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LATAMesa

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NAVIGATING THE ETHICS OF DOING IN PARTICIPATORY ART

FROM *THE* EDITOR

LATAMesa is a curatorial initiative founded in 2023 by Carolina Orlando and Pilar Seivane with a clear mission: to build and sustain a strong network among Latin American artists and art professionals based in London. Our objective is to foster connections among individuals rooted in Latin American identities, diaspora communities, and supportive structures. At our core, we prioritise collaborative work and embrace notions of community and solidarity.

Our recently launched editorial section is dedicated to featuring and showcasing one artist each month, amplifying Latin American voices in the process. We believe in the power of fostering a space for conversation among individuals, opening new discourses, and delving further into the professional art practices within LATAMesa's artistic network.

Caro & Pilar

LATAMesa's founders



ISSUE #2

JOSÉ GARCÍA OLIVA

Navigating the ethics of doing in participatory art

Join us in this conversation with London based Venezuelan artists José García Oliva at his studio in Gaswork. We dive into his practices and standpoints when committing in collaborative art practices, debating terms as community and resistance in his work. This open interview explores his participatory and research-based art, encompassing drawing, painting, and performance. José examines themes such as identity and labour, with an interest in unveiling societal hierarchies and traces of colonial legacies and power dynamics.

Currently engaged in Gasworks' 8-month Participation Residency Artist Programme, José has previously undertaken residencies at Casa Wabi in Oaxaca, Mexico, SOMA in Mexico, Lancaster Arts and The Muse Gallery in London in 2022. His exhibitions span the UK and international venues, paralleled by his involvement in cultural and social initiatives with entities like One Housing, Fusée de Détresse, Justice4Grenfell, CAIWU, and IWGB.

He holds an MA from the Royal College of Arts, London, and a BA from Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Madrid. Currently, he serves as the course leader for MA Visual Communications at Ravensbourne University and works as an associate lecturer at Kingston School of Art.





Artist portrait at his studio in London, photo by Betty Brunfaut
(Copyright © José García Oliva, 2022)

LATAMesa: You have a background in Fine Arts from the University of Rey Juan Carlos in Madrid and in visual communications from RCA. A significant portion of your practice is now research based incorporating participatory methods. Can you share more about your artistic journey? When did your interest in themes like identity and labour begin? Was this a subject that intrigued you during your time in Spain, or do you feel it emerged or intensified during your stay in London?

José García Oliva: I spent my entire life in Venezuela until I turned 17, and that's when I moved to Spain. I was fortunate to receive a scholarship from the Ministry of Education, and I spent four years there, all on my own while my family stayed back in Venezuela. Initially, I planned to return, but circumstances shifted as the situation in Venezuela worsened after I left. So, I ended up staying and graduating in Fine Arts. But Madrid wasn't easy. It was difficult to feel a sense of belonging. Being Latin in Madrid comes with all these categorisations, all these labels assigned to you just by having an accent. I'm not sure if I placed these labels on myself or if others made me feel that way, but it was always a struggle. I'd plan my words in advance when I spoke, worried about being asked to repeat myself because of my accent. I'd constantly translate in my head from Spanish – Venezuelan to Spanish – Spain, leaving me feeling out of place.

I've always been intrigued by how an accent shapes your identity or confine them to certain perceptions. It's like being put into a box that defines your background and even influences your future. I studied traditional drawing at University. But in Spain, I never felt comfortable enough to delve into these subjects of identity politics. I remember one time a classmate asked me to repeat myself three times and then proceeded to call my accent funny.

I had to point out that it felt somewhat xenophobic because everyone back in South America understood me perfectly. So why couldn't they? But when I raised these issues, none of my classmates supported me, or understood—they said I was being overly sensitive. I felt like I couldn't express my experiences or perspective in Spain. All of the work that I was doing there was much more psychological, about trying to understand my new position in Europe, I guess.

