

The Absent Stone

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Sandra Rozental, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Cuajimalpa,

Mexico City



The Absent Stone (2013) is a documentary film that combines contemporary ethnographic filmmaking, animation and a wide range of found footage and archival visual materials to tell the story of the largest single-stone sculpture in the Americas, and how it was transported from a village in the Texcoco area to one of Mexico City's busiest streets. In 1964, the sculpture, which archaeologists believe to be a pre-Columbian rain deity, was forcefully removed from Coatlinchan following military intervention. Using national patrimony laws to justify the extraction, the state repurposed the 167-ton carving as a monument marking the entrance of the newly-built National Anthropology Museum. The engineers and architects in charge of the feat were stunned when the sculpture's arrival resulted in one of the most abundant rainfalls the city has ever seen during its alleged dry season. Throughout the years, the stone has become an icon of rain, called upon by

different actors when there is drought or when floods take over the capital. Meanwhile, in Coatlinchan, residents are often nostalgic, remembering better times when the sculpture was still a landmark in their territory. At the same time, in the wake of this state-enforced event of dispossession, Coatlinchan's residents are building replicas of the missing sculpture all over their town and engaging in their own forms of research to piece together Coatlinchan's ancient past and its relevance today.

Based on the ethnographic fieldwork of anthropologist Sandra Rozental and the cinematographic work of filmmaker and visual scholar Jesse Lerner, the film shows how an ancient sculpture can be much more than an archeological vestige, a historical artefact, or even a bounded thing.

You can watch the film until March 6th on Cultural Anthropology's [Screening Room website](#) and read an extensive interview with the filmmakers:

Stay tuned also for commentaries by anthropologists and filmmakers that will be added to the site over the weeks to come.

You can also visit the film's [website](#) or Facebook page where you will find many more materials, press releases and interviews with the film's directors and protagonists.

Jesse Lerner is a filmmaker, writer, and curator based in Los Angeles. His short films *Magnavoz* (2006), *T.S.H.* (2004) and *Natives* (1991, with Scott Sterling), and his feature-length documentaries *Atomic Sublime* (2010), *The American Egypt* (2001), *Ruins* (1999), and *Frontierland* (1995, with Rubén Ortiz-Torres) have won prizes at film festivals in the United States, Latin America, and Japan, and have shown at New York's Museum of Modern Art, the Sydney Biennale, and the Sundance Film Festival. He has curated film and photography exhibitions for the Robert Flaherty Seminar, the Guggenheim Museums in New York and Bilbao, and National Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City. His books include *The Maya of Modernism: Art, Architecture, and Film* (2011), *The Shock of Modernity: Crime Photography in Mexico City* (2007), and *F is for Phony: Fake*

Documentary and Truth's Undoing (2006, with Alex Juhasz). He teaches in the Intercollegiate Media Studies Program of the Claremont Colleges in Claremont, California.

Sandra Rozental received her PhD in socio-cultural anthropology from New York University in 2012. Her research explores national patrimony and heritage claims generated by the extraction of archaeological objects from local communities and other state-making enterprises. She is currently an assistant professor at Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Cuajimalpa in Mexico City. She has worked as an exhibitions researcher and curator in anthropology museums and cultural institutions in Mexico and has collaborated with artists and curators on several installations in museums and galleries. "The Absent Stone" (2013) is her first film which she directed alongside Jesse Lerner. The film has received several awards, including the Ann Arbor Film Festival Jury Award, and has screened in festivals and theatres in Mexico and abroad. She has also collaborated on the Material World Blog with film, book and exhibition reviews:

<http://www.materialworldblog.com/2007/05/using-film-to-move-a-totem-pole/>

<http://www.materialworldblog.com/2007/08/the-welcome-collection/>

<http://www.materialworldblog.com/2011/05/unearthing-small-things>

<http://www.materialworldblog.com/2011/05/seeing-through-rocks/>