

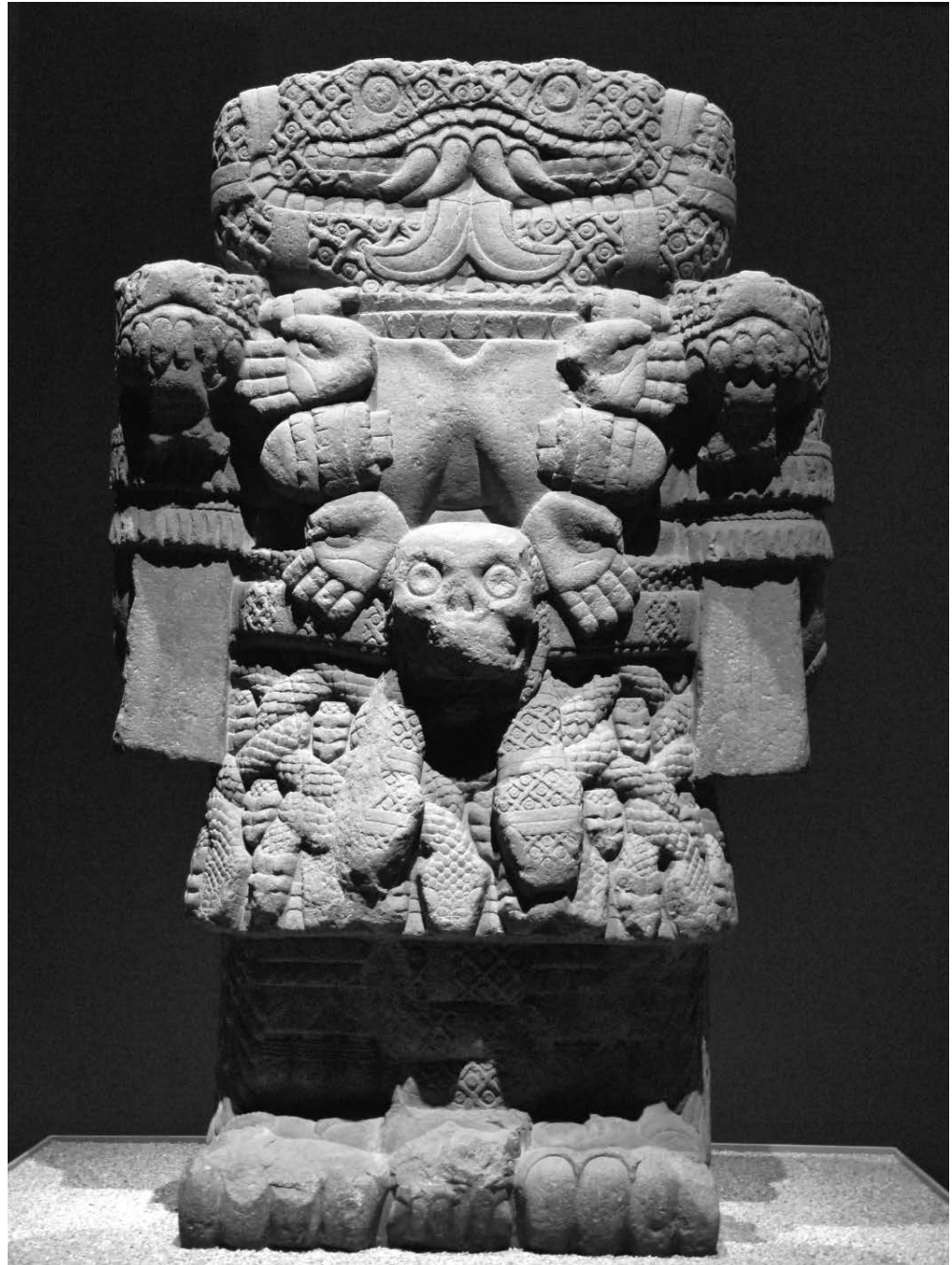
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## **Circulating casts of the *Coatlicue*: Mariana Castillo Deball's unearthing of the Aztec earth goddess's history of reproduction and display**

The contemporary Mexican artist Mariana Castillo Deball (b. 1975) created a green fibreglass cast from a fibreglass mould of the *Coatlicue*, an andesite sculpture of the Aztec earth goddess of this name (fig. 1). Castillo Deball produced the cast by layering sheets of fibreglass on to the interiors of the partial moulds that when pieced together create the shape of the *Coatlicue*. When the sections of the cast were finished, she joined them together, but intentionally left the seams visible to capture the modular nature of production. The final sculpture, called *No solid form can contain you* (2010), is a one-to-one replica of the *Coatlicue* that lay on its back on the gallery floor in the exhibition *Mariana Castillo Deball: Finding Oneself Outside*, at the New Museum (22 January–5 March 2019) (fig. 2). Castillo Deball's use of a fibreglass cast and the sculpture's supine position gesture to two important and yet understudied aspects of the *Coatlicue*: the frequent disinterment and reburial of the Aztec sculpture, and its subsequent proliferation as a three-dimensional form in plaster casts both in Mexico and around the world. The history of the *Coatlicue* is intimately linked to the act of burial as a form of preservation and reversible iconoclasm, and also tied to the power of European and *criollo* men to produce and display replicas of the female goddess. The moment when the object was disinterred for the last time shortly preceded the period when its replication and circulation in three-dimensional form began.

In analysing Castillo Deball's sculpture, this article attends to the history of the burial and replication of the *Coatlicue* through a combination of historical research, theoretical models, visual analysis and interviews with the artist. To articulate more clearly the critical role of the two- and three-dimensional copies of the *Coatlicue*, I draw on the article, 'The Migration of the Aura or How to Explore the Original through its Fac Similes', by the French philosopher Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe, founder of Factum Arte.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, they press against Walter Benjamin's well-trodden argument that the aura resides in the initial object, and instead argue that it is primarily through the proliferation of its replicas that the original object gains its importance. While the *Coatlicue* was a significant object of veneration for Indigenous people in both pre- and post-contact Mexico, its status as an archaeological specimen and sculpture only came into prominence through two- and three-dimensional copies. This was particularly true when it lay underground, as the copies were the only way of visually accessing the sculpture. After its final disinterment and subsequent display, the *Coatlicue* became almost hypervisible, appearing at world's fairs and museums around

1 Unknown Aztec artist(s),  
*Coatlicue*, 1300–1500, andesite,  
350 × 130 × 45 cm. Museo  
Nacional de Antropología,  
Mexico City, Mexico  
(photo: El Comandante, CC BY-SA  
3.0)



the world, as well as being reconfigured in paintings, murals and sculptures. This visibility of the sculpture through its copies secured its position in the canon of pre-Columbian art.

