

Mining Laughter: A Journey through Gold, Power and Street Comedy in Peru

by Oscar Lara

Mining Laughter: A Journey through Gold, Power, and Street Comedy in Peru, arises as a narrative response to my need of drafting different lines of thought used and revised when producing my research project *Searching for Power on the Collective Laugh*.

Searching for Power on the Collective Laugh (SPCL) is the second test of a sub-project within my current PhD. In collaboration with a group of Peruvian street comedians; a sociologist and environmental activist; an anthropologist and journalist; and an educator and Theatre of the Oppressed facilitator, the project aims to empower street comedians in the context of the problematics of illegal gold mining, in order for them to produce humour out of an activity whose daily circumstances degrade humankind to its minimum.

SPCL tests the power of humour and its materialization, the production of comedy, as a tool to normalize new information and thus help in the acceptance of changes in society. The project employs an experimental working methodology, mixing known academic strategies such as workshops and round tables with performative exercises taken from the Theatre of the Oppressed. The result is the production of new comedy material which was distributed on the streets of Lima and the Amazon region of Peru, as well as presented in the RIA Research Week 2020 and on the streets of Stockholm, Sweden.

The project is constructed on three pillars that have coexisted throughout the whole process and that have attempted to stay within the initial decided framework, which has been helpful in designing the working methodology of the experiment. In the following text, I will try to explain two of them, thereby aiming to provide clearer contextual grounds that I hope will contribute to establish a common conversational climate that will mitigate the socio-contextual distance of starting and operating a PhD investigation in various locations in Peru during the last two and a half years.

Content, Format and Methodology are the three pillars that have constantly shaped the project into what it is today, and they arrived at the project in that order. First, the content, which was the most important base and existed since before *SPCL* was even designed. Later, a distribution format was decided, and with that, we made an analysis

searching for a suitable experimental working method for accomplishing the given task concerning the site(s).

The first pillar is Content: Mining Illegalization strategy by the Peruvian government

Next, the Format is crucial: Street comedy

Finally, the third pillar is Methodology: Blending Art, Research, and Social Engagement

As mentioned above, gold mining was of great interest to me, and is an element that has been present in my thoughts even before beginning to plan this PhD. In the following introduction to this text, I have for the first time felt the need to discuss this interest further, mainly in order to acknowledge the need to offer a more generous articulation of the extent and multi-layered character of this research.

The following compilation of personal experiences, factual data, critical living memories, and various anchor points is my very sincere effort to provide an overall context in order to contribute to devising entry points to the several aspects of such adventure.

Opening Thoughts

It was in the summer of 1982 that I set out for the first time on a journey that would quickly become one of the routes in my life that had the capacity to make me feel real, simply by stepping inside one of those Faucett aircrafts which, during the eighties, were the only ones that would fly from Lima to Puerto Maldonado.

Puerto Maldonado was for me one of those fairy tales places that were constructed in my mind as a five-year-old. A place where I would fantasise about swimming with caimans, snakes and piranhas, and where the glow of the moon and the stars were enough to light the streets of what the place was at that time: the jungle paradise that my dad helped me to construct in my sweetest dreams of my childhood in a suburb of Lima.

Unlike other children my age, I was not traveling in search of a better life, nor fighting for my life escaping from the tyranny of the *Shining Path*.¹ I was going on holidays with my mother and my sister. We were on our way to discover for the first time the place where my father was born; the place we consider we are also from; and a place of which we knew so much but had thus far only seen in an image of its main square on the cover of a long play recorded by my uncle *Ico*.²

I can now say that that was the very beginning of a close relationship I have managed to build with Puerto Maldonado, Madre de Dios. A relationship that at times has felt more like a constant cycle of frustration and hopelessness that I have always managed to keep at bay by remembering our breakfasts during that first visit in 1982, with chapo (traditional sweet banana smoothie), fried bananas and huevos de charapa (jungle turtle eggs). It feels that for the people who are familiar with the Madre de Dios amazon

¹ The Shining Path was a terrorist group with Maoist ideals that assassinated approximately thirty thousand people and operated mainly in the Andes. The escape from that situation for many was to migrate to Lima. Gustavo Yamada, *Patrones de migración interna en el Perú reciente*, 2012. Accessed on 10 October 2023. <http://files.pucp.edu.pe/departamento/economia/LDE-2012-01-04.pdf>.

² Wilfredo Rodriguez is my uncle-in-law. Together with Isaac Corvera, he produced a long play called *Madre de Dios*. The cover featured a picture of the main square in Madre de Dios.

region of Peru, there is no other option than to keep very carefully those precious memories that such a jungle paradise so humbly shares with you sometimes.

Gabriel Arriarán said in his book, *Frontera Pirata*:

“In what I consider to be his best novel, *La Velocidad de la Luz*, a character from Javier Cercas goes so far as to say that Ernest Hemingway was a good idiot detector. If you don't like Hemingway, it is a big chance that you're an idiot.

I think Madre de Dios works with people like a similar thermometer. Very few people remain after going through his brutal hovering. But the ones that remain ... it's not that they're nice people. It is that they are fucking great.”

This is the only way I can explain my constant eagerness to invest time and energy in researching the biggest and most dangerous illegal mining area of the whole amazon jungle. The people who taught me about Madre de Dios and the people I have found in the construction of my own version of Madre de Dios, have helped me in defining who I am today in so many ways.

But what happened with Madre de Dios and gold mining? I think it was on my visit of 2013 when I came back from Europe and decided to go to Puerto Maldonado with my dad, and we ended up spending most of our time visiting mining towns and inquiring in police stations. It was the first time that to find some answer to that question really became unavoidable.

Madre de Dios is located in the jungle of Peru. It has an area of 85,300 km² and it is one of the most biodiverse regions in the planet.³ However, the Peruvian jungle is one of the places that seems to be doomed to its extinction. At the end of the nineteenth century was the rubber; at the beginning of the twentieth century was the *castaña* (chestnut); then later that century it was the still uncontrollable deforestation by the *madereros* (lumberjacks) as the demands for mahogany in international markets caused its price to escalate as never before. All these compulsive searches for commodities triggered commercial exchanges in the amazon area that always took most of the natural resources and left only traumatized communities behind. But I am confident in saying that the region had never before witnessed the denigration of the very base conditions of human beings that the mining activity brought to the jungle.

A mining activity which was, as my father used to say, “only a few artisans by the river trying to get lucky in the sixties. You would see them everywhere with their silver plates by the *beaches*.”⁴

³ In 1987, UNESCO recognized the Manu National Park as "Natural Heritage of Humanity." Accessed on 15 October 2023. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/402/>.

⁴ It is called beach, when the river tide drops and reveals its sandy ground.

Or as my uncle Raymundo told me in one of those many stories while working on sculptures in his metal workshop:

“...my dad was a gold trader, he would send merchandise from Cusco to Puerto Maldonado. He would go on his raft navigating the river trading goods for gold. It was 1949, when I broke one of eleven Capri bottles that he had full of gold in our house. They were ready for selling and I broke one and spilled all the gold in the grass. It was the only time that my dad hit me with his belt. Months after, he came out from our house because there was a drunk man urinating at the door of my mum's fonda [place that offers lunch service to workers]. He fought this guy but his friends beat up my dad in the end. He ended up spitting blood from his mouth and my grandma took him to Cusco. We didn't even have a doctor in our town. I wanted to come with him but they didn't let me. My dad stayed at the hospital in Cusco for several months. On May 21st 1950, it was the Cusco earthquake. The hospital was destroyed and my dad died that day. They never told us where those bodies were buried.”

From a personal memory of Puerto Maldonado, we begin a broader exploration:

There is a long tradition of gold mining in Madre de Dios and it comes from far before what the Peruvian state uses as registered data. Those stories have been always very present to me when reading news about gold mining in the jungle. News that from the perspective of the day-to-day citizen of Lima, reflects the precariousness in which the jungle region has always been operating, and the ignorance of the region's people with regards to being conscious of their environment.⁵

It is obviously very easy to feel that way, when most of the images we have access to from mining activity in the jungle appear to be something closer to a bizarre landscape from the interspace. Perhaps a mix of the surface of Mars and how we could imagine certain parts of Peru would have looked after the *Pacific War*.⁶ Or that most of the NGOs that provide aid in the region focus more on showing the terrible way in which miners deal with quicksilver and that they should be in jail for that, or that the fact that there is gold mining in the buffer zone of the *Tambopata National Reserve*⁷ should be an international ecological crime. It is easy to blacklist the miner and the activity from the bits of information that we have access to, and of course that is the way Peru operates

⁵ 181 tonnes of mercury are dumped annually in Madre de Dios. Accessed on 10 October 2023. <https://www.servindi.org/actualidad-noticias/27/08/2018/181-toneladas-de-mercurio-se-arrojan-al-ano-en-madrede-dios>.

