

# Cosmic Fractures: Beatriz Cortez's Simultaneous Realities

**Raquel Gutiérrez** | March 23, 2016





Beatriz Cortez, "Black Mirror." Multimedia installation: steel, automotive paint, found audio recording. Cer MacDevitt.

In artist Beatriz Cortez's installations, cracks and crevices are a consistent clue to the fractured existence she has experienced in her life. Cortez's work is greatly impacted by her migration from El Salvador to the United States and the civil war

she endured, escaped, and left behind. "All of my friends were being murdered. There was no way I could stay," Cortez tells me as we walk through her Los Angeles area studio, which contains many versions of her flight-into-exile narrative. Her installation work "Hideout," revisits the stinging memory of hiding in a small crawlspace to avoid the whirring bullets flying past her. She re-fashions the ramshackle structure, inviting spectators to crawl inside and imagine the gestures of war rage in this now ambivalent space positioned in a gallery. Through cracks in the wall, observers can see the world through a sliver. The interrupted view is much like her own life.

She came to the U.S. in 1989, after the "final offensive" in San Salvador, a guerrilla intervention, led by the various factions united as the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, which disrupted the country's presidential elections, signaling the bloody end of the country's 12-year civil war.

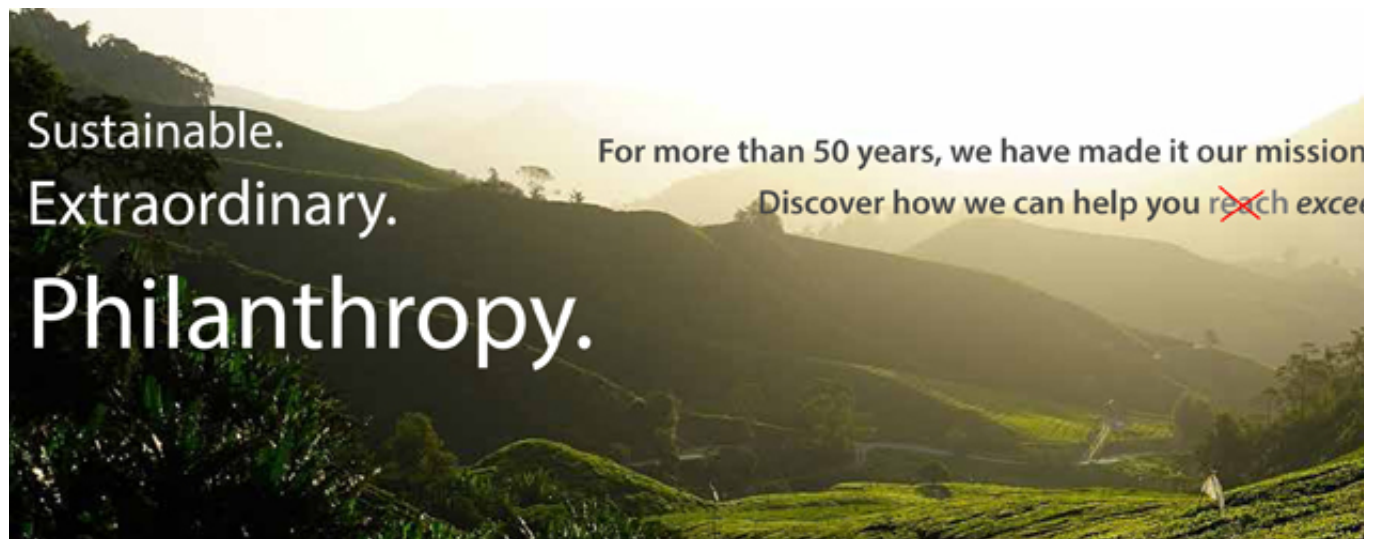
Later, she earned her PhD in Latin American literature from Arizona State University. After a stint teaching Central American literature in Detroit, she came to Los Angeles, becoming a professor of Central American studies at California State University, Northridge.

As an immigrant artist, Cortez says that living in Arizona taught her about how difficult it is for immigrants to negotiate daily life in an environment often hostile to outsiders. “The community of students [at Mesa Community College in Arizona] really helped me survive the shock of immigration in a most creative environment,” Cortez said. It was there where she was simultaneously having trouble appreciating the beauty of the desert and missing the green of the tropics. “I remember drawing the moving shadows of multiple moons made by the light of a solar eclipse moving through the branches of a tree, or us trying to paint that very landscape that immigrants find when crossing the border.”



Beatriz Cortez, "Hideout/Guarida." An exploration of space and the human condition throughout the exper

Cortez offers that her experience as a cultural critic impacts her work through an abounding relationship to theory that serves as a creative motor. "Many of the ideas about the cosmos, the future, becoming, play,