One significant outcome of the massive proliferation of the *Coatlicue* and other pre-Columbian objects was that modern and contemporary Mexican artists began to think more critically about the role of the pre-Columbian past in their own identity. According to Erica Segre, in her book *Intersected Identities: Strategies of Visualization in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Mexican Culture*, artists such as Tina Modotti (1896–1942), Frida Kahlo (1907–54) and Silvia Gruner (1959–) integrated remnants of pre-Columbian art into their work to create an ‘archival density’, where archaeological objects are reinterpreted to ‘interrogate identity’.<sup>2</sup> Castillo Deball operates within

this framework by layering her work with a deeper history of the statue's subterranean existence, replication and reclamation. By highlighting the political manipulation of the *Coatlicue* over time, Castillo Deball urges the viewer to think through the politics of display and reproduction, and the power dynamics between what is seen and hidden. Castillo Deball is among several female artists and collectives who have been recuperating the earth goddess in her iconographic, symbolic and mythological instantiations in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

### The *Coatlicue* as object and in myth

Carved between 1300 and 1500, the *Coatlicue* is commonly referred to as a representation of an earth goddess, though earlier accounts identified it as a figure of the goddess of death, Teoyamiqui or Teoyaomiqui.<sup>3</sup> The stone statue stands 3.5 metres tall, 1.3 metres wide and 45 cm deep,<sup>4</sup> and weighs approximately two tons. The head is composed of two serpents in profile whose eyes, fangs and tongue converge into the frontal face of the goddess. Encircling the two sagging breasts lies a chain of alternating hearts and hands punctuated by the outward face of a skull that simultaneously forms the main pendant of the necklace and the protruding buckle of the serpent belt around her waist. Snake heads replace the dismembered arms and a fretwork of intertwined snakes form the exquisite skirt for which, in the Aztec language Nahuatl, the goddess is named She of Serpent Skirt.

At the base of the sculpture, two eagle claws grasp the ground beneath her. The back of the statue mimics many of the formal aspects of the front but is

2 Mariana Castillo Deball, *No solid form can contain you*, 2010, modular fibreglass cast from the original *Coatlicue* statue, 250 × 120 × 120 cm. Installation view at the exhibition *Mariana Castillo Deball: Finding Oneself Outside*, New Museum, New York, 2019. Courtesy of Mariana Castillo Deball and Museo Amparo Collection (photo: Maris Hutchinson/EPW Studio)



besides a vast number of divinities, ranging over the whole Indian Olympus, collected under the gallery at the furthest extremity of the court, most of which are frightful, and would



TEOYAMIQUE, GOD OF DEATH AND WAR.

give a poor idea of Aztec talent, did we not know that they are all specimens of hieratic art, and as such were not permitted to vary in shape or design. And now we come to *Tizoc's* stone, or *Temalacatl*, the sun's stone, one of the most interesting in

3 After P. Sellier, 'Teoyamiqui, God of Death and War', in Désiré Charnay, *The ancient cities of the New World: being travels and explorations in Mexico and Central America from 1857-1882*, trans. J. Gonino and Helen S. Gonant, London, Chapman and Hall, 1887, p. 60  
(photo: Getty Research Institute)

hundred other children (representing the stars in the southern sky) caught wind of the news, they prepared to kill their mother. After her offspring decapitated her, Huitzilopochtli emerged fully formed and heavily armed from her womb. He fought off his siblings, including Coyolxauhqui, whose dismembered body rolled down the mountain of Coatepec (which means 'snake mountain' in Nahuatl). A giant circular slab representing Coyolxauhqui's fragmented body was discovered in 1978 by electrical workers at the foot of the temple of Huitzilopochtli (fig. 4), which further supported the idea that the entire archaeological complex dramatizes this founding Aztec myth.

In a recent interview with the author, Castillo Deball explained that she was first drawn to the *Coatlicue* by the multifaceted iconographic programme carved into the symmetrical form of the female goddess. She was also interested in the violence enacted against the main female protagonists of the founding myth of the Aztec Empire, which became physically encoded in the centre of Tenochtitlán. In the interview, Castillo Deball described how this female-on-female violence of Coyolxauhqui against her mother, and Huitzilopochtli's total dismemberment of his sister, served to

differentiated by two draping folds that cascade beneath the skull buckle. The entire surface of the statue is intricately carved, including the base, where one finds a frontal view of a squatting figure with arms hinged at the elbow (fig. 3). This representation has been identified as Tlaloc-Tlatecuhtli,<sup>5</sup> Mictlantecuhtli<sup>6</sup> or Tlaloc, each of which are Aztec deities related to the earth, death or rain. The Aztecs placed the statue at the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlán, where they eventually buried it shortly after the consolidation of their empire in the Valley of Mexico and beyond.<sup>7</sup>

The Templo Mayor is comprised of two main temples: one dedicated to the god of the sun and war, and the founding Aztec deity, Huitzilopochtli, and one to the god of rain, Tlaloc. Due to its original location near the Temple of Huitzilopochtli and its unique iconography, scholars have identified the statue as Coatlicue, Huitzilopochtli's mother. According to the legend recorded by the Franciscan friar and ethnographer Bernadino de Sahagún (1499-1590), Coatlicue was sweeping when a tuft of feathers descended upon her.<sup>8</sup> She tucked the tuft between her breasts and suddenly became impregnated with Huitzilopochtli. When her daughter, Coyolxauhqui (the goddess of the moon), and Coatlicue's four

legitimate the power of this patriarchy that was coming out of [Coatlicue's] womb. [Castillo Deball] was always thinking that it was somehow a declaration of war, but also a declaration of war against the female symbolisms that were present in culture beforehand and somehow the Aztecs tried to make [a] tabula rasa.<sup>9</sup>

According to Castillo Deball's reading of the myth, the destruction of female goddesses extended to an eradication of the female as a symbol of strength and also a displacement of non-Aztec Indigenous conceptions of the world. The vast expanse and brutal regime of the fifteenth-century Aztec Empire threatened to usurp Indigenous identities and cultures in the same way that Spanish colonialism would later destroy the vestiges of the former imperial power. In the exhibitions *Between You and the Image of You That Reaches Me* (Museum of Latin American Art, 2010) and *Resisting the Present* (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2012), a life-size, cut-out paper version of the Coyolxauhqui was pinned to a nearby wall (fig. 5). The decapitated mother and daughter served as persistent victims of each other and of Aztec myth- and national-building apparatus.