⁶ The Pacific War was a conflict between Peru and Chile from 1879 until 1883. Chile invaded Tarapaca and Arica, causing the largest destruction Peru has witnessed to this day.

⁷ The Tambopata National Reserve is located in the districts of Inambari and Tambopata in the Madre de Dios region. It was declared a protected area on 4 September 2000 by the N° 048-2000-AG decree. Accessed on 12 October 2023. <https://www.sernanp.gob.pe/tambopata>.

at all levels. It is in this misconception of the full picture of the mining situation where we started the project.

But how to talk about gold mining and how to answer my big question of 2013? What happened with Madre de Dios and gold mining?

Why do the children of *Pacherre*, as my dad calls him, not have a fully recognized and registered mining business, being children of Manuel Pacherres Mozauro, the initiator of the mining activity in *Fortuna* (a place that was actually named Fortuna by him when he claimed the land for the state in 1969)? Why is such a prominent activity, that once promised to bring wealth and development to a forgotten jungle paradise, now associated with human trafficking, assassination and slavery?⁸

It is not my intention to fully portray the subject, which I consider would be a titanic mission, but there is a need to round up key aspects of the social and political context that constructed the theoretical framework in which this research project has operated for the last two and half years.

Manuel Pacherres Mozauro, or Pacherre, was one of many inhabitants of Puerto Maldonado who initiated the mining activity in the region. However, he was different to the artisans by the river that my dad referred to in his stories: Pacherre extracted 700 grams of gold in a single day, an amount that was unthinkable in those days for an artisan miner.

“...everyone used to search for gold in the riversides, in the Madre de Dios river, the Malinowsky, the Tambopata, everywhere. It was right after heavy rains that the black sand would cover the riversides and that was a clear indication of gold. But no one knew from where this gold was coming from. The rain and the river bring it from somewhere in the *monte* [jungle term for referring to forest].

Pacherre was a Mitayero [jungle hunter] and a very good one. He went out hunting to the forest one early morning and after several hours walking, arrived at a place full of monkeys. The thing with monkeys is that once you fire your rifle they escape through the trees as wild acrobats making such a noise that most animals will escape with them. Pacherre killed a monkey but it was trapped in some tree branches and he knew that it would be the only thing he would hunt that day, so he was preparing for climbing but the wind came and the sky went dark. That is the worst for a mitayero, a mitayero doesn't need a machete for making his path and not getting lost as we do. He can locate himself just by looking at the sky but with a dark sky he gets trapped. Pacherre hid himself by a big Shihuahuaco because he thought that the wind would not take down such

⁸ “However, the mining activity in Fortuna began in 1975, with the first mining settlers, Manuel Pacherres Mozauro and Jesús Arce Alarcón, who found gold in large quantities.” Karina Romero, *Proceso de Formalización Minera: Políticas Ambientales y Respuestas del Sector Minero Informal a Pequeña Escala en el Poblado Fortuna de Laberinto, Madre De Dios, 2012–2014*, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Escuela de Posgrado, 2017.

a tree. But the rain was so heavy and the wind so wild that even that big tree went down and Pacherre quickly hid under it without any other option than to spend the night in the monte. The next morning as the sun rose, he saw something shiny in the ground, right in the hole that the Shihuahuaco roots left. He wove a capilleo (basket made with banana leaves) and brought as much of this sandy ground as he could back to Puerto Maldonado. It was gold, a lot of gold. He never told anyone where he found it but soon after people followed him, and that was the beginning of Fortuna. He named his farm Fortuna because he certainly got lucky that day, but we didn't know that later the whole area would adopt the same name.” (Raymundo Gallegos, 2015)

As my dad told me once, by that time it was impossible to imagine that someone could travel to Lima from Madre de Dios with a costal full of gold to be sold. Or that a local inhabitant of a town in the middle of the Amazon jungle could buy a brand-new Dodge in the capital and send it by plane back to their house in the jungle. There were many who got lucky in their gold hunt back in the sixties, and with that the need for state regulation of the activity was imminent. In 1972, the Banco Minero opened an agency in Laberinto⁹ with the aim of incentivizing the artisanal mining activity by offering loans for the acquisition of working tools and buying the total of the production of the miners at very competitive prices. But people have already forgotten that the Banco Minero was also a provider of quicksilver.¹⁰ It was a steady start for what would later become the most deadly and sinister activity that Peru would witness in all its republican history.

It has been crucial for my project hypothesis to understand the role of mining through the history of the Madre de Dios region, and with that to construct a more accurate definition of *informal miner* (artisan miner) for our attempt to answer my question: What happened with Madre de Dios and gold mining?

The informal miner model exists to this day: those fortune-seekers such as my great uncle, the father of uncle Raymundo, or Manuel Pacherre, or many others, passed their mining tradition to the next generations. This practice has been sustained until today in many of the mining areas of Madre de Dios: *Fortuna*, *Malinowsky*, *Huepetuhe*, just to mention a few of the most recognizable areas where mining is the only source of income for those entire towns.¹¹ This informal mining model is the one to which we refer as a ground for our theoretical research hypothesis.

⁹ “Due to the increase in mining activity in Madre de Dios, an office of the Banco Minero (BM) was installed in 1972 in Puerto Rosario (capital of Laberinto).” Karina Romero, *Proceso de Formalización Minera: Políticas Ambientales y Respuestas del Sector Minero Informal a Pequeña Escala en el Poblado Fortuna de Laberinto, Madre De Dios, 2012–2014*, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Escuela de Posgrado, 2017.

¹⁰ “El Estado ha ilegalizado a los mineros de Madre de Dios.” *La Mula*, 2014. Accessed on 13 October 2023. <https://redaccion.lamula.pe/2014/03/27/el-estado-ha-ilegalizado-a-los-mineros-de-madre-de-dios/gabrielarriaran/>.

¹¹ Fortuna, Malinowsky, and Huepetuhe are three mining towns located in the Madre de Dios region. Fortuna is in the district of Laberinto, Malinowsky is by the 108 km mark of the Interoceanic highway, and Huepetuhe is in the Manu province.

It is very relevant for the project to make a clear distinction between informal and illegal mining, and perhaps even more relevant to acknowledge the fact that informal mining still exists on the same basis as in the fifties and sixties. In some cases, they even follow a clear bloodline of business heritage that strengthens our argument for the existence of a carefully designed *illegalization strategy* by the Peruvian government.

Mining Illegalization strategy by the Peruvian government

There are many hypotheses that researchers and journalists have suggested as major reasons for the explosion of gold mining in the Madre de Dios area into the uncontrollable and self-sustainable depredation model that it is today. The rise of the price of gold in the 2008 global economic recession, when gold became the obvious commodity in which to safely invest, is one of them.¹² And if that is merged with the construction of the Interoceanic highway that connected Peru and Brazil a couple of years later, we could be looking at the perfect setup for a mining boom in the Peruvian jungle. The Interoceanic highway provided a much faster route for moving larger quantities of gold to Lima and also to the neighbouring countries, but also enabled access to bigger machinery and weapons, as well as the smuggling of fuel and even people.¹³

This was always well acknowledged by the Peruvian state, which understood the need to take over control of the area and regulate the mining activity. Proof of this is the fact that Peru has, since January 2002, a law that was specifically created with the aim of regulating the *pequeña minería y minería artesanal* (small mining and artisan mining).¹⁴ But it was not until 2010 that the state declared the public need for and national interest in putting order in the gold mining activity of the Madre de Dios region.

¹² Brook Lamar, *The Real Price of Gold*, National Geographic, 2009. Accessed on 11 October 2023. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2009/01/gold/>.

¹³ Verité, *Risk Analysis of Indicators of Forced Labor and Human Trafficking in Illegal Gold Mining in Peru*, 2013. Accessed on 11 October 2023. https://www.verite.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Indicators-of-Forced-Labor-in-Gold-Mining-inPeru_0.pdf.

¹⁴ *Law No 27651, "Ley de Formalización y Promoción de la Pequeña Minería y Minería Artesanal"*, El Congreso de la República de Perú, 2002. Karina Romero, *Proceso de Formalización Minera: Políticas Ambientales y*

"Declaration of the public necessity, national interest and priority execution of the ordering of gold mining in the region of Madre de Dios, in order to guarantee the health of the population, the safety of people, tax collection, the preservation of natural heritage and the development of sustainable economic activities" (DU Urgency Decree No 012-2010: art.1)

The creation of the Ministry of the Environment in 2008 and this DU of 2010, felt to Peruvians as if finally, the state realized the importance of having a much more serious approach toward the protection of its natural environment, considering the Amazon jungle as a place of global importance, and its protection became finally a national priority. It truly felt like a fresh new start for Madre de Dios. The formalization of the mining activity was a matter of time and the eradication of illegal mining was imminent.