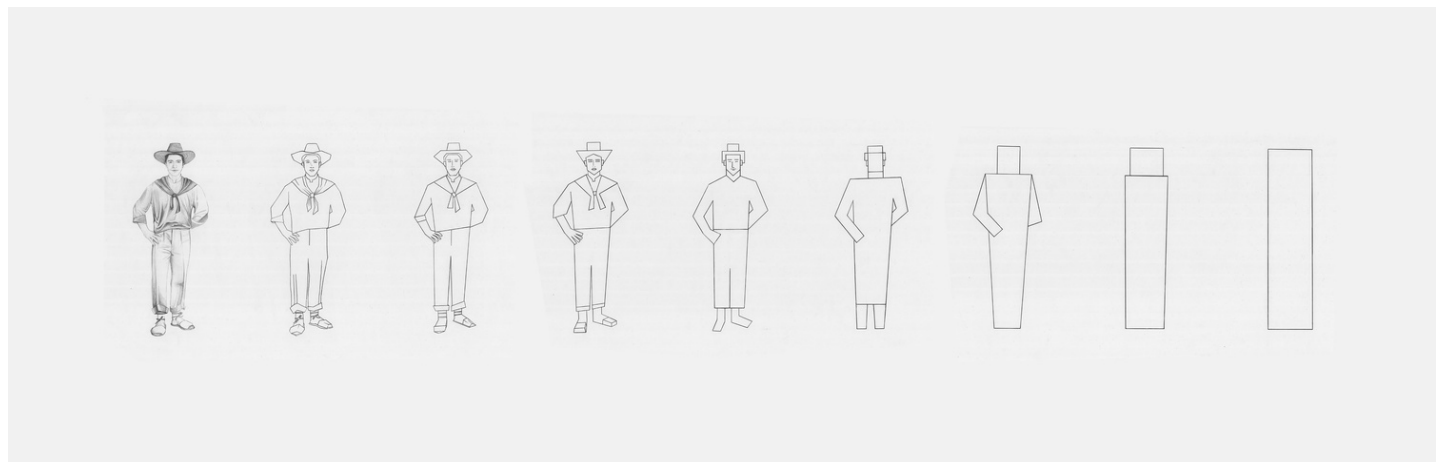
When I arrived in London, everything changed. It allowed me to view my experiences in Madrid from a different perspective. I realised I was confined within this box, feeling I wasn't entitled to step outside of it. At the RCA, the experience was entirely different, surrounded by people from all around the world. However, I soon noticed that the only Latin Americans that I was encountering at university were the cleaners. It reminded me of my past experiences in Madrid, highlighting how one's identity often dictates their work or the type of job they are expected to do. This was not constrained to the RCA, it was the same at CSM and Goldsmith's. It's the same at the Barbican and Tate Modern. It's evident across all these art institutions that proudly speak about representation. Every time, the cleaners tend to be Latin Americans, security staff from Africa, and lecturers from Europe.

This realisation sparked an obsession with the correlation between identity and labour, particularly how labour significantly shapes one's life. In today's world, where work consumes the largest part of our time, it undeniably influences who we are. It doesn't necessarily define our personality, but it reflects what we dedicate most of our daily lives in order to survive in cities like London.

LATAMesa: When and why did you transition from drawing to a more research and participatory-based practice?

José García Oliva: When I first arrived in London, I was doing very detailed drawings. I found myself disagreeing with the conventional idea of the 'genius artist'. How in the art world the sale isn't just about the artwork; it heavily revolves around the artist's story. My focus shifted towards visual art becoming a platform or a facilitator to materialise diverse voices and experiences. Especially within circles that contribute to the issue of misrepresentation or where hierarchies are made visible. My artwork evolved from these aesthetic drawings to becoming a space where conversations happened. The outcome of my work became secondary; it served as a catalyst for discussions; and that's what was most meaningful for me. Especially when it invites people who are normally not used to participating in these spaces.

For instance, at the RCA, we talk so much about the politics of art, the politics of representation, decolonising the curriculum and all of these things. But then you step outside the classroom and you realise the hypocrisy of these discussions when certain voices were excluded. So I think that was why I became interested in this practice. Now I'm only using drawing as a way to help me process thoughts, and embodies conversations into visual outcomes that prompt further discussions.



