

the unusual journey of a corn husk

Francesca Cozzolino, Coralie Maurin & Juliette Nier – March 4 2025

• corn • Mexico • design • video animation • photo documentary

The Unusual Journey of a Corn Husk is a film based on an investigation by Francesca Cozzolino into the production of design objects from corn cultivation in the state of Puebla, Mexico.

Using the medium of a visual narrative, this film presents the researcher's fieldwork, and the data produced in the course of her ethnographic study, combining a local context (the decline of corn from Mexico's semi-arid Mixteca region) to an event in contemporary global history (the NAFTA free trade agreements).

Narrated by an animated husk of corn which performs like a voice-over, the anthropologist recounts how Mexican designer Fernando Laposse, looking for a sustainable, local approach to design and a way to support a struggling farming community, successfully persuaded a group of families from the small village of Tonahuixtla in the state of Puebla to work the land using permaculture methods (milpa) and then take charge of processing the cultivated corn husks using semi-mechanical processes to produce an elegant coating material: Totomoxtle.

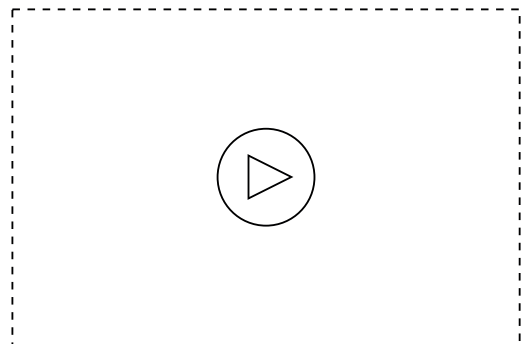
The voice-over, along with montage and 2D animation techniques, draws on the researcher's photographic, video, and sound documents, as well as the creation of animated images, to convey the designer's approach and the wider environmental issues this case raises.

Designed according to a three-voice approach, this film brings together an anthropologist, a documentary filmmaker specializing in the documentation of collective professional activities in the sciences, Coralie Maurin, and graphic designer Juliette Nier, who works with 2D animation tools to explore phenomena and confront realities that are difficult to grasp, sometimes incongruous or complex to explain.

The film explores the codes of fiction, documentary, and animation, giving viewers insight into a project positioned on the edge of crafted tradition and technical innovation. More broadly, the case of Totomoxtle raises the question of how a technique is conceived and passed on, in a context where the complex cultural, economic, political, and ecological hybridizations that characterize our contemporary worlds collide.

This contribution was published on www.able-journal.org in a video.able format:

www.able-journal.org/en/the-unusual-journey-of-a-corn-husk



credits

authors: Francesca Cozzolino, Coralie Maurin, and Juliette Nier

production: Coralie Maurin

script: Francesca Cozzolino and Coralie Maurin

graphic design and animation: Juliette Nier

voice-over: Laura Flety

photography: Romain Courtemanche and Andrés Pulido Esteva

sound recording: Francesca Cozzolino

additional sound: Felix Blume

music: "Xochipitzawak," Trío Colatlán de Don Heraclio Alvarado, Heracio Alvarado Tellez, Mauricio Juárez Joyner, César Juárez-Joyner, ©Mitote Digital 2022

about the authors

Francesca Cozzolino (PhD) is an anthropologist with a doctorate from EHESS, she teaches humanities and social sciences at the École des Arts Décoratifs, Paris and is a researcher at EnsadLab. Specializing in the ethnography of artistic practices, she works at the crossroads of visual studies and the anthropology of art and material culture.

<https://ensadlab.fr/fr/francesca-cozzolino>

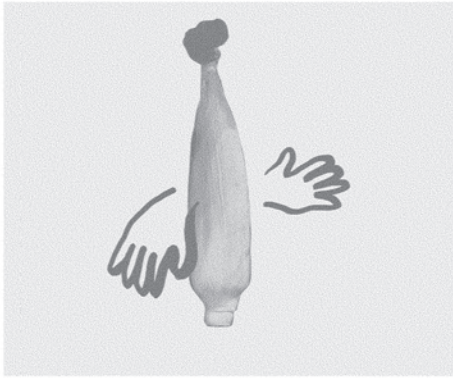
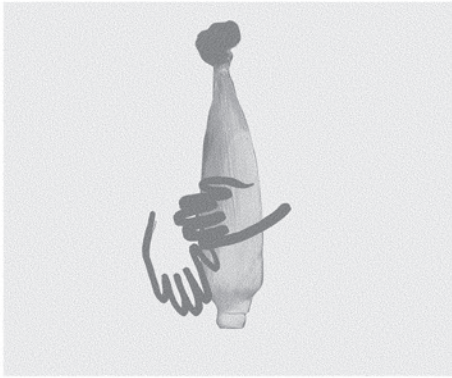
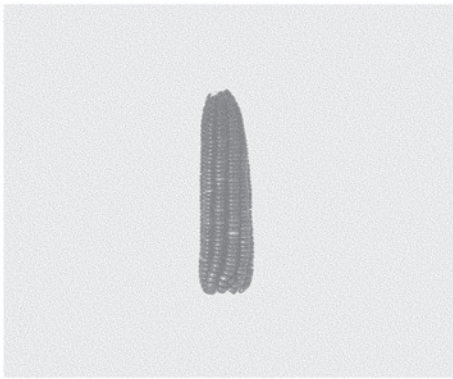
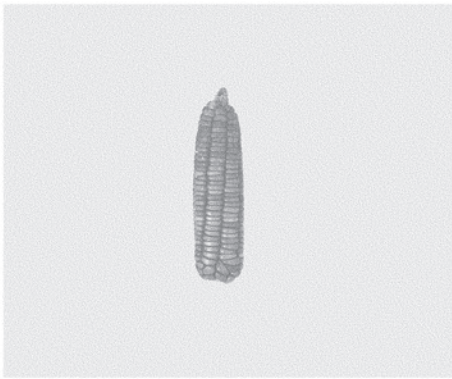
<https://ensad-fr.academia.edu/FrancescaCozzolino>