We couldn't have been more wrong about that, and despite the opinion of the former Minister of the Environment, Manuel Pulgar Vidal: "Formalization is a complex, but successful process. It would be enough that there is only one illegal miner formalized for us to say the formula is correct, we will insist with it and we won't break it".¹⁵ We like to analyse his formula from a different angle. We prefer to put ourselves in the shoes of Pacherre's children perhaps, or of the *comuneros* (*workers who are part of an association or inhabitants of a village*) of the mining associations of the Malinowsky river, AMATAF and APAYLOM¹⁶; those families that have passed their mining tradition through generations and for whom mining concessions dated from the early seventies in many cases. What if we analyse the Peruvian formula from the perspective of those informal miners whose grandparents were the ones in the stories that my dad and my uncles used to tell me all the time? What is the formalization strategy then? What is the core of this formula that Pulgar Vidal talked about in 2014?

Here I want to bridge my theoretical hypothesis to the final material of our experiment, our street comedy play, *Las Aventuras de Chuchupe* (The Adventures of Chuchupe). I hope this will strengthen the contextual grounds on which the project was built, and will make evident the urgent need for a suitable distributional format for such a complex project. Before getting into that, I want to mention that there are many elements in the Peruvian strategy that could be brought to the surface, but I will only focus on two of them: *la interdicción* and *el proceso de formalización* (the interdiction and the formalization process).

Respuestas del Sector Minero Informal a Pequeña Escala en el Poblado Fortuna de Laberinto, Madre De Dios, 2012–2014, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Escuela de Posgrado, 2017.

¹⁵ RPP Noticias, *Manuel Pulgar Vidal: La formalización es un proceso complejo pero exitoso*, Lima, 29 November 2014. Accessed on 11 October 2023. <http://rpp.pe/politica/actualidad/manuel-pulgar-vidal-la-formalizacion-es-un-proceso-complejo-pero-exitosonoticia-746458>.

¹⁶ *Asociación de Productores Agrarios y Lavadores Artesanales de Oro de Malinowski (APAYLOM)* and *Asociación de Mineros Artesanales Tauro Fátima de Malinowski (AMATAF)* have practiced traditional mining in the Malinowsky River since the 1970s and were formally registered as mining associations in 1994. Accessed on 14 October 2023. <https://redaccion.lamula.pe/2014/07/24/inteligencia-militar/gabrielarriaran/>.

1. La interdicción (The interdiction)

(Extract from the printed script prepared for the presentation at the Research Week, Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm, 2020)

[...] "...Chuchupe is the leader of his informal miners' association and is calmly organizing the documents requested by the government because of his coming trip to Lima, the capital, to apply once more for the formalization process, hoping to finally get the validation signature that he so much needs. Unfortunately for Chuchupe, the Peruvian navy has arrived in the jungle and is bombing the area. Chuchupe confuses the bombing noise with celebrative fireworks but El Sajino, his working mate, arrives to take him back, as someone needs to fight the military. Chuchupe realizes that his belongings are on fire and fights the military officer in charge of the operation. El Sajino encourages Chuchupe to fight furiously but the navy makes them run with a last bombing.

Soldier: Keep going, keep going! You have to move forward.

Chuchupe: We're not going anywhere. This is my home! What are you doing here? We're calm, and you come here making trouble.

Soldier: Keep going, mister. Keep going—you're destroying the whole jungle!

Chuchupe: You're the ones destroying everything! You're the ones screwing us over! Why don't you go mess with the multinational companies instead, you abusive jerk?

Sajino: Don't make me proceed!

Chuchupe: Proceed all you want! Proceed, proceed—

Soldier: What!? Don't raise your tone with me!

Chuchupe: You think I'm scared of you? You're crazy! You've got it wrong—we're informal! The illegals are over there! Check properly, you idiots!

Soldier: Are you leaving or not?

Chuchupe: I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying right here. Shoot me if you want. Kill me if you want. Go on, kill me! Shoot!

Soldier: But sir, we don't have weapons.

Chuchupe: Oh, you don't have weapons? Here, take mine!

(The soldier tries to shoot Chuchupe, but the gun has no bullets)

Soldier: It has no bullets.

Chuchupe: I'm a miner, not a fool.

(The soldier hits El Sajino several times, but Chuchupe feels the pain)

Chuchupe: I'm not going anywhere!

Soldier: Victor, send me forty troops!

Chuchupe: Send eighty—you'll need them.

Sajino: How many did you ask for?

Chuchupe: Eighty.

Sajino: Send twenty more for me, you'll need them too.

Soldier: Move away, move away! You think you're funny?

Chuchupe: I'm not moving!

Soldier: Aren't you going to leave?

Chuchupe: I'm not leaving.

Soldier: Are you sure?

Chuchupe: Sure.

Soldier: Are you completely sure?

Chuchupe: I'm not going anywhere.

Soldier: Then I'll retire...

Chuchupe: That's right. Run, you cowards.

Sajino: That's the way to fight these bastards.

(The navy starts bombing again, forcing them to run)

Soldier: That's what I like! The navy must be respected!

Chuchupe: "I'm informal, I'm illegal"—it's all the same!..."[...]



Still from documentation of *The Adventures of Chuchupe*, Research Week 2020. Royal Institute of Art, 2020.

An interdiction, in the Peruvian strategy, is the authorized use of military force for eradicating illegal mining activity from protected areas. This strategy started in 2011 and was later the signature of the former Minister of Environment, Manuel Pulgar Vidal (2011-2016). If we ask the average citizen of the city of Lima 'What is illegal mining?', the chance that they will immediately refer to mining that is not allowed and that is destroying the jungle, is enormous, and this answer, in its broader sense, is correct. But if we were to reformulate that question and ask, 'What is informal mining?', the answer would be exactly the same. Understanding this difference is key in order to be able to fully grasp what the Peruvian government has been doing. Informal mining is, in simple terms, mining activity that was once given a *mining concession* (the right to possess a territorial area for mining purposes) by the Peruvian government; that was supported by the Banco Minero; and that has even started the formalization process now demanded by the state. Illegal mining is, in simple terms, mining activity that exploded in 2008 and does not hesitate in taking over land as it wishes without having a mining concession; mining that expands without borders following the mineral; and that is not interested in being formal. These are two very recognisable mining models that no one from the capital of Peru nor from other countries knows about, but it is a crucial differentiation that suggests that the Peruvian strategy could have had different aims.¹⁷

Chuchupe, then, is an informal miner, and more concretely, he is an informal miner from the riversides of the Malinowsky river and belongs to the association APAYLOM, which has been acknowledged by the Peruvian government as an association in the

¹⁷ Ministerio del Ambiente, *La Lucha por la Legalidad en la Actividad Minera* (2011–2016), Lima, 2016. Accessed on 12 October 2023. <https://sinia.minam.gob.pe/documentos/lucha-legalidad-actividad-minera-2011-2016-avances-concretos-retos>.

search for formalization in a census of 2011.¹⁸ But to his surprise, a group of soldiers from Lima decided to interdict his mining area, bombing his belongings, and destroying his working tools and his jungle. Chuchupe is furious: he tries to talk sense with the soldiers, but they pretend not to understand his Amazon dialect and they just ask him to retreat. They accuse him of destroying and contaminating the jungle and they warn him not to continue because he can get hurt.

Chuchupe tells them that they are the ones that contaminate the jungle with their bombing and asks them: “Where does it say to interdict APAYLOM and AMATAF? Where? Show me.”¹⁹ He is well aware of his rights and he tells the soldiers that they are making a mistake, but the soldiers could not care less about a small miner from a forgotten area in the Amazon jungle. This won't be the only time that Chuchupe will get his belongings destroyed; the soldiers will come back and they will attack again. They will come from Lima, people who have nothing to do with the jungle and who don't understand it at all; soldiers who are just following orders.

"The first ones in burning have been us," Don Armando remembers bitterly. "We were not at work [...] we were receiving training (while) we were all being burned. In just two hours [...] When we returned we had no tools, nothing. [...] When we arrived at our workplaces we no longer had anything. There are comrades who are totally ruined now, and they are hard workers. Their children, those kids have unfortunately stopped studying. The work was a livelihood, it was not to get rich." (From *Frontera Pirata*. Interview with Armando Carpio, president of the AMATAF association, 2018)

In our opinion, these attacks changed the fortune of the Madre de Dios jungle. These big backstabs to such traditional mining associations as APAYLOM and AMATAF catapulted illegal mining transforming it into what it is today. Why did the state interdict this area, even though they were in search of formalization, a process that the same state started and asked them to be part of?

