

### Carlos Aguirre *A Balance of Forces*

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# CARLOS AGUIRRE A BALANCE OF FORCES

DEBBIE O'ROURKE

To walk into Carlos Aguirre's exhibition at Deleon White gallery was to enter a world of intersected white space, as if one somehow found oneself within a sheet of delicate abstract pencil sketches. A weight here, a smear on the wall there, gave counterpoint to the slender arcs Aguirre had drawn with metal rods, and the first impression was of a harmonious, elegant minimalism. But the tranquility was deceptive, for close examination of individual works revealed that each piece existed in a state of tension. Aguirre had, out of wood, hardware and various found objects, concocted ephemera better described by gerunds than by nouns. Not a sculpture but a hanging, a crawling, a threatening, a restraining, a swinging, a springing, a drawing, a holding. They were kinetic constructions whose stillness was the product of a careful balancing of opposing forces, leading to a sense of instability, impermanence, and even of danger. A mere nudge could have created a release of potential energy resulting in the spectacular destruction of a piece.

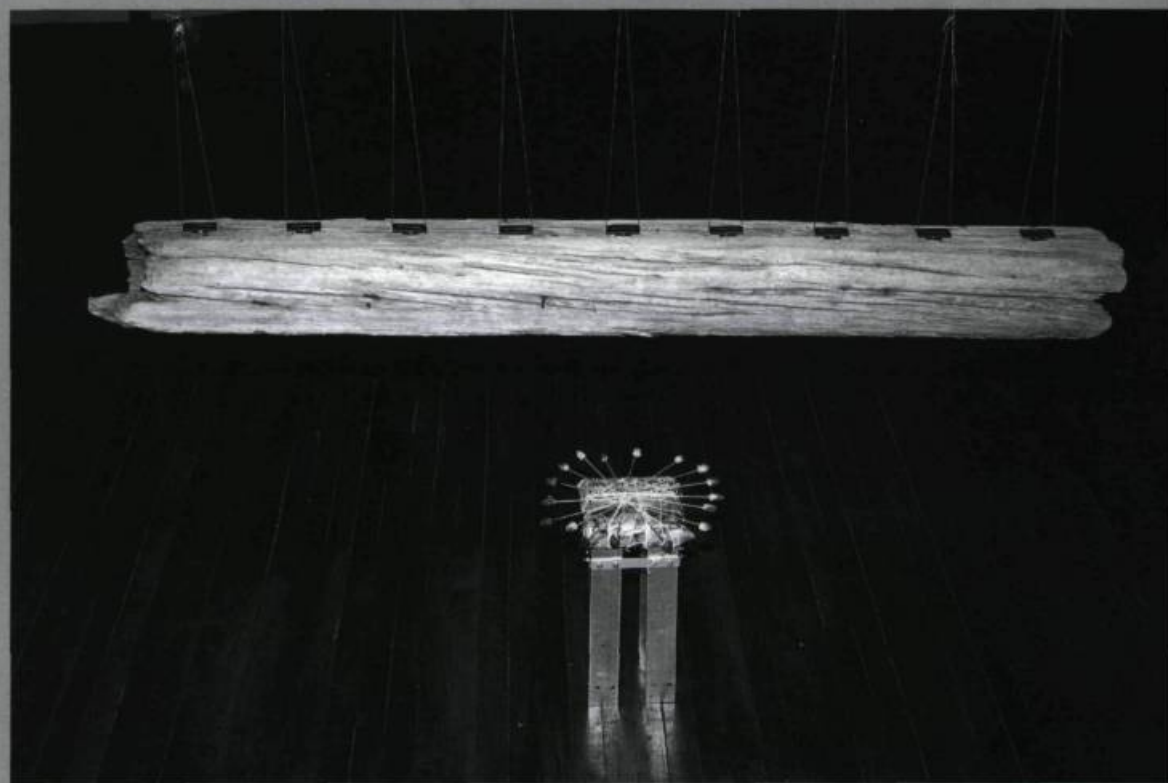
In one of the artworks, a log the size and shape of a human torso was cradled on two metal bands suspended from slender rods. Four lengths of surgical tubing hung from the ceiling to support the construction and every juncture was held together by surgical clamps. In another, a metal rod was bolted to the gallery wall. It bent in a graceful arc, one end weighted by a copy of the Mexican constitution. To the other end was attached a pulley from which a small, hand-made bag and a long, straight driftwood branch leaned in opposite directions. Together they maintained a force that balanced the political weight at the other extremity. All of Aguirre's artworks were untitled, but the brief list of materials that accompanied each one gave a clue to deciphering the piece. When one understood, for instance, that the string bag in the previously-described construction was made in Chiapas, Mexico, the reading became very specific. According to the artist, the leaning branch

symbolized the land itself, while the bag represented the people who made it.

