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Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal

Title

Refract Journal, Volume 4: Document/ary Full Issue

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/24r1z37d>

Journal

Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal, 4(1)

Author

Editorial Board, Refract Journal

Publication Date

2021

DOI

10.5070/R74155780

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Peer reviewed



REFRACT

An Open Access Visual Studies Journal

Document/ary | Volume 4 | Issue 1 | Fall 2021

Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal

Document/ary | Volume 4 | Issue 1

ISSN 2640-9429

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Refract is generously supported by the department of *History of Art and Visual Culture* at UCSC, *Porter College* at UCSC, the *UCSC Arts Division*, the *UCSC Student Fee Advisory Committee*, the *Graduate Student Association* at UCSC, and individual donors.

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Cover: Silvia De Giorgi, *Grandmother's Hair*, scanned object, 2020 (this volume).
Courtesy of the artist.

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Letter from the Editor

My colleagues at the University of California, Santa Cruz and I founded this journal for a number of reasons, including but not limited to: providing a space outside the gatekeeping and privileged (and white, heteropatriarchal) standards of academic publishing, which often marginalizes emerging and independent scholars and artists; honing our editing skills and providing a workshop-like space for other writers; creating a free and accessible product that circulates beyond/outside the academy; and continually exploring and articulating what “visual studies” even is.

Refract's editorial board is constantly striving to fulfill these goals, with a mixed bag of successes and shortfalls. But what I have been thinking most about while putting together this latest volume is that last item: What is visual studies? And what is *Refract's* role in this still-burgeoning field?

Earlier this year, the editorial board revisited some canonical texts in the earliest formations of what has become visual studies—such as the now-classic (dare I say infamous) “Visual Culture Questionnaire” from the 1996 issue of *October*.¹ We did not have a specific agenda in rereading these texts; we simply wanted to see what resonated with us now that we are four volumes deep into this project. What struck us most about the debate over visual studies was a sense of anxiety about its disciplinary identity. How is it different from a “new art history” or “cultural studies”? Where does it fit into the university curriculum? What are the stakes of naming, creating, and defining disciplines in the first place?

As we discussed the angst that seemed to characterize those debates, I realized that this question of disciplinary belonging was never really of concern to *Refract's* founders or to its subsequent editors. Many of us on the editorial board found this aspect of the debate to be an unproductive, even reductive, instance of the “turf policing,” as Mieke Bal and others have called it, that runs rampant in

academe.² Rather, the editorial board and I found that what most resonated for us were the discussions of methodology rather than of disciplinary boundaries and institutional belonging. *How* is visual studies put into practice? How do scholars/practitioners of visual studies collect their “data,” use their “archives,” and “read” their objects of analysis?

As Bal stated in her polemical essay “Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture,” objects “are active participants in the performance of analysis in that they enable reflection and speculation, and they can contradict projections and wrong-headed interpretations (if the analyst lets them!) and thus constitute a theoretical object within philosophical relevance.”³ Michael Ann Holly similarly argued for this kind of approach in her response to the *October* questionnaire, saying that “the ‘work of art’ itself (of course the range of what counts here has been enormously expanded into any visual representation) has as much a role to play in the production of the circulation of meanings as does the critic or historian who tries to get it to speak.”⁴

With this in mind, *Refract* considers artists, filmmakers, poets, performers, and creative practitioners of all kinds to be *doing* the work that we might call visual studies. In this volume—and all those that came before—original, creative work is integrated into the table of contents, not as illustrations of someone else’s argument but as intellectual, theorizing projects in their own right.

Alongside these projects, the scholarly essays included in *Refract*’s volumes over the years are also putting visual studies into practice, if not definitively naming it as such. From unpacking the role of cosmetics in sixteenth-century British imperialism,⁵ to framing trans selfies on social media as decolonial acts,⁶ our contributors co-produce their analyses in the kind of performative praxis that Bal called for. Further, they fulfill what Sara Blaylock, in our second volume, identified as imperatives for the field: they “[offer] a different way of seeing and engaging with the world” and are “social justice minded in both historical and contemporary subjects.”⁷

As editors, we are always looking for artists and writers who enact the kinds of methodologies that characterize, to us, a visual studies approach. This is the reasoning behind our annual feature, “Voices of Visual Studies,” for which we invite scholars who we believe are doing important work with/around/alongside artistic production. The quote from Blaylock comes from her contribution as our “Voice” in volume 2, while James Elkins preceded her in our inaugural volume.⁸ Those two featured voices were both white scholars whose doctoral training was in the fields of art history and visual studies, respectively. But some of the most critical, insightful, and inspirational work that might be called visual studies is happening in (or between) other disciplines and by people of color. So, for the

third volume's "Voice," we invited Professor Katerina Teaiwa to reflect on the role of images and artistic work in her own scholarship on the colonial history of Banaba.⁹

In the present volume, we again feature interdisciplinary, social justice-oriented work by a woman of color. Catherine Sue Ramírez's essay, "Visualizing Precarity and Security: Mona Hatoum's *Drowning Sorrows* and Guadalupe Maravilla's *Walk on Water*," considers the condition of "precarity" as it exists in the contemporary world. Deftly weaving in some of today's most pressing social and political issues, Ramírez considers how visual culture allows us to really see and understand precarity while providing avenues for healing. One of the most exciting parts of this guest feature is her pedagogical practice. Like Teaiwa, Ramírez mobilizes the visual as a form of teaching. In many ways, I consider *Refract* to also be a kind of object that serves a pedagogical function (a "document," you might say, as outlined in this volume's introduction), and within its pages one can see the multitudinous forms that a visual studies approach can take.

My deepest gratitude to Catherine Sue Ramírez, Dark Laboratory, and Amalia Mesa-Bains for accepting our invitation to contribute to the current volume. My appreciation also goes to the other contributors, whose passion and hard work have made this volume so strong. On behalf of the editorial board, I would like to thank the department of History of Art and Visual Culture, the Arts Division, the Graduate Student Association, and the Student Fee Advisory Committee at the University of California, Santa Cruz for their financial support. We are especially grateful to Ruby Lipsenthal for all her help (and patience) while we continually figure out how all this works. Thanks also to Professors Alexis Boylan, Vilashini Cooppan, Derek Conrad Murray, Kyle Parry, and Kailani Polzak for serving on our advisory board. Thank you to the team at eScholarship for answering our (many) questions, to all the peer reviewers for your time, and to Paula Dragosh for copyediting. My personal thanks to my friends and colleagues on *Refract*'s editorial board: Spencer Armada, Rachel Bonner, Susanna Collinson, Katie Ligmond, Kelsey McFaul, Stacy Schwartz, Matthew Simmons, Madison Treece, and Elia Vargas, as well as former editorial board members who helped lay the groundwork for this incredible project.

Maggie Wander

Notes

- ¹ Svetlana Alpers et al. “Visual Culture Questionnaire,” *October* 77 (1996): 25–70, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778959>.
- ² Mieke Bal, “Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 1 (2003): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/147041290300200101>.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 24.
- ⁴ Michael Ann Holly, “Saints and Sinners,” in Svetlana Alpers et al., “Visual Culture Questionnaire,” *October* 77 (1996): 41, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778959>.
- ⁵ Tara Allen-Flanagan, “The Face of an Empire: Cosmetics and Whiteness in Imperial Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I,” *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (2020): 285–307, <https://doi.org/10.5070/R73151193>.
- ⁶ Ace Lehner, “Trans Self-Imaging Praxis, Decolonizing Photography, and the Work of Alok Vaid-Menon,” *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* 2, no. 1 (2019): 45–77, <https://doi.org/10.5070/R72145857>.
- ⁷ Sara Blaylock, “Lag and Impact in Visual Studies,” *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* 2, no. 1 (2019): 231, <https://doi.org/10.5070/R72145853>.
- ⁸ See *ibid.* and James Elkins, “What Is Radical Writing in Visual Studies?,” *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2018): 15–22, <https://doi.org/10.5070/R71141455>.
- ⁹ Katerina Martina Teaiwa, “Visualizing Banaba: Art and Research about a Diffracted Pacific Island,” *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (2020): 309–16, <https://doi.org/10.5070/R73151194>.