¹⁸ Instituto de Investigaciones de la Amazonía Peruana – IIAP and Ministerio del Ambiente, *Minería Aurífera en Madre de Dios y Contaminación con Mercurio*, Editorial Súper Gráfica E.I.R.L., 2011.

¹⁹ Dialog from footage obtained in 2013 from the Puerto Maldonado police station, showing a miner from the APAYLOM association confronting soldiers from the Peruvian navy.



Still from a video taken by a miner from the APAYLOM association. The Peruvian navy interdict their area. 2011

The Malinowsky riverside is located in the buffer zone of the Tambopata National Reserve. A buffer zone that in 2010 was declared *zone of mining exclusion* by that very same DU 0122010 which we were all happy about at first. This means that from that day onwards it was forbidden to practise mining in an area where families have responsibility been practising the activity since the sixties; an area that in 1987 was formally signed as land with inhabited rights.²⁰ This is even three years before Candamo was declared a National Reserve and much earlier than the Tambopata Reserve, which was founded in the year 2000.²¹ This means that the property rights over this land that Chuchupe and Sajino have, are prior to any conservation effort in the region. To keep these indicators in consideration when planning the strategy is too much to ask for the fancy offices of the Ministry of Environment in the always comfortable district of San Isidro in Lima – but it is here where we are convinced that everything went wrong. Associations such as the APAYLOM and AMATAF have for decades been strong lines of protection for the vast area that constitutes the Tambopata reserve; protection from *medederos* and illegal miners who have always sought to put their feet into such rich ground.

[...] These miners [AMATAF and APAYLOM] have in the long run served as a brake, so that illegal miners who have entered from Huacamayo towards the buffer zone do not enter the reserve. They have been a very strong buffer. Miners themselves, but knowing that they are in a reserve and that they do have an

²⁰ *Frontera Pirata*, *El Principio de Hanlon*, 2019. Accessed on 10 October 2023. <https://medium.com/frontera-pirata/el-principio-dehanlon-ebdec84ec52>.

²¹ The Tambopata National Reserve is located in the districts of Inambari and Tambopata in the Madre de Dios region. It was declared a protected area on 4 of September of 2000 by the N° 048-2000-AG. Accessed on 10 October 2023. <https://www.sernanp.gob.pe/tambopata>.

interest in staying. That is their life, that land is their home. There they will always have a house to stay” (Norma Reboredo, Tambopata Reserve official)

Well, it is not very difficult to imagine what would happen if we were to eradicate Chuchupe and Sajino from their land. Illegal miners would have easy access to the supposedly precious Tambopata reserve, and the traditional mining would be forced to spread in order not to lose the area taken by the newcomers. This all sounded very logical to us but also very suspicious. How come the Peruvian state didn’t see this coming if they have been working so hard in taking over control of this activity in the jungle? How can they be so naive about the real possible outcome of destroying some of the few remains of traditional mining?

2. El proceso de formalización (The formalization process)

(Extract from the printed script prepared for the presentation at the Research Week, Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm, 2020)

“...Chuchupe finally arrives in Lima, as leader of his miners’ association. It has cost him a lot of work to once again collect all the documents needed for the so desired formalization. He arrives at the offices of the Peruvian Ministry of Energy and Mining and his friend, Culebra, calls him to complain that they made a lot of effort to send him to Lima and that Chuchupe is just enjoying the trip as if he were on holiday. Chuchupe gets upset with Culebra and explains to him that he is just about to enter the ministry and that the phone call interrupted him. “...Culebra tells the people in the jungle to calm down and explains that Chuchupe is about to present the documents. The ministry official receives all the papers and congratulates Chuchupe for finally bringing all the documentation needed, but just when Chuchupe has called Culebra to share the good news and everyone is celebrating in the jungle, the official tells him that there is a new document he needs to bring. Chuchupe gets furious as again they are asking him for new documents. But the official explains that without that document, there won’t be any signature. Petrolíño, a Brazilian businessman, arrives at the office to get his papers sorted. He is upset because he has needed to come all the way from Brazil and the ministry official tells him that he didn’t need to do that, that he could have authorized his papers even by fax. The official is very quick in fixing the so needed signature for Petrolíño as he needs his machinery to come into Peru to exploit the jungle. Petrolíño gives his *cariño* (love = bribe) to the official and leaves the office. Chuchupe, who has witnessed everything, is now very angry and demands that his signature should be given immediately. The official asks for his *cariño* but Chuchupe tells him that he doesn’t have any money. The official kicks him out from his office and leaves. A disappointed Chuchupe calls Culebra once more and communicates that there is no signature this time either. Chuchupe asks Culebra to bring everyone to Lima to demonstrate against the way he has been treated.

[...]Official: Exactly. That’s why I need your water bill.

Chuchupe: You’re right, sir. You’re right. All this for one signature...

Official: Now I need your federation card.

Chuchupe: Federation? From which one? Volleyball? Basketball?

Official: What federation do you represent right now?

Chuchupe: Informal miners’, sir.

Official: That’s the one I need.

Chuchupe: You’re right, sir. You’re always right.

Official: Now, your death certificate.

Chuchupe: Death certificate?!

Official: Yes.

Chuchupe: I’m not dead, sir!

Official: But you will be someday.

Chuchupe: You’re right, sir. You’re right. Death certificate.

Official: And the most important one: The virginity certificate.

Chuchupe: I’m done, sir. Now I’m really pissed off. My daughter has nothing to do with this!

Official: Who mentioned your daughter?

Chuchupe: Didn’t you just ask me for a virginity certificate? And here, the only virgin is my daughter.

Official: No, I’m talking about the place where you’re working. The jungle needs to be virgin.

Chuchupe: Ah, no. The jungle's already deflowered.

Official: Who? Your wife?

Chuchupe: The jungle, you idiot!

Official: Do you have the certificate or not?

Chuchupe: Yes, sir. You’re right, sir. You’re always right.

Official: Now, the very important one: The Certificate of Environmental Impact Studies.

Chuchupe: Sir, that’s the one that cost us the most. Engineers had to come and study the area. Here it is, sir.

Official: Okay, it's done.

Chuchupe: It's done?

Official: Yes.

Chuchupe: Finally, thank you, God. I'm going to call my friend.

(Chuchupe calls Culebra to share the good news.)..."

Our analysis of the formalization process is very complex and broad, but to follow the aim of this text—to provide context—I will focus on the part of the research that gave us the final outcome of our hypothesis that you can see in our play.

We first needed to comprehend what the state was doing to formalize mining activity. We needed to look at it with very neutral eyes considering all the work that has been done since that initial law of 2002 until today. We had a formalization process in front of us. We had the steps to follow, the timeframes, the capacitation sessions, the *ventanilla* (checkout desk), the IGAC; we had everything.²² Everything was there right in front of us, a formalization process that you just need to put your mind, effort and resources into and it will be yours. But why isn't it happening? Why, by 2018, from the thousands of miners from Madre de Dios, there was not a single one who managed to formalize his business? There are several reasons for this, but we focused on finding parameters for understanding the real intention of the Peruvian government, and for this there is no better way of understanding Peruvian power structures than following the money.

back to my return to Puerto Maldonado in 2013—when I pretended to be a journalist coming from Sweden, starting a research about human trafficking without imagining that I would end up stealing footage and pictures from the computer of a policeman in the Puerto Maldonado police station—I cannot help but think about the words of the policeman who felt accused by me of not doing enough to stop human trafficking:

"Look, we make interventions but not constantly because we don't have logistic support; because for reaching those areas you need a lot of logistics, vehicles, fuel, even rafts. There are certain things that are not within our reach. But we do make interventions at times. But to reach those areas like [...] Delta 1, over there the authorities almost never go. [...] We would need to go with approximately a hundred men, in one raft we can fit ten men, they charge 300 soles (100 USD) per raft so imagine spending 3000 soles (1000 USD). No way. The state will never give us that money. We don't have those means."

If the Madre de Dios police department in 2013 considered that 3000 soles was too much money to ask the state to spend on a police intervention into an illegal mining

²² Ministerio del Ambiente, *La Lucha por la Legalidad en la Actividad Minera* (2011–2016), Lima, 2016. Accessed on 12 October 2023. <https://sinia.minam.gob.pe/documentos/lucha-legalidad-actividad-minera-2011-2016-avances-concretos-retos>.

camp, how can we understand that the same state is now organizing such spectacular interdictions bringing military from Lima, helicopters, the navy and even their own journalists at times for areas like the Malinowsky river? Looking at the numbers of how much money the Peruvian government has spent on this interdiction strategy, we could not help but ask ourselves, how much money is that same government spending on helping miners, such as Chuchupe, to accomplish the demands of the formalization process?