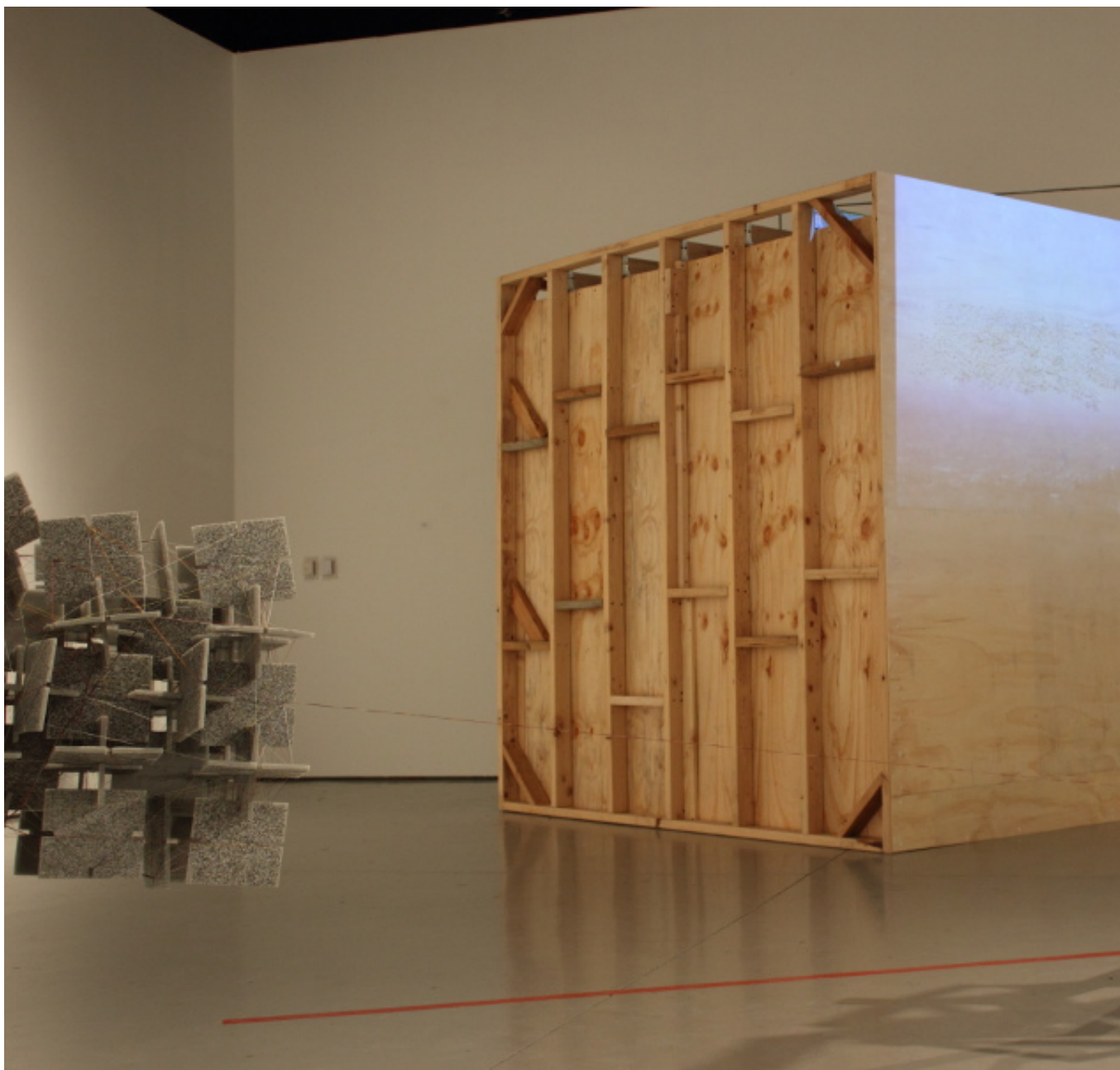


the posthuman, or the mechanic eye come from my inner conversations with Spinoza, Deleuze, Agamben, Braidotti,” Cortez says. “It is really interesting to find the connection between my life as an immigrant and my past as a person who grew up in a war, and my ideas about the future, all connected to the philosophy that I read.”

There is an expansiveness of grief and mourning embedded in Cortez’s installations. “In the middle of the loss there is always some life and some joy that pops up in my work,” she says. “I’m always thinking about the future, death and the cosmos, play and virtual reality, as well as the past being still here in the present, or the coexistence of different temporalities.”

Her piece “The Time Machine,” ruminates on the expansiveness of longing that exists in the rearview mirror of the immigrant’s memory.

This piece recreates a birds-eye view of San Salvador at night, lights dotting the purview while the viewer swings on the swing inside the large box-like structure -- the last site the Salvadoran immigrant sees while leaving home under duress. On the other side of the installation the dots splinter over a projection of Griffith Park overlooking Hollywood -- home to a large Central American community. A community that, in Cortez's rendering, continues to seek out a present interrupted by that constant longing that hiccups itself into relief.



Beatriz Cortez, "The Time Machine/ La máquina del tiempo." Multimedia installation. 6 x 8 x 8 feet.

After so many years of not feeling displaced, Cortez says Los Angeles has finally become home, while she simultaneously thinks of El Salvador as her home. "I think the technological possibilities, the friendships, the ways in which we are in two places at once has greatly impacted my work," Cortez says.

Simultaneity, the sense of being in



two places or two different moments in time at once, is another theme that emerges consistently in her work. In her turn towards it, Cortez makes the past visible and alive by establishing connections to daily life around her.

In her archival work, she is currently exploring the history and politics of vocational school. “Black Mirror,” her latest large-scale installation that looks like a futuristic multi-sided hedron structure, is part of “Your Life’s Work,” a series that she says “explores the way vocational education was conceived as part of a plan for population control that put into practice ideas about the predetermination of people’s lives that were inherited from colonial times and then recycled into modern national discourse.” This series takes a cue from Cortez’s background as an educator at one of Los Angeles’ largest working class universities, where the role of education still seems to gesture towards the “predetermination of different groups of people based on divisions of class and race.”



Beatriz Cortez, "Black Mirror." Multimedia installation: steel, automotive paint, found audio recording. Cer



Beatriz Cortez, "Unknown/Desconocida." Wire, soil, paste, grass seeds.



Beatriz Cortez, "The Untimely Conversation Box/La caja de la conversaci3n a distiempo." Interactive sculpture (CalArts). February 21-February 27, 2015.

*Top image: Beatriz Cortez, "The Time Machine/La m1quina del tiempo." Multimedia installation. 6 x 8 x 8 feet.*