(De)contextualisation, 2023, Pencil on paper (Copyright © José García Oliva, 2022)



Julian's Bucket, 2020, blue plastic bucket (Copyright © José García Oliva, 2022)

LATAMesa: In projects such as *How May I Serve You?*, *Traces*, and *People Here Like That*, you aim to shed light on the relationships between identity and labour, highlighting the often invisible, underrated, and underpaid labour that some marginalised communities face. And in doing so, you also unveil the traces of colonial power dynamics. In *How May I Serve You?* specifically, you draw a parallel between the customer/vice relationship and the coloniser/colonised dynamic. How do you navigate and represent these complex power dynamics through your artistic medium?

José García Oliva: Ok, let's start with *How may I serve you*. While in Spain, I noticed that most call centres were based in Latin American countries like Colombia, Peru, and Venezuela. Here in the UK, are predominantly located in Pakistan and India—countries with a history of colonisation. There is a shared language – because of this history – but also a stark difference in wages. Outsourcing to these countries became more profitable than paying employees within the country.

This is how *How may I serve you* came to place in the UK. Initially, my intention was to work with the cleaners, but due to Covid restrictions, I shifted the context to a call centre setting. Plus, I wanted to shed light on online labour during the Covid times.

The underlying theme remained the same—the system of outsourcing. Most cleaners aren't directly employed by institutions like RCA but by external companies. I believe the company at RCA is called Churchill. Outsourcing labour detaches employers from the responsibility of workers' treatment, as it's delegated to these external firms. When companies do this on an international scale, this detachment is even worse, as there's little insight into the working conditions on the other side of the world. A dream of mine is to replicate this project in Latin America and Spain. However, being in the UK, it made a lot more sense for me to focus on the UK–Pakistan context to explore these labour dynamics.

When dealing with these marginalised communities – and I don't like this term – I'm always wary of not imposing my own position. I prefer to let them express themselves. I don't want to be patronising, and that's precisely why I struggle with words like 'communities' when discussing my work.



How May I Serve You Book (Copyright © José García Oliva, 2022)



How May I Serve You, Photo of the exhibition space, SET Kensington, London, UK. (Copyright © José García Oliva, 2022)



Traces, 2022, mop painting, participatory performance (Julie Haygarth), Lancaster Arts, Lancaster. (Copyright © José García Oliva, 2022)

We don't talk about communities when referring to a group of white people. It's only when there's a perception that they're almost fading away that we label them, and it feels belittling. So, I think I'm trying to change the vocabulary I use in my practice.

I'm still unsure how to phrase or articulate it, but I suppose with these projects, my aim has been to let the people involved to speak for themselves. They say what they say, and they are the ones who will explain it. My role is to put it in a plinth, to present it, to highlight it, if that makes sense. For instance, in *How may I serve you*, they shared about not being able to use proper lighting in the rooms. They resort to using computers as lamps, all as a means for the company to save on electricity.

Additionally, having mirrors in front of the cubicles serves as a reminder for them to maintain a constant smile. Seeing themselves smile becomes a cue to manage their frustrations while dealing with clients. These are very loaded experiences, and yet it is not me articulating this.

My role is to create a space for these conversations to unfold and, in a way, also to archive them. I believe in the idea that if a story isn't recorded, it will only be told by the winners, which can distort or erase what actually occurred. It's vital to materialise these stories in a way that involves the people—making them collaborators and participants in how these narratives are represented and told.