In 2016, Gabriel Arriarán had access to the official numbers, and from 2013 to 2016 in the Madre de Dios region, the total cost of interdictions was S/. 277'412 329.85²³ (about ninety million dollars), as well as three years of furiously fighting the mining devil that was eating up the Amazon. It was clear that the Peruvian state was convinced that this strategy was paying off and as Pulgar Vidal said in 2014, they will stick with it. But having a closer look at the indicators of the growth of gold mining in the area, there is obviously something that is not adding up. Research made by CINCA in 2017 shows that during the time of interdictions, the deforestation of the Amazon because of illegal mining rose by more than 240%.²⁴ It is difficult to comprehend that the state could keep on betting for this formula as a successful strategy, and even more difficult to imagine the ninety million dollars that this cost the country.

Looking at the other side, the formalization process has not received equal support from the state, and as Eduardo Salhuana, lawyer and general manager of the Madre de Dios region, said in 2015 to the newspaper, *La Mula*:

"We then assume that there must be other types of interests, we presume that there are other types of interests. If not, it is incomprehensible. And what has happened here, we have said it, to Jiménez Mayor, to Villanueva, who has already been removed, to Urresti, fifty thousand times: why don't you be honest, General? If mining does not go, then, sir, people will go home. But don't lie to them [...] He always answered that: No, that is not so, that this, then the other. He tells you a story, but does nothing. [...] But these two years the State has not helped us at all in the formalization process. What is being targeted is not to formalize, but to eliminate the activity. Who will come next? Who will they give it to? They are strangling the gold economy in the region."

²³ Presidencia del Consejo de Ministros, *MEMORANDO N° 317-2016-PCM-ACAFMIRA-04*, 2016. Accessed on 13 October 2023. <https://medium.com/frontera-pirata/la-inversión-del-estado-en-la-deforestación-de-la-pampa-3846eb5f5611>.

²⁴ CINCA - Centro de Innovación Científica Amazónica, *Tres Décadas de Deforestación por Minería Aurífera en la Amazonía Suroriental Peruana*, 2018. Accessed on 11 October 2023. <http://cincia.wfu.edu/wp-content/uploads/CINCA-Research-Brief-1-Three-Decades-of-Deforestation.pdf>.



Still from documentation of *The Adventures of Chuchupe*. Plaza San Martín, Lima, 2018 'Petroliño, Brazilian business man, getting his authorization for exploiting the amazon'

Chuchupe then needed to find out the hard way that his formalization dream was never any more than that, just a dream. The state had other plans for his land already. Plans that can easily be even more devastating for the Amazon than illegal mining itself. For Chuchupe, Petroliño came from Brazil. This was because by the time we worked on the production of our street comedy play, the Brazilian company Odebrecht was the subject of the biggest corruption scandal that Peru and South America have witnessed so far. Odebrecht controlled the politics of several nations, including Peru. And it was that same Brazilian company that in 2010 finished constructing the Interoceanic highway.²⁵ But for the people of the APAYLOM and AMATAF associations at the Malinowsky river, their Petroliño comes from the United States of America in the shape of the Hunt Oil Company, which in 2006 was granted by the Peruvian government the right to exploit Lot 76,²⁶ an extension which superimposes the villages of Harakbut, Matsiguenka and Yine in the Manu province and also collides with the buffer area of the Tambopata National Reserve and the Malinowsky river.²⁷

It is still early for us to predict what will happen to the jungle and who will be the next entity that will rule the game, as it seems that some very big interests are behind this formalization smokescreen.

²⁵ Odebrecht obtained the contract for the Interoceanic Highway construction through bribes. The highway was completed in 2010, during Alan García's presidency. Accessed on 14 October 2023. <https://elcomercio.pe/politica/alejandro-toledo-vinculo-odebrecht-coima-interoceanica-noticia-656097-noticia/>.

²⁶ By Supreme Decree No. 053-2006-EM, dated 20 September 2006, the Peruvian government granted Hunt Oil Company the license for the exploration and exploitation of hydrocarbons in Lot 76, located in the Madre de Dios region. Accessed on 14 April 2018. <https://cdn.www.gob.pe/uploads/document/file/5988706/5138651-decreto-supremo-n-035-2005-em.pdf?v=1709732967>.

²⁷ Environmental Justice Atlas, *Amarakaeri Communal Reserve Against Hunt Oil and Repsol, Peru*, 2016. Accessed on 11 October 2023. <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/amarakaeri-against-hunt-oil>.

Comedia Ambulante (Street comedy)

"Nov 22, 1968, street theatre is created with my arrival to the *Plaza San Martín* (San Martín Square).²⁸ A month before Velasco Alvarado gave a coup and on November 22nd the curfew was lifted. Velasco comes with the premise of being a revolutionary government, and that is why the police didn't chase me immediately. They didn't hit me straight away, they didn't know what to do they said. "Peasant, the boss will no longer eat from your poverty!" and all these slogans came, [...] we will work for the people, the people and the people, Velasco said. That is why they allowed me to work, and it is not that they allowed me totally but they allowed me half-heartedly because they could not prohibit me. I was working for the people" (Jorge Acuña Paredes, 2020)

To clarify how I decided to work with street comedy, I want to align everything that I have already said with the core intention of my research as a whole: namely, the constant search for new artistic production models that could exceed the distribution effects that socially engaged art communication channels have. And on the contrary, I attempt to propose exchanges where the art practice could be understood as a sort of provider of a working climate where other parties are allowed, and that it is in these exchanges that we could materialize products that wouldn't necessarily cross paths with the art field otherwise.

The way of doing this in the project, *Searching for Power on the Collective Laugh*, was with the question: What would be the central and obvious need of our theoretical framework? As I quoted earlier, the content was present even before the shaping of this

²⁸ *Plaza San Martín* is one of the most representative public spaces in Lima, Peru. It is located at the ninth block of Colmena Avenue, within the Historic Centre of Lima, which was declared a World Heritage Site in 1988 by UNESCO. Accessed on 14 October 2023. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plaza_San_Mart%C3%ADn,_Lima.

PhD investigation, and as the fieldwork was given, the following exercise was to challenge this content with the central intention of the research. What could exceed the distribution effects that most socially engaged initiatives utilize? And in which terrain would our theoretical framework be more pertinent to navigate?

All this became very quickly a question about audiences and more concretely, audiences that could respond to our hypothesis. Then, the aim was based on the power of knowledge, in terms of distributing a message—often not brought to surface or even acknowledged—to wider audiences who could respond to that message. A first deeper research was made in that direction, taking into consideration many of the cultural and populist expressions that take place in a country as Peru. I looked into theatre, film, dance, art exhibitions, singing, and stand-up comedy, among others. What I found was that there was no cultural activity that reaches more people on a daily basis in Peru, than *Street Comedy* (known in Peru as *Comedia Ambulante*). Street comedy in the city of Lima reaches thousands of people weekly and it is something that has been going on for generations. Its average reach has been maintained over time and ironically it reaches people who are mostly from economic strata C and D, as is usually explained when we refer to the universe of Peruvian economics.²⁹ These are people who are not normally the ones who make the decisions in our country, but paradoxically they are the main target audience for political campaigns. That is how street comedy or *Comedia Ambulante*, as Augusto Ferrando aptly baptized it in the eighties, arrived at the project.³⁰

I started this section quoting perhaps the only living testimony of a person who claims to have been the initiator of street theatre in Lima in 1968, Jorge Acuña Paredes, with whom I spoke during our collaboration in Stockholm in February 2020. There is no research data about the beginning of street comedy, and the only mention of street comedians is in Victor Vich's book, *El Discurso de la Calle*³¹, where he dedicated a full chapter to these *Angeles Justicieros* (Justice Angels), as biologist and conservationist, Antonio Fernandini, called them during our first workshop in the making of this project. That allowed me to proceed with formulating my own hypothesis of how and why street theatre, later called street comedy, appeared in the *Plaza San Martín* in the late sixties.

²⁹ The socioeconomic levels in Peru are classified into four categories: A, B, C, and D, based on total family income. Accessed on 12 October 2023. <https://www.ipsos.com/es-pe/caracteristicas-de-los-niveles-socioeconomicos-en-el-peru>.