Coralie Maurin is an artist and documentary filmmaker at the Institut National de la Recherche pour l'Agriculture et l'Environnement (INRAE), where she conducts filmed fieldwork with professionals from various research fields. Her films, inspired by direct cinema and ethnographic approaches, contribute to a better understanding of the challenges of research work.

<http://cargocollective.com/CoralieMaurin/Index>

Juliette Nier has been a freelance designer and graphic artist since 2018 (and is a graduate of the École des Arts Décoratifs de Paris). She carries out commissioned projects in a variety of fields, from visual identity to exhibition signage, and develops graphic research at the intersection of visual didactics and object theater. Developed during residencies, workshops, and exhibitions, these narratives of knowledge dissemination mobilize writing, video, and scenography.

<https://juliettenier.fr/>





This is the village of Tonahuixtla.



It's a small village in the state of Puebla, Mexico.



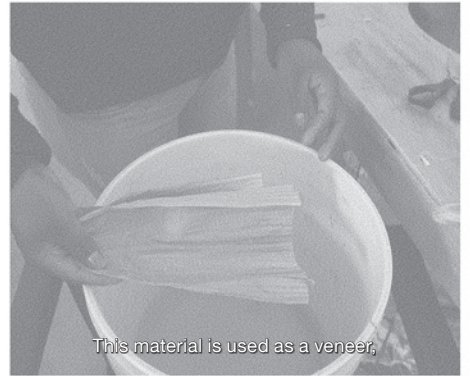
Here, everyone is busy.



People work with dried husks from colored corn



to produce Totomoxtle.