### Cycles of burial and unearthing

The sculpture *No solid form can contain you* bears both the physical imprint of its original and references the specific object biography of the *Coatlicue*. For example, the fibreglass cast captures the iconographic elements of the *Coatlicue*, including the large clawed feet and braided scales towards the bottom, a few hands with palms facing outwards near the middle, and two profiles of fanged snakes in profile at the top. While these details connect directly to the original, other aspects, such as the segmentation into pieces

that are bolted together at protruding seams and the giant cavity at the base of the sculpture, are unique to the methods of fibreglass reproduction. While the scale of *No solid form can contain you* mirrors that of the *Coatlicue*, the fibreglass cast is much lighter than the original andesite monument. The light shining down from the gallery's ceiling on the hollow void inside the sculpture made the top part of the piece glow and cast the bottom half into shadow.

From an early stage in producing the sculpture, Castillo Deball was interested in 'combin[ing] the mythology of the piece, like the original meaning of it together with this history of excavation and display'.<sup>10</sup> Rather than show the sculpture upright, she installed the fibreglass cast of the *Coatlicue* on the floor of the gallery, as it referred to the

4 *Coyolxauhqui Stone*, c. 1500, volcanic stone, approx. 3.35 m. in diameter. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, Mexico  
(photo: Wolfgang Sauber, CC BY-SA 3.0)



important connections with the original sculpture's former subterranean existence, 'when the piece was hidden in this courtyard', and sidestepped the 'emblematic idea of the piece in the archaeological museum in the center of this constellation'.<sup>11</sup> By the latter, Castillo Deball invoked the current location of the *Coatlicue* in the National Museum of Anthropology (Museo Nacional de Antropología), as one of the centrepieces installed in the heart of the gallery and on a pedestal to signal its ascribed status.

As mentioned previously, this cycle of interment and unearthing began with the Aztecs, who buried the *Coatlicue* near the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlán after consolidating power in the Valley of Mexico and the surrounding regions. According to the account by the astronomer, anthropologist and writer Antonio de León y Gama (1735–1802), the statue lay buried until 13 August 1790, when workers discovered it while building an underground aqueduct for the palace of Viceroy Juan Vicente de Güemes Padilla Horcasitas y Aguayo, the Count of Revillagigedo (1738–99). In a departure from previous trends of either destroying stone monuments or reincorporating them into colonial architectural projects,<sup>12</sup> the government requested the removal and storage of the *Coatlicue* in the nearby university.<sup>13</sup> This shift from dismantling to preservation occurred because of the rise of the nascent field of archaeology and the foundation of private and museum collections both within and beyond Mexico.<sup>14</sup>

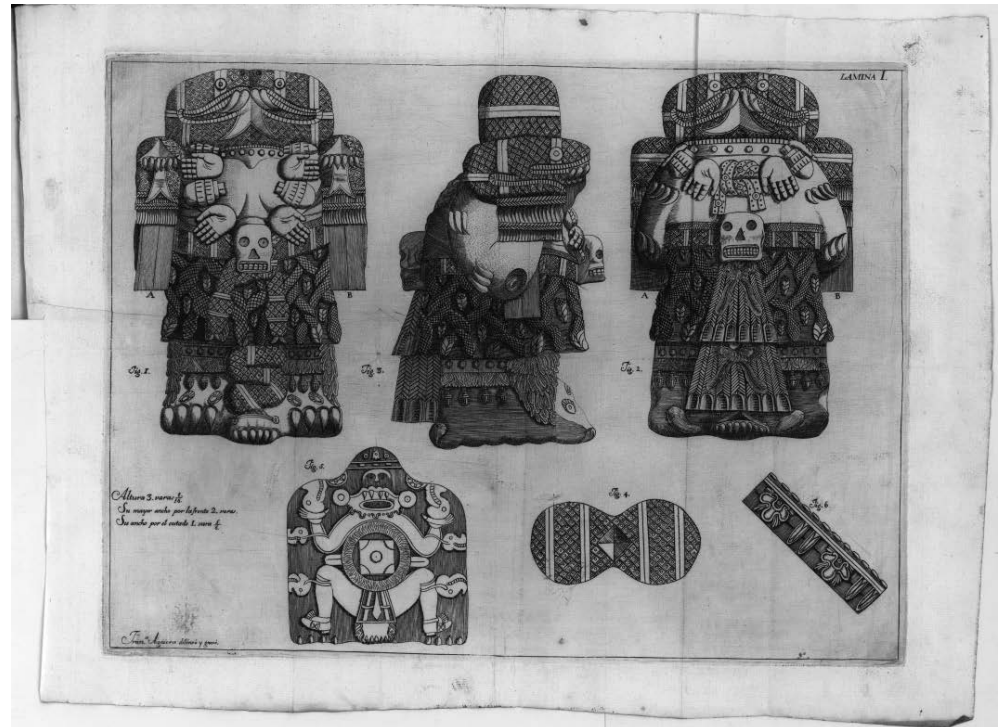
5 Mariana Castillo Deball, *The stronger the light your shadow cuts deeper*, cut paper, 300 cm diameter. Installation view of *Between you and the image of you that reaches me*, Museum of Latin American Art, 2010 (photo: courtesy of Mariana Castillo Deball)



In early September 1790 the Spanish magistrate Bernardo Bonavía y Zapata and viceroy Revillagigedo ordered the relocation of the heavy sculpture to the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico (Real y Pontificia Universidad de México, established 1551), where it stood among classical casts donated by Charles III.<sup>15</sup> This is the first instance in the history of the *Coatlicue* that is linked to the technique of cast production, though only by vicinity. The group of Greek and Roman casts formed the foundation of the national sculpture collection in Mexico City.<sup>16</sup> These casts were followed by the arrival of 192 casts in 1791, ordered from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando in Madrid by Jerónimo Antonio Gil (1731–98), director of the Royal Academy of San Carlos in Mexico.<sup>17</sup> While the *Coatlicue* was a persistent reminder of the pre-Columbian past, these Greek and Roman casts were intended to teach neoclassical painting and sculpture techniques, while also imposing European aesthetic values and classical heritage on to the New World.