³⁰ Augusto Ferrando was an emblematic figure in the 1980s and 1990s. He hosted *Trampolín a la Fama*, a talent show that gave space for street comedians to showcase their talents on national television. He coined the term *Cómicos Ambulantes* (street comedians).

³¹ Victor Vich, *El Discurso de la Calle: Los Cómicos Ambulantes y Las Tensiones de la Modernidad en el Perú*, 2001. Accessed on 11 October 2023. <http://repositorio.up.edu.pe/bitstream/handle/11354/263/VichVictor2001.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y>.



Jorge Acuña Paredes. Photo by Carlos Chino Domínguez. Plaza San Martín, Lima, 1968

I considered that a fair method for doing this to contact street comedians who might have worked in those days, but that was impossible. The only traces of the very first still active comedians are *Cotito*, *Caballo*, *Fosforito*³², among a few others, but they started in the early seventies when they were still little kids and had their golden years in the eighties and nineties. They were too young on that 22nd of November of 1968, the date to which Acuña refers, to be able to lend proper credit to Acuña's statement. But besides not being able to say that Jorge Acuña was the very first person on the San Martín square, they all agree that the *Teatro Universitario* (University Theatre) of the Universidad Mayor de San Marcos, was also performing in the square in 1968. Kelvin Cordova (*Puja Puja* in the seventies and *Fosforito* since the eighties) remembers that he was eight years old and he was commuting every day from his home in Villa el Salvador to his dad's place in Callao³³. He would always stay to watch the *Teatro Universitario*. He would see Jorge Acuña at times, but what caught his attention in those days were the satires that the *Teatro Universitario* used to perform.

“They would always perform plays that would criticize how society was working those days. I think it was their way of criticizing the military regime that was in power and that was talking a lot about caring for its people but we could not see that in reality. There was this play of a *cholito* (person from the Andes or that has Andean indigenous features) coming from the Andes and going to Callao, to observe the ships and the ocean. And a *criollo* (person from

³² Cotito, Caballo, and Fosforito were part of the first generation of street comedians. Their real names are Roger Sandoval, Carlos Hidalgo, and Kelvin Cordova.

³³ Callao is a seaside city in the Lima metropolitan area with high levels of crime and poverty.

the city, characterized for being street smart) comes and demands that he has to pay for each ship he sees:

Criollo: Hey *cholito*, don't you know that it is forbidden to observe the ships here? You need to pay for each ship. Here everyone pays. How many have you seen?

Cholito: Twenty

Criollo: Ok, that would be twenty ships by ten cents per ship. You owe me two soles

Cholito: Ok, here you have two soles

Criollo: Such a stupid *cholo*, he believes that we charge for looking at the ships

Cholito: Such a stupid *criollo*, he believes that I have only seen twenty ships.”

I cannot argue with Acuña's statement because it is seconded by the opinion of most of the comedians who are still active today, and there are traces of his contribution to what later became street comedy.³⁴ So I think that Jorge Acuña Paredes has all the right to be called the initiator of street theatre in Lima. Further, I think most street comedians who saw him performing learned from his methods. But here I can say that the Teatro Universitario took to the streets because of the need to protest against the military government of Juan Velasco Alvarado and later the one of Francisco Morales Bermúdez³⁵; and that Jorge Acuña Paredes went to the streets because he got fired from his teaching job at the University of Huamanga in Ayacucho and he was banned from working in any state institution. They accused Acuña of being one of the people responsible for the strike that the university had that year. Because of this, he says that it was the state that threw him to the streets. He had four children in Ayacucho and he needed to find ways to provide for his family. These are the two branches that are linked to the very beginning of performative expressions in the streets of Lima, in Lima downtown, in the San Martín square and in the *Parque Universitario*.³⁶

They are the ones that give rise to many artists imitating this initiative and daring to use public spaces as places of enunciation. This, combined with the growing centralism that

³⁴ “In various interviews I have conducted, everyone pointed to him as the first person to set up a stage in Plaza San Martín and as the mentor from whom the older comedians learned their first techniques.” Victor Vich, *El Discurso de la Calle*, 2001.

³⁵ Velasco Alvarado held a coup in 1968, and Morales Bermudez led another coup against Velasco in 1975. Both established dictatorial regimes.

³⁶ The *Parque Universitario* (University Park) is another emblematic location where street comedy has been performed since the 1970s. It is located three blocks away from Plaza San Martín in downtown Lima.

the military government detonated, meant that the streets of downtown Lima were frequented by many provincial people, many provincial youths and children whose families had come to the city in search of a better future.

There are many aspects to analyse in trying to portray the context of street comedy, the street comedy during the time of Jorge Acuña, and the street comedy that we see today. Many things have changed, and it would be too difficult to focus on those differences, though I find it fascinating how the comedy always responded to the changes in the popular culture of the city. This is what I found both in the chats I had with Jorge Acuña at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm in February 2020, and during my experience learning about street comedy with Kelvin Cordova (Chuchupe), Victor Astete (El Sajino) and Jorge Santa Cruz (El Falladito).



Orlando Mendoza, 'El Cholo Cirilo', playing the *cholito* arriving to Lima. Plaza San Martín, Lima, 1970

Jorge Acuña told us that it is clear that for working at the streets you need to be brave but most of all you need to be smart. You need to understand the organic rhythm of all the elements and players who are in your surroundings. I think that he refers to the fact that the streets of Lima are not just a passing-by public space. Those streets of downtown Lima are the home of many and the working place of many others, and on top of this you have the passers-by as well. So, it is a matter of understanding your place in this public space that you have decided to claim as yours, whilst always understanding that harmonic chaos, as Acuña calls it. He told us one part of his routine in those days, where he needed to synchronize with the many pickpockets that are always in the *ruedos* (the audience usually stands in a circle surrounding the comedians; these circles are called *ruedo*).

“During those days, the police used to chase us every day. I must have spent around 2000 hours detained in different police stations. If you were working from the horse's head of the monument to the plaza union, they took you to the sixth commissary in Alfonso Ugarte Avenue. If you were behind the horse's tail, the university park and the square of the Justice Palace, they took you to the fifth commissary. [...] But since I came from Ayacucho they focused a lot of attention on me. They thought I was a terrorist from the Shining Path. All the plays were works of protest, everyone who went out to do street theatre was there to protest how the government treated people. And that's why they beat us with sticks and clubs. But I was skinny and small, I needed to be friends with everyone. So, in my *ruedos* there were always pickpockets. We knew them, they were there working every afternoon. I needed to let them work of course. But we had an agreement. There was a moment when I would say: “Now, I need all your attention!”. That was the sign. They knew that their shift was over. I needed to be friends with them because they were the ones who could protect me when being arrested. The police were taking us all together, so we were friends in the square and in the police stations as well.” (Jorge Acuña Paredes, 2020)



Still from documentation of the collaboration with Jorge Acuña Paredes. Royal Institute of Art, 2020

This routine that Acuña described, is very similar to what I feel every time I am at the San Martín square; or at Jorge Santa Cruz' house, just one block from the square; or just walking around Lima with the comedians. The use of codes at all times with the many players, as Acuña calls them, coexisting in such an organic environment, such a well-organized system that all those years on the streets give them access to, defines a strong distance between them and us. We are not lucky enough to master such codes. Victor Vich also refers to this in his book, but is more focused on linguistic differences, in how he felt marginalized in the square by not fully understanding all the slang the

comedians were using. But I have to admit that while reading Vich's book, I kept remembering many similar questions that I formulated to myself during the production of this project. We didn't work with the same comedians and Victor Vich did his research in 1996, more than twenty years ago, but still his questions are just as relevant for me today as they were for him during that time.

“Who was I to them? What did it mean that a ‘mate’ quite ‘posh’ who studied ‘literature’ and lived in the United States had come to the *plaza*, and was there recording them all day and sharing some beers at night? How did they see me? What sociocultural meanings did I articulate in their imagination and what kind of power relations had been established between us? [...] was it me, myself who had ‘built’ those categories to make a difference?” (Victor Vich, *El Discurso de la Calle*, 2001)

Methodology: Blending Art, Research, and Social Engagement

My interest in having the chance to invest years of my life immersing myself in a research project that could challenge everything I have done with my artistic practice so far, came from not feeling comfortable with the *distance* anymore. A distance that is well perceived in Victor Vich's questions and a distance that most artists have toward their subjects in most participatory art projects. Contrary to previous processes, this time I was well aware of this, and I was convinced that in this new challenge, the working method would need to be a mixed model that could allow and control the constant feeding of content by the diverse disciplines in the group, but that could also be flexible to the randomness that a horizontal working structure can bring. I knew I wanted to even up this distance with the working method. It needed to be a working strategy that could generate a sense of property in the comedians towards the working process and the project in general. But *Theatre of the Oppressed* works with the oppression in human groups who might need to channel their frustrations or traumas through the use of theatre as language³⁷. I learned that from Ricardo Galvez, our facilitator of Forum Theatre in the group. My aim was that the method could discover itself in the making of the project, a blend of artistic practice, field research, and social engagement. Central to this process was *Theatre of the Oppressed* (TO), but focusing mainly, at first, in allowing us to create a horizontal, participatory environment that bridged the gap between the diverse backgrounds of the participants. If the comedians

³⁷ Boal, A. *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Third Stage: *The Theatre as Language*, 1979, pp. 108–110. Boal discusses Theatre of the Oppressed as a tool for transforming spectators into "spect-actors," enabling active participation and rehearsal for real-world action.

were to generate a sense of property in this process, we needed to discover the formula of how to push away that *distance* from the room.