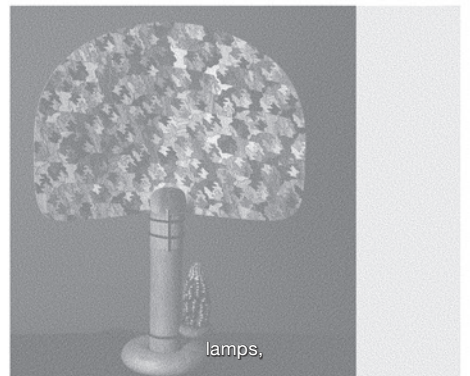
This material is used as a veneer,



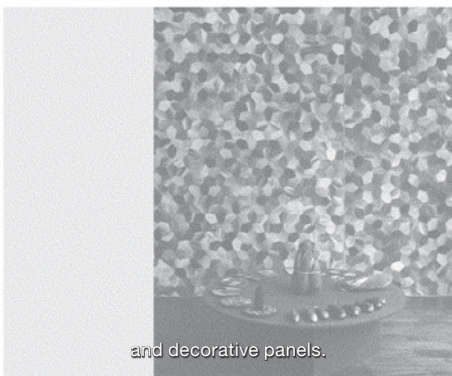
for interior objects



such as tables,



lamps,



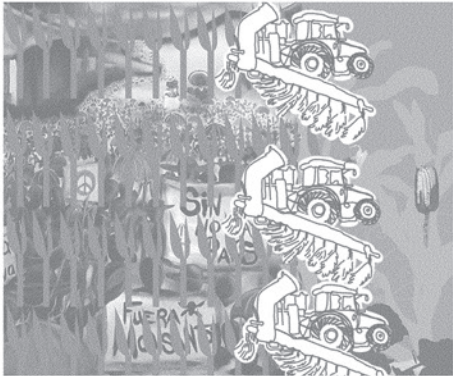
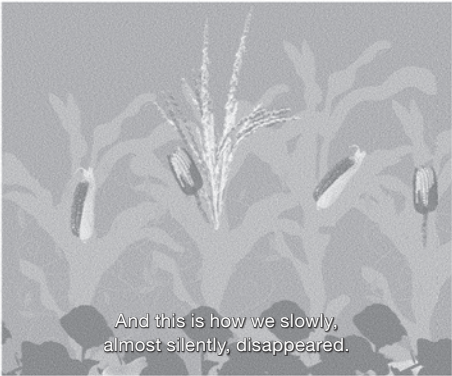
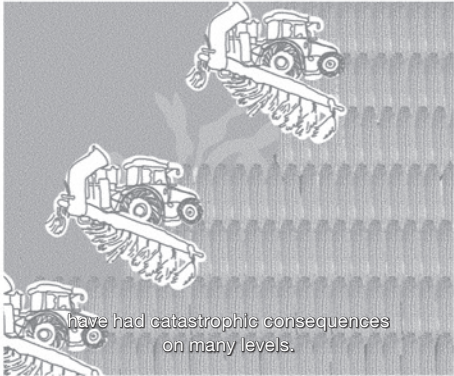
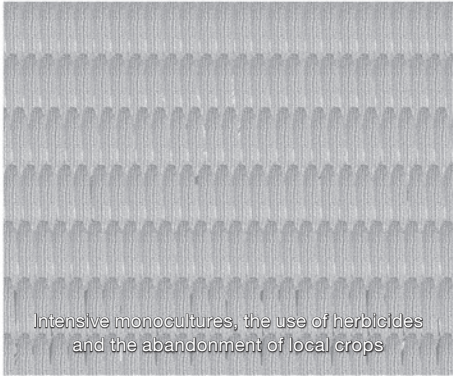
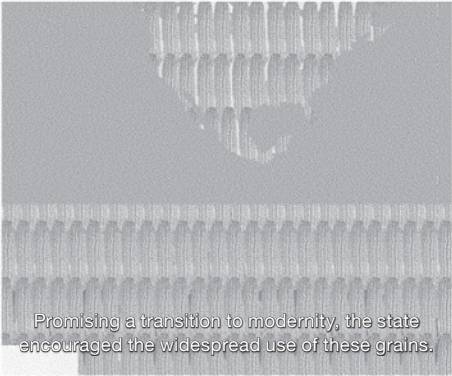
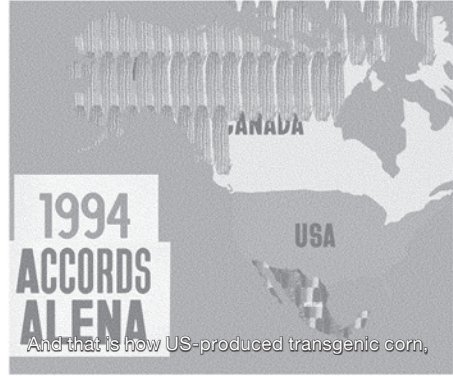
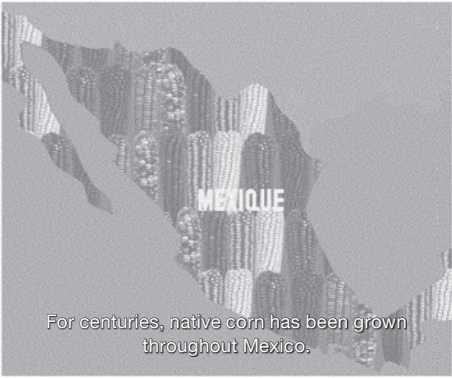
and decorative panels.

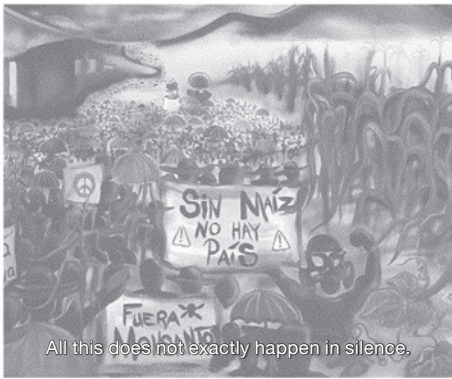


We, the husks of corn, come from a variety of corn that hasn't been grown

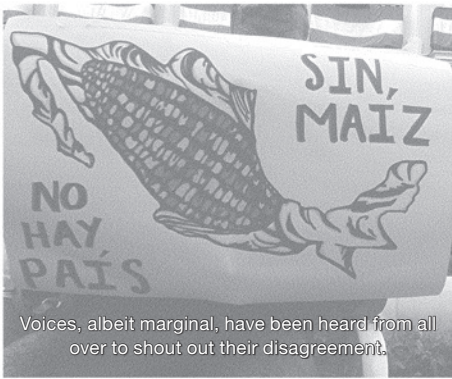


In the region for years,

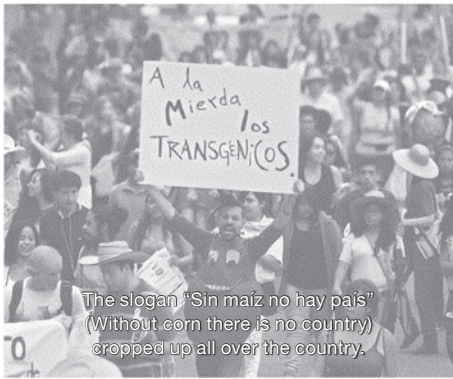




All this does not exactly happen in silence.



Voices, albeit marginal, have been heard from all over to shout out their disagreement.



The slogan "Sin maíz no hay país" (Without corn there is no country) cropped up all over the country.



In our village of Tonahuixtla, diversity disappeared in favor of intensive monocultures.



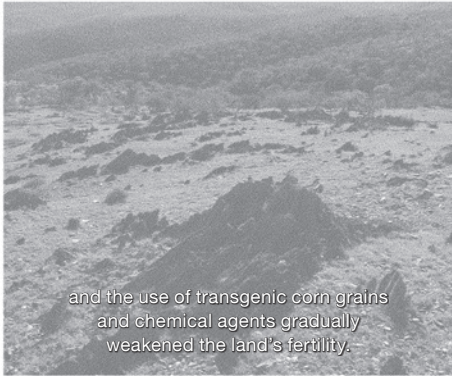
After 1994, many farmers left their land.