"The struggle in Chiapas is not about Native rights," Mr Aguirre said in explanation of this piece. "It is about the land. It is about who controls one of the richest eco-systems on earth." This kind of conflict is familiar to those which have

between nature, human self-determination and Power.

The most easily described and understood artworks were the most political pieces in the show. But Aguirre is as likely to abandon himself to a totally poetic sensibility as he is to express a political idea. Aesthetically and



followed the struggles of First Nations people in Canada. From the Cree in Quebec to the Teme Augama in Ontario to the many tribes in B.C. who battle strip mining and clearcut logging, one finds that the titanic struggles are in reality about the conservation versus the destruction of the last complex eco-systems.

Great corporate and state powers have successfully spent a great deal of time and money enforcing the myth that the interests of any particular group are in opposition to all other groups and to nature itself. Aguirre's constructs express the complexity of the relationship

philosophically he is interested in exploring the tension of interacting forces, the surprising strength and magic qualities of materials. The viewer's unconscious and instinctive reactions are called upon, as well as the intellect.

Aguirre is a quintessential site-specific artist. Travelling from Mexico, he arrived in Toronto with only a few tools and some of the brackets he makes himself for suspending his constructions. As he searches for appropriate materials, each exhibition becomes a personal interaction with the city he is exhibiting in, and he is very talented at finding the best sources for materials. He was impressed with the

Carlos Aguirre,  
Untitled, 1998. Detail.  
Beam supported by  
magnets, surgical  
material. Deleon White  
Gallery, Toronto.  
Photo: John Oughton.



rich resources available to the artist in Toronto.

"I don't go to art supply stores" Aguirre told me, "but I found a great place to buy materials." He described Active Surplus, an extraordinary resource for Toronto artists and designers: a cornucopia of wires, tubing, components, parts and materials where they give good deals but don't give a damn about the arts. No amount of begging will get them to let you into the basement to fetch a part if they have decided not to open it for the day, as Mr. Aguirre discovered the evening before his show opened.

At the other end of the spectrum was Jacob's Hardware: an old cluttered, shoe-box of a shop where a worker often spends fifteen minutes searching for a part that will solve a customer's problem for a few cents. Aguirre also discovered some wood-carvers' secrets: Lee Valley Tools and a bend of the Don River where a

consisted of two charred driftwood lengths, echoing an adult arm in size. Suspended on springs, they "drew" on the white wall.

Each construction in its own way exemplified the dynamism of a living body in its state of taut, repressed energy. Even a resting body is not a static thing but a complex pattern of interacting processes: similarly, it was the balance of tensions that prevented Aguirre's sculptural works from "decomposing" into their component elements.

The maintenance of civilization is also a balancing act, as the inventiveness and energy stimulated by self-interest struggles against the conservative but necessary concern for the whole. The loss of respect and reciprocity results in economic paralysis and starvation. As we have seen many times in this century, the abandonment of responsibility, tolerance and personal conscience results in

