of economic activity for a significant portion of the population. Informal markets like *tianguis* operate outside formal tax regulations and intellectual property protections, enabling broad access to affordable food and commodities. However, this accessibility comes at the cost of economic instability for vendors, who often lack social protections and operate in a legally ambiguous space.

In his interview with Valeriia Baklan, Abaroa states:

Outdoor markets are an example of the informal economy that has been a growing problem for Mexico City for forty years. As much as 38% of economic transactions in the country occur without paying taxes [...]. People can buy cheaper local agricultural products, counterfeit goods, and pirate music and DVDs [...].²¹

21 Valeriia Baklan, "Inwiefern ist der 'Obelisco roto' von Eduardo Abaroa politisch geprägt?" (Bachelor's thesis, Goethe Universität Frankfurt, 2018), 17.

Newman's monumental sculpture, fabricated from three tons of weathering steel, embodies a modernist aesthetic rooted in permanence, universality, and metaphysical transcendence. As described by Robert Hughes, Newman's work produces "a life-affirming image of transcendence,"²² its abstract form and imposing materiality reflecting the technological and economic prowess of advanced capitalist economies. In contrast, Abaroa's installation—constructed from lightweight metal tubes and plastic film, materials typical of Mexico's *tianguis*—embraces the temporal and spatial mobility of informal employment, subverting the static monumentality of Newman's sculpture and its presumed neutrality.

Abaroa's intervention extends beyond materiality to a conceptual critique of the narratives surrounding Western art. As he articulated in a 2015 conversation with Marian de Abiega Forcén, his aim is to "sabotage in different ways the prefabricated artistic heroism"²³ and to question interpretive frameworks that tether artworks to metaphysical meanings. The Western art canon, exemplified by figures like Newman, often constructs the artist as a solitary, transcendent figure whose work operates independently of socio-economic constraints. Abaroa disrupts this myth by foregrounding the lived realities of Mexican artists, many of whom are casual laborers navigating informal economies. His *Obelisco roto portátil* thus serves as a counter-narrative, emphasizing survival and adaptability over abstract universalism.

Informal Labor on the Stage of Global Art

Francis Alÿs, a Belgian-born architect who relocated to Mexico in 1986 as part of an international mission to aid in the reconstruction of Mexico City following the 1985 earthquake, frequently centers his artistic practice on the dynamics of informal labor and urban culture. His work *Turista* (1994), documented through a photograph, exemplifies this focus by engaging with the informal economy of Mexico City while interrogating his own positionality as a foreigner.

22 Robert Hughes, "Art: Pursuit of the Sublime," *Time*, October 18, 1971, <https://time.com/archive/6843969/art-pursuit-of-the-sublime/>.

23 Marian de Abiega Forcén, "Entrevista: Eduardo Abaroa," *Revista de Arte Ibero Nierika*, no. 8 (2015), http://www.iberopublicaciones.com/artes/volumenes_anteriores.php?id_volumen=6.

In the photograph documenting *Turista*, Alÿs stands at the center of a group of five men, posed against the wrought-iron balustrade of the Zócalo with the Metropolitan Cathedral visible in the background. Each man, including Alÿs, holds a sign indicating their profession, a common practice among informal workers in the area. From left to right, the signs read: “PLOMERO” (plumber), “GAS” (gas technician), “TURISTA” (tourist), “PINTOR YESERO” (painter and dry wall expert), and “CAÑO” (pipeline). Alÿs’s sign, “TURISTA”, is written in red on a white background and placed at his feet, distinguishing him from the workers whose signs reflect their practical trades. Notably, a green bag labeled “PLOMERO” (plumber) sits beside the man on the far left, suggesting the presence of an absent plumber.

The composition of the photograph captures the interactions among the men. On the far left, a man identified as an electrician sits on the balustrade, facing Alÿs. Next to him, a smaller man, identified as a plasterer and painter, gestures animatedly while speaking to Alÿs, who listens attentively behind sunglasses. To Alÿs’s right, a gray-haired man, whose sign indicates expertise in pipes and cables, appears reflective, having stepped slightly to the left of his sign as if drawn into the conversation. On the far right, another electrician leans against the railing, his posture suggesting a mix of skepticism and disinterest.

Turista transcends mere irony, as Alÿs’s act of presenting himself as a “tourist” alongside informal workers serves as a profound reflection on his dual role as an artist and a foreigner in Mexico. By aligning himself with laborers in the Zócalo, Alÿs blurs the boundaries between leisure and labor, contemplation and intervention, thereby questioning the nature of his artistic practice. The photograph becomes a performative confession of how his role as a curious observer of Mexico City’s everyday life has evolved into a form of occupation, positioning him as a “privileged witness” to the region’s socio-cultural dynamics.