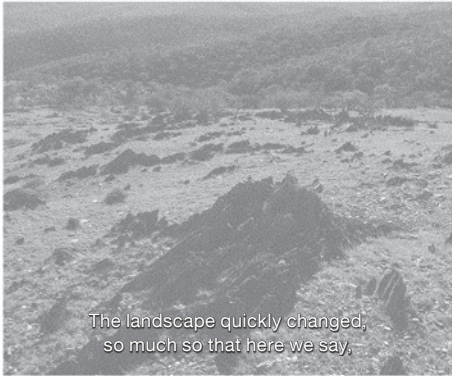
The price of native, mixed-crop corn



remained too high to compete with North America,



and the use of transgenic corn grains and chemical agents gradually weakened the land's fertility.



The landscape quickly changed, so much so that here we say,



"Rocks have replaced plants."



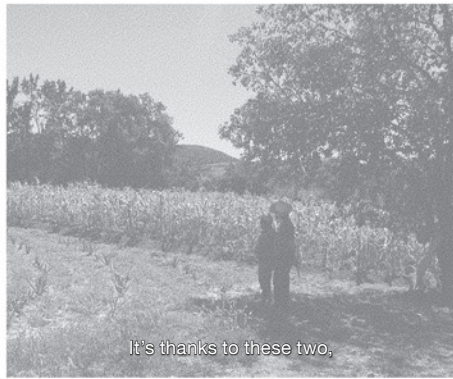
So, you may be asking yourself,



how is it that colored corn can be found today



in the fields of Tonahuixtla?



It's thanks to these two,



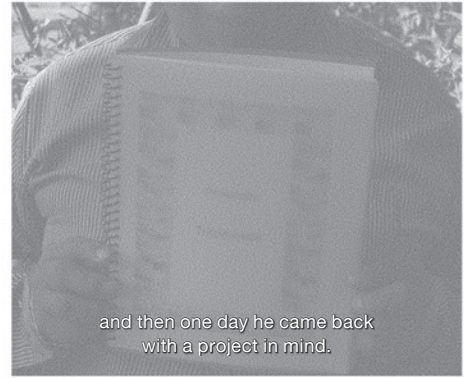
Fernando and Delfino



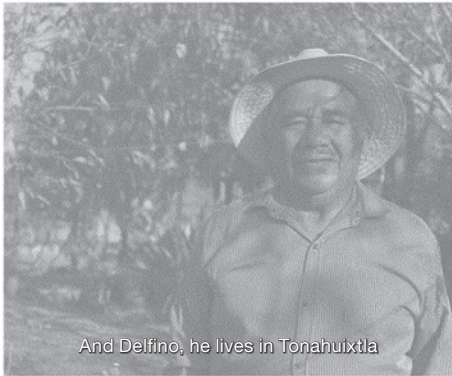
Fernando is a Mexican designer who used to come here on vacations when he was a child.



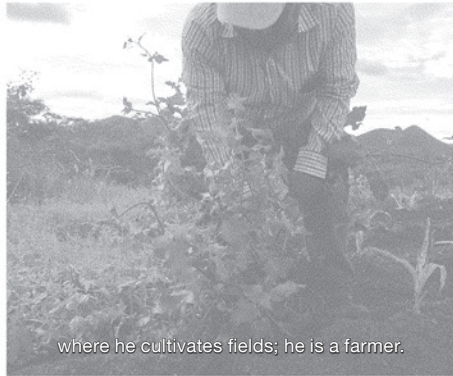
He traveled all over the world to make a career,



and then one day he came back with a project in mind.



And Delfino, he lives in Tonahuixtla



where he cultivates fields; he is a farmer.



In 2015, when Fernando presented him with his marquetry project



using colored corn husks,



Delfino was interested.



To be able to produce this corn,



Fernando suggested returning



to a traditional model of cultivation:



the milpa, or the "three sisters" combination of beans, squash, and corn.



The following year, in 2016,



a third character joined



this cooperation chain.



The designer met the scientific head



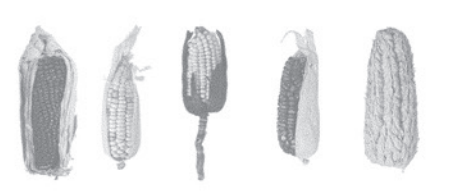
of a group of researchers at CIMMYT,



an international corn seed bank



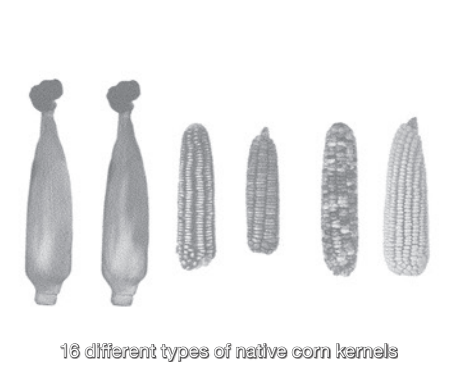
based in Texcoco, near Mexico City.



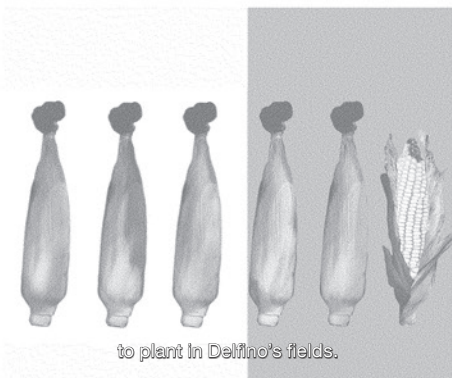
Fascinated by the designer's project,



Denise Costich agreed to give Fernando



16 different types of native corn kernels



to plant in Delino's fields.



