

# NO ES SENCILLO

OLINDA SILVANO AND CORDELIA SÁNCHEZ (SOI NOMA)  
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Sara Greavu: The gap or blindspot we wanted to speak to in this article is not unique to *The Funambulist*, but is a recurring issue that has come up again and again in discussions with my friend, Andrea Francke. Here, it stemmed from an incident when I shared an article from the magazine with her, which prompted another instalment in this ongoing conversation about the ways in which Latin American history, culture, and experience are flattened and generalized by texts produced in a Global North context. As always, I was grateful for and humbled by Andrea’s generous criticality in her response. When asked to suggest a “corrective” piece for this issue, I thought immediately of this conversation, and asked if she would be willing to elaborate on this point. Instead, she worked with curator Giuliana Vidarte and artists Olinda Silvano and Cordelia Sánchez of SOI NOMA to embody a different way of working.

Andrea Francke: Perhaps it is inevitable that institutions in the Global North, which hold unequal power in knowledge-making and distribution, repeat colonial structures, even when well-meaning. It’s hard to escape the conditions of where thinking happens. I’m also part of that system, so this critique also includes me. Years ago, in Peru, I was speaking with the daughter of an influential Peruvian intellectual about how he would discuss having made a choice. He could either produce knowledge that is legible and intended for a Global North audience, or he could work in Peru on projects that made sense and intervene in that context. He was aware that you can’t have it both ways, and that it is not only a social and political choice, but also a personal career choice. The refusal of Global North legibility is a choice.

Sara and I wanted to find a way to produce and circulate something that claimed a different type of space, that generated different relations of production. It was hard because the structure itself is not a good fit. I approached Giuliana Vidarte, who came up with the format and organized the conversation. Since the point is to map and situate the thinking, then in terms of authorship, Giuliana is more central than us. She raised the point that whenever Cordelia and Olinda, or anyone in the SOI NOMA collective, speak about their work, it is quickly limited to contextualizing and making it legible. It’s trapped in the eternal loop of producing legibility by appealing to specific codes that have been proved effective and seductive to an international

art-world context. Giuliana suggested, what if we asked them completely different questions? What if we talked about their experiences travelling? What if instead of making themselves legible, they made the structures that host them and distribute their work visible? What if voices from the Global South were doing the analysis instead of producing testimony that is then analysed in the Global North?

OLINDA SILVANO: It is an honor for us to tell our story. Right? Because we go through things and sometimes, there are also stories behind that big mural.

CORDELIA SÁNCHEZ: Talking about stories or art is very profound and these are very beautiful topics, beautiful stories, but also sad stories. As Indigenous women, we have a different culture, different customs, and different languages, right? But we still understand each other.

OS: Some people are so interested, so interested, and they travel to meet us there, to be there with us. So it’s a wonderful journey. I was also a little sad while travelling. But the important thing is to represent your country or your people or your Nation. With your wonderful art that comes from the mind, that comes from memory, from being ourselves, from our feet to our heads. What our ancestors taught us, our grandmothers from thousands of years ago. To feel that our grandmothers are present with us. Each piece of art is unique, and each woman inspires with her own inspiration. Every woman has her own strokes. Every woman has her own stories. Every person. Sometimes we can’t express ourselves like that because we’re shy, but we can express ourselves through art, right? That we were submissive women before, and now we’re flying. Now we feel freedom, the freedom to fly like a hummingbird.

CS: Getting to know Barcelona was a very nice experience. Also, meeting other Indigenous



Fig.1

brothers and sisters. Like those from Brazil, who are Huni Kuin, the MAHKU. Also, a Quechua sister from Ecuador. Rember, who is Huitoto, was also there. It was a wonderful experience. Right? Meeting brothers and sisters who are also Indigenous. Mixing that culture, that art that each one inspires and paints on the mural.