In a 2007 interview with Russell Ferguson, Alÿs elaborated on the intentions behind *Turista*, noting that the performance was designed to “test his own condition as a foreigner, as a *gringo*,”²⁴ probing whether he truly belongs to Mexico or remains an external observer. By offering his

24 Russell Ferguson, “Interview with Russell Ferguson,” in *Francis Alÿs*, ed. Cuahémoc Medina (Phaidon, 2007), 11.

services as a tourist in the midst of carpenters, plumbers, and other laborers, Alÿs oscillates between the roles of participant and spectator, challenging conventional distinctions between work and idleness.

The pervasive presence of informal employment in Mexico forms a critical foundation for Francis Alÿs's artistic practice, enabling him to position his work as a form of service while interrogating the structures of modernity. Alÿs, who arrived in Mexico in 1986, consistently juxtaposes modernist discourses—particularly their rigid regulations of space and time—with the alternative temporal and spatial models embedded in Mexico's informal economy. These models, exemplified by the adaptability and resilience of informal labor, offer subtle resistance to the homogenizing tendencies of modernist orders. While Alÿs does not explicitly critique Mexico's economic and social conditions, his work is inseparable from these realities, as the socio-economic tensions of everyday life inevitably permeate the contexts in which his art is situated.

Alÿs's engagement with informal labor extends to his 1991 project *El mentiroso, la copia del mentiroso* (The Liar, the Copy of the Liar), which exemplifies his collaborative approach with *rotuladores* (commercial sign painters). In this body of work, Alÿs begins with small oil paintings based on transfer drawings, which he then commissions *rotuladores* to enlarge and reinterpret. This process challenges traditional notions of authorship by fostering a dialogue between the artist and the commercial painters, who represent a pre-capitalist trade in Mexico City. Curator Cuauhtémoc Medina, a frequent collaborator with Alÿs, interprets this project as a political act that disrupts the hierarchies between conceptual art and popular culture.²⁵ By facilitating a mutual process of copying and reinterpretation, Alÿs creates an aesthetic and social community, transforming the popular genre of sign-painting into a medium for conceptual expression. This collaboration not only elevates the *rotuladores*' craft but also establishes a cultural sub-tradition with artistic and political implications, bridging the gap between high art and vernacular practices.

In his 1994 performance *Turista*, Alÿs stands among informal workers who advertise their trades through handmade signs, or *rótulos*, crafted by

25 Cuauhtémoc Medina, *Abuso Mutuo: Ensayos E Intervenciones Sobre Arte Postmexicano (1992–2013)* (Promotora Cultural Cubo Blanco, 2017), 199.

rotuladores—specialized typographers operating within the informal sector. These *rótulos*, a cultural hallmark of Mexico's informal economy, reflect survival strategies that Alÿs integrates into his work, merging the temporal and spatial dynamics of informal labor with contemporary art practices. This engagement with informal labor not only informs Alÿs's artistic methodology but also contributes to a redefinition of Mexicanity within the global art arena. As Alÿs's work gained international prominence through early participation in biennials around the turn of the millennium, informal employment became aestheticized as a distinctive element of Mexican identity, often overshadowing its underlying economic and social challenges.²⁶

Curator Cuauhtémoc Medina often frames Francis Alÿs's incorporation of informal labor into his artistic practice as a political gesture that challenges modernist structures. However, this interpretation may overlook deeper social and economic implications of such collaborations, prompting alternative readings of Alÿs's work. One perspective considers whether his engagement with informal laborers reflects a form of solidarity among guilds. As an artist familiar with the precarity of creative labor, Alÿs might be seen as supporting other informal workers through commissions, contracts, and collaborative projects. Alternatively, Alÿs's practice could be understood through the lens of isomorphism—an inherent alignment where art and artist are inseparable from the dynamics of informal labor. In this view, the integration of informal labor is not a deliberate choice but an inevitable reflection of the socio-economic realities that permeate life in Mexico, particularly within Mexico City's urban landscape.

This raises a critical question for reception theory: To whom is Alÿs speaking when he exposes the failures of modernism? Is his critique directed at the European or North American curator who recognizes the fractures in modernity's narrative? Or does it address a broader global intellectual class already aware of modernism's shortcomings?

