Lejos de Dios/Far from God

a photodocumentary installation by Leah Krieger ’03
In the fall of 2002, I lived in the state of Oaxaca working as an intern for a Mexican non-governmental organization, FomCafé, a name derived from the verb *fomentar* to promote and foster. Within three indigenous Zapotec communities, FomCafé promotes the production and international distribution of Fair Trade organic coffee for La Trinidad Cooperative. In general, the label Fair Trade certifies that cooperatives are democratically organized and guaranteed a minimum price for their coffee beans. For my internship, I translated FomCafé's Web site and assisted in organizing various community meetings, including one that was designed to teach women concepts of a savings and micro-lending program that would support economic diversification and women's empowerment. Informally, I acted as a shadow—listening, observing, writing, and formulating my own un-romanticized perspectives of what was going on around me.

The photograph on the front of the card documents a series of educational activities designed to promote better communication and support regarding women's health care. Demonstrations, videos, and role-playing encouraged women to obtain yearly Pap smears in order to decrease the incidence of cervical cancer in rural coffee-producing communities. Because these economic and social initiatives often subverted traditional gender roles, they were met with varying degrees of resistance from both men and women, and I continue to question their sustainability within certain communities.

During my time off, I spent countless hours wandering through chaotic labyrinthine markets. Heaps of fresh-cut flowers, especially during the *Día de los Muertos* Day of the Dead celebrations, constantly entranced me. I also witnessed a street protest opposing the construction of a McDonald's in the historic center of Oaxaca City and an anti-capitalism march. As a tourist and as an American, I was unwelcome at these frequent political mobilizations.

The title of my exhibition refers to a common Mexican *dicho* saying: *tan lejos de Dios, tan cerca de los Estados Unidos* too far from God, too close to the United States. While I wished not to be labeled a *güera* white girl, this constant reminder made me realize that I am an *estadounidense* a person from the United States. Despite its failings, successes, and excesses, the U.S. is the country that I call home, and English will always be the language in which I communicate best. With this acknowledgment, I attempt to avoid perceiving culture as static but instead examine the complexity of the world and why places, people, and countries evolve and interact as they do—whether it be by historical forces, global economic structures, God's will, or pure chance.

—LK
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August 20 – October 11, 2003

Wednesday, September 3, at 7:00 p.m.
Gallery discussion with the artist
FOR this independent study project, Leah Krieger creates a synesthetic gallery installation based on an ethnographic research project that she conducted in Mexico from July through November 2002. She examines issues of economic and gender equity in the international coffee market and rural women’s health care, as well as cultural traditions, tourism, and social protest. In the exhibition, she includes her own photographs, cultural artifacts, and journal excerpts of personal observations and reflections to weave together visual artistic expression, academic research, and ethnographic cultural critique.

Leah Krieger graduated in 2003 with a combined major in sociology and environmental studies and a double minor in Caribbean and Latin American studies and Spanish. Her interest in diverse Latino cultures stems from living in and exploring Western and Southwestern states in the U.S. During college, she developed a more critical analysis of Latino populations, examining issues of political power and resistance, privilege, race, class, and the Othering of culture. Her research in Mexico was funded by a grant from the St. Lawrence University Romeo/Gilbert Intercultural Endowment. Additional support for the exhibition is provided by the Cashin Endowment for Fine Arts, the global studies department, the department of modern languages and literatures, and the Caribbean and Latin American studies program. Special thanks to Aram Muksian ’04 for designing and painting exhibition text panels.

Support the Unions!, 2002

Front:
Addressing Cervical Cancer in Role-Playing Exercise, 2002
Lejos de Dios/Far from God
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Lejos de Dios
the exposition

photos courtesy Carole Mathey
Brush Art Gallery

Fair Trade does not guarantee equal distribution of power and
control among all participants.

Viva La Muerte!