I'm also interested in challenging the dynamic of the art market, where the financial benefits often centre around a so-called 'genius artist' undertaking community work. That is bullshit. How can you create an alternate economy where the earnings from artworks are shared among the participants? For instance, in a gallery scenario where the gallery takes 50%, the remaining 50% goes to the participants, of which I am one. If I receive a commission, I'm compensated as a facilitator, but the resulting artwork is collectively owned by all participants. Take *Traces*, for example, those large paintings at Lancaster—they're collectively owned. It's not solely my work; it's divided among approximately 78 units shared by us all. That's why I teach; relying solely on this income would be challenging. It's a fundamental question for me: How do I sustain my practice without altering its essence? If I rely entirely on selling my art for a living, my practice would inevitably change. I wouldn't be able to approach participatory work in the manner I believe it should be. Otherwise, it turns into an extractivist practice, commodifying them as content.

LATAMesa: This is so interesting, but before delving further into this, can we circle back for a minute to your problem with the word community? I'm intrigued, especially given that you teach participatory art. I'm aware it's become such a buzzword lately. However, I don't think the word 'community' per se is wrong. It's more about its excessive use, or when it is externally assigned to communities that are not 'real' communities or they might not think of themselves as such.

José García Oliva: Yes, I prefer using 'local groups' instead. I feel 'community' is also a form of categorisation. The other day, a friend mentioned that 'community' is for non-white people, while 'networking' is for white people. There's some truth in that.

LATAMesa: Only associated with minorities.

José García Oliva: Exactly. Maybe it has just become so overused that it makes me uncomfortable. It's similar to decolonising theories. Sometimes, it's so extensively used that it loses its meaning and gets applied in contexts where it doesn't fit.

LATAMesa: But don't you think that precisely because we are talking about minority groups, there is more of a real need to create community?

José García Oliva: Absolutely. I think that's why he mentioned that idea—that because you're a minority, you need it for mutual support. But it feels like being labelled, you know? Also, this idea of doing community projects as if it was volunteer work. Feeling obligated to 'support' these 'communities' that may not even want that support.

LATAMesa: Like charity work, in a patronising way.

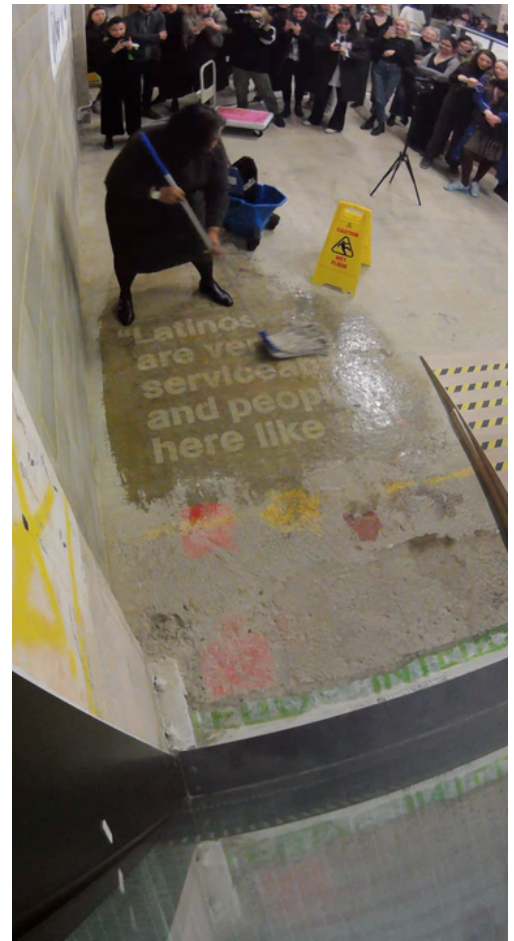
José García Oliva: That's the thing. Don't get me wrong, charity work can be amazing, but it depends on how you frame it.

LATAMesa: Yes, and again, it's about these hidden or not so hidden hierarchies and power dynamics we were talking about before.