Over time, the *Coatlicue* was removed from the room with the Greek and Roman casts, probably

6 Francisco Agüera, *Front, back and side view of a statue of Coatlicue, a Mexican deity*, engraving in Antonio León y Gama, *Descripción histórica y cronológica de las dos piedras*, Mexico, En la Imprenta de don Felipe de Zúñiga y Ontiveros, 1792, Plate I. John Carter Brown Library, Brown University, Providence, RI, B792 L579d (photo: John Carter Brown Library, Brown University)



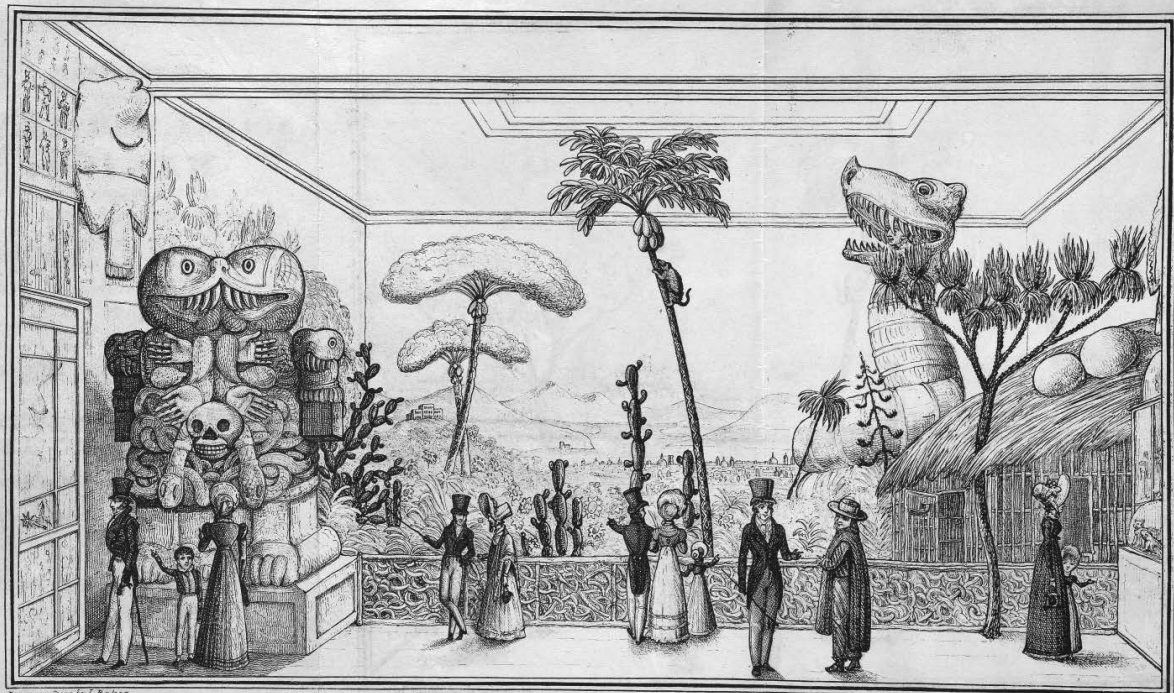
as a result of the objections of the university professors and the rector, who disapproved of the ‘monstrous’ Aztec sculpture in the same visual field as refined copies of European artistic mastery.<sup>18</sup> The university officials relocated the *Coatlicue* to the courtyard, where members of the Indigenous population began to revere the statue by leaving offerings and other indications of idolatry.<sup>19</sup> The *Coatlicue* threatened to destabilize the conversion of the Indigenous population, as ‘priests found it was inspiring too much devotion from the Indios’,<sup>20</sup> and the ‘native population resumed making her an object of worship’.<sup>21</sup> In addition to concerns over the kindling of ‘heathen’ belief systems, the professors at the university feared the potential negative influence of the statue on their students.<sup>22</sup>

Battling with the need to safeguard the *Coatlicue* while upholding the standards of a Catholic university, the stewards of the object decided to bury it. This type of burial was a convenient solution as it served the functions both of preservation and reversible iconoclasm. The *Coatlicue* was protected from defacement or destruction, while also being made unavailable to the Indigenous population who sought to worship it. This decision would only be reversed at the request of important Western figures, such as the humanist and scientist Baron Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) and the English traveller, collector and museum founder William Bullock (c. 1773–1849).

### The constitutive power of copies

Prior to its first reinterment, León y Gama created a drawing of the *Coatlicue* for his book, *Descripción histórica y cronológica de las dos piedras* (*Historical and chronological description of the two stones*) (1792), in which he described





7 I. Baker, *View of the Exhibition of Ancient and Modern Mexico*, lithograph, 22 cm, in William Bullock, *A descriptive catalogue of the exhibition, entitled Ancient and Modern Mexico*, London, 1824, unnumbered plate. Smithsonian Libraries, F1386. B85 1824 (photo: Smithsonian Libraries)

and depicted the *Calendar Stone* and the *Coatlicue*.<sup>23</sup> The *Calendar Stone*, also known as the *Piedra del Sol*, is a post-classical Aztec sculpture that was discovered within a few months of the *Coatlicue*. The monumental sculpture presents iconography related to the Aztec and was lauded for its astronomical and mathematical precision.<sup>24</sup> Both sculptures were depicted by the Mexican artist Francisco de Agüera, though for the *Coatlicue* he created six separate drawings to capture the fully sculpted nature of its body (fig. 6). Agüera's drawings circulated widely through León y Gama's book, which inspired Humboldt to visit Mexico City in 1803.<sup>25</sup> Humboldt solicited the help of the Bishop of Monterey to have the university officials unearth the *Coatlicue* from the ground for a brief viewing, which Humboldt described:

We saw it lying down, and, true, the huge mass of this colossus – once suspended in the air – is amazing. I accompanied the bishop to his convent and then went back to the university in order to contemplate the colossus once more, but it had seen the light of day for just twenty minutes; when I arrived, it had been buried again.<sup>26</sup>

The rapid reburial suggests the heightened concern over idolatry and contributes to the importance of Agüera's drawings as a primary source for comprehending the *Coatlicue*.

Humboldt included Agüera's rendition of the *Coatlicue* in his publication, *Essai politique sur le royaume de la Nouvelle Espagne: ouvrage qui présente des recherches sur la géographie du Mexique* (1808), which in turn inspired William Bullock to view the *Coatlicue*. The sculpture remained buried until 1823, when Bullock arrived in Mexico City and requested to view and make



a cast reproduction of the *Coatlicue* for his upcoming exhibition, *Ancient Mexico*, which opened in the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, London (April 1824–September 1825). Bullock visited Mexico and made casts of other monumental sculptures including the *Calendar Stone*, and models of important sites, such as the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan. With the help of Andrés Manuel del Río y Fernández (1764–1849), Professor of Mineralogy at the College of Mines (Real Seminario de Minería, founded 1792), Bullock convinced the clergy to have the *Coatlicue* disinterred again so that he could create a cast for his exhibition. In the catalogue, *A Description of the Unique Exhibition called Ancient Mexico; Collected on the Spot in 1823, by the Assistance of the Mexican Government, and Now Open for Public Inspection at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly*,<sup>27</sup> the plaster cast of the *Coatlicue* is listed as No. 65, the ‘Great Idol of the Goddess of War’, which was one of the contemporary interpretations of the statue (fig. 7).