26 It is worth mentioning that alongside Francis Alÿs, Santiago Sierra also addressed the dynamics of precarious labor through works that employed provocative strategies such as hiring informal workers for specific tasks. These pieces questioned labor exploitation and the role of art in the global economy. Sierra's work, however, exploits unemployment by creating forms of occupation in which participants are paid to perform banal or demeaning activities. Debroise and Medina, *El Arte de Mostrar*, 163.

A significant tension in Alÿs's engagement with informal laborers lies in their frequent invisibility within his work. While laborers appear in photographic documentation, such as in *Turista* (1994), or serve as executors of artistic actions, their individual identities, names, and personal narratives are often omitted. For instance, in a 2007 interview with Russell Ferguson, Alÿs refers to the workers in *Turista* as including carpenters, despite none of the individuals depicted in the photograph identifying as such. This misidentification, whether intentional or inadvertent, underscores a broader issue of erasure within socially engaged art. The laborers, despite their central role in Alÿs's performances, are rendered anonymous, their contributions subsumed into the artist's broader conceptual framework.

This erasure raises critical questions about authorship, representation, and the ethical dimensions of visibility. By prioritizing his own narrative as a tourist or observer, Alÿs risks perpetuating the very hierarchies he seeks to challenge, positioning the laborers as mere props in his exploration of modernity and identity. The lack of acknowledgment of their personal stories or agency prompts a reconsideration of the ethical responsibilities of artists working with marginalized communities, particularly within the context of informal labor, where visibility and recognition can have significant social and economic implications.

Making Informal Labor Visible: Mauricio Limón De León

Rejecting the folklorization of informal labor seen in earlier Mexican art—such as Gabriel Kuri's 1998 *Chicharrón* sculpture, which aestheticized market produce for museum display—Mauricio Limón de León's artistic practice represents a significant evolution in the trajectory of Mexican contemporary art, particularly in its engagement with informal labor. Limón de León consciously resists the commodification of marginalized communities' struggles. Extractivism²⁷ in art—a process that appropriates the cultural, social, and political energies of these communities—often transforms

27 The term "cultural extraction" differs from "cultural appropriation" in that it denotes a logic of extractivism reproduced within cultural and artistic practices. This logic is based on the exploitation of resources, aiming to extract as much material as possible to maximize profit. Extractivism also implies the removal of natural resources from their place of origin, which inevitably displaces the economic benefits they offer. See Anna Willow, *Understanding ExtrACTIVEISM. Culture and Power in Natural Resource Disputes* (Routledge, 2019).

their contextually rich expressions into marketable, formalistic works detached from their historical and political roots. This practice, prevalent in earlier Mexican art, re-packages social struggles as aesthetic elements aimed at elite tastes, reinforcing existing power structures and perpetuating cultural exploitation.²⁸

Over the past two decades, Mauricio Limón de León has developed a distinct and socially engaged artistic practice, particularly in his exploration of informal employment and the lives of those who perform it. His 2006 video *El Coro Bizco Merolico* (The Merolico Cross-eyed Choir) exemplifies this focus, drawing from his intimate familiarity with Line 2 of the Mexico City Metro—a space he navigated during long commutes to secondary school. In this project, Limón de León collaborates with metro vendors to form a choir, blending the baroque tradition of counterpoint with the quotidian rhythms of informal labor. The two-and-a-half-minute video captures seven vendors performing a coordinated progression of product announcements, their overlapping voices creating a soundscape that mirrors the auditory chaos of Mexico City's metro stations and historic center.

A distinctive element of *El Coro Bizco Merolico* is its setting: an Art Deco bathroom, a choice that carries profound cultural and historical resonance in the context of Mexico City. Art Deco, which flourished in Mexico during the 1920s and 1930s, emerged as a prominent architectural and design style during a period of rapid modernization following the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920). Art Deco spaces in Mexico City, with their connotations of modernity and exclusivity, were historically tied to the socio-economic elite—those who could afford to inhabit or frequent such aesthetically refined environments. By staging the vendors' performance in this setting, Limón de León juxtaposes the opulence and cultural prestige associated with Art Deco against the precarious, often marginalized existence of metro vendors.

To realize this project, Limón de León navigated the complex organizational structures of the Line 2 vendors, which operate as a form of informal unionism. These self-regulated systems enforce territorial control, regulate vendor numbers, and maintain price stability, reflecting a

28 Jorge Sanguino, "El formalismo de los niños globales, los followers de la clase media y la extracción estética de los marginalizados: el nuevo régimen estético," *Esfera Pública*, January 9, 2022, <https://esferapublica.org/el-formalismo-de-los-ninos-ricos/>.

sophisticated network of collective governance. Gaining access required negotiating with the chief of the Line 2 vendors, a process in which Limón de León demonstrated his ability to bridge socio-cultural divides by using street slang to earn trust and acceptance. Ultimately, seven vendors participated, their voices weaving together in a performance that Limón de León describes as capturing the urban vibrancy of Mexico City's metro stations and historic center, while also confronting the contrast between access to high culture and the daily realities of informal labor.