Some varieties took, others didn't, and today there are six produced in the village.



[let's get busy]



[let's get busy]



LES CHÂÎNES OPÉRATOIRES DE TOTOMOXTLÉ

[the stages of Totomoxtle's production]

LES CHÂÎNES OPÉRATOIRES DE TOTOMOXTLÉ

[the stages of Totomoxtle's production]

LES CHÂÎNES OPÉRATOIRES DE TOTOMOXTLÉ



For milpa, farmers grow
three different vegetables in unison:



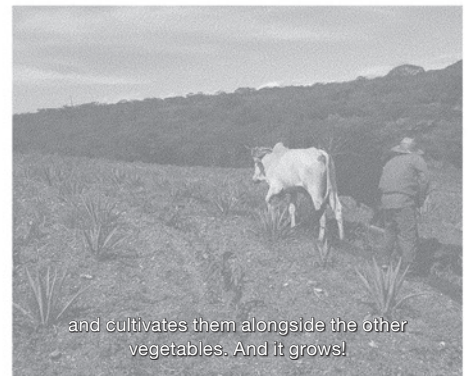
beans, squash, and us, corn.



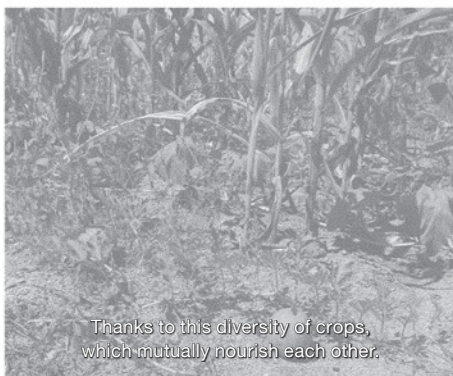
Irrigation is natural, from rainfall.



Delfino plants our native corn kernels



and cultivates them alongside the other
vegetables. And it grows!



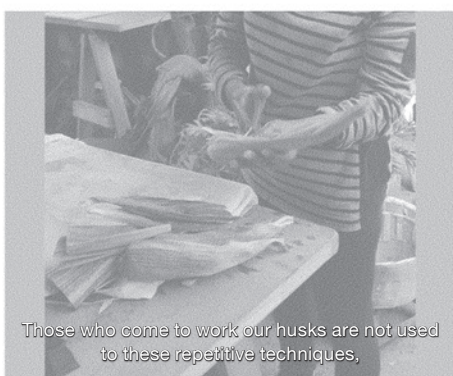
Thanks to this diversity of crops,
which mutually nourish each other.



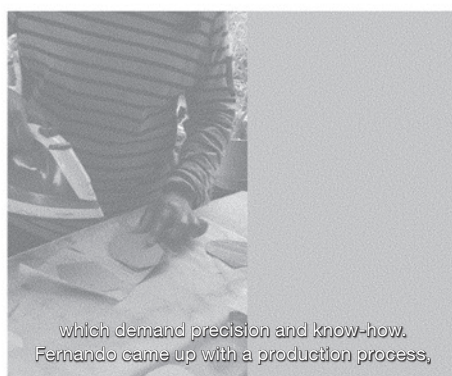
Next, the whole Delfino family helps



process our husks.



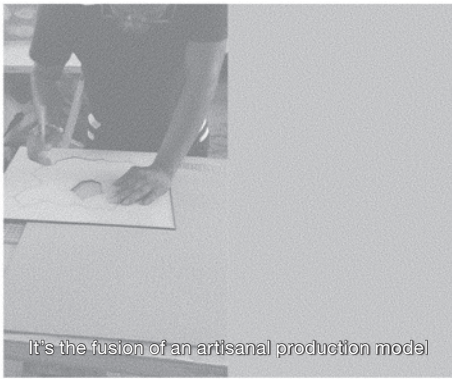
Those who come to work our husks are not used
to these repetitive techniques,



which demand precision and know-how.
Fernando came up with a production process,



but also tools and machines to correct manual
gestures using semi-mechanical processes.



It's the fusion of an artisanal production model



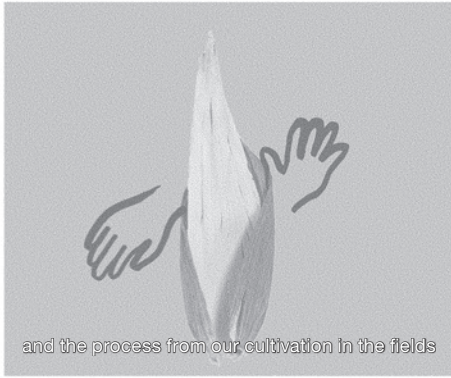
and a contemporary design studio.



Totomoxtle, then, is the finished material,



the fruit of a series of skilled techniques,



and the process from our cultivation in the fields



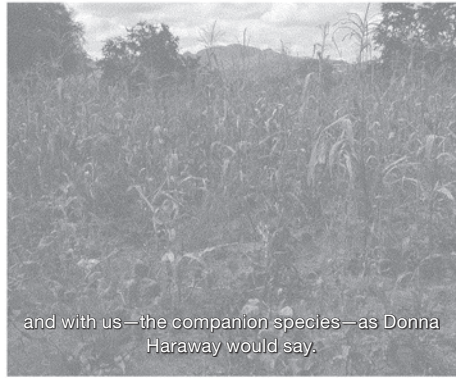
to the product manufactured
in Fernando's workshop.