As evidenced by the power that these two men had to unearth the *Coatlicue* from the ground, it is clear that the initial control over viewing the sculpture was shaped by outside interests. Compared to its other pre-Columbian counterparts, the *Coatlicue* as an image of a female deity lacked the scientific rigour ascribed to the Aztec *Calendar Stone* and the victorious narrative of the *Stone of Tizoc*, an eponymous post-classical sculpture that depicts the heroic battles fought by an Aztec emperor. The *Coatlicue* did not belong among the plaster casts of Greek and Roman sculptures, nor could it reside in the courtyard lest it rekindle the fervour of Indigenous worshippers. According to Bullock, the statue was promptly reburied again, though it was more likely kept above ground in a storage facility at the university.<sup>28</sup> It was through Agüera’s rendition of the original that Humboldt, Bullock and the larger public began to learn about Aztec art and culture, and their curiosity probably contributed to the acceptance of the *Coatlicue* as an object worthy of consideration and study.

The two- and three-dimensional copies, in effect, transformed the *Coatlicue* into a visible object appropriate for existence above the ground. Accordingly, the sculpture is a quite literal example of Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe’s theory of the constitutive power of copies to create the original object. In their essay ‘The Migration of the Aura or How to Explore the Original Through its Fac Similes’, Latour and Lowe challenge the common perception that a copy is simply a derivative version of the original and instead insist that the original would not have its notoriety or fame without its copies. They turn to the image of the cornucopia, ‘a twisted goat horn with a sharp end – the original – and a wide mouth disgorging at will an endless flow of riches’, to propose that an image or object ‘which has no progeny, no reproduction, and no inheritors is not called original but rather sterile or barren’.<sup>29</sup> According to Latour and Lowe, these multiple iterations are essential to the knowledge and canonical status of the original.

We see this phenomenon play out in important ways in the *Coatlicue*, along with other pre-Columbian objects. Diana Fane describes how ‘Ancient America has continually been represented and interpreted through the

selective replication of its surviving monuments. In this process unique objects have become multiples and acquired new histories and associations.<sup>30</sup> She primarily focuses on large pyramidal complexes that remained *in situ* and monumental sculptures that could not leave Mexico due to early laws forbidding their removal, which existed from 1825.<sup>31</sup> Fane argues that the canon of pre-Columbian art did not exist: 'First the canon of works to be replicated was not a given, but had to be created.'<sup>32</sup>

In fact, the inverse relationship has to be noted: the replicated works created the canon. In other words, the key objects in the canon of pre-Columbian art relied on the circulation of their copies. Drawing on Latour and Lowe, Anne Eriksen notes how '[t]he more copies available and in circulation, the more value is assigned to the original'.<sup>33</sup> In their consideration of the *Calendar Stone*, Mary E. Miller, Matthew H. Robb and Kristaan D. Villela ask the question, 'Is the object famous because it has been so often reproduced, or is there something intrinsic to the object that demands such copious reproductions?'<sup>34</sup> Their response is that the former is the case, the fame of the object lying in its frequent reproductions rather than in any intrinsic qualities.

The *Coatlicue* is one of the most replicated, circulated and highly valued works of pre-Columbian art. It was first widely known through León y Gama and Humboldt's print versions and later in three-dimensional form through Bullock's casts. It was the latter iteration that seemingly ended the cycle of burial and resulted in the potential of further copies to be made of the *Coatlicue*. This dovetailed with larger political and museological developments in Mexico, particularly driven by Lucas Alamán (1792–1853) and supported by President Guadalupe Victoria in 1825, to reinvigorate the concept of the national museum and, in doing so, 'conver[t] idolatrous objects into museum pieces'.<sup>35</sup> It took more than forty years for this process to unfurl, but a major shift in the popular, political and museological understanding of the *Coatlicue* was soon underway.

### **Aztec-centric Mexican national identity**

After Mexican independence in 1821, the new republic aimed to establish a fresh identity that sprouted from its past. The *Coatlicue*, *Calendar Stone* and the *Stone of Tizoc* formed the core visual symbols of Aztec artistic, scientific and imperial achievement. As Enrique Florescano writes:

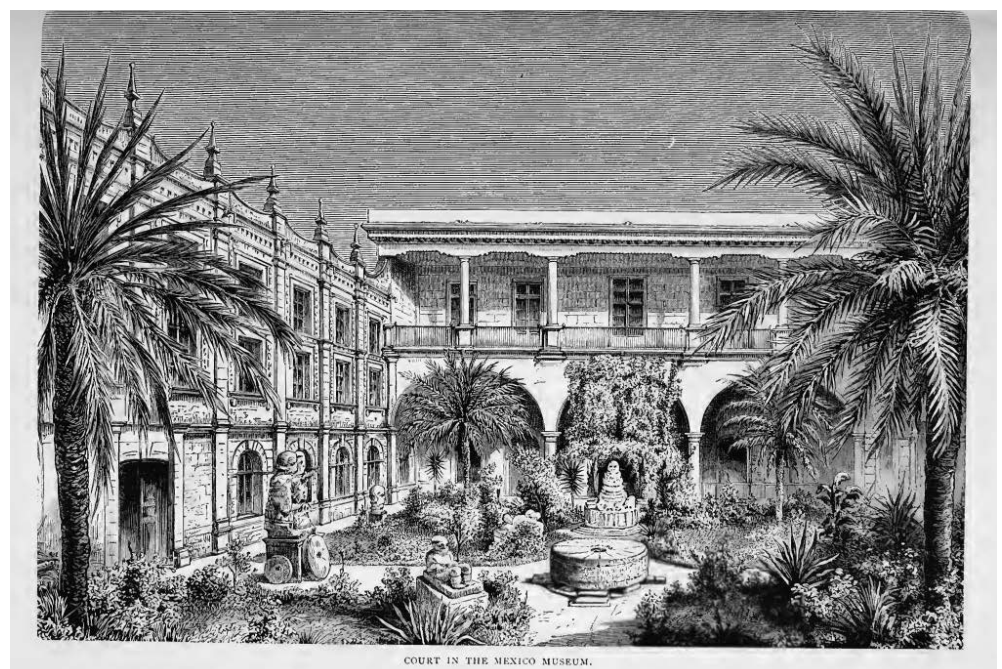
In this new political situation, the reconstruction of the national past, the reconstitution of its dismembered history, the rescue of its most ancient roots, the formation of an archive for the preservation of its written memory, and the creation of a museum that treasured its monuments would all play a central role in the construction of the nation and its identity.<sup>36</sup>