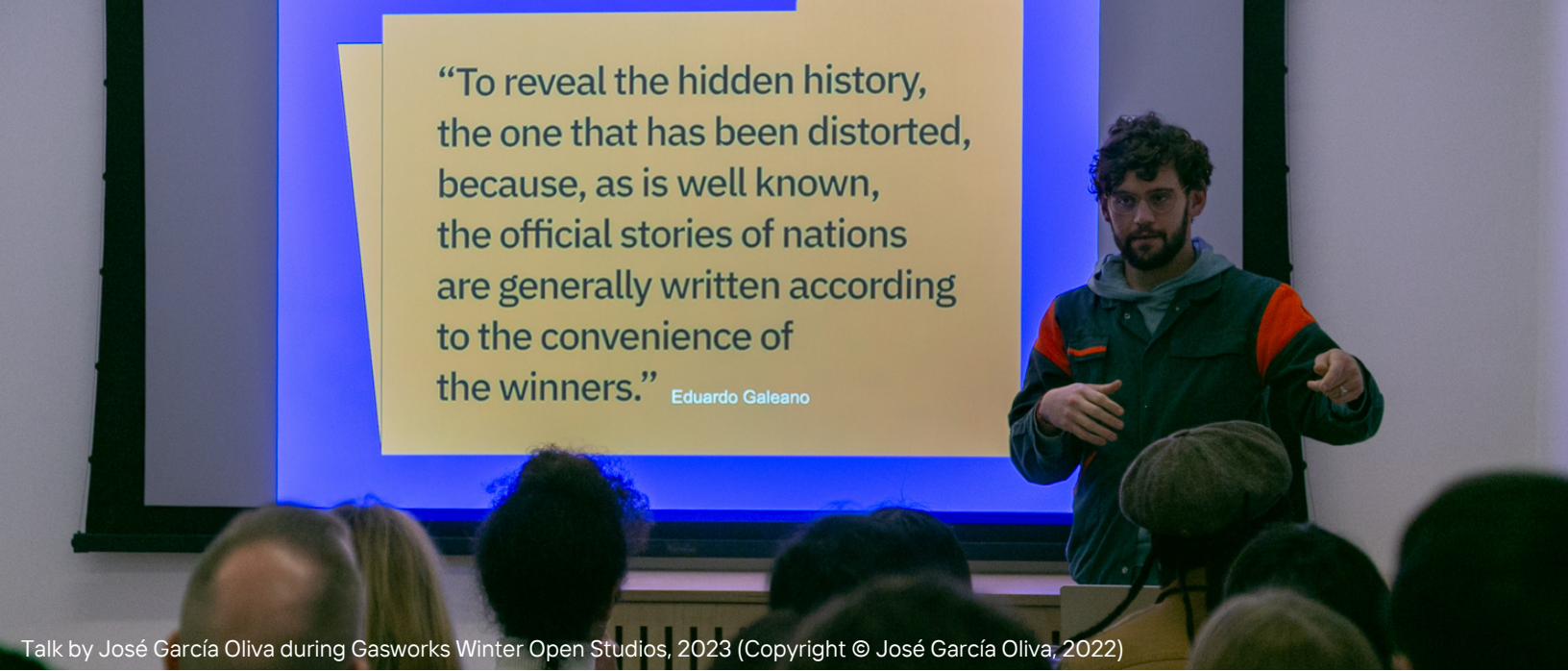
José García Oliva: Exactly. It's replicating that dynamic. This often occurs in contemporary art, originating from these elitist sectors, imposing their methods and ways of building community relationships. I'm not sure if I'm explaining it correctly, but it often involves infiltrating your thoughts and goodwill into groups that may not even require your assistance, merely because of a 'Savior complex.' I find that problematic.

Another principle I like to adhere to is to avoid quick projects. If I receive a commission for a participatory artwork that spans only three months, I decline. You can't foster relationships in such a short time. Asking people to engage in a workshop to paint together with vibrant colours can feel quite superficial. It can even be detrimental, depending on what you do with the outcome. If the community owns or profits from the artwork, it's meaningful. But if you conduct a workshop and take the work away, it raises questions about your intentions and impact.

LATAMesa: Do you have any particular examples of an artist that works in a way that you really appreciate in this sense?