And it is also the relationships
that have been forged



throughout this process between humans
and their environment,



and with us—the companion species—as Donna
Haraway would say.



Fernando's project is unique.



It couldn't exist anywhere else but here,
on this land, in this local context.



It has been carefully crafted to ensure
that we can continue to exist



and that Tonahuixtla's farmers can benefit from it.



Subsequently, Fernando's workshop
has expanded.



After testing his system,
he moved to a larger space



that he rents in the village, and hired more people.



Everyone come when they can, without having to master the techniques.



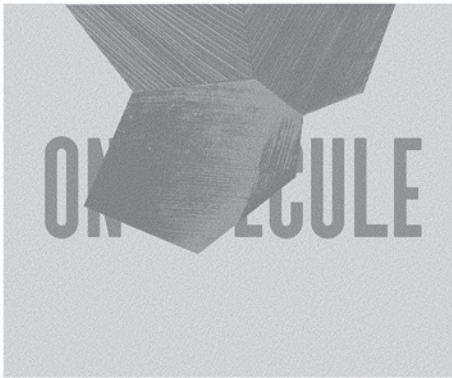
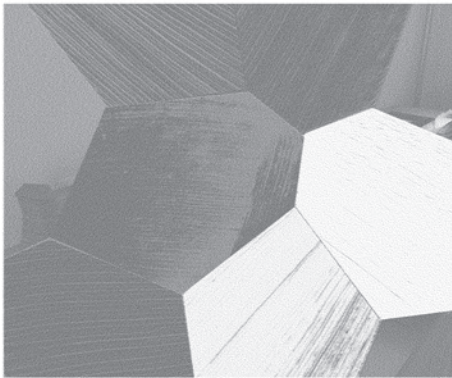
Everyone learned on the job and was introduced to new processes.



And, over time, the women specialized in preparing our sheets



and the men in assembling them on cork supports.



ON ÉCULE



ON SPÉCULE

[speculation]

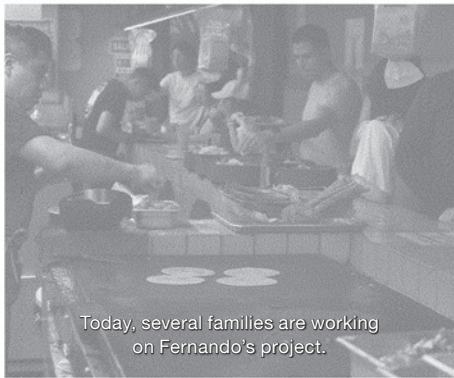


INVENTER
DES POSSIBLES

[inventing possibilities]



INVE
DES POS



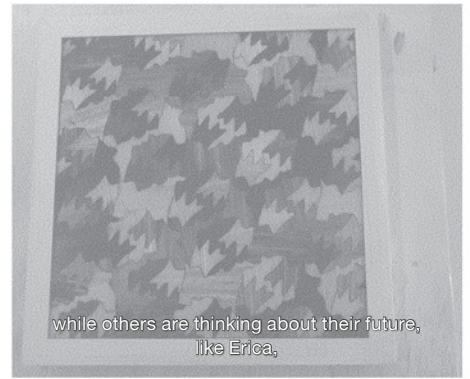
Today, several families are working on Fernando's project.



Some young people sell their corn to a tortilleria in Mexico City



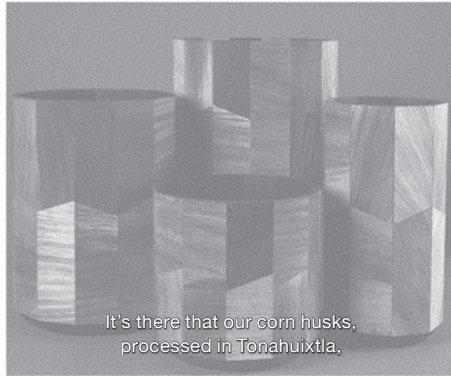
to supplement their work in the workshop,



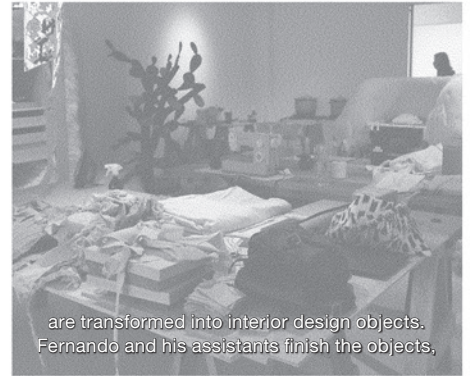
while others are thinking about their future, like Erica,



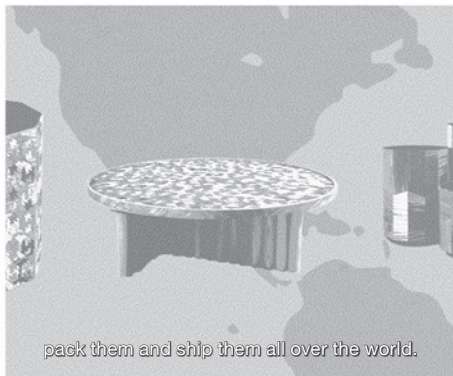
who has gone to study in the capital while working in Fernando's workshop,



It's there that our corn husks, processed in Tonahuixtla,



are transformed into interior design objects. Fernando and his assistants finish the objects,



pack them and ship them all over the world.