Introduction

Refract's fourth volume explores the entanglements between the document and the documentary as sources of information and forms of visual culture. Derived from the Latin *docere* (to instruct, to teach), the document can be a pedagogical tool, a disciplinary measure, or a literary and legal form that ascribes value to people and property and gives shape to cultural beliefs called laws. And yet, the document defies boundaries—it is at once literary, sociological, scientific, and historical while also being a material object with affective qualities.

By tracing the history of how the term *document*, in the English language, became more and more associated with ideas of truth, evidence, and imperial power, this introduction serves as a cognitive exercise in troubling the ontological barrier between the object (the document, a documentation) and its viewer/audience. Considering the significance (even overdetermination) of the visual in considerations of the “document/ary,” this volume shows how the division between object and subject becomes a fantasy of embodied sensuality. Further, by attending to how the document/ary, as both concept and material object, conditions and is conditioned by social and epistemological needs, this volume considers the role between document/ary’s aesthetic/rhetorical and social/political dimensions.

As a material object, the document/ary has a distinct history. While it is possible to retroactively read many cultural forms as being a “document” or “documentary,” it is important to recognize how the English term itself first manifests as a tool of (colonial) bureaucracy in the Western world. The dividing line between *document* and its suffix *-ary* indicates etymologically a span of some four hundred years: from the point where the former entered the English language in the fifteenth century until it was joined by its adjectival form in the

nineteenth. In its fifteenth-century usage, document has two primary meanings, the first teaching and/or warning, the second a manifestation of evidence or proof.¹ By the eighteenth century, the document had taken on an association with written evidence and other inscribed objects, such as tombstones and coins. The line here between document as a noun and verb is thin—the document as an object itself documents, just as “to document” produces an object that we, in turn, call a document.

Many of the contributors to this volume play with the slippage between the *act* of documenting (preserving, cataloguing) and the object, or more specifically the *archive*, that results. Madison Treece’s interview with Amalia Mesa-Bains explores the Chicana artist, scholar, and educator’s unique relationship to the archive and considers how the practice of documenting and collecting has shaped her artistic practice. This wide-ranging interview covers the importance of documentation in shaping history, determining what is held on to, and how this informs the burgeoning field of Chicana art history (which is also the subject of Catherine S. Ramírez’s special feature; see this volume’s letter from the editor).

Sharing her own practice of collecting, Silvia De Giorgi’s “Memory Matter(s)” is a short essay that engages a multimodal method for documenting, archiving, and memorializing bygone domestic life in her grandparent’s rural home in the Italian province of South Tyrol, initiated by the conditions of social distancing. In “A Catalog of American Things,” Marisa J. Futernick similarly plays with the idea of creating an archive by humorously and horrifyingly cataloging various “things” that might be typified as “American.” Designed as an ever-expanding document of images and exploring the notion of encyclopedic knowledge, the work juxtaposes phrases such as “Manifest Destiny” and “same-day delivery” with photographs that highlight the shallowness of the authoritative words that seek to give meaning to America itself. Elpitha Tsoutsounakis also creates her own archive in “Ground Maps of an Unknown Prospect,” a series of prints depicting topographical maps of a prospective mining site in the Colorado Plateau. Overlapping the maps are large patches of color applied with pigment the artist created from Ochre samples she collected herself at the site. *Unknown Prospect* complicates cartography’s documentary function by materializing the agentic quality of Ochre—deemed “waste” by the US Geological Survey—through the corporeal and relational experience of collecting, cataloging, archiving, and transforming the mineral.

Like Mesa-Bains, De Giorgi, Futernick, and Tsoutsounakis, many other contributors are interested in the active construction of archives (collections of documents in various forms) as a way to preserve and document present and

past experiences. Turning to Enlightenment-era art salons as a kind of archive, Delanie Linden's "Denis Diderot's 'Salons' as Art Conservation in Eighteenth-Century France" explores Diderot's "Salons" as a way to preserve works of art through ekphrasis. By analyzing the reactions to natural disasters in and around Europe in the eighteenth century, Linden considers the role of public anxiety in the preservation of artworks during this period. Stella Gatto's essay "Synthesizing a Dual-Definition of *Façade* in the Western Palaces of Yuanming Yuan: Art, Politics, and Place-Making in the Garden of Perfect Brightness" examines how the documentation of this eighteenth-century garden changes in response to its shifting historical and political contexts. Gatto utilizes the idea of the façade to explore the illusory nature of the Western Palaces, both through the architecture itself and in its representations in print and photography.

The above contributions demonstrate the way document/ary is at once a *thing* and a *practice*. This reflects how scholarship on the historical formation of the document as a concept has identified a purported closing of what we call here the experiential gap—or encountering an object's re-presentation rather than the object itself. What is clear from the term's etymology is that, as both a noun and a verb, the/a *document* aims to instruct and manifest, either by standing in for an absent authority or by otherwise attempting to close an experiential gap by reproducing the phenomenon of observing an object in the world. One of the animating questions of this volume, then, is how this experiential gap is figured historically and in contemporary creative practice, and to what extent do certain aesthetic and discursive practices close, or claim to close, it?

Take, for example, Lisa Gitelman's 2014 *Paper Knowledge*, which maintains that documents are "material objects intended as evidence and processed or framed" such that they are recognizable as a genre of object intended to be taken as such, standing in (if on somewhat shaky ground) for firsthand experience.² This discursive process of framing inaugurates a relationality between object-cum-document and viewer/reader, simultaneously producing both visibility and knowledge. Gitelman writes:

Documents help define and are mutually defined by the know-show function, since documenting is an epistemic practice: the kind of knowing that is all wrapped up with showing, and showing wrapped with knowing.³

In this formulation, the document does more than manifest *content* amenable to epistemological capture. It also inextricably links, on the level of form, visibility and the production of knowledge. Seeing (including reading) is believing, or at least

establishes the conditions for belief in secular, discoverable truths.

Many contributors to this volume grapple with the relationship between the documentary and authoritative truth. Rachel Klipa, for instance, reviews the exhibition *An My-Lê: On Contested Terrain* at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Klipa reflects on the disorientation that resulted from the display of what seemed to be documentary landscape photography in Vietnam and the United States. On closer examination, the images were fictional reenactments that challenge the militarist and nationalist foundations of an American psyche. Sayward Schoonmaker's *Authoritative Forms*, a participatory poem-object, takes seriously the role of materiality—in this case the materiality of paper—in producing the conceptual and physical forms that manifest and convey authority. The piece invites viewers to engage with the poem by manipulating it materially, turning what seems like an exercise in locating authority into an experience of materiality as “pure means,” now cleaved from the authoritative telos of an original or final meaning.

The relation between visibility and knowability that Klipa and Schoonmaker complicate through their work relies on a prior historical shift in Europe, in the latter half of the seventeenth century, in the understanding of where truth (itself a slippery, problematic notion) is located. As the literary critic and historian of science Tita Chico shows in *The Experimental Imagination: Literary Knowledge and Science in the British Enlightenment*, the basis of empiricism and experimental knowledge coincides with a modulation of “truth” away from its aristocratic, religious, and scholastic antecedent, and the concomitant transformation of what constitutes an object of knowledge. Chico writes:

In the Scholastic tradition, *object* and *objective* referred to the presentation of an intelligible entity, universal essence, or “species” to consciousness; the objective state of an entity's essence was the mental mode in which the essence existed in the knowing mind. Understanding the world was a matter of mental labour.⁴

Experiment, which came to mean “discovery” among seventeenth-century European natural philosophers, occasioned an externalization of the object of knowledge and of the processes of knowledge production. “To underscore the transformation,” Chico states, “*object* and *objective*, which earlier understood the knowability of things as a feature of the mind, now indicated an independence from that same mind.”⁵ For “truth” to be disaggregated from status and from intellection, objects in the natural world had to contain or bear observable information. For an object to be the source of truth and for this truth to travel

between persons, especially to those not present at the moment of “discovery,” transmission required forms that purported to document (and thereby reproduce) the experiential relation to the object such that truth’s grounding in the object is preserved while also “protect[ing] the discovered from being disbelieved.”⁶ We consider this an early instantiation of one form and function of the documentary, crucial for the document/ary’s *evidentiary* function and serving as a key conduit for closing the experiential gap between present observer and others.