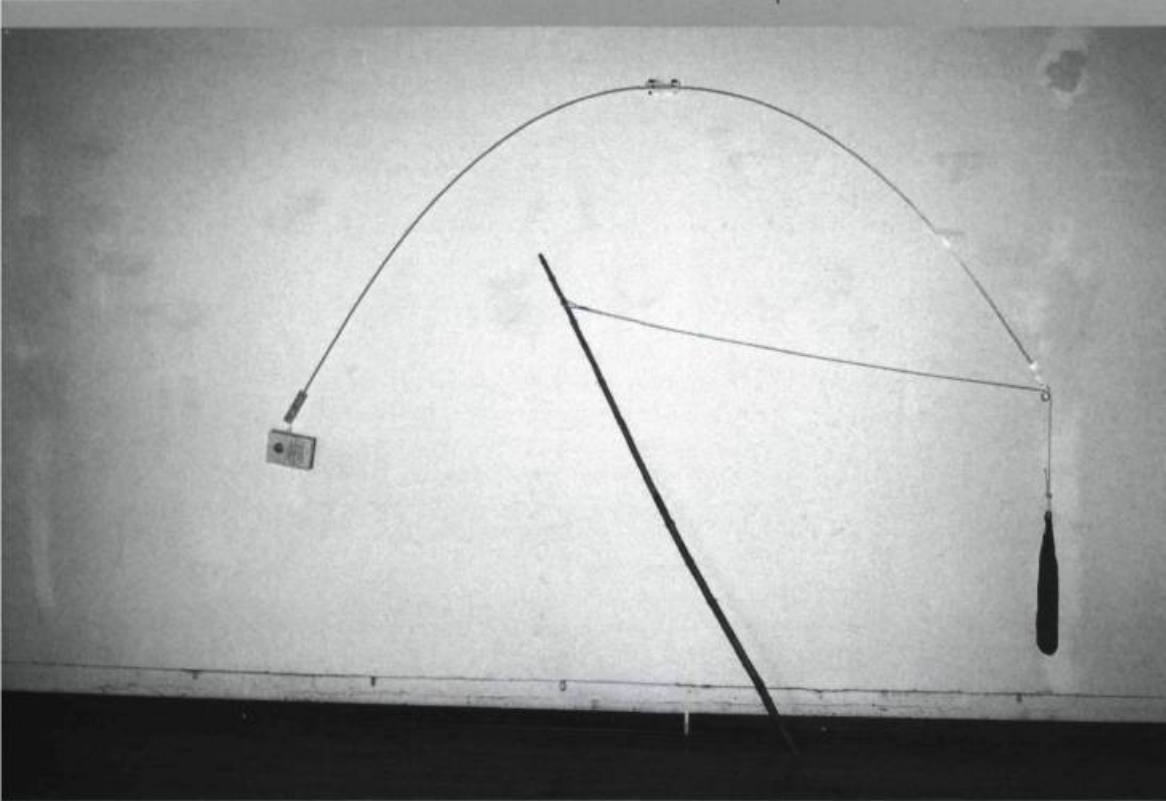
newspaper *La Jornada*, prevents the full weight of the State from descending upon the indigenous people of Chiapas.

Mr. Aguirre is a Mexican artist who has won a Guggenheim Fellowship for his installation artwork. His current tour includes a show in Spain and is being promoted by Mexican consulates abroad. He admits that to express a political consciousness can be a delicate matter for an artist. The fact that the risks can at times drive us to pursue metaphors that are deeper and more complex is not bad for art. To forestall other dangers, Mr. Aguirre works to keep a high profile and, he says, "I pay all my taxes on time."

This exhibition was co-hosted by the Mexican Consulate in Toronto and the Deleon White Gallery, a two-year-old venue with the mandate to foster "arts, culture and ecology". Ecological art is a burgeoning form that crosses over into activism and spirituality, but it can also be a contemporary way to practice the time-honoured art of romancing the landscape. Aguirre's inclusion of human and aboriginal rights in the ecological question is well-placed. The first artist to be included in the stable of Deleon White was Ojibway artist Carl Beam, who has never separated human and natural history,

As marginal peoples world-wide try to survive from day to day, they often come into conflict with those who have the luxury of worrying about the morrow. It is difficult for an unemployed fisherman or logger, or a displaced peasant to find common ground with the activist who wants to see pristine nature preserved as his playground. Racism and cultural barriers block communication between both groups and the First Nations people who occupy the territories slated for exploitation. As surely as tomorrow becomes today, the common interest exists. Often employed in logging and other resource industries, but possessing a sense of permanence and duty to subsequent generations, First Nations often hold the key to that meeting place. But in the face of all the forces that strive to keep us apart, that territory must be searched out, fought for, and commemorated.

Modern technologies and ethical systems that value labour — any labour — above any form of leisure, thought or spirituality give the modern worker more working days and far less freedom from surveillance than a medieval peasant. In these times of electronic communication/surveillance and mega-weaponry, the destructive power of CEOs and heads of state is greater than that of any dictator or monarch of the past. Power itself has become at the same time



Carlos Aguirre, *Untitled*, 1998. Mexican constitution handbag from Chiapas. Deleon White Gallery, Toronto. Photo: John Oughton.