People Here Like That, 2020, Screenshots of the documentation of the participatory performance. Royal College of Art, London (Copyright © José García Oliva, 2022)



“To reveal the hidden history,
the one that has been distorted,
because, as is well known,
the official stories of nations
are generally written according
to the convenience of
the winners.” Eduardo Galeano

Talk by José García Oliva during Gasworks Winter Open Studios, 2023 (Copyright © José García Oliva, 2022)

A huge reference for me is the Free Art Collective, particularly the work of Melanie Jordan, who was Head of MA Contemporary Art Practice at RCA until 2020. Their work aimed to provoke conversations, utilising the art gallery as a space for dialogue. They emphasised the concept of ‘antagonism’, as a place of encouraging healthy disagreement and diverse viewpoints. I appreciated their critical discussions both inside and outside the art world. Their critical body of work was incredible. I believe they’re no longer active, but they remain a key reference point for me. Additionally, Melanie’s insights into the public sphere have been enlightening.

LATAMesa: Could you perhaps talk a little bit more about your current residency at Gasworks?

José García Oliva: I’m currently examining the workers’ rights protests within the Latin American diaspora in London from the 80s up to now. What I’ve been doing lately is engaging in numerous conversations with various organisations and unions. It’s essential to grasp the struggles these groups have faced and the victories they’ve achieved. Personally, I’m more inclined towards highlighting the positive narratives, steering away from replicating the stereotypical representation of these “poor communities” hardships. I’m trying to infuse a playful approach and demonstrate the benefits of collective work. Unions embody this teamwork, collective mentality—which I love – where the more united we are, the stronger our chances of success. Utilising archives helps me delve into past events and observe the similarities in the ongoing fights that persist to this day. Viewing these struggles through a historical lens provides a sense of empowerment, a sentiment and framework that tells us that we are not alone in these fights.

The upcoming activities are centred around unpacking, rebuilding, and reconstructing the archive with diverse perspectives to create a future repository. Currently, I’m digitising numerous protest banners. I find the visual language of protest fascinating—a need to speak up and occupy public spaces, using domestic everyday materials like cardboard, tape, paint to express oneself authentically. It’s about pure self-expression without a trace of commercial intent, far from the polished clean outcomes of the gallery. Typically, protest materials are transient, discarded after use. That’s why digitisation is essential to me—it’s not about preserving the physical object but remembering the narratives they carry, building a sort of historical visual library that can be consulted. This archival effort is crucial, especially for underrepresented communities like the Latin American community in the UK.

My collaboration with unions involves consolidating scattered content, digitising and organising it, and returning it to them for display according to their preferences. These workshops will also aim to tackle bureaucratic procedures, such as tax deductions, holidays, sick leave, and other administrative complexities. The resulting archive will encompass past events while integrating new knowledge based on current union-informed laws.



Gasworks Winter Open Studios (02), 2023 (Copyright © José García Oliva, 2022)

Visually, I'm not certain how it will look, but that's the beauty of participatory artworks. If I dictate the idea, it goes back to the artist imposing their vision. Instead, I want to open up all this content and materials to these groups, letting us decide collectively. Of course, the workshops will be facilitated to make sense in how we select and use the archive, but they will be involved in all the decision-making processes.

LATAMesa: How do you work long-term with these unions? When do you determine that a project is finished?

José García Oliva: I've been collaborating with these unions for about four years, mainly volunteering to create graphics, especially designing banners for protests. And I believe I will keep on working with them in the future. This project, I think, is rooted in documenting the events and workshops—that's the primary outcome. The visual output, I believe, is beyond my control, and I find that intriguing. Usually, I love being in control, as with drawing. Here, it's different. I see my role as a facilitator. Facilitation is like hosting a dinner party; you can prepare all you want, but you're never sure how things will unfold or what the mood of your guests will be. And that uncertainty is what makes it interesting.

LATAMesa: I'm intrigued by the use of resistance as a concept. In the description you wrote for the series *Topologies*, you mentioned you were examining the "liminal spaces where transformation and resistance coexist." and we could delve deeper into more expressive ideas of resistance and transformation in your current research at Gasworks. How do you interpret resistance within these works and in your broader practice?