This epistemological premise—on the one hand, that the truth of an object inheres in that object and, on the other, that visibility and knowability are co-constitutive—is what Gitelman calls the “know-show” function. This requires readers/viewers to buy into the notion that the experiential gap is indeed closed, or sufficiently closed, such that truths “discovered” about and in the world can be accurately and objectively conveyed to those not present. Otherwise, simply conveying those truths would constitute a reversal of the empirical shift privileging discovery over authority. The projects in this volume, such as Schoonmaker’s *Authoritative Forms*, expose this epistemological premise and encourage us to think more critically about the “truth” of documentary evidence.

As Chico, Gitelman, John Guillory, and others have written, the document’s evidentiary function is rhetorical, or rather, the “evidentiary” is itself rhetorical. As Gitelman notes, Guillory’s capacious work in “The Memo and Modernity” holds that the implication of the “self-evidence” of the document is “intrinsically rhetorical.”⁷ Taking a slightly different tack, Chico shows how the rhetorical, or literary, figuration of both the “observer” and the “observed particular” precedes any textual relationship through which instruction can take place. Rather than simply taking for granted the epistemic conceit that suggests documents can manifest particular truths about the world, the generic categories of truth, particularity, and observation have to be recognizable and successfully deployed. Thus the document does more than provide access to information. Instead, it constitutes a key part of the ideological circuit through which information becomes legible and meaningful. This ideological function, then, reveals the way knowledge, sociality, and power collude to meet particular historical needs.

Indeed, many contributions to this volume explore the role of the document/ary in identity formation—especially racial, gender, and national identities. Dark Laboratory’s curatorial essay, “I’m New Here: Black and Indigenous Media Ecologies,” reflects on the born-digital photography exhibition by the same name. Curators Tao Leigh Goffe and Tatiana Esh bring together photographic essays by artists Abigail Hadeed, Nadia Huggins, Kai Minosh Pyle, Allison Arteaga, steve núñez, Melia Delsol, and Dóra Papp that critique racial

capitalism as it intersects with climate crises while also exploring and celebrating Black and Indigenous ecologies beyond replicating the violence of the colonial archive. Margaret Allen Crocker's "Documenting Gender's Signs: Site, Performance, and the US-Mexico Border in Contemporary Art" examines performance and documentation in the work of Ana Teresa Fernández and M. Jenea Sanchez, both women artists whose work critically engages with the US-Mexico border. Crocker argues that gender is a central framework for understanding the intersection between location and identity at the border, while documentation is the form that makes these artists' gendered labor visible. Similarly concerned with gender, Lesdi C. Goussen Robleto's "The Somatic and Textural Language of Patricia Belli: Recrafting Social and Political Bodies in 1990s Nicaragua" examines Belli's tactile textile assemblages as explorations of alternative feminisms and points of resistance to the imbalanced relationship between Nicaragua and the United States in the aftermath of the twentieth-century Central American Crisis. Goussen Robleto contextualizes Belli's works within the *MESOTICA* series of exhibitions, which she reads as creating a liminal and experimental space empowering the female/marginalized body against heteropatriarchal violence and asserting Indigenous modes of cultural transmission.

Other contributions are specifically focused on ideas of nationalism: for instance, "Olympic-Scale Subversion: Poster Art, Architecture, Performance, and the Afterlives of Mexico 1968" by J. Nathan Goldberg discusses how the Mexican state attempted to create a national identity as the host for the upcoming Olympic Games and the backlash of students against the violence of the state that eventually resulted in the Tlatelolco massacre. Goldberg discusses the way the state attempted to co-opt Spanish and Indigenous themes and intersperse them with cosmopolitan imagery to present a modern image to the international stage, even as the government was violently suppressing dissidents and labor unions. Paula Muhr's contribution also looks at the way government power uses certain types of documents and imagery. "Tito/Tata: Fiction and Factuality in Documentary Photographs of the Father Figure in Communist Yugoslavia" is a collection of photographs collected from the artist's family photo album and "Yugonostalgia" websites. Her work juxtaposes imagery of the Communist leader Tito with her father as a commentary on the ways authoritarians attempt to be the "father" of their subjects. This collection demonstrates how a nation can be infantilized and a national myth can be created in the microcosm of the home.

In "The Struggle of Memory against Forgetting: Afterlife and Memorialization of Imagery Surrounding South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission," Madeleine Bazil explores the TRC's multiple proliferating afterlives

as they emerge in the work of four South African visual artists. While official media images from the hearings attempt to solidify one official narrative about the truth of apartheid, Bazil draws out the ways these artists repurpose and reinterpret archival imagery to elicit embodied semiotic responses that deepen conversations about the TRC's contradictions, nuances, and perceived failings. Finding official archives to be lacking, Nastia Volynova's "Thinking of Water as Material Witness: An Attempt to Fill the Voids in the Archive of the Moscow Canal (1932–37)" considers the research challenges posed by Soviet archives and proposes that attention to the material qualities of water may offer an alternative methodology. By analyzing the Moscow Canal's structure and flow, and recognizing its capacity to preserve human and infrastructural remains, Volynova gestures toward a more complete record of the exploitation that characterized the canal's construction in the 1930s.

The contributions by Goldberg, Muhr, Bazil, and Volynova focus on the role of the document/ary in the twentieth century. However, as this introduction outlines, the role of the document in the service of (national, imperial) power is rooted in a much longer history. For example, the eighteenth-century turn to the evidentiary function of the document aligns with the contemporary needs of the British Colonial Empire, which required an instrument to record, convey, administer, and establish hierarchies over lands, peoples, life-forms, and other "discoveries" (scientific and otherwise) outside the metropole. Documents allowed for the possession of lands; even those places that only a few eighteenth-century Europeans would ever see with their own eyes became not only real and mappable but also potential property. For instance, Captain James Cook's charts documented the coastlines of Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, but as Paul Carter writes, "The chief discovery of the Endeavour was its discovery of nothing or, rather, of the non-existence of a great southern continent."⁸ As such, Cook's documentary practices "preserved the trace of encountering" land, closing the experiential gap between the uncertain space of the imagined "Great Southern Continent" and the actuality of his voyage.

As settler colonialism became more entrenched into the nineteenth century, legal documents alongside the work of surveyors overwrote Indigenous lands into property. At the same time, early photographic technologies were fast advancing, providing another level of authority and assumed truth value to the meaning of "document." As many of the contributions in this volume demonstrate, the camera is a key player in the contemporary usage of "document/ary," in both its photographic and cinematic forms. The first use of the word *documentary* in relation to film is from a review by John Grierson of *Moana* (1926), a film directed by Robert Flaherty about life in a Sāmoan village. Grierson

introduced the term as part of the phrase “documentary value” and provided an oft-cited definition of documentary as the “creative treatment of actuality.”⁹ It is no coincidence that a film about Indigenous peoples of the South Pacific was the first to be labeled a documentary. Just as the document plays a crucial role in colonial practices, the documentary film evolved out of colonial genres of image-making, such as the travelogue and the expedition film, with the resultant magic-lantern lectures. As Michael Chanan notes in *The Politics of Documentary*, “The documentary instinct for the ‘seizure of physical reality’ turns out to carry ideological implications . . . since the leading film-producing countries were nations with colonial empires . . . their films reflected the attitudes that made up the colonial rationale.”¹⁰

There is undoubtedly a deep technological and historical connection between the documentary and the camera, and this volume is an effort to illuminate their (intertwined) roots in colonialism, as “new technologies absorb the political and ideological contexts in which they are developed.”¹¹ Conceptually, the camera’s privileged relationship to the real is founded on two pillars: indexicality, meaning that in a film camera light refracts off an object and exposes the negative, producing a physical trace; and iconicity, in that the image looks like the thing itself. In fact, early photographs were less concerned with the fidelity of representation, as the technology was not yet reliable enough to consistently capture what Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen term an “acceptable” image—well exposed, focused, rich in detail.¹² One early practitioner, Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, for example, writes on the subject in 1857:

Far from holding up the mirror to nature . . . it holds up that which, however beautiful, ingenious and valuable in powers of reflection, is yet subject to certain distortions and deficiencies for which there is no remedy. The science therefore which has developed the resources of photography, has but more glaringly betrayed its defects. For the more perfect you render an imperfect machine the more must its imperfections come to light.¹³

Long exposure times meant that any movement of the camera or subjects within its frame resulted in blurring, even though indexicality was still at play. In fact, the removal of movement—when “photography became associated with the immobilization of movement, the elimination of change from its subject matter”—had to occur before cinema could reintroduce movement and duration through the frame.¹⁴

As the pieces by Klipa, De Giorgi, and others show, many of this volume’s contributions experiment with (documentary) photography, truth, and memory.