As the former occupants of Mexico City, whose monuments, language (Nahuatl), belief systems, religious iconography, city plan and architecture

persisted on site, the Aztecs were convenient and powerful forebears for the new republic. As perhaps the best-known indication of the appropriation, the Mexican flag's iconography of a serpent perched on a cactus captures a critical moment in the Aztec founding myth.<sup>37</sup> According to Ann de Léon, 'In fashioning an idea of Mexico, many Mexican and European intellectuals set about to recover and re-write the Aztec past as unique and representative of the Nation.'<sup>38</sup> Although Mexico's National Museum was founded in 1825, it remained a 'neglected child of the state' for administrative, political, economic, logistical and even existential reasons until the end of Maximilian of Habsburg's Second Empire in 1867.<sup>39</sup> President Benito Juárez (1806–72; in office 1858–72) rekindled the importance of honouring the ancient pre-Columbian past and used it to help consolidate a national Mexican identity.<sup>40</sup> By 1887 the *Coatlicue* had been installed in the Court of the National Museum of Mexico (fig. 8).

The transformation of the *Coatlicue* from 'heathen' icon into sculptural symbol of Aztec identity meant that it could operate within the network of objects both within and beyond the museum. Like other objects, the *Coatlicue* moved through different spaces in the National Museum of Mexico over time, whether in the outside courtyard or the Gallery of the Monoliths. By the mid-1880s the *Coatlicue* was displayed with a copy of its base in front, probably made of plaster, so that the sculpture's carved bottom could be made visible, similar to Agüera's drawings from a century earlier. Beyond the walls of the museum, plaster cast copies of the *Coatlicue* circulated through world's fairs, including one made by the French archaeologist, architect and photographer Léon-Eugène Méhédin (1828–1905), who visited Mexico as part of the Scientific Commission of Mexico (La Commission scientifique du Mexico, 1864–67). Modelled after earlier efforts in Egypt and Greece, this Commission was developed to understand the linguistics, archaeology, natural history and

8 After C. H. Barbant, 'Court in the Mexico Museum', in Désiré Charnay, *The ancient cities of the New World: being travels and explorations in Mexico and Central America from 1857–1882*, trans. J. Gonino and Helen S. Gonant, London, Chapman and Hall, 1887, p. 57  
(photo: Getty Research Institute)



biology of Mexico.<sup>41</sup> Méhédin created a cast of the *Coatlicue* for the 1867 Paris World's Fair, and it was situated near the entrance to a replica of the Temple of Xochicalco (c. 650–900 CE) (fig. 9).<sup>42</sup>

From this point onwards, a flurry of plaster cast production arose from the dovetailing of two major phenomena in Mexico: the rise of European-style national and encyclopaedic museums in the Americas and the heightened importance of Aztec monuments in the consolidation of a Mexican identity. As both the United States and Mexico were newer countries, they lacked a cohesive historical narrative, colonial endeavours, art schools, archaeological programmes and princely collections, which were all foundations for the establishment of national museums. Starting in the early nineteenth century, these countries began founding these interwoven institutions and relied heavily on acquiring plaster casts from Europe. For example, as previously mentioned, the Royal Academy of San Carlos, founded in 1781 as the Provisional Drawing School, obtained plaster casts of Greco-Roman sculptures within its first decade to instruct its art students, and the Boston Athenaeum, founded in 1805, acquired a cast collection in 1822.<sup>43</sup>

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Mexico codified its canon of pre-Columbian objects as its own ancient civilization and circulated casts of objects to further this agenda. This reached fever pitch during the presidency of Porfirio Díaz (1830–1915), who proudly stood next to the *Calendar Stone* in a widely circulated photograph and consolidated the most important Aztec sculptures in the Hall of Monoliths in 1887 (fig. 10). Now that the country had solidified its visual representations, it sought to proliferate this newfound programme internationally. Replicating the model of the museum-based cast workshops of Europe such as the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum), the National Museum of Mexico established its own plaster cast workshop to create reproductions of its impressive stone monument collection in 1891.<sup>44</sup> There were also individual cast-makers



9 Pierre Petit, *Xochicalco Pyramid*, photograph, 19 × 24 cm, in *Album du Parc, Exposition universelle de 1867 à Paris. Documents iconographiques*, p. 77. Archives nationales (photo: Cliché Service photographique des Archives nationales)

10 Abel Briquet, *Archaeological Museum, Mexico City*, c. 1885–95, albumen print, 12.4 × 19 cm. A. D. White Architectural Photographs, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections (photo: Cornell University Library)



such as the brothers Francisco and Dionisio Abadiano, who produced casts for diplomatic exchange and exhibition as early as 1871, though it is unclear whether this was under the auspices of or in collaboration with the National Museum.<sup>45</sup> Spearheaded by the sculptor D. Epitacio Calvo (1832–95), the workshop produced 26 plaster cast replicas of the National Museum’s collection for the *Exposición Histórico-Americana* in Madrid in 1892.

Further north, the US National Museum in Washington, DC, opened in 1879, was undertaking a major programme to acquire all types of objects, including pre-Columbian ones. The curators commenced a project of fleshing out its holding of pre-Columbian representations, acquiring 22 plaster casts of Maya sculptures made by Désiré Charnay (1828–1915) from the Trocadéro Museum in 1883 and 34 plaster casts of Aztec ones by Eufémio Abadiano in 1885. Eufémio, son of Francisco and nephew of Dionisio, created two sets of 34 plaster casts for sale during the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair. Accompanied by a catalogue, the plaster casts were on loan to and eventually purchased by the US National Museum, and now reside in the collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History.