And we travel to galleries, biennials, and museums all over the world:



Paris, Milan, New York, London.



But you can be sure that we'll never be



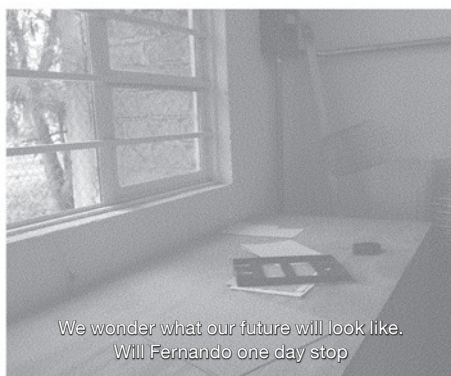
found in any of Tonahuixtla's houses!



Fernando has made us an exclusive, luxury product



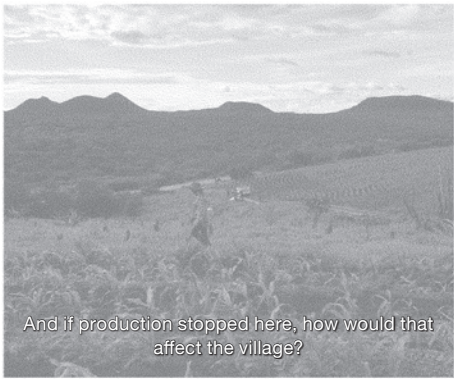
that is not intended for the local market.



We wonder what our future will look like. Will Fernando one day stop



producing Totomoxtle in Tonahuixtla, to keep it only in Mexico?



And if production stopped here, how would that affect the village?



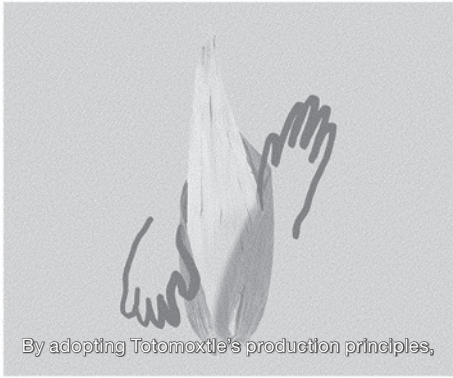
Would it still be in the interest of farming families



to cultivate native corn according to milpa?



Many possibilities come to mind...



By adopting Totomoxtle's production principles,



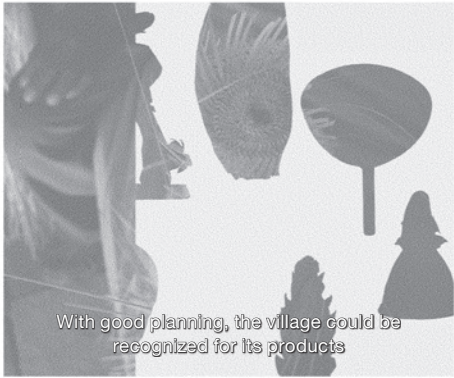
the people of Tonahuixtla could develop their own local crafts,



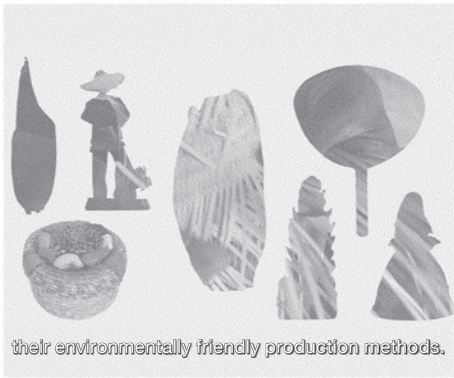
for example by continuing the production of basketry objects



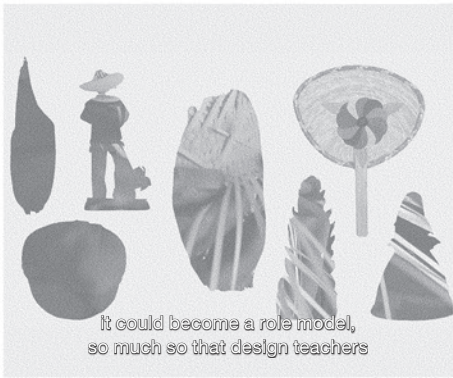
—already in place in the village—using our husks



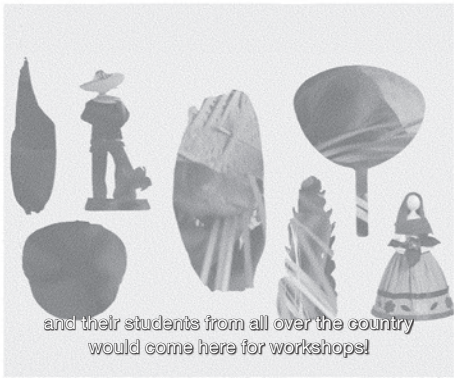
With good planning, the village could be recognized for its products



their environmentally friendly production methods.