Other contributors expand on this by playing with the form of a documentary film. “Neustadt a.d. Aisch,” by Marla Elisabeth Heid, uses three-channel video to document her conversations with her mother and grandmother after learning her grandfather was a member of the SS in Nazi Germany. Devoting a channel each to her mother and her grandmother, and asking the viewer to choose between their audio tracks, Heid seeks ways to come to terms with the past through the documentation of personal and familial expressions of silence, shame, and forgotten memory. *Grandmother’s Garden*, by Amy Reid, uses the materiality of film to examine the production of quilts as they intertwine with the politics and histories of their makers in the United States. Reid layers documentary practices—treating the quilts themselves as documents to be read—in order to question the truth claims of the documentary film. Moving between 16 mm and video, *Grandmother’s Garden* unfolds across multiple archives and geographies, stitching together a picture of women’s labor. And finally, Ncomi Nzimande’s short film *Jozzi Rhapsody* documents contemporary life in Johannesburg through a narrative of personal and spiritual transformation in a city of deep layers and constant movement. Drawing on South African traditions of documentary film and playing with conventions like a black-and-white palette and amateur actors, *Jozzi Rhapsody* argues for the ability of the urban documentary to center and claim the truth of African realities.

The foundational slippage between the indexical and representational qualities of the camera informs what Hito Steyerl calls “documentary uncertainty,” what might otherwise be called an “experiential gap.” Steyerl writes:

We are faced with the first paradox: the documentary form, which is supposed to transmit knowledge in a clear and transparent way, has to be investigated using conceptual tools, which are neither clear nor transparent themselves. The more real documentary seems to get, the more we are at a loss conceptually. The more secured the knowledge that documentary articulations seem to offer, the less can be safely said about them—all terms used to describe them turn out to be dubious, debatable and risky.¹⁵

Steyerl draws on the example of the cell-phone footage broadcast live from the invasion of Iraq in 2003 where, due to the lack of resolution, there was nothing much recognizable as the “world out there.” Yet, as Steyerl concludes, “Those CNN images still vividly and acutely *express* the uncertainty, which governs not only contemporary documentary image production, but also the contemporary world as such. They are perfectly true documents of that general uncertainty, so to speak. They reflect the precarious nature of contemporary lives as well as the

uneasiness of any representation.”¹⁶ In other words, since the advent of the technical image, the document need not be intelligible—indeed, the closer it gets to the “real,” the less intelligible it may appear to the human eye. Just as Lady Eastlake wrote over a hundred years ago, “the more perfect you render an imperfect machine the more must its imperfections come to light.”¹⁷

Not only is the desire for an index that can close the epistemic and experiential gap politically and ethically charged, the need to close this gap is also affectively charged. We might refer to one illumination of this affective relation in W. G. Sebald’s 2001 novel *Austerlitz*. The novel depicts, among other things, Austerlitz’s attempts to verify how his mother manifests in the visual archive of the Holocaust. This attempt to stabilize and verify some aspect of the visual record of the Holocaust is driven by the understandable desire to hold before him some image, and thus be given a chance to experience the presence, of his lost mother and her social world.

I imagined seeing her walking down the street in a summer dress and lightweight gabardine coat, said Austerlitz: among a group of ghetto residents out for a stroll, she alone seemed to make straight for me, coming closer with every step, until at last I thought I could sense her stepping out of the frame and passing over into me.¹⁸

As in other places in the novel, and like its printed images of the film stills and photographs of varying resolutions (some to the point of pixelated abstraction), what is made visible is the problem of indexicality and of proximity. What we see here is the profound affective relation between the documentary and the viewer, and how that affective relation is part of the circuit purporting to close the experiential and epistemological gaps. What begins as a cognitive exercise in imagining the object of an image existing *to be viewed by the viewer* becomes a fantasy of embodied sensuality, not only imagining that the documented scene is there to be viewed but that such viewing might fracture the ontological barrier between viewer/viewed, dissolving the framing division between levels and transporting one to the other such that no experiential gap persists. And though this is partly a function of the way documents produce forms of visibility, it is clear that even the indexical is rhetorical, itself in need of framing and interpretation to produce what we wish it to attest.

Notes

- ¹ Philip Rosen, “Document and Documentary: On the Persistence of Historical Concepts,” in *Theorizing Documentary*, edited by Michael Renoz (New York: Routledge, 1993), 65, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203873083>.
- ² Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents* (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 2014), 2, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822376767>.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Tita Chico, *The Experimental Imagination: Literary Knowledge and Science in the British Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 17, <https://doi.org/10.11126/stanford/9781503605442.001.0001>.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge*, 2.
- ⁸ Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 23, <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816669974.001.0001>.
- ⁹ John Grierson, “From ‘First Principles of Documentary’ (UK, 1932),” in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures*, edited by Scott MacKenzie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 453–59, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520957411>.
- ¹⁰ Michael Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 62, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781838711054>.
- ¹¹ Jason Fox, “Introduction: What Do Cameras Do?,” *World Records* 1 (2018), <https://vols.worldrecordsjournal.org/01/01?index=1?index=1>.
- ¹² Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen, “Photography, Vision, and Representation,” *Critical Inquiry* 2, no. 1 (1975): 157, <https://doi.org/10.1086/447832>.
- ¹³ Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, “Photography” (1857), in *Photographic Theory: An Historical Anthology*, edited by Andrew Hershberger (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 62.
- ¹⁴ Paul Carter, *Dark Writing: Geography, Performance, Design* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 245, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824862145>.
- ¹⁵ Hito Steyerl, “Documentary Uncertainty,” *The Long Distance Runner* 72 (2007): 1–2, http://www.kajsadahberg.com/files/No_72_Documentary_Uncertainty_v2.pdf
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 8.
- ¹⁷ Eastlake, “Photography,” 62.
- ¹⁸ W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, translated by Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2001), 343.

Amalia Mesa-Bains and the Archive: An Interview with the Artist

Amalia Mesa-Bains and Madison Treece

The following is an interview between editorial board member Madison Treece and celebrated Chicana artist Amalia Mesa-Bains. Treece has worked as Mesa-Bains's archivist since 2017. For this issue on "document/ary," Treece asked Mesa-Bains about the function of the archive as document, its contributions to Chicana art history, and its more personal implications. The interview took place on March 9, 2021, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Madison Treece: This issue of *Refract* is titled "Document/ary." Having worked with you and your archive, I see it as comprising both documents and a process of documenting. I'm wondering if you could reflect a little on the archive as documentary, and if the archival process has made you think differently or more deeply about the role of the "document" in documentation.

Amalia Mesa-Bains: Well, I have to say, definitely, because prior to this I just collected material, because I never wanted to throw anything away. Some part of me thought, well, this might be useful someday, so I would continue. And, in my own process as an artist, I make these books, not even drawing books, but they're like books that record what I'm looking for. So, if I did an interview, if I found an article in the newspaper, if I found a little image, I'd tape it in [the book] and then it would build up until I figured out what I was going to be doing. Then the focus would come. And then eventually the making process.

I would say that I'm very language-based as an artist—I always have been. I'm not like, and I always give my friend Carmen Lomas Garza as an example, or Rupert Garcia. They all begin with images. I do not. I begin with words. The words usually come out of some irritation that I have about something that's going on, and I begin to look for things about it. And then those words become part of the document that eventually turns into the direction toward the image and the image making.

Looking at the UCLA Fowler project, *New World Wunderkammer*, is a perfect example. I had altogether, I think, five or six visits to them over a two-year period to select the objects that would be in the cabinet of curiosity. Each time I would go there and get interested in certain objects they would give me books on them. I ended up with like twenty or thirty books. Then, I would go through and tab little notes and that whole process helped me to finally select the objects. Once I selected the objects, then the language came out of that, whether it was violence or genocide or slavery or reconciliation, whatever it was that was happening because of the objects and the people whose objects they were. That became the language of the piece.