### **Hypervisibility and female recuperation of the *Coatlicue***

The expansion of pre-Columbian objects in the visual field both within Mexico and abroad led to an increased familiarity with Aztec iconography and the conflation of these images with a modern Mexican identity. This reframing of the Aztec past bled into the artistic sphere, as artists were both commissioned to create art with pre-Columbian iconography for the Mexican Republic as well as reclaiming their own personal connection to the past. Along with the *Calendar Stone*, the *Coatlicue* was one of the most artistically reworked pre-Columbian monuments. As a few examples, the statue appears

in Saturnino Herrán's study *Coatlicue Transformed* (1918), on the south wall of Diego Rivera's Detroit Industry fresco (1932–33), and in the middle of an illustrious crowd in Miguel Covarrubias's *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art at the Museum of Modern Art* (1940), during which the *Coatlicue* made an appearance in plaster cast form. These appropriations in modern art by male artists align with the Mexican nationalist urge to have the *Coatlicue* as a stand-in for an Aztec-centric past.

As a counterpoint to the male-dominated history of excavation, scholarship and artistic response, contemporary female artists and writers have begun to reclaim the deity, her history and her image. These interventions encompass a range of media, from those of the performance artist Jesusa Rodríguez and the theatre group Teatro Coatlicue to the writing of Gloria Anzaldúa and the mixed media graffiti mural *Homenaje a la mujer*.<sup>46</sup> While each of these artistic outputs reconsiders the goddess, mythology and form of the *Coatlicue* in different ways, they do not necessarily capture its broader historiographic and museological trajectory. For this mode of reflection, I return to the contemporary Mexican artist Mariana Castillo Deball, and her work *No solid form can contain you*.

According to Castillo Deball, one of the overarching goals of her practice is to unearth the hidden histories of pre-Hispanic objects and confront the constructed nature of museum displays. In the case of the *Coatlicue*, she researched deeply into the histories of the object to understand 'both aspects of the work as an archaeological artifact and also as a museum artifact, so how it kind of went from one life to another'.<sup>47</sup> This comprehensive assessment of one of the most important and canonical Aztec sculptures clued her into the ways that the statue has been manipulated over time, as outlined above, and she drew on this history to highlight two important aspects: the history of its plaster cast reproduction and its subterranean existence. These elements are glossed in the historical accounts and known through visual records, but sidelined as secondary aspects of the object. However, in returning to Latour and Lowe's argument that the copies constitute the original, I should like to argue that the object's replication, which is so closely tied to its oscillating existence above and below ground, is central to understanding the *Coatlicue*. The piece and its installation exist within the parameters of institutional critique, as Castillo Deball brings an analytical lens both to the historiographic and museological role that the *Coatlicue* has been made by play by male decision makers in manipulating the statue as a symbol of Mexican identity.

To produce *No solid form can contain you*, Castillo Deball worked with a family of Mexican cast-makers led by Mario Cirett, his daughter, Silvia, and his grandsons to create a fibreglass cast of a fibreglass mould of the *Coatlicue*. In a similar trajectory as the Abadianos, the Cirett family are among the most acclaimed replica producers in Mexico, and have made a living creating plaster casts, models and dioramas for over a generation. The Cirett family would use these moulds as the basis for making a finished replica of the *Coatlicue*. As described earlier, Castillo Deball bolted together the distinct

sections of the fibreglass cast, leaving the protruding external seams and hardware exposed. In the interview, she mentioned that she was interested in the ambiguity between ‘a positive shape that appears to be a negative mould, because the way the fragments assembled are not seamless’.<sup>48</sup> By placing the hollow form on the floor, she further undermines the reading of the cast as a substitute for a celebrated monument while also referencing its earlier states of burial. The productive tensions between negative and positive, fragmentation and completeness, lying and standing are central to the work, as they create opportunities to critically examine traditional museological practices in displaying pre-Columbian objects and their replicas.

By creating a cast from a mould and referencing the sculpture’s earlier interred existence, Castillo Deball operates within the same milieu that Erica Segre develops for other Mexican artists, including Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti, in which ‘archaeological artifacts, pre-Hispanic, colonial, folkloric, and industrial paraphernalia, surface to *interrogate* identity [Segre’s emphasis]’ where ‘totemic objects are often reproduced not *in situ* but extracted and installed, recontextualized yet ahistorical’.<sup>49</sup> Segre goes on to argue that modern and contemporary photographers such as Silvia Gruner infuse their work with ‘an archival density and melancholy or ironic reflexivity ... [that] do not so much demystify canonical representations as reinvest in the metaphorical potential of archaeology – to resist official memory and collective amnesia’.<sup>50</sup> Castillo Deball’s fibreglass cast made from a mould is one way that the artist questions not only the history of the original *Coatlicue*, but its history of reproduction and circulation as well. She interrogates the use of the *Coatlicue* in nineteenth-century efforts to consolidate a Mexican identity around Aztec objects, and her work is inflected with an archival density as the materiality, process and display condense over five hundred years of history into one piece.

In her work as an artist, Mariana Castillo Deball draws attention to this long history of three-dimensional reproductions of the *Coatlicue*, and the transience of this sculpture as it travelled in replica throughout the world. Castillo Deball has traced the trajectory of the *Coatlicue*, and more importantly has given its history an aesthetically compelling, visible and public form. Her focus on the *Coatlicue* enabled her to dive into the long politicization of pre-Columbian objects, as they were either rejected or embraced depending on the time period. The supine placement of the cast on the floor helps to resist these appropriations by reducing its visually imposing size and weight and referring to its subterranean existence and connection to the earth. By working with a Mexican cast-maker to produce a fibreglass replica of the mould, Castillo Deball not only connected her work with the generations of Mexican cast-makers but also referenced the history of an Aztec monument and two hundred years of its replication in prints and casts through an uncompromisingly modern material. The circulation of *No solid form can contain you* throughout Europe and the United States for different exhibitions mirrors the movement of similar casts by Bullock, Méhédin and the Abadianos, though the rough edges, colour and hollowness provide a



critical distance between the original and its copy.<sup>51</sup> Castillo Deball's conscious decision to engage with these multiple histories of the object through tracing the replicas, choice of materials, production process and display preferences ensures that *No solid form can contain you* resists yet another celebratory appropriation and instead encourages an in-depth excavation of the complex history of the *Coatlicue*.