OS: Others invite us too, and the journey continues for the muralist women of SOI NOMA. They open their path to participate in international fairs and workshops, because the mothers are so skilled at doing the workshops, by hand, embroidery workshops, and natural dyes. Some people don’t know what we paint like we do. How do we do it? It’s all based on nature. The sun is what helps us fix it, the sun. It’s what helps us dry. You can’t draw a straight line without the sun. We want to do these workshops to make people appreciate and value the art. It’s not so they can take it away from us, because some people think that. That they’re going to take it away from us. Or some people discriminate against us, like last time, when they

told us that Shipibo art is simple. No, no, it’s not like that. It’s not simple to come up with an idea, fill it in, and paint it. It’s very meticulous work. It’s delicate work done with a lot of love. You get inspired by the fabric, talking as if you were talking to your friend or your partner. And you start drawing the line and it sings, right? That’s why our art isn’t like machine-made art. With a machine, you can produce lots of pieces, but never by hand. You can’t make a piece in a day. And when you make a mistake, there’s no eraser that allows you to go back and fix it. It’s stained, it’s stained, it stays there. It’s not like a notebook, where you paint and then erase and can start again, go back. This art requires a lot of delicacy and concentration, which is why the work is spiritual. The work is magical. It comes from our Shipibo-Konibo worldview. But there are people who don’t appreciate it, who treat us very badly. They make us feel bad, but now we are empowered. We used to cry. Now we don’t cry anymore. We just try to respond intelligently, like teacher-mothers with wisdom.



Fig.2

[...] Claudi was presenting what he does, his documentary. Then I started telling my story. I'm a muralist, this is what I do, and he listened attentively. There were a lot of tourists there. That's where I met him, in that place. I like to sing, and when I went out into the courtyard and started singing, the monkeys came closer. The monkeys that were there, it was as if the monkeys were accompanying me as I sang. Claudi was laughing his head off: "Hey, hey, how do you get the animals to come out with that song?" Then he suggested that he would make a documentary about me, take photos in Manaus, of what I was working on. But I never thought he would invite me; I just thought it would be nothing more than that. Until one day, Miss Iris also came. She arrived at my house as curators always arrive at my house.

[...] That's how we started, and they had brought the Huni Kuin brothers, there were about four of

them, two men and two women. And the size of their mural was almost the same as ours. So I started to complain. "Oh, no," I said, "why are they painting together, the four of them, and why is each one of us painting one mural?" I complained, "We are a group of 12 women, you should have brought four of us too." "Well," I said, "look, it's a huge wall we're going to paint." I started to bother him too. Since he was bothering us too, I said, "No, what's fair is fair." We started playing around, right? Laughing.

**CS:** It's very different to be painting here in my studio and to paint in a very large museum like the one in Barcelona. When a lot of people passed by, they would ask us questions and we had to answer. When we were concentrating, we kind of stopped and started showing them and telling them what we were painting.

[...] Some other female friends also came to

invite us to lunch because we were tired of eating there. There was no Peruvian food, which is very different. It had been about a week and we wanted to eat Peruvian food. Olinda had a friend there named Naná, and she came and took us to a Peruvian restaurant. We were excited, and we went to eat Peruvian food. Olinda had chicharrón and I had lomo saltado. And I felt like the happiest woman in the world.

**OS:** Wherever I travel, my friends look me up because I post on Facebook: "I'm in Barcelona. I'm at CCCB. I'm painting a mural." Then they find out and they always visit me and invite me to dinner: "I know you're tired of the food here, and other things..." Of course we don't like the food because we're a people of the forest and we don't eat many vegetables, and Cordelia didn't like that. I'm used to it now. I travel so much. I eat everything. I saw that Cordelia wasn't eating. She just nibbled, left her food, and I was worried. She could have fainted while painting the mural. Because it's not easy to paint a mural, you have to use a lot of strength in your neck. Because you have to stand there painting, and your neck gets tired. So we have to be well fed, well nourished to be able to keep working.

[...] Then the students came, Claudi told us, since we weren't making any progress: "Do you want the students to come?" "Yes, bring them." But sometimes they helped us and they also crossed the line, or they did something else. Because they don't know how to make kené. So that happens, you have to show them too.