“To fit my role in that working structure was difficult. We were seven men starting a project with different ambitions and expectations. Each of us in our fields and with our knowledge and with our specific roles in the process [...] We were not doing Theatre of the Oppressed properly speaking, neither therapeutic nor pedagogical at times. We had a mixed traditional structure of experts on the one hand and novices on the other. But in that merge, there was a ‘dialogue of knowledge’ that triggered a flow of information from both parties. It was great.” (Ricardo Galvez, 2020)

The methodology was not only intended to bring together artists, researchers, and street comedians but also to integrate lived experiences with theoretical frameworks, ensuring that the voices of all participants were equally valued.

1. Theatre of the Oppressed: A Horizontal Collaboration Between Art and Life



Still from documentation of Ricardo Galvez's workshop. AAA - Theatre Association, Lima, 2018

In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal emphasizes the importance of empowering oppressed communities by transforming them into both the actors and subjects of their own stories.³⁸ This principle naturally emerged in *Las Aventuras de Chuchupe*. Working with street comedians, I observed how humour can serve as a powerful tool for addressing systemic oppression. As the project evolved, it became a platform for

³⁸ Boal, A. *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Third Stage: *The Theatre as Language*, 1979, pp. 108–110.

exposing the injustices miners face in the Madre de Dios region while also broadening the narrative to reflect on themes of marginalization and exploitation across society.

Street comedians in Lima, though geographically and culturally distant from the miners, embody different but intersecting forms of marginalization. *Chuchupe*, the character, faces the struggles of being a miner in the Amazon who still believes in the state, while the comedian portraying him, Kelvin Cordova, channels his frustrations as a street performer and informal worker. This duality allows the project to bridge layers of oppression and resonates with Boal's philosophy of making theatre a tool for the oppressed.

A significant challenge in the project was ensuring a horizontal working dynamic between participants from different social and cultural contexts. The comedians—Kelvin, Koki, Cholo Víctor, and Caballo—came from rural regions and impoverished backgrounds, while the rest of the team, including myself, Ricardo Galvez, Antonio Fernandini, and Gabriel Arriarán, came from Lima and more privileged environments. This disparity in social and educational backgrounds could have created barriers to genuine collaboration, but we leaned on *Theatre of the Oppressed* to break down these hierarchies.

Through exercises from Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*,³⁹ introduced by Ricardo Galvez, the methodology of the project intended to create an atmosphere of trust and collaboration. These exercises, focusing on body language, improvisation, and reducing interpersonal hierarchies, helped the group to express themselves beyond verbal communication, which is often restricted by social norms. The method heartened all participants to contribute equally by fostering trust, reducing interpersonal barriers, and empowering the comedians to speak openly and contribute their perspectives and lived experiences into the performance, making the narrative more authentic and resonant.

Another key tenet of Boal's work is the transformation of the passive audience into active participants, or *spect-actors*. In the project, while the performers (street comedians) were the ones on stage, the intent to provoke audience reflection through humour creates a bridge between Boal's theory and our proposal. By showing the absurdities of bureaucracy, corruption, and exploitation through comedy, the project endeavoured to challenge the audience to recognize their role in these systemic issues. Like Boal's *Forum Theatre*, which invites the audience to intervene in the action, *Chuchupe* encourages viewers to laugh at the injustices portrayed, but also to question and, potentially, act upon them.

³⁹ Boal, A. *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, 2nd ed., Trans. A. Jackson, Routledge, 2002, pp. 5–7. Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* includes a wide range of exercises aimed at enhancing participants' physical and emotional expressiveness, fostering deeper engagement with social themes and enabling both actors and non-actors to use theatre as a tool for reflection and action.

Boal argued that oppression manifests in multiple layers—political, economic, social, and cultural.⁴⁰ We proposed informal mining, bureaucratic roadblocks, and environmental destruction as examples of this multilayered oppression. By highlighting the intersectionality of these forms of exploitation in the research, the figure of the oppressed trapped in a web of interrelated systems, becomes latent and used in the project as a tool for creating a self-identification in the audience. For example, the miners in *Chuchupe* are oppressed not only by the environmental devastation caused by mining but also by government corruption, which refuses to formalize their work and provide legal protections. When confronting the comedy in contexts such as mining towns like *Huepetuhe*⁴¹, the self-identification is very direct but when proposing the comedy to places such as the San Martín Square in Lima, the identification functions in a much broader sense. Our street comedians deliver material in social terrains where the state is absent in one way or the other, not providing basic health care nor basic education, nor assuring safety in their communities. This mirrors Boal's understanding of the complexity of oppression, where no single force dominates, but many conspire together to marginalize entire communities.

"In scenic games (several of which come from the TO experience), the group climate is changed, and interpersonal barriers are reduced; the unpredictable and playful nature of the creative process becomes more evident. Everyone participates, and a lot of laughter and complicity is generated. They seem to bridge the gap between comedians and 'professionals' at times." (Galvez, 2020, p. 3)

Street performance, by its nature, breaks down the fourth-wall⁴², directly engaging audiences in public spaces. *The Adventures of Chuchupe* removed the traditional barrier between actors and audience, inviting a more dynamic and spontaneous interaction. This technique brought the societal issues of mining, corruption, and exploitation into a public arena where the audience became part of the performance. In Boal's terms, this interaction dissolved the separation between art and life, encouraging immediate reflection on real-world issues.

Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* offers a powerful framework for understanding the dynamics at play in the project *Searching for Power on the Collective Laugh*. Blending street comedy with Boal's participatory techniques of collective creation, engaging participants in the creative process, highlighting systemic oppressions, and using humour to drive critical reflection, aims not only to entertain but also to provoke critical reflection and action. The goals of the project and for instance of the play *The Adventures of Chuchupe* tested the transformative potential of addressing

⁴⁰ Boal, A. *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, 2nd ed., Trans. A. Jackson, Routledge, 2002, pp. 5–7.

⁴¹ *Huepetuhe* is a region in Madre de Dios, Peru, with the highest density of informal and illegal mining in the country.

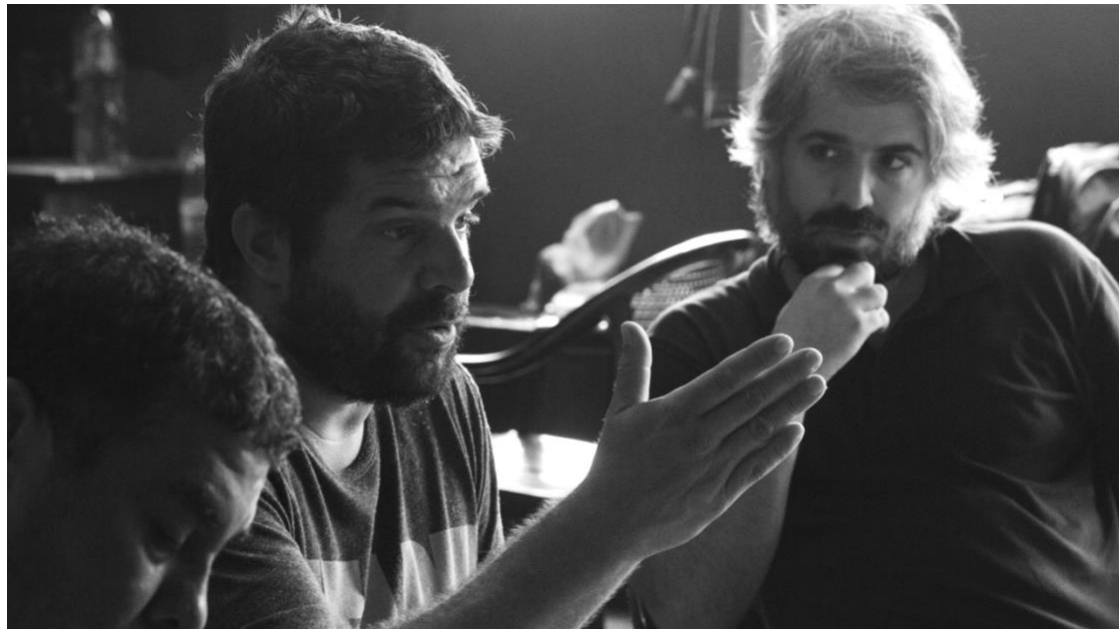
⁴² Boal, A. *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 1979, p. 94. Boal discusses the breakdown of the fourth wall in traditional theatre as a crucial step towards involving the audience in the action. By transforming spectators into "spect-actors," he aimed to eliminate the divide between the stage and the audience, empowering individuals to take an active role in shaping the narrative and exploring real-world possibilities through theatrical engagement.

structural inequalities by its intersectional methodology pushing the boundaries of street theatre as a tool for social change.