1. B. Latour and A. Lowe, 'The migration of the aura or how to explore the original through its fac similes', in T. Bartscherer (ed.), *Switching Codes: Thinking through Digital Technology in the Humanities and the Arts*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011, pp. 275–97.
2. E. Segre, *Intersected Identities: Strategies of Visualization in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Mexican Culture*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2007, pp. 251, 244. Italics original.
3. A. de León y Gama, *Descripción histórica y cronológica de las dos piedras: que con ocasión del nuevo empedrado, que se está formando en la plaza principal de México, se hallaron en ella el año de 1790 ...*, México, Valdes, 1832.
4. 'Coatlicue', [https://www.lugares.inah.gob.mx/es/museos-inah/museo/museo-piezas/7428-7428-10-1153-coatlicue.html?lugar\\_id=471](https://www.lugares.inah.gob.mx/es/museos-inah/museo/museo-piezas/7428-7428-10-1153-coatlicue.html?lugar_id=471), accessed 7 August 2019.
5. A. de León, 'Coatlicue or how to write the dismembered body', *MLN*, 125, 2010, p. 279.
6. J. Franco, 'The return of Coatlicue: Mexican nationalism and the Aztec past', *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 13, 2004, p. 209.
7. Ibid., p. 205.
8. B. de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de nueva España*, México, D.F., Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2000.
9. Jennifer Reynolds-Kaye, interview with Mariana Castillo Deball, 1 August 2019.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. A. Lopez Austin and L. Lopez Lujan, 'The posthumous history of the Tizoc stone', in B. D. Dillon and M. A. Boxt (eds), *Fanning the Sacred Flame*, Boulder, CO, University Press of Colorado, 2012, pp. 439–60 (p. 441); E. H. Boone, *The Aztec Templo Mayor: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 8th and 9th October 1983*, Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1987, p. 18.
13. I. Bernal, *A History of Mexican Archaeology: The Vanished Civilizations of Middle America*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1980, p. 39; de Sahagún, as at note 8, p. 80.
14. Boone, as at note 12, p. 18.
15. L. A. Pimentel, 'Ekphrasis and cultural discourse', *Neohelicon*, 30, 2003, p. 61; M. J. Schreffler, 'The making of an Aztec goddess: a historiographic study of the Coatlicue', unpub. PhD thesis, Arizona State University, 1994, pp. 9–10.
16. For the sake of comparison, the first casts of Western sculpture arrived in the English colonies of North America in 1728. For more, see J. K. McNutt, 'Plaster casts after antique sculpture: their role in the elevation of public taste and in American art instruction', *Studies in Art Education*, 31, 1990, pp. 158–67.
17. E. Fuentes Rojas, 'Art and pedagogy of the plaster cast collection of the Academia de San Carlos in Mexico City', in R. Frederiksen and E. Marchand (eds), *Plaster Casts: Making, Collecting, and Displaying from Classical Antiquity to the Present*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 2010, pp. 230–31.
18. Schreffler, as at note 15, p. 10.
19. E. Florescano, 'The creation of the Museo Nacional de Antropología of Mexico and its scientific, educational, and political purposes', in E. H. Boone (ed.), *Collecting the Pre-Columbian Past: A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 6th and 7th October 1990*, Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks Research and Library Collection, 1993, p. 86.
20. A. L. Petersen, 'The ruinous maternal body "par excellence": Coatlicue in the Mexican imaginary (from the monolith to Elena Poniatowska)', *Letras Femeninas*, 40, 2014, pp. 107–08.
21. Florescano, as at note 19, p. 86.
22. Boone, as at note 12, p. 25; de León, as at note 5, p. 260.
23. M. E. Miller, K. D. Villela and M. H. Robb, 'Introduction', in M. E. Miller and K. D. Villela (eds), *The Aztec Calendar Stone*, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2010, pp. 4–5.
24. Ibid., pp. 1–3.
25. Schreffler, as at note 15, pp. 10–11.
26. Pimentel, as at note 15, p. 62.
27. W. W. Bullock, *A Description of the Unique Exhibition Called Ancient Mexico: Collected on the Spot in 1823 by the Assistance of the Mexican Government: And Now Open for Public Inspection at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly*, London, 1824.
28. There are two conflicting dates for the movement of the Coatlicue to a storage area. According to Boone, the Coatlicue was relocated in 1823 (as at note 12, p. 25), whereas Miller, Villela and Robb date the movement to storage in 1830 (as at note 23, p. 18).
29. Latour and Lowe, as at note 1, p. 279.
30. D. Fane, 'Reproducing the pre-Columbian past: casts and models in exhibitions of ancient America, 1824–1935', in Boone (ed.), as at note 19, pp. 143–4.
31. S. E. Garrigan, *Collecting Mexico: Museums, Monuments, and the Creation of National Identity*, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2012, pp. 65, 80.
32. Fane, as at note 30, p. 151.
33. A. Eriksen, 'Copies, concepts and time', in *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research*, 9, 2017, p. 20.
34. Miller, Villela and Robb, as at note 23, p. 23.
35. L. G. Morales-Moreno, 'History and patriotism in the National Museum of Mexico', in Flora Edouwey S. Kaplan (ed.), *Museums and the Making of 'Ourselves': The Role of Objects in National Identity*, London, Leicester University Press, 1994, p. 177.
36. E. Florescano, *National Narratives in Mexico: A History*, trans. Nancy Hancock, Norman, OK, University of Oklahoma Press, 2012, p. 232.
37. Ibid., p. 232.
38. de León, as at note 5, p. 259.
39. M. Achim, 'From idols to antiquity: forging the National Museum of Mexico', *Museum History Journal*, 9, 1, 2016, p. 14.
40. Morales-Moreno, as at note 35, p. 179; de León, as at note 5, p. 260.
41. G. S. Dunbar, "'The compass follows the flag": the French scientific mission to Mexico, 1864–1867', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 78, 1988, p. 232.
42. H. Honour, *The New Golden Land: European Images of America from the Discoveries to the Present Time*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1975, p. 184.
43. P. Born, 'The canon is cast: plaster casts in American museum and university collections', *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America*, 21, 2002, p. 8.
44. F. del Paso y Troncoso, *Catálogo de la Sección de México*, Madrid, Sucesores de Rivadeneyra, 1892, pp. 11–12; B. Mundy and D. Leibsohn, 'Of copies, casts, and codices: Mexico on display in 1892', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 29/30, 1996, p. 335.
45. Miller, Villela and Robb, as at note 23, pp. 27, 29.
46. Franco, as at note 6, p. 216; Petersen, as at note 20, p. 104.
47. Reynolds-Kaye, interview with Castillo Deball, as at note 9.
48. Email from Mariana Castillo Deball to Jennifer Reynolds-Kaye, 2019.
49. Segre, as at note 2, pp. 244–45.
50. Ibid., pp. 251–52.
51. *No solid form can contain you* has been on display in *Between You and the Image of You That Reaches Me* in Long Beach, California; *Resisting the Present: Mexico 2000/2012* in Pueblo, Mexico, and Paris, France; and *Mariana Castillo Deball: Finding Oneself Outside* in New York City.