**CS:** Claudi brought some students to help us and they helped Olinda. I also asked them to help me, but instead of helping me, they kind of gave me a little more work. I couldn't say don't do it, but I had to say do this and do that, and they helped me. It was also very nice. Because they painted differently and wanted to do it their own way, and they actually did.

**OS:** Before, I saw that Corde was very afraid. I saw her trembling or not talking, but that time Corde was spiritually hypnotized. A spirit of the forest. And we were also hypnotized. I felt like I was the owner of the kené. I felt the kené in my whole body. That's how I feel when I make my

murals, when I draw my designs. I feel that this is my passion. Loving art, loving the Shipibo people, loving my identity, loving my Indigenous roots as an Indigenous woman. Representing my country, Peru, with wonderful art. This art that I never thought I would take far, because sometimes they tell us that we are ignorant, because we are women who have no education. But put that aside. Remember that we have ancestral knowledge that our grandmothers have taught us, and that is very important. The person who has an education will be a lawyer, or will be a... But they don't know our art. They don't know our art, just as I don't know theirs. Make people feel that my certificate is the murals I paint, the quilts I embroider, the breastplates I make with such enthusiasm.

[...] Art opens the way for us, art takes us far. Art gives us opportunities, it helps us a lot. Art is like our faithful partner. It doesn't betray us, it's with us, it's there because we embroider at any time of day. We are on the road, we embroider, we paint, we also paint there in our room. Corde also painted, didn't she? And I also painted in my room. We each had our own apartment. And on the day of the opening, I was able to sell that art and Corde also sold her art. I even embroider on the plane. I sit down and embroider. To get it on the plane, I wrap my needle up well so they can't take it away from me. Sometimes they take my scissors. When they catch me, I tell them "But this is my artwork, and I'm embroidering this, and this is for cutting. I'm not going to hurt anyone. I'm Indigenous, and this is who I am." Or sometimes we have rattles in our outfits. They ask me "Why are you wearing that?" The first few days they asked me that. "Why are you wearing that?" "I'm Indigenous and that's my traditional dress. I'm going to represent my country with it and you can't forbid me to wear it because without it I won't be able to make myself beautiful, okay?" So now you know how much I travel, at the airport, you know. "Mrs. Olinda, where are you going now?" "Oh, I'm going to such-and-such place, and this is my art." "Oh, yes, yes." She always wears her things. My crowns that jingle. So now people know me. And we also sing.

[Olinda sings] ■



Fig.3

Olinda Silvano is an artist from the Shipibo people in the central Amazon region of Peru, a healer, and a teacher of the art of *kené*. After moving to Lima, she continued practicing *kené* with a group of women known as *Las Madres Artesanas* (The Artisan Mothers) from the community of Cantagallo.

Cordelia Sánchez is a Shipibo-Konibo artist who lives in Lima, where her work has been exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Lima, and the Martín Yépez Gallery.

Giuliana Vidarte is a curator, art historian, and educator. She has developed research and exhibition projects on the relationships between visual arts and literature, the rewriting

of history through the recovery of non-official discourses, and the history of arts and contemporary creation from the Peruvian Amazon.

Sara Greavu is a curator, researcher, and organiser based between Derry and Dublin, Ireland. She is the director of Fire Station Artists' Studios.

Andrea Francke is a Peruvian social practice artist based in London since 2007. Her practice focuses on developing structures for being and thinking together. These exchanges manifest through a regular practice of writing, publishing, public speaking, podcasting, exhibiting, teaching and residencies, all undertaken collaboratively.

**Fig.1-2** Olinda Silvano and Cordelia Sánchez, giving a workshop as part of the exhibition *Amazons. The Ancestral Future* at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, on November 9, 2024. / CCCB / CC BY-SA-NC, photo by Vincenzo Rigogliuso.

**Fig.3** Olinda Silvano, *Kené. Knowledge of the Piri Piri*, acrylic on wood (2024) and Cordelia Sánchez, *The Four Worlds*, acrylic on wood (2024), both produced by CCCB for the exhibition *Amazons. The Ancestral Future*. / CCCB / CC BY-SA-NC, photo by Cris Palomar.