I think I've been slightly documenting everything since I was probably a teenager. I have all kinds of things that ended up in the archive. I didn't know anything about archiving when it began. Absolutely nothing. I remember my formal archive started because I went to a class at Stanford with Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano and she asked me after, did I have an archive? I said, "I don't think so."

She said, "But you've saved your stuff."

I replied, "Yeah, I save everything."

She said, "Well, you know, Stanford acquires archives. Maybe you should start talking about it."

So she arranged a visit for us to go to the Stanford library. Then she arranged that first two summers for her students to be my archivists. And then there was an interruption, so it kept getting prolonged over time, and you were the last generation—there were two in between who were archiving. But none of them were seriously archiving, they were just organizing materials. I didn't realize what the process was like, except that I got a PhD, so clearly, I liked documents, or I wouldn't have done that. I would've just gone on being an artist.

My degree is in clinical psychology, but that was not really the emphasis. The emphasis was about artists and how artists work, and what they think, and how they develop. So that whole process, which was from '77 to '83 or '84, involved me interviewing all these other artists over years and years. Those documents became part of my life too. My life has been transformed by not just

the process of documentation but the formality of archiving and what that turned out to mean, which I had no idea when I started. Absolutely no idea.

MT: It seems you've been collecting and maintaining a record of your life for a very long time. You've mentioned this, and I've looked in your archive; there are objects, images, and drawings, from your childhood and family records from before that, photographs in particular. You say you didn't make a conscious decision to collect until your friends suggested that you already had an archive on your hands, but maybe reflect a little bit on the process of collecting and how that developed once you came to the realization that you were going to create a more official archive as it exists now. Having had people work on it, did you make any conscious decisions about what would be included or removed?

AMB: I think that there's something that precedes all of it. Precedes documentation, archiving, collecting all of it, and that is memory. My upbringing, my cultural disposition, is one of memory. I've written about it. I talk about it. I've curated shows about memory. It's because I grew up in an ethnic community that doesn't really have a complete racial standing. You're not black, you're not white, you're not indigenous. You're just sort of there, made up of all those things. Your history is never really present anywhere except as a footnote of colonization, or as a footnote of American or western expansion. It's just not there. At the heart of the early Chicano Movement was this kind of cultural reclamation, which is a practice of remembering.

I also grew up in a household where stories were told and nobody was ever forgotten. It didn't matter if they died. It didn't matter if they left. It didn't matter if they never wanted to see us again, we never forgot them. The remembering is part of a practice of living: it helps you to survive. It gives depth to your life because when you're a child, you haven't had enough life yet, but the memories of your parents and your grandparents are infused in the way you look at the world. Your attributes are sometimes recognized because they're like someone who came before. My father's favorite thing when he got angry at me was to say, "You're just like your grandmother." Which, to me, was just the biggest compliment in the world. And I would get all puffed up and happy. What he really meant is that I was kind of ornery and difficult to control, but I didn't get that part. I just thought it was really great.

Memory has guided me since the beginning. I kept letters from middle school, high school, family photos, and eventually it became the basis for a large part of my art making. As I made my way through the [Chicano] Movement

everybody [in my family] took a role in it somehow. I think this probably had to do with my mentor Yolanda Garfias Woo.

She was probably the first person, at least in the Bay Area, to make the Day of the Dead apparent. She did the first show at the de Young Museum in the early seventies. She was close friends with Ralph Maradiaga, who, with René Yañez, ran the Galería de la Raza. I think her presence in my life contributed to the layer that had already been built by my parents and my grandparents. That was another way of finding my role in the Movement, which was largely connected to making altars, and then later *ofrendas*, home altars. I mean, all of it. That is the core. The documentation, that comes later. The memory and the process of memory, that's how it becomes an art practice. Then later, once I'm thoroughly ensconced in altars and *ofrendas*, I start expanding into other sacred forums like *descansos*, roadside shrines, the little chapels, then eventually into historical moments and memory.

When I got the chance to do the *New World Wunderkammer* at Fowler, one of the great moments was when we were in the collections, which are just beyond any comprehension. I was so stunned. The walls open up, and every wall has roughly ten drawers, is ten feet high, and runs probably seven sections to the wall. All filled with objects. Then, they would pull out the drawers and they would have, arrowheads, various weaponry, milagros—the amulets. I got really attracted to the drawers, and the museum said to me, “If you want, we can build a drawer or a casing for the drawer into the cabinets.”

The first time we slid the door open from the cabinet, it was like a miracle. It is a living archive of a moment. That was when I realized I'm staging something that already exists, because I am taking what others might call an “archive,” or a “collection,” and I'm placing it in my own context. I would say the *Wunderkammer* was the most advanced aspect of my collecting and archival tendencies as an artist. And this was while I was doing the archive with you. So, there was some overlap.

MT: Your archive is, then, very much related to your personal history and your artistic practice. But then there's a lot that is work-related, some of the mundane aspects of working at Galería de la Raza, for example: meeting notes, formal correspondence, lots of emails. Why did you feel it was important to keep those documents as well? Is it still coming out of an artistic impulse, or was it just for the sake of formality?

AMB: I never thought my archive was really just about me. I never thought that. I knew it was important because I'm a cross-disciplinary person. I'm a scholar, an activist, a writer, an artist, and an organizer. And I knew that I held on to materials

that didn't exist anymore, anywhere else, from the Galería de la Raza, from Self Help Graphics, from SPARC, even so far as the Caribbean Cultural Center. All those years that I traveled for the shows that were in Europe.

I think it was a conscious effort to establish a social historical record that included all of those things. For example, the (Re)generation Project or, in 1992, I helped oversee the quincentennial project at the Galería. I did a series of exhibitions of Caribbean artists, Central American artists, Latin American artists, and Chicanos in the US. I knew that it would be important because very few other people were doing that. I needed to keep those things. The same thing with the letters and the meeting notes. I don't think you can really understand an organization unless you do that.

At the Galería we gave our records to a project at UC Santa Barbara back in the nineties, perhaps the late eighties, and it all went away. Different directors came in, and every time they threw everything out and started again. I knew in the back of my head; they're going to lose all of that history. I thought, "I'm going to keep everything." Same thing with the Caribbean Culture Center, which was our counterresponse to mainstream organizations, which were trying to do the "diversity thing"—but it was so superficial.

All of our gatherings brought together some of the most important thinkers from diverse backgrounds—Native American, African American, Asian American—we had think tanks in different places over the world. I'm not going to lose that. It is really important for people to see that in the period of the eighties and nineties, there was a movement of multiculturalism across this country and that it was networked together by different organizations and by different leaders. My work with Martha from Caribbean Cultural Center, with Maria Pinedo from Galería de la Raza, and Judy Baca from Social Public Art Resource Center, all of those people. I need to keep it together, because each individual entity might have one section, but I have a lot of the overlapping sections.

It was very conscious. And I didn't realize how much of it I had until we started archiving. Same thing with the residencies when I traveled abroad. I'd keep everything. I thought it was a record of a time, not so much an individual person, but a group of people.

I started thinking about the collective nature of Chicax and Latinx art, how long that has gone on from the very earliest collectives, the Mujeres Muralistas, the Royal Chicano Air Force, Los Four, ASCO, and contemporary ones . . . Slanguage. I think about a collective experience, a group functioning, a disposition toward collaboration. It is very Chicano. It is because we come from larger families, because people who are often low income must work together, whether you're a farmworker, or when I went with my mother to clean houses, or

when our family would contract an orchard and we'd all pile in the pickup trucks and there'd be four families to pick walnuts or whatever. The kids didn't do that much work, but you learn from the beginning that your life is also their life. That collective nature is embedded in my archive. It looks at a period of time, a group of people, a set of organizations, and in some way, underscores this notion of collectivity. I think that's important.

MT: Do you think your archival impulse, this accumulation and collecting is *rasquache*?

AMB: Oh, that was so easy. Or *domesticana*, but it is. I was thinking about it the other day when I saw your word *accumulation*. I thought, "Oh my God, that is a word I used for years to talk about my own work." When other people couldn't understand it. The feminists would call it *bricolage*. And I'd think, "No, no, no, no, no, no." That's much more organized, more formal. I just acquire things and I accumulate them. I do it in every part of my life.