El Coro Bizco Merolico interrogates the structures underpinning informal employment, such as territorial organization and collective regulation, while raising broader questions about social stratification and the role of art in engaging with marginalized communities.

Following *El Coro Bizco Merolico*, Limón de León embarked on a more sustained engagement with informal labor after his encounter with El Flama, a windshield washer and car caretaker from the densely populated municipality of Iztapalapa. During this chance meeting, El Flama jokingly likened the artist to Jesus Christ due to Limón de León's red hair and green eyes, sparking a collaboration that lasted more than a decade.

El Flama's neighborhood, Iztapalapa, is notable for its annual theatrical staging of the Passion of Christ during Holy Week—a tradition deeply embedded in the community's identity.²⁹ This context gave deeper meaning to El Flama's jest, as Limón de León saw an opportunity to develop an artistic project grounded in a profound engagement with his collaborator's lived experiences.³⁰

His engagement with La Flama and his friends began with regular drawing sessions held three to four times per week. During these sessions, Limón de León created portraits and images that the El Flama and his community used to produce personalized T-shirts and hats.

29 Limón de León's ongoing collaboration with El Flama has evolved to encompass broader narratives about Iztapalapa. Between 2022 and 2025, the artist documented the production of the neighborhood's Passion of Christ performance, highlighting communal decision-making, resource allocation, and the informal labor sustaining this monumental event. These efforts contextualize the lives of his collaborators within the larger framework of Iztapalapa's social and cultural dynamics, emphasizing the interplay of tradition, community, and survival in precarious conditions.

30 Mauricio Limón de León and Marco Calderón, "Conversación Con Mauricio Limón y Marco Calderón," moderated by Instituto Cultural de México in Madrid, posted April 28, 2021, video, 1:15:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQQzVYfPRSE&t=515s>.

This collaborative approach expanded into video projects, including *Hey You Listen to Me* (2011), which features El Flama and his friend El Gordo performing scenes drawn from their daily lives as street vendors. The video juxtaposes the harsh realities of informal labor with humor and irony, incorporating stylistic elements reminiscent of music videos to craft an unconventional yet humanizing portrayal. Through playful and intimate interactions, Limón de León highlights the resilience and humanity of the vendors, challenging reductive stereotypes by presenting their lives with depth and agency.

In *Le Premier Qui Rira* (The First to Laugh, 2012), Limón de León further explores the dynamics of play and performance. The video captures El Flama and El Gordo engaged in a French children's game, *Le Premier Qui Rira*, in which participants face each other, often holding their chins, and attempt to maintain a serious expression; the first to laugh loses.

The video depicts El Flama and El Gordo standing in a barren, hilly landscape, enclosed by a low stone wall, beneath a cloudy sky. Both men are dressed in formal black suits and ties, attire typically associated with professional or business settings rather than the everyday clothing of informal laborers such as street vendors. The contrast between formal suits and the harshness of their lived experiences sets the stage for the deeper vulnerability that unfolds.

As they play the game, El Flama and El Gordo stare intently at each other while holding their chins, their expressions teetering between focus and suppressed amusement. Set against the backdrop of a fading sunset, the scene transitions from playful competition to profound introspection. As the game progresses, the participants begin removing their suits piece by piece, an act that symbolically sheds the external markers of this temporary role-play. This undressing reveals the physical scars of their hard lives on the street—most notably on El Flama, who bears the marks of a past shooting he survived. The gradual disrobing, culminating in stillness as night falls, mirrors a shift from lighthearted interaction to a raw, reflective state, exposing the toll of their labor-intensive and often dangerous existence.

Reframing Informal Labor in Mexican Contemporary Art

The various artistic practices examined in this essay reveal a sustained engagement with informal labor, allowing us to understand this connection as a defining—yet underexplored—feature of contemporary Mexican art. Historically, this relationship can be traced back to Los Grupos, whose search for alternative modes of exhibition and audience interaction within the urban fabric of Mexico City led to direct dialogue with informal laborers inhabiting those same public spaces. This early engagement set a precedent for subsequent generations. In the 1990s, artists such as Francis Alÿs, Eduardo Abaroa, Gabriel Kuri, and others further developed this relationship, incorporating informal economies and precarious labor conditions as central themes and agents within their conceptual and material practices.