2. Field Research and Narrative Creation

In parallel with the TO exercises, the project relied heavily on field research led by Antonio Fernandini. Based in Madre de Dios and working with the NGO *Coalición por la Amazonía*, Antonio's extensive on-the-ground research provided critical insights into the socio-political dynamics of illegal and informal mining in the region. His investigation of the mining ecosystem—encompassing small informal miners, large corporations, and the complex web of corruption—helped frame the narrative of the play.

Antonio's reports highlighted the contradictions and paradoxes inherent in the Peruvian government's formalization process. For example, while informal miners struggled to navigate bureaucratic red tape, large multinational corporations were given legal impunity despite their destructive environmental practices. Antonio's findings were used as the foundation for many of the scenes in *The Adventures of Chuchupe*, especially those that dealt with police corruption, environmental exploitation, and the disenfranchisement of small miners



Still from documentation, round table session with Antonio Fernandini. AAA - Theatre Association, Lima, 2017

"Miners in Peru are judged by different standards. Transnational miners are considered legal and often treated like semi-gods, with little attention paid to the destruction or pollution they cause[...] Due to the history of informality in Peru, the informal miner was invited to settle in Madre de Dios and until now pays mining rights and fines for not reaching the extraction goal." (Fernandini, 2017, p. 1)

The process of turning these findings into a narrative was collaborative and iterative. Based on Antonio's research, we worked with the comedians to identify specific situations and characters that could be developed through improvisation and satire. This included exploring scenarios such as government officials demanding bribes, police officers turning a blind eye to illegal mining, and the absurdity of the bureaucratic processes surrounding mining formalization. The comedians were encouraged to bring their own perspectives and improvisations to the process, resulting in a performance that was both comedic and deeply critical of Peru's mining policies.

3. Blending Satire with Social Commentary

The street comedians were vital to shaping the tone and delivery of the performance. Drawing on their experiences as public performers, they infused the narrative with humour and satire, using comedy as a tool to address complex social issues. However, this humour was never superficial; it was rooted in the harsh realities of life in Madre de Dios and the comedians' personal experiences with marginalization. The character of *Chuchupe*, for instance, was developed through the comedians' improvisations, reflecting their ability to transform tragic situations into moments of dark humour.

"The socio-environmental context is so worrying, devastating, and entails so much corruption that it apparently lacks amusing elements to develop. However, the improbable paradoxes that coexist to make the Great Business of illegal mining persist are precisely the genuine foundation of sarcastic and ironic humour capable of dismantling all the misinformation disseminated in popular media." (Fernandini, 2017, p. 1)

The final product was a unique blend of *Theatre of the Oppressed* and street comedy, where the audience was invited not just to laugh, but to reflect on the underlying structural injustices. Through satire, we were able to address issues such as environmental destruction, labour exploitation, and the complicity of the state in perpetuating these conditions. The comedic elements of the performance allowed us to reach a broader audience, while still provoking outrage and critical thought.

relationship that each one had with Madre de Dios, the issue of the mining of the gold as artistic material. It is also true that by the time we were working on *The Adventures of Chuchupe*, this idea never crossed my mind. This text is an attempt to fill that void.

What I did think is that, if it had been up to me, *The Adventures of Chuchupe* would have taken a completely different path. This text is also a way to recover that line of exploration that was finally abandoned.” (Arriarán, 2020, p.4)

Moreover, Ricardo Galvez’s involvement in the project led to the founding of *Talleristas*, a cultural service group that uses art and other disciplines to address social traumas.⁴⁴ This initiative is a direct outcome of the collaborative and participatory nature of *Searching for Power on the Collective Laugh*, demonstrating the project’s ongoing impact on the communities and individuals involved. The comedians also formed the group *Rimaq Sunqu*⁴⁵, where they now mentor young performers on how to use comedy to address social issues, continuing the legacy of the project.

However, while we created a method for achieving a horizontal framework, there were limitations. Although we fostered a sense of ownership and agency—evidenced by the comedians performing *The Adventures of Chuchupe* as they wished—certain experiences highlighted the constraints of this approach. A pivotal moment arose during an anticipated presentation in the Peruvian jungle, intended to engage a larger local audience. Unfortunately, unforeseen challenges led to the cancellation of the event at the last minute, forcing us to hastily seek alternative arrangements with little success. This setback resulted in a disappointing turnout, prompting the performers to cancel the show while assuring the few attendees that they would return in the future.

This moment served as a turning point for the project. I shared with the participants that I had exhausted the remaining funds on the recent trip, emphasizing that if they were committed to moving forward, their support would be essential. From then on, the nature of our collaboration shifted; we transitioned from a formal rehearsal space to practicing in Koki’s front patio, which reflected our changing circumstances and their agency in functioning as providers in the structure of the project. The performers began to forgo their usual payments, recognizing the challenges I faced and contributing to the project’s momentum through their collective effort.

As our professional relationship evolved, we grew closer, transcending the roles of mere collaborators. I became part of their personal lives, attending celebrations and receiving their support during my own losses. However, despite this newfound intimacy, the dynamics of our work still positioned me as the "boss," and subsequently, a potential

⁴⁴ “We are an interdisciplinary collective of professionals who believe in Peru and in the power of the arts, culture, education, and mental health as means of social transformation.” Accessed on 19 December 2023. <https://talleristas.pe>.

⁴⁵ *Rimaq Sunqu* is the name chosen by the street comedians in 2020 after returning from their experience in Sweden. In Quechua, it means “Speaking Heart.”

Personal Reflections and Outcome

For me, *Searching for Power on the Collective Laugh* was not just an artistic endeavour; it was a personal journey that allowed me to reconnect with my family’s roots in Madre de Dios and confront the environmental and social devastation of the region. This project grew from my desire to explore the place where my father was born, but it became something much larger—an intersection of art, activism, and personal healing.

One of the most profound outcomes of the project was the tangible social impact it had on the participants. While *The Adventures of Chuchupe* started as the performative outcome of an artistic PhD sub-project, its influence extended far beyond the art world. Gabriel Arriarán, for example, wrote a literary piece based on the project, *Las Aventuras de Chuchupe*,⁴³ which further disseminated the themes we explored. The comedians, too, have continued to perform the play on the streets of Lima, using the script to earn a living while continuing to critique the structures of power that oppress them.

“Regarding *The Adventures of Chuchupe* as an artistic project, our views diverge. And I consider that this divergence finds its basis in the experience that each person has had in the capital.

Oscar's vision was captured as a street comedy sketch.

I think that his proposal would have been enriched if the childhoods of all of us who participated in the project were put into play as street comedy, and from the

⁴³ Arriarán. Gabriel. *Las Aventuras de Chuchupe*, 2020

opportunity for them to earn income illustrating the complexities of our collaboration. This experience highlighted the inherent limitations in striving for a fully horizontal structure.

In conclusion, I believe that *Searching for Power on the Collective Laugh*, bridged the gap between art and activism, brought together diverse voices, and if to measure its success this is not just in the performances we gave or the critical acclaim we could've received, it is in the lasting impact it had on everyone involved—not only for the comedians but for everyone involved, including myself. While it didn't fully meet the ideal of horizontality, the project succeeded in creating meaningful change—personally, professionally, and socially. Its true conclusion lay in the way it transformed the lives of the participants, allowing for emotional catharsis, professional development, and social change. It taught me the power of collective storytelling, the importance of horizontal collaboration, and the transformative potential of art in confronting social injustices.

Ultimately, this was a journey that intertwined personal and collective experiences, fostering a space for reflection, critique, and the collective imagining of a better future.



Koki, Caballo, Kelvin, Ricardo, Gabriel and Oscar sharing the first meeting of the project *Searching for Power on the Collective Laugh*, at the AAA - Theatre Association, Lima, 2017