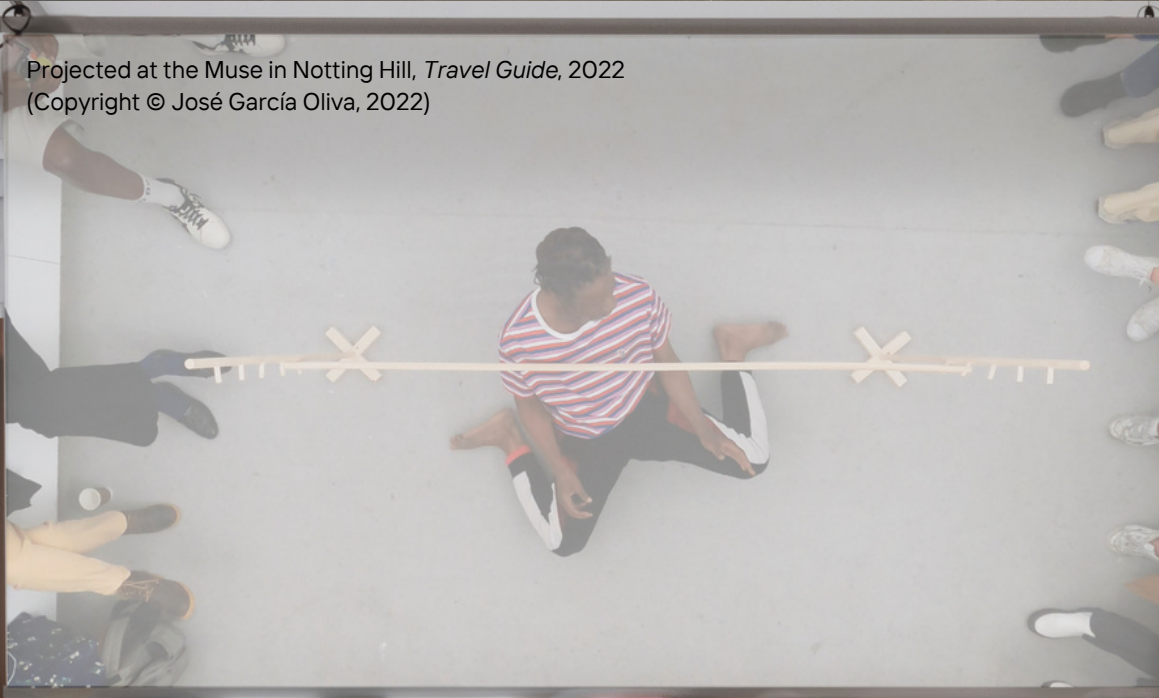
José García Oliva: So, *Topologies* explores the malleable states of transition between a starting point and a destination through the limbo dance and the yuca. It delves into how our physical experiences or bodies have to adapt to transition from one place to another, similar to the migration process.

I chose the Yucca plant as an example due to its strong links to Latin America; it serves as a beautiful metaphor. When you cut it and place it in a specific location influenced by humidity, heat, and light, it takes on a distinct shape. Similarly, in the limbo dance, one distorts their body to move from one place to another, symbolising these transitions in a timeline. Resistance, in this context, is manifested in the body's distortion to navigate and adjust to a new environment.

I collaborated with limbo dancer Mambo Jambo and Trinidadian activist, poet, and community organiser Isis Amlak. The Limbo dance, though internationally associated with parties, originated in Trinidad and is historically linked to the motion of rowing boats, often by slaves. One theory behind its origin lies in the movement of a wooden stick through the body, curving the back to pass into the new world. I find the limbo dance fascinating, witnessing the body's flexibilities. Also, it's a solo dance and everyone's attention is on you. It's an uncomfortable position, with the neck all the way back, placing oneself in a vulnerable and precarious stance, risking a fall. This parallels the challenges of migration—facing scrutiny and diverse opinions about success or failure in a new place. Carrying heavy baggage, one has to dance this metaphorical limbo to survive. In this transition, resistance is in the act of disrupting oneself to move forward, reshaping the body to coexist in new spaces.