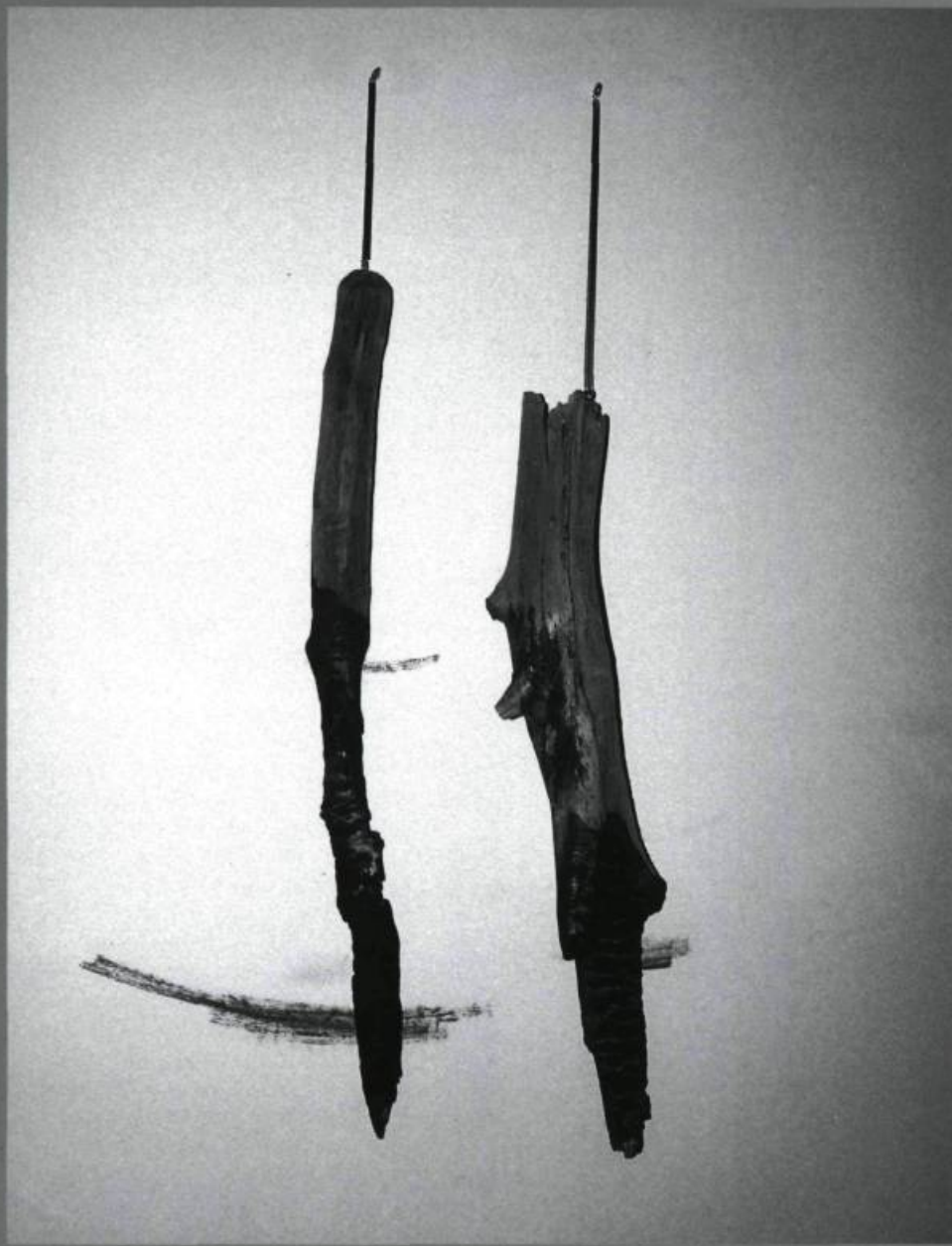
great selection of driftwood piles up. This intimate encounter with a new place, from begging recalcitrant storekeepers to negotiating a public transit system while carrying eight-foot metal rods, is intrinsic to Aguirre's working process.