My work has a basis of accumulation and display such that all of it had to be shown. That was the way it came about. In the beginning I didn't make drawings. I didn't have diagrams. I had no measurements. I would show up with bags full of objects in the trunk of my car. They would give me a few pedestals at the Galería or someplace else, and I would move things around and eventually that would turn into an installation. It wasn't until the mid-1980s that I started to be more "professional" as an artist.

So, it has always been quite *rasquache*. That impulse to accumulate and collect is very *rasquache*. It's making the most from the least, which is the phenomenon. It's also *domesticana*, in the sense that as a woman, I accumulate different things than a man probably would. There's not a ribbon, or a piece of lace, or a little paper flower that doesn't make me want to have it and put it in my little box just in case I might need it, and never throw it away.

When I redo these pieces, it gives me a chance to do them differently than I did the first time. I'm very excited about the possibility of redoing these pieces. The joke I've had for years is that I could never have a retrospective because I've used the same fifty objects for over almost fifty years in various combinations in various installations. If I ever had to do any of those installations at the same time, in the same place, what would I do? Run around moving the thing every day? No, I'd have to duplicate them.

MT: That's really interesting that you're thinking about duplicating the objects for the installation.

AMB: Which in some ways is a little bit eerie because the reason they have power is that they've been with me through all those spaces. We were in Istanbul for the Third Biennial, and when we went home the first night, I had laid my materials out on the tables. When we came back in the morning, it had rained and the skylights leaked. There were two inches of water on the floor. The legs of the bureau from *Borders* absorbed the water and swelled up. The sides popped out. All the stuff on the table . . . they'd hurriedly swept the water off and covered it with plastic, but it was too much. Now some of my fifty objects are a little crinkly looking, but they have that memory.

They've been all over the world. They've been through moments of hysterical fits, fights with other artists, whatever it is. To duplicate them is really kind of weird, but I don't know what else to do. I can't start all over and live those moments again because those days are gone. The best I can do is find something that's close, or make something that's similar, but they'll be symbolic.

MT: That's kind of uncanny; being so familiar with your work, I understand how important embodiment, both your physical presence and personal memory, is to the installations—it is what imbues the objects with meaning.

AMB: Yes. I used to have wonderful talks about the “valence” objects have when I taught installation. I would show students how, you take two objects and they're this far apart. Then you slowly, slowly, slowly move them to here, here, and what happens? Something totally different because they have valence. The objects have a radiant space around them. People always ask, “How do you know when you've got to the right place?” I would reply, “I can't explain it. It doesn't have a logic to it.” Only I know what that's supposed to mean. That's why I never liked anyone else to install for me. They can't possibly know. Your body, your size, your gesture, the length of your arm, your energy, everything determines how you place things.

When I went to see *Transparent Migrations* the first time the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, put it up (before COVID), I walked in and was shocked. It was already done. I thought they were going to do it while I was there. I sent [my friend] Gilbert to go look at it (during COVID) because he can travel and had his shots. I said, “I want you to tell me how far apart the doors are because when I saw it online, they look wide open.” One of the important aspects of the armoire is the space—how far the doors are open is an indication of intimacy, secretiveness, revelation, what you want to reveal, and what you don't. He called me from the lobby of the museum and says, “Oh my God, it's so far apart. So embarrassing.”

I said, “I know! I feel like my little dress is totally exposed.”

He said, “Do you want me to go tell him to close it?”

And I said, “I don’t think they’re going to listen to me.”

I learned that when I sold the first Dolores del Rio piece. The Smithsonian set up a component and said that it is not my piece anymore so I can’t go install it. Then I never sprayed the curtains gold like I was supposed to. To this day they’re bright pink and it irritates me. Once you sell the piece, you just have to make peace with the fact that someone else will decide how it looks and it won’t matter what you think.

MT: That makes me think, coming back to the conversation, that you can write the specs, but they only go so far—the document can’t ever fully replicate that valance or embodiment.

AMB: They’re just about how much space the whole thing is going to take up, but not for that one thing there. Where do you put that? You know, I arrange in the bottom of *Transparent Migrations* that little crystal city of Tenochtitlan with volcanoes, and chinampas, and all of that. With the door being slightly ajar, the light hits it, and they sparkle, but you’re not supposed to have them open enough for people to see everything, because then what’s the secret? What’s the story? You don’t want them to have it all.

MT: We talked about how the process of archiving and documenting contributed to your artistic practice, as well as why your work often documents your personal and your family’s history. In terms of remembering, memory, and how no one is forgotten—it’s a practice of the living. Did you want to elaborate on that a little bit before we move on?

AMB: It’s also a public political strategy. I want people to understand the history, not just of my family, but all those families, because when people look at my work, they will recognize themselves. I think all Chicano art in the early years was really a public strategy to bring the history of oppression and of cultural contribution out into the open. The other was to really counterbalance a racist history.

The memory and retelling of family stories is, on the one hand, my individual family, but it is all families. It is a universal quality of a political history within a narrative that, to this day, is still not accurate. We’ll keep having to do this for years to come. Like now, with the children [incarcerated at the border]. First, we get them out of the cages but where are they going to go? Will they get any school, any recreation, any health checks? We’re going to be telling these stories for years and years to come.

I also want to say something about the archive. First there's the memory, then there's the collecting, then there's the documentation. Eventually, we come to the conscious recognition of an archiving process that also happens to hit developmentally. I am aging, from my fifties to my seventies, I am doing this process. [The archive] is me taking stock of my life, recognizing what place I have in American history, more specifically in Chicanx and Latinx history, and what it's like having a place.

One of the challenges of aging is a sense of a loss of productivity, or a loss of status, or a loss of value. You fight really hard to feel like that is still part of you. Well, I was lucky because the archive gave it all back to me and I went, "Oh my God, I had no idea! No idea that I was ever that productive." I didn't even remember some of the things, and they were important. Not just the prizes and the recognition, but the people that I've met, the places I've been, the things that I was privy to listening to in discussions. I think that the archiving process has been very healthy for me. It's kind of revitalized my sense of well-being, and I've become the institutional memory for a lot of different people. [Archiving] is kind of a salvation in a way, a negotiation with the end.

MT: I think that's interesting and true. Particularly how documenting those histories in your work and archive is a public political intervention once it enters the world. When you make an *ofrenda*, which honors and remembers the people you are close to, do you ever think of this as a documentation of that person, made for the public? Or is the process of documenting specific people more personal?

AMB: Both. It begins, for me, to heal the loss. I just really, really need to hold on to my memory of them. The things we did together, who they were in the world. Then the second part is that I want it to be public because I want people to know how important they were. I want to share that part of history with other people, because I think it's really important. The *ofrendas* for my peers, those are the hardest because I'm not alone. They're important to a lot of other people, but I need to share how we worked together, what we did together. With my family, how else would I survive? Like doing Judy's piece at the Oakland Museum, it's the tradition, but the reason it's tradition is that it's very healing and it helps you. I wish more people could understand that and then they would do it because then they would see that it's not macabre and it's not morbid. It is life-giving because when you do it, you remember them, and you find the little things that made them happy. When you put it all together, it's almost like you're giving it back to them. Yes, it's personally healing, but it's also about wanting to share that sense of a collective history.

The archive is my way of leaving something for other people to learn from. I like to imagine what it would be like for people when they get in there and dig around. I am still deciding on certain things that I will or will not put in, but in general, I think it's a pretty good record.

MT: This might be a question for a different interview, but I'm curious. In this collective moment of mourning that we're experiencing as the world goes through the pandemic, there's something people could learn from that process of remembering that happens through making altars and *ofrendas*.

AMB: Oh, I'm working on that . . .

I'm trying to get organizations across the country to do digital *ofrendas*. Judy [Baca] is doing it with SPARC. I think I have the Galería on board, and I'm working with NALAC [National Association of Latino Arts and Culture] to see if I can get them to ask their organizations to do it. They would be online images for the dead in their region who have died from COVID so that everybody, or at least the Latinos who have passed, will have a place to be remembered. I feel like this Day of the Dead is going to be a very, very important one because this is probably the greatest level of mourning worldwide that we've had since any of the Great Wars.

