



ABOUT THE ARTIST

MARÍA VELASCO is a Spanish-born artist who has been living and working in the US since 1991. She creates site-specific installations, public art and participatory projects about displacement, gender identity, vulnerability, and the structures of authority that govern our lives. She has exhibited at The Soap Factory, Minneapolis; Contemporary Arts Forum, Santa Barbara; ARC gallery, Chicago; Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence; H&R Block Artspace; Avenue of the Arts, Kansas City; Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art, Saint Joseph; Paula Cooper gallery; Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, NYC; Salón Tentaciones (Madrid, Spain); Museo Del Barro (Asunción, Paraguay); Paradise Gardens Biennial VI (Darmstadt, Germany), Mexico, Argentina and Morocco. Her work appears in Art In America and Sculpture magazine. Among her numerous accomplishments is a Rocket Grant of the Kansas City Charlotte Street Foundation, and an Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation Emerging Artists Grant. Velasco was the first art student to obtain a scholarship to further her studies in the U.S. through the Madrid-California Education Abroad program at the Universidad Complutense of Madrid, where she received her B.F.A. and completed doctoral courses. She obtained an M.F.A. from the University of California at Santa Barbara. She is a Professor of Visual Art at the University of Kansas and lives in Lawrence with her ten-year-old son, Alex, who loves to draw and make art.





The art of María Velasco emerges in connection—to cultural identities, to stories, to carefully chosen materials, to communities—and especially to those who participate in the process of making the work. For *Spaces of Conviviality*, Velasco engaged local immigrant groups and others living in the Murcia region of Spain, an area in the Southeast near the Mediterranean Sea. A native of Spain herself, but now based in the United States, Velasco inspired residents to participate as part of an Open Studios grant and artist residency hosted by Centro Negra-AADK (Aktuelle Architektur Der Kultur), based in Blanca, Murcia, in summer 2018.

The project derives in part from Velasco's archival research in Madrid, where she studied several texts including *The Book of Games*, an illustrated manuscript developed in the 13th century by King Alfonso X "The Wise" (1252-1284). A ruler with broad influence in the Murcia region, King Alfonso X promoted his world view and offered various lessons through the book, using games as a method or platform for interacting with his subjects and audience.

Taking this game book as a premise, Velasco invented a card game that participants played. The game created a kind of permission for them to articulate their values and personal identities in meaningful short phrases, using their own words. Volunteers then stitched these phrases onto fabric badges by hand, often working in group sewing sessions, utilizing distinctive shapes and colors for the badges. The final product was a banner or flag of identity badges, installed outdoors on a building in the community. The work is low-tech but high impact. Both the artist's research, the process, and the flag connect to issues of displacement, and also to histories of hierarchy as well as conviviality.

FOR THIS AND OTHER RECENT PROJECTS BY VELASCO, THE SYMBOLIC, EMOTIONAL, AND AESTHETIC POWER OF VISUAL PATTERNS CONSTITUTE A KEY ELEMENT THAT PROVIDES PARTICIPANTS MEANINGFUL FORMS TO EMBODY THEIR THOUGHTS.

Velasco's identity flag allowed community members to celebrate their own ideas or traits, instead of those from a past event, or from a privileged ruler from earlier times.

The idea of conviviality arises in various social activities, including those where friends and strangers meet to eat or drink, or to make something together. The idea embraces realms beyond art and focuses on community, as well as self-expression. Being convivial conjures community building and strengthening our ties to each other in contemporary places of meaning. Its history, though, reminds us of ancient taverns, and to moments such as, for example, 16th-century Iran, when conviviality was employed to consolidate royal power.



SPACES OF CONVIVIALITY AND THE BOOK OF GAMES

PHOTOCREDITS
COPYRIGHT © BRIAN HAWKINS
COPYRIGHT © PATRIMONIO NACIONAL



What Velasco has masterfully combined is a wise ruler's 13th-century book of games with historical traditions of conviviality—effectively turning the power dynamics of each one upside down. The "ruled" now create the game, and the spaces of conviviality they gather in serve to democratize authority, rather than stratifying and reinforcing it.

The work incorporates Velasco's research into the compelling use of patterns in Morocco and Islamic Iberia to shape the visual and cultural topography and how they relate to history, identity, social interactions, and societal norms. Part of her project involves participatory opportunities that allow viewers to question their identity in relation to historic memory and to stereotypical perceptions of the "Other."

Velasco's *Spaces of Conviviality* helped build a greater understanding of the diverse array of communities in Spain. It called upon the city of Blanca itself and the history of the region as part of the framework. Velasco reveals not only aspects of the local architecture but also deep meanings in patterns that relate to all of us, in different ways, and that connect to our personal and historical identities.

The work looks to prior patterns and materials, and also to the present moment. Creating a humble, community-based vision, the project suggests that our best future might result from the hand-made, and from and a highly democratic idea of games paired with conviviality.

-- Susan Earle, PhD, curator of European and American art, Spencer Museum of Art, the University of Kansas.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
My sincerest appreciation goes to all who participated in this project: Walid El Omrani, Mohamed Elhail, Soufianne Haouass, María Angeles Cano, Ammar Cheida, Angel Ríos, Mohammed Bouazzaoui, Nahoual Khattari, José Luis Sánchez, Loli Molina, and the Team at Centro Negra. This project has been made possible with the support of the University of Kansas Research Excellence Initiative | Office of International Programs | General Research Fund | Visual Art Department | Shimomura Fund | Patrimonio Nacional de España.

-- F. María Velasco