In his exhibitions in Mexico, Aguirre has, occasionally, incorporated human remains into his works. At Deleon White the presence of the human body was strongly suggested. The use of surgical materials inserted an awareness of vital processes, bodily fluids, vulnerability, invasion. Wood often stood in for the body: the cradled torso mentioned above is one example. One enchanting piece

savagery, holocaust, genocide.

In Aguirre's exhibition, this dynamic was portrayed by a structure in which a large wooden beam threatened to descend upon one of the Chiapan bags which dangled from another indigenous invention, a carved wooden stick designed to hold the bags of possessions away from damp walls. The timber was restrained from falling upon the delicate articles by the weight of a bundle of newspapers on the other side of the gallery, joined to the beam by a ceiling-mounted rope-and-pulley system. It is Aguirre's contention that only vigilant journalism, especially personified in the





the invisible bonds that bring people together, and it is a visible manifestation of the forces that drive the sub-atomic and the cosmological universe.

Like many contemporary artists Mr. Aguirre intends that his work be read, not merely looked at. But he brings to the gallery a sensibility that is poetic more than didactic. He has not adopted or created a code by which his works can be translated, but exercises the full range of meanings that can be suggested by his materials. For instance, wood is employed as a substance that not only possesses its own beauty and character but can represent something as tangible as a human body part or as abstract as state power, threat, or nature itself.

Aguirre creates artwork that invites the intelligent viewer to decipher it but does not reduce the experience to the level of an obscure and exclusive parlour game. Reading Aguirre's work does not require a background in theory and art history, but only an informed and curious mind. Like Anishnaabe installation artist Rebecca Belmore, Aguirre creates wordless statements that employ the dictionary of the body, of Nature, of the media environment in which we struggle to survive and protect one another. ■

Carlos Aguirre, *A Balance of Forces*  
Deleon White Gallery, Toronto  
May, 1998

L'exposition de Carlos Aguirre, *A Balance of Forces*, à la galerie Deleon White de Toronto se composait de plusieurs constructions cinétiques. L'impression de calme qui s'en dégageait résultait du parfait équilibre entre des forces antagonistes, d'où émanait une sensation d'instabilité, d'impermanence, voire de danger. Toutes les œuvres d'Aguirre étaient sans titre, mais la liste des matériaux accompagnant chacune d'elles fournissait un indice pour les déchiffrer. Lorsque l'on comprend, par exemple, que le filet dans telle œuvre a été réalisé au Chiapas (Mexique), la lecture en devient très explicite. Selon l'artiste, la branche inclinée symbolise le territoire lui-même, tandis que le sac représente les gens qui l'ont exécuté.

Une importante corporation et des instances gouvernementales ont dépensé avec succès beaucoup de temps et d'argent à renforcer le mythe que les intérêts de quelque groupe particulier entrent en opposition directe avec ceux de tous les autres groupes. Les constructions d'Aguirre expriment toute la complexité de la relation qui se tisse entre la nature, l'autodétermination et le pouvoir. L'artiste élabore des constats «sans mots» qui utilisent le langage du corps, de la Nature, et des milieux environnants dans lesquels nous nous débattons pour survivre et nous protéger les uns les autres.

Carlos Aguirre,  
*Untitled*, 1998. Two  
burned branches  
springs. Deleon  
White Gallery,  
Toronto. Photo:  
John Oughton.

vaster, more abstract and more absolute in the punishments it can deal out.

Aguirre's wooden beams, threatening delicate human constructions, are metaphors for this power over others that has been present throughout civilization but has reached an exponential intensity in this century. But he has an equivalent fascination for the strength that can be manifested in small things, especially operating together or in counterpoint to one another.

For example, Aguirre made a quaint construction out of newspaper and surgical swabs. The swabs are roughly made of wood and plastic foam, and the tips are the size and shape of chicken hearts. Aguirre tied them together so that the "hearts" - not sentimental shapes but

the form of living organs - make a wheel with the sticks as spokes. The circle symbol is ancient and ubiquitous, representing such universals as community, and the continuity and cycles of life. Like Damocles' sword, a wooden beam loomed over this delicate construct. It had been hung from the ceiling by surgical thread attached to nine small magnets whose attractive force carried the weight of the beam.

This complex piece carries a heavy weight of social and psychological metaphor, but its use of materials also induces wonder and curiosity. Surgical thread has many strengths, often carrying the gift of rescue by a surgeon's hand. But here was visible manifestation of its power. Magnetism is often a metaphor for