MT: Undergirding all of this is the important role you've played in establishing the Chicana art field, or just Chicana art in general. How do you think your archive contributes to Chicana history and what do you think it can contribute in perpetuity? I'm thinking specifically about accessibility for students, scholars, et cetera? Then, how do you feel about the fact that you are shaping history by deciding what is documented and then made public or visible?

AMB: I would say that my archive is more concerned with the work of women, the women in my peer group, and other women in the field of Chicana and Latina [art] because I've written about them, I've known them over the years, and I still have communication with them. I feel like that's really important. I'm only sad I haven't done the book of my dissertation, but I feel that the archive provides an insight to some of those women. I have files on all of them as you well know. I have some correspondence with them.

Most of the catalogs that I wrote for are in there. It will be accessible to students and art historians. On this whole discussion about diversifying the museum, it's not a simple fact of collecting artists. If you don't have curators of the group that you're collecting, guiding the process of acquisitions, and curatorial

statements, and exhibitions, it can go all wrong. If you put them in the wrong context or you don't even understand what it is they made. It's a challenge for the next generation. That's what my project at the Galería, (Re)generation, was about, finding a way to get other Latinos and Chicanos out in the field, writing, curating, whatever it takes to move the museum world and the art world further along.

MT: Why was it important for you to have such a strong hand in the archive, and not simply hand everything off to somebody else? Were you thinking about what you wanted people to know about Chicana identity, history, memory, as well as your own life and the lives of those around you? Really, what do you want people to take away from your archive?

AMB: I never thought of handing it off. I also felt like some parts that were so hyperpersonal, early drawing books, my hippie pictures, because you know, the hippie days were a little bit naked, a little wild. I was thinking I could add them to the archive. I think I will just make much more sense to people. In some ways I needed to have my hand in it because I've always felt misunderstood. My *Cibuatlampa* piece, which is in my *Venus Envy* series, is really about being too big.

I was working in a research facility, and the people there were treating me as though I were overbearing, toxic. Once a man said, "You're just like a one-note song because all you talk about is diversity, endlessly, and people are sick of it." I'm thinking, "Why do you think they hired me here? I'm supposed to be writing a book about how to run a diverse classroom." It's that feeling of never fitting in. I didn't fit that space. I was too big, too loud, too outspoken, too everything, and it never went away. I thought the archive would need me to make myself understandable to people. I was tired of being misunderstood.

During that period when I was speaking up to the museums and conferences, I was beginning to feel that I had just worn myself out—doing something that people asked me to do, but that they didn't really want me to do, or they didn't want to have to do what I said they should. That's when I started (Re)generation. I thought, "Okay, if I can't change a sixty-year-old white man, why don't I just go back and grow some other people who can take his place when he retires or whenever?" All of those things made me want to set the record straight. That's what the archive is, setting the record straight.

Underneath it all, I feel like we are still in a battle, and I don't think it will end soon. I said to Richard the other day, "You know, we have to keep going as far as we can to get all this work done because it's a record, and the record is important because other people can claim that record someday as their own." If I

don't put it out for people, if I don't write the things, if I don't give the talks, if we don't have the archive accessible, how will they know?

When I go to the conferences and I tell them this history they stare at me, "When did that happen?" I say, "Before you were born and it's going to happen again. So, you might as well be armed with some history. You might as well know how long we have all been doing this and why it's important to continue to do it." The archive helps that in a bit of a way.

* * *

Amalia Mesa-Bains is an educator, artist, and cultural critic. As an author and lecturer on Chicano art, her work has enhanced understanding of multiculturalism and reflected major cultural and demographic shifts in the United States. She has worked to define a Chicano and Latino aesthetic in the US and Latin America, and has pioneered the documentation and interpretation of long-standing Chicano traditions in Mexican American art. Her artworks have been exhibited and collected in both national and international venues. Mesa-Bains has served on the San Francisco Arts Commission and the Board of Directors for Galería de la Raza and Center for the Arts at Yerba Buena Gardens. She has received special achievement awards from the Association of American Cultures, the Association of Hispanic Artists, San Francisco State University Alumni, the Stanford University Ernesto Galarza Award, and the University of Texas at Austin Americo Paredes Award and is a recipient of a distinguished MacArthur Fellowship. She founded and developed the Visual and Public Art program at California State University at Monterey Bay and is currently Professor Emerita at the university.

Madison Treece (she/her) is a PhD candidate in visual studies in the History of Art and Visual Culture Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her work focuses on contemporary Chicax art and visual culture with an emphasis on borderlands, landscape, and the politics of migration. Madison holds an MA in art history and museum studies from Tufts University and a BA in art history from the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Memory Matter(s)

Silvia De Giorgi



Figure 1 Silvia De Giorgi, Mother's Wreath, scanned object, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

This essay serves as a brief insight into an ongoing art project, centered on the documentation of my grandparents' house. The aim of the project is to formalize an art-based methodology to explore the histories of a familiar place that no longer exists in its original setting. The location, my grandparents' house, was accessed and documented through a collaborative recollection of memories linked to artifacts that characterized the physical site. In this work, drawing, mapmaking, and photography are used as tools to examine the relationships between place, object, and memory, and help reconstruct an image of a site now lost in time. This practical research was initiated in 2020, as part of my studies in Art & Archaeology: Contemporary Theory and Practice at Orkney College, University of the Highlands and Islands, UK.

This project emerged out of a wish to preserve the memories and family histories related to my mother's birth home, following my grandparents' departure. My grandparents' home is a traditional farmer's house, built by my great-grandfather, and is situated just at the edge of the forest in a quiet mountain valley in the province of South Tyrol, in the Italian Alps. This house inhabits most of my childhood recollections; it was the central setting for every festivity and holiday, a place for exchange and pastime, and visited frequently by family friends and relatives. After my grandparents' move to a retirement home, many personal objects, tools, and furniture pieces were gradually removed from the house. Several items had to be taken away for safekeeping due to the deteriorating and humid condition of the building. Other objects were removed at a later point, when the house was repaired and refurbished. The house is still in the family, but it has lost most of its original furnishings, and my grandparents' personal belongings have been divided between my mother's siblings.

The research I conducted for my personal investigation of my grandparents' house draws on the interdisciplinary approaches and themes present in the study of contemporary archaeology. Conversation and storytelling take on an important role in reconstructing the essence of a place, which, in its integrity, no longer exists in visible space but only as a virtual projection in the remembrance of a few people. Memory thus represents an essential part of the reconstruction procedure. In *Drawing Memories*, Rachel Zuanon and her coauthors write about remembering as a process that "does not exactly entail reconstituting the experiences or events of the past but rather recognizing things that have value and being able to embody them in our present circumstances."¹ Memory is connected to both individuals and society and is thus an intrinsic part of a group's cultural heritage. The value of memory and the heritage created by its documentation constitute a "legacy of past generations" and form an essential "part of the [present] life of communities."²

In this work, drawing and photography act as supporting tools for the conversations that took place and the reconstruction of memory; like field

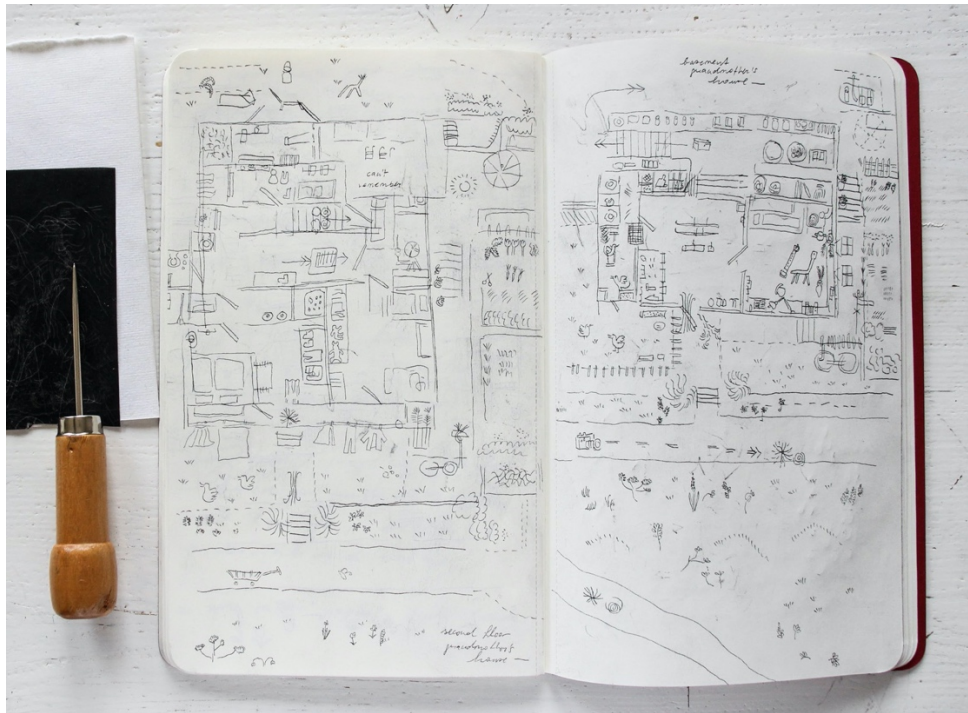


Figure 2 Silvia De Giorgi, *Grandmother's House (work in progress)*, carbon paper and bookbinding awl on paper, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