However, questions of visibility and the recognition of co-creation with informal workers were largely absent at the very moment when these bodies of work began to circulate internationally—appearing in major biennials and entering the global art market. This asymmetry underscores a persistent tension between artistic representation and the socio-economic realities of those whose labor or presence is embedded within the work, but who remain unacknowledged within its institutional reception.

Limón de León's work marks a deliberate shift toward ethical engagement, centering the voices, agency, and lived experiences of informal laborers. Through projects like *El Coro Bizco Merolico* (2006), in which he collaborated with Mexico City metro vendors to create a baroque-inspired soundscape in an art deco bathroom, and his long-term partnership with street vendors El Flama and El Gordo in videos such as *Hey You Listen to Me* (2011) and *Le Premier Qui Rira* (2012), Limón de León prioritizes sustained relationships and reciprocity. His approach avoids romanticized narratives of precarity, instead foregrounding the complexities of informal economies—such as the vendors' self-regulated systems of territorial control and price stability—and the resilience, humor, and vulnerability of his collaborators.

Limón's proposal should not be interpreted as antagonistic toward earlier artistic practices but rather as a critical opportunity to reassess contemporary Mexican art as a field marked by a heightened social consciousness.

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Santrauka

„Se compran colchones...”: neoficialus darbas ir šiulaikinis Meksikos menas

Jorge M. Sanguino

Reikšminiai žodžiai: neoficialus darbas, šiulaikinis Meksikos menas, Francis Aljės, Mauricio Limón de León, „Los Grupos“.

Straipsnyje analizuojama, kaip formavosi Meksikos neoficialus darbas – nereguliuojamo, nestabilaus darbo sistema, kurioje dalyvauja daugiau nei pusė šalies darbo jėgos, ir kaip ji atsispindėjo šiulaikiniame Meksikos mene nuo XX a. 8 deš. iki šių dienų. Pradedant „Los Grupos“ kolektyvais, menininkai atmetė institucinį elitizmą ir viešąsias erdves pavertė kolektyvinių veiksmų platformomis. Tokios grupės kaip „Grupo Suma“, „Fotografos Independientes“ ir „Tepito Arte Acá“ nutiesė naujus tiltus tarp meno ir miesto darbininkų klasės gyvenimo, tiesiogiai perkeldamos neoficialios ekonomikos estetiką bei socialinę-politinę tikrovę į gatvės erdves.

Nuo XX a. paskutinio dešimtmečio tokie menininkai kaip Eduardo Abaroa ir Francis Aljės tęsia šias tradicijas. Pasitelkdamas kasdienę Meksikos *tianguis* (gatvės turgaus) materialiąją kalbą, Abaroa kūrinyje *Obelisco roto portátil para mercados ambulantes* permąsto monumentaliąją modernistinę skulptūrą, kritiškai reflektuodamas ekonominio nestabilumo idėjas. Aljės darbai – pavyzdžiui, *Turista* bei bendradarbiavimas su *rotuladores* (iškabų piešėjais) – ištrina ribas tarp conceptualaus meno ir neoficialios prekybos, tačiau kartu kelia etinius klausimus apie matomumą ir autorystę, nes darbininkų indėlis pasaulinėje meno sistemoje dažnai lieka neįvardytas.

Kitokį posūkį žymi Mauricio Limón de Leónas, kurio kūryba grindžiama etiškomis, ilgalaikėmis bendradarbiavimo praktikomis su neoficialiais darbininkais, pavyzdžiui, jo dešimtmetį trukusia partnerystę su El Flama – automobilių stiklų plovėju iš Iztapalapos. Tokiuose darbuose kaip *El Coro Bizco Merolico* ir *Hey You Listen to Me* Limón de Leónas parodo, kad neoficiali ekonomika pasižymi sudėtingomis savireguliacijos ir kolektyvinėmis struktūromis, kurios kvestionuoja supaprastintus nestabilumo darbo

rinkoje įvaizdžius ir priešinasi išnaudojančiai estetikai, dažnai marginalizuotą darbą paverčiančiai preke.

Tirdamas neoficialaus darbo ir meninės praktikos sąveiką, straipsnio autorius siūlo naują šiuolaikinio Meksikos meno analizės perspektyvą ir parodo, kaip šio santykio pokyčiai formuoja dabartinius socialinius įsipareigojimus šiame sektoriuje.