

Conversation between Fernanda Olivares, Nicolás Spencer, Nora Haas, and Claudia Augustat

In September and October 2022, Fernanda Olivares, an activist, and Nicolás Spencer, an artist, both from Chile, came to Vienna for two weeks to conduct research at the Weltmuseum Wien. The aim of their visit was to develop work for *Extinctions!?*, an experimental exhibition, which opened at Weltmuseum Wien in February 2023, as part of the TAKING CARE project. Olivares and Spencer worked with objects from the Selk’nam, an Indigenous group, living in the Argentinean and Chilean Tierra del Fuego. The Selk’nam, which is the group to which Olivares belongs, are a recognized minority in Argentina, while in Chile they are considered extinct. The Selk’nam objects that Olivares and Spencer would engage with were collected by the missionary Martin Gusinde between 1923 and 1927.

This project forms part of the wider efforts for an analysis of the relation between objects and their environment in the context of extinction that is made in the works of Olivares and Spencer. For example, Olivares’ community, the Covadonga Ona, are currently campaigning to be recognized under Chile’s Indigenous Development and Protection Law. The aim of their work with the museum was to re-establish a relationship between the objects of the past and the people in the present, while intervening in the discourse of extinction that surrounds the group.

The following text is based on a conversation between Fernanda Olivares and Nicolás Spencer and the TAKING CARE team that took place during their stay in Vienna. While remaining close to what was said in the course of the conversation, the text has been edited for clarity.

Fig.1: Fernanda Olivares at the archive of the Steyler missionaries. © Nicolás Spencer.



Nicolás Spencer (NS): For me, the intention of this project, which is taking place within the framework of the Terra Ignota project¹, is to question the meaning of objects. What does the museum think about an object? How might this be the same or different from the meanings these objects had for those who made or use them? Or might their meanings be given to them by the visitor? We wanted to confront the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous perspectives in order to question what should happen with the objects.

Fernanda Olivares (FO): This is my first time working with a museum. For me, the entire process is experimental, as I didn't know what we would be doing here before we arrived. Now that we are here, it has evolved from an experimental process into a process of discovery. These are our guiding questions: why are things here, how are they shown? How can we change the perspectives that the public has about these objects?

¹ The ideas of meeting and encounter sparked the Terra Ignota project, which was initiated in 2015 by and for a dynamic group of Chilean and international artists, scientists, curators, and producers as a recurrent nomadic lab in Tierra del Fuego / Patagonia.

The transdisciplinary research platform studies the relationships between culture, nature, knowledge, and their different forms of representation. Terra Ignota is a concept used in maps to designate places unknown to mankind. We propose the extension of this concept to refer to the little or erroneous knowledge we have as a society of the territory beyond the geographical confines of the extreme south of the planet.

Terra Ignota is informed by archaeology, (colonial) history, (Indigenous) practices, nature, and the climate of a region and aims to connect those to urgent global questions. It is rhizomatic; it moves slowly, listens, zooms in and out, and connects.

NS: And we hope that the results of this project will bring the audience to a place where they can think as we do, where they can ask similar questions. We want to create a sound or visual installation to make the audience think.

We always want to work in a way that I call 'fireside': It is a place to assemble and talk together; there is a special light, it is warm, and therefore an environment conducive to talking. There should be multiple voices, multiple answers, multiple feelings.

Claudia Augustat (CA): It is this kind of practice that we wanted to foster. But we also were especially interested to work with Fernanda, who shares historical, shares ancestral relations with the people who created the objects.

Telling Lies – A Liary

Nora Haas (NH): Nicolás, while we were looking at objects from the Selk'nam community here in the museum storage, you repeatedly said: 'Fernanda, tell me a lie about this!' I assume that you wanted to prod her to talk more about these objects; to think about who might have owned them, or what this person's connection was to the object and more. I found it very interesting that you described it as *telling a lie*. For me it was not so much about a lie, but about stories. So, I wonder, how did this idea of the lie come about?

CA: And as a follow-up, I think it is a very provocative approach to call these stories lies. Was it your intention to provoke? Fernanda, do you also consider them lies?