Topology of the oppressed, 2021, Sun-dried cassava on stainless steel (Copyright © José García Oliva, 2022)



Projected at the Muse in Notting Hill, *Travel Guide*, 2022
(Copyright © José García Oliva, 2022)





Variable Systematic Structures. Pen on paper mounted on softwood, oak framed, (Copyright © José García Oliva, 2022)

LATAMesa: That's interesting. It's like resistance is more about adaptability for you. Whereas it could also be interpreted as a place of reluctance and rigidity.

José García Oliva: That's true. Resistance can be "I'm not moving." But no, I think resistance is about reshaping yourself, about adaptability.

When we did the limbo performance, we recorded it from the top. You could see how people sitting around observed the extreme physical transformation of the limbo dancer. A professional dancer passing through a space that holds the height of a bottle of beer. Particularly in an art gallery with a predominantly white audience, having a professional limbo dancer from Trinidad holds its own significance, even though I'm not explicitly addressing that aspect. And that's the beauty of performance— things that you didn't originally think about may unravel. Take, for instance, the performance we did with the cleaners at RCA: *People here like that*. Interestingly, only women participated, grabbing the mops. It wasn't part of the plan, but it happened. These situations uncover real social hierarchies and stereotypes, adding multiple layers to a work that's both about performance and participation.

LATAMesa: And what about this project with Gasworks? I heard you mention something along the lines of playful resistances.

José García Oliva: Yes, that's right. When discussing workers' rights, there's a prevailing heaviness associated with it. It can be particularly taxing for those already grappling with work-related struggles. So, we wanted to invite people to something different for these activities. We pondered on altering the project's tone and vocabulary. Playfulness seemed like a fitting approach. The play could be understood as the antonym of work, serves as an escape, a temporary break from reality. Especially as an adult, engaging in play allows you to forget the weightiness of life. It's a beautiful aspect of play. It becomes a way to resist one's own or others' realities. In our activities, we aim to infuse this playfulness. I believe our goal for these activities is to find ways to divert*, from the harsh reality of poor working conditions you're experiencing. We're aiming to discover a new reality where we can explore fresh forms of resistance.

*Using 'Divert' and 'diversion' as a play on words with the Spanish term 'diversión' or 'divertir' meaning 'to have fun'



Traces, 2022, Exhibited at Lancaster University Library (03), Lancaster (Copyright © José García Oliva, 2022)

LATAMesa: To wrap things up, what's next for you?

José García Oliva: Well, next for me is finishing up this residency at Gasworks and continuing to develop all these projects I've been talking about. I aim to build a cohesive body of work that ties into each activity. I want to merge all these groups together. I believe it's crucial, especially as these groups are quite distinct from one another. Finding a moment for them to reconnect and exchange ideas is important. At the same time, I'm working on an exhibition at Lancaster University that consolidates all the work I've been doing there. I'm currently collaborating with the university's cleaners on a project that involves broom bristles. It's a slow process due to the thinness of the bristles, but it's fascinating as it symbolises collectivity—how many bristles work together to clean the floor, representing unity.

There's another project I'm undertaking with the security staff, this one involving cyanotype. We're using their torches for this. They carry these lamps during night walks to check the university premises. So, I've prepared a long canvas with cyanotype chemicals, and they paint with light. It reveals the hidden work they do during those times when nobody sees them, and I'm quite pleased with how it's turning out. This project symbolises the 24-hour nature of their work, represented by 24 dots. It's about connecting the dots, showcasing their round-the-clock efforts. This exhibition is set to happen in April, and it'll run for about a month and a half. It's a great opportunity to celebrate and share these projects with everyone involved.



Traces, 2022, Mop (action) painting, participatory performance 4_5, Lancaster Arts, Lancaster (Copyright © José García Oliva, 2022)