It could become a role model, so much so that design teachers



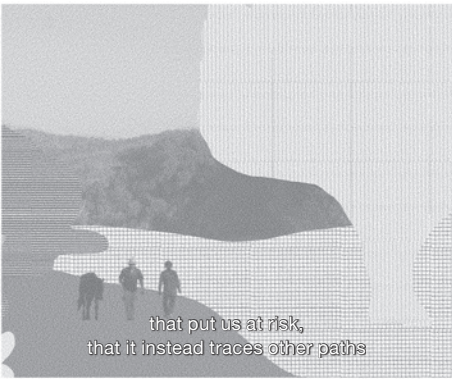
and their students from all over the country would come here for workshops!



But what do we actually want to see in this future?



That it does not limit us to the capitalist market model



that put us at risk,
that it instead traces other paths



and forms of resistance
to the agro-liberal economy.



We hope our story inspires you
to think about the initiatives



that have been appearing lately,
the uprisings in favor of the land



that collectives are calling for, here,
close to you, in the world around you



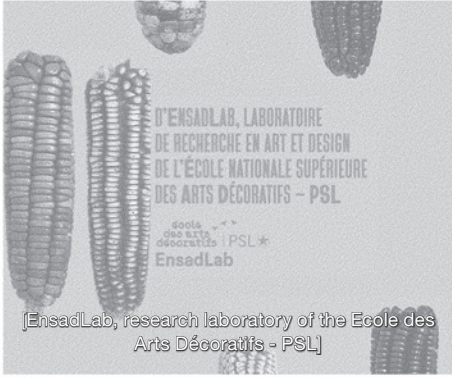
UN FILM RÉALISÉ
AVEC LE SOUTIEN

[Produced with the support of]



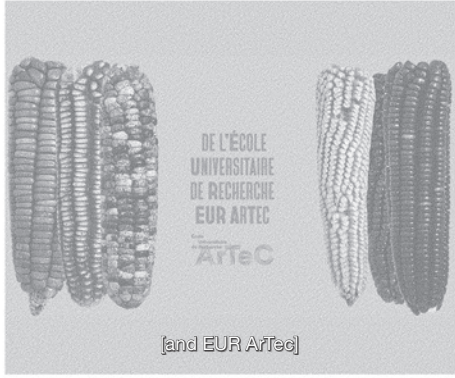
DU LABORATOIRE
DE RECHERCHE
SACRe-PSL
PSL * SACRe

[the research laboratory SACRe-PSL]



D'ENSADLAB, LABORATOIRE
DE RECHERCHE EN ART ET DESIGN
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école
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décoratifs PSL *
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[EnsadLab, research laboratory of the Ecole des
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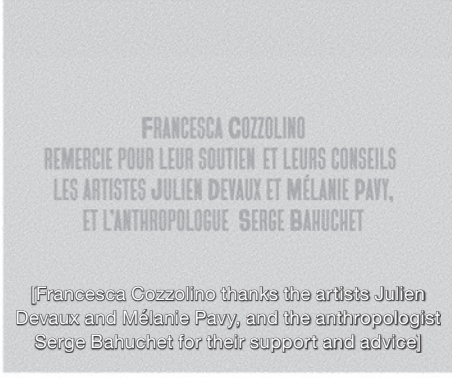


DE L'ÉCOLE
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[and EUR ArTeC]

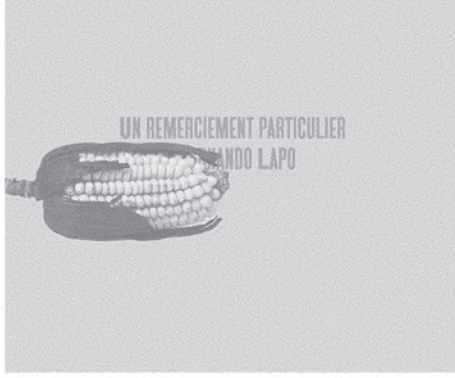


FRANCESCA COZZOLINO
MERCE POUR LEUR SOUTI



FRANCESCA COZZOLINO
REMERCE POUR LEUR SOUTIEN ET LEURS CONSEILS
LES ARTISTES JULIEN DEVAUX ET MÉLANIE PAVY,
ET L'ANTHROPOLOGUE SERGE BAHUCHET

[Francesca Cozzolino thanks the artists Julien
Devaux and Mélanie Pavy, and the anthropologist
Serge Bahuchet for their support and advice]



UN REMERCIEMENT PARTICULIER
FERNANDO LAPO



UN REMERCIEMENT PARTICULIER
VA À FERNANDO LAPOSSE
ET À LA FAMILLE DE DELFINO
ET LES PERSONNES QUI NOUS
ONT ACCUEILLIS À TONAHUXTLA:

Special thanks to Fernando Laposse
and Delfino's family, and to the people
who welcomed us in Tonahuixtla:



DOÑA LUCIA, DENISE COSTICH,
SUSANNA, NICOLAS, NOÉ, SAUL, SUSANNA



DOÑA LUCIA, DENISE COSTICH,
SUSANNA, NICOLAS, NOÉ, SAUL, SUSANNA

Doña Lucia, Denise Costich, Susanna,
Nicolas, Noé, Saul, Susanna.

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