FO: Usually, when you speak to Indigenous people, they can recall memories that are passed on from generation to generation, and so on. This is not the case for me. Our history was cut off at some point; we have to rebuild it or try to assimilate what happened and then start over. Therefore, I don't have facts. I have some fragments, I have two-sentence-long stories, that's it. I am not sure that lie is the best word, but these are also not facts; these are stories, fragments that we turn into stories.

NS: We need to create myths, new poetry, new ways of conceiving the truth.

FO: That's the origin of this joke. I think everything started when he [Nicolás] asked something and I answered very concisely, with only two words. And then he would say 'So give me a little bit more information.' It is within this context that the question of telling lies came up.

The Process in Vienna: From Outside to Inside, from the City to the Storage

NH: Perhaps you can talk a little bit about your process of working here in Vienna. As you have said, your intention was to capture the context of this object. Moving from the outside to inside, from the city, via the building, its entrance, hallways, and of-

fices, and finally to the storage where the objects are housed. Why did you work in this way?

FO: At the beginning of our conversation, we touched on how to represent these objects, and, moreover how they represent themselves. How are they represented right now, in this place? In this context, it made sense to get to know the city because the objects are in this city right now, they are not where they originally belonged. For us, the objects are not just dead things. They hold the potential to create a lot of life around them, also for me.

NS: Another thing that is important for us is something you might call the aura of an object.

We are using 3D scans, but not to show the object itself. What we would like to do is to capture the poetry inside the object.

In our project we want to explore important issues that emerge from the objects themselves, but the visitor will only see a representation of the object. This gives Fernanda the freedom to think of new museographies beyond the object. This reproduction will also be part of our project to bring the objects back to where we think they came from.

NH: What do you consider to be the things that are important, but missing in the museographic conversation about or representation of the objects at Weltmuseum Wien? Why do we need a new or changed museography?

FO: I have a lot of internal conflicts about this. In general and more positively, I can say that I think, that I feel that everything is actually really well taken care of at the museum. The objects do not seem unhappy here. And still, I haven't made up my mind yet.

Research Trip to Steyler Missionaries in Mödling

During their residency, Fernanda Olivares and Nicolás Spencer also went on a research trip to the Steyler missionaries in Mödling who are the custodians for a collection of objects collected in Tierra del Fuego by the missionary Martin Gusinde.²

FO: While I was in the storage, I had the impression that they didn't really know what they had. This is not just about the ethnographic Selk'nam objects, but the entire collections. It was so much, with collections everywhere, on tables and....but it was also really nice. It was like jumping into a lot of stuff. There were a lot of baskets

² Martin Gusinde was a missionary of the order of the Divine Word and an anthropologist. In the early twentieth century, he conducted field work among all groups in Tierra del Fuego. His books are a frequently quoted source about their cultures at that time.

and I looked at them all, trying to find one that belonged to the Selk'nam people. I couldn't find any.

NS: We were doing archaeology of a kind. That said, it is important to note that the missionaries have no one there physically to take care of the collections anymore. The person who had been the caretaker for the museum passed away, and with him the knowledge about this collection also disappeared in a sense.

CA: Just now, as we were talking about the passing of the caretaker, I thought: Oh my God, these objects have twice lost the humans they belong to. The first time they lost the humans they were connected to in Tierra del Fuego and now the last person who was really taking care and was really interested in them passed away. They are alone.

NS: And then there is also the really important thing that happened at the end of our visit. We went to this holy place, to the cemetery where Gusinde is buried. He himself was in many of your (Fernanda's) holy places all the time.

FO: During the tour through the premises he [the Father who guided us through the premises] said something like, for the people in Gusinde's time, Indigenous people were closer to God than their own society was. This is sort of contradictory! He plundered graves and dug human remains out, but at the same time he thought that these people he was digging out were closer to God than he himself.

NS: What happened with the massive killing of the Selk'nam, it only ended one hundred years ago – it's not that long ago.

On the Experience of Working with Museums

CA:... Sometimes people say that an object is speaking and I say I have never heard an object say anything. But Nicolás mentioned the aura of an object. Maybe this aura is the energy saved in the object: The energy of plants that have grown and the energy of people who harvested the plants to make the objects. Maybe this is what is meant by an object speaking to us.

NS: The museum is an environment with many things inside.

As human beings, we cannot see everything in an object, therefore we need more poetry or imagination or ... lies.