drawings and artifact photography in an archaeological excavation, they serve as connecting points between different aspects of domestic life, patterns of usage, and particular episodes in the family history. Drawings and photographs created in the research not only record the conversations that took place but also actively inform the stories connected to them, sparking more memories that in turn lead to additional details in the reconstructed biography of the house and its past inhabitants.

As the house is connected to the matrilineal side of my family, I invited my mother to participate in the first part of the project, through phone interviews. In the documentation process, the various rooms in the house were reconstructed from our personal and shared memories captured as drawings on paper (Fig. 2). The map drawings, which I drafted in real-time during the calls, served as a point of departure to our phone conversation. The subsequent transcripts of the conversations have functioned as guidelines to the drawn maps and provide further details. Photographic documentation of the objects, once situated in the house or related to the discussed memories, is still in progress. The items, now mostly kept by my mother and her siblings, are photographed in my studio using a flat-bed scanner. The selection included in this essay represents a portion of this photographic archive (Figs. 7–23).

In the following essay, I illustrate my working process and observations in more detail. I expand on my findings in relation to the art practice of Marlene Creates and the research conducted by Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks

based around narrative, enactment, and archaeologies of the contemporary past.

Recording Memory: Work Process and Observation

Conversation

The remote mapping of the house was conducted over several phone sessions. Each session addressed a single room and lasted about one hour, depending on the number of objects and memories discussed. The conversation, which developed spontaneously and had no set instructions, was primarily led by my mother. Set on speaker, she would typically start each room description with the item most significant to her, due to its frequent usage within family life or its emotional value. From there, she would begin to meticulously list all the tools, pieces of furniture, and architectural details contained in the space.

In her description of the kitchen, for instance, my mother spent a third of our one-hour-and-forty-three-minute phone call recalling the various components and functions of the iron stove. The presence of the stove made the room the most important space in the house. The wood-fired stove was used every day for cooking and constituted the main source of heating for the entire building. During our conversations, we noticed that most of our combined memories of my grandmother are connected to the stove and the kitchen, a busy, vibrant space, which would lead visitors from the entrance door to the living room.

Drawing

During the phone interviews, I visualized the information I received from my mother in quick sketches on paper, using a bookbinding awl as drawing tool and carbon paper to produce my marks (Figs. 2–4). The lines I drew on the paper left slightly elevated marks due to the applied pressure of the awl. This created a tactile surface, which might recall a stitched textile: a reference to my grandmother's practice as tailor and my grandfather's occupation as traditional leather embroiderer. The drawing informed the conversation. I frequently asked questions about the position of objects, their properties, and their usage. This would spark further descriptions and memories related to particular episodes in the family history as well as local traditions and country lore.

In one of my most vivid childhood memories, I see my grandmother, standing in her bright nightgown in front of the small kitchen mirror. Her figure is sparsely illuminated by the yellowish fluorescent lamp fixed above the

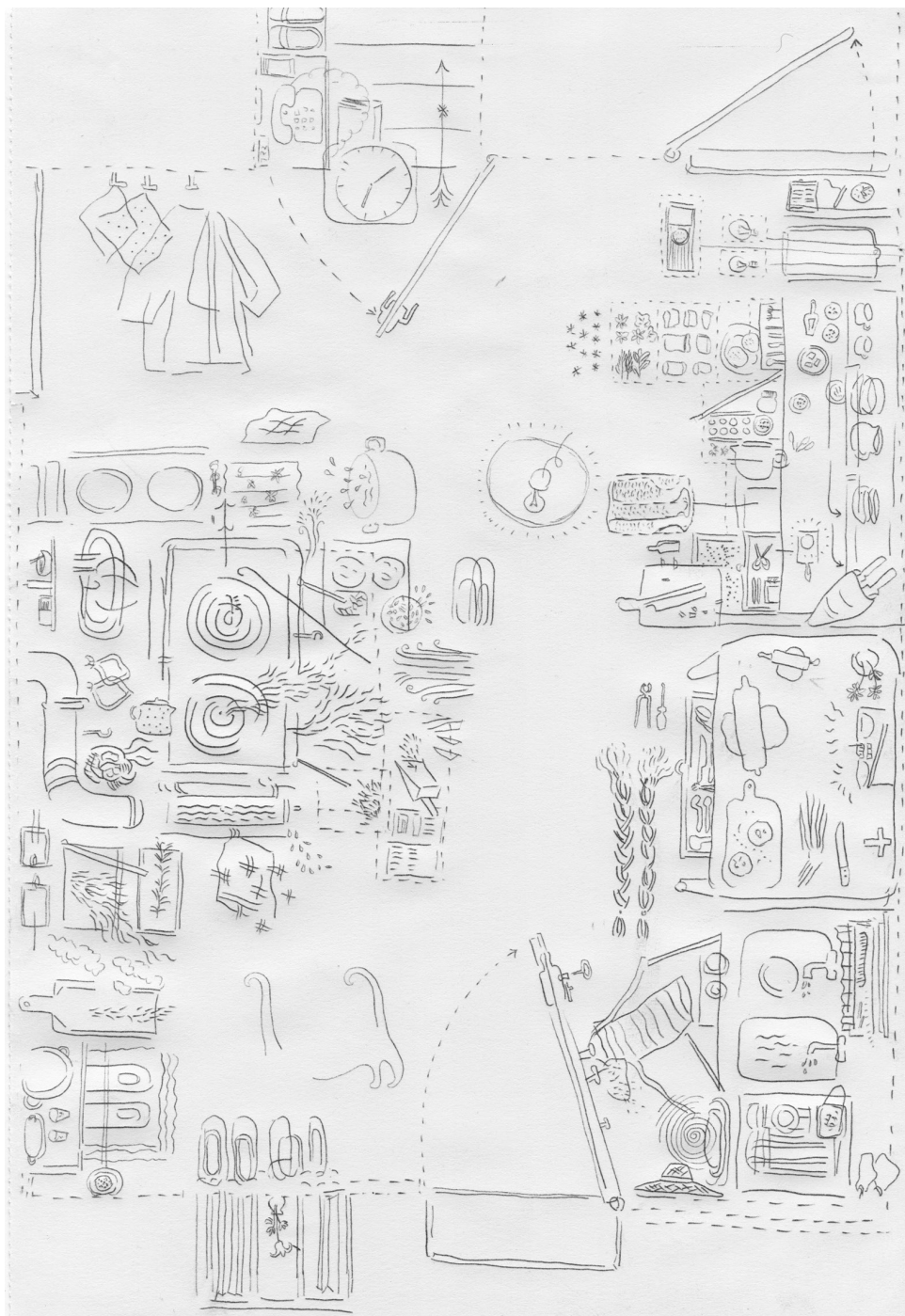


Figure 3 Silvia De Giorgi, *The Kitchen*, 29 × 20 cm, map drawing, carbon paper, and bookbinding awl on paper, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

sink. She has loosened her long white hair and is brushing it with a dark horn comb. Her hair is flowing down her back and ends in pale blond strands that barely touch the kitchen floor. She appears to me as if she had just walked out of a fairy tale. As she ties her hair with a ribbon for the night, I am reminded of the weather witches said to inhabit the high mountain pastures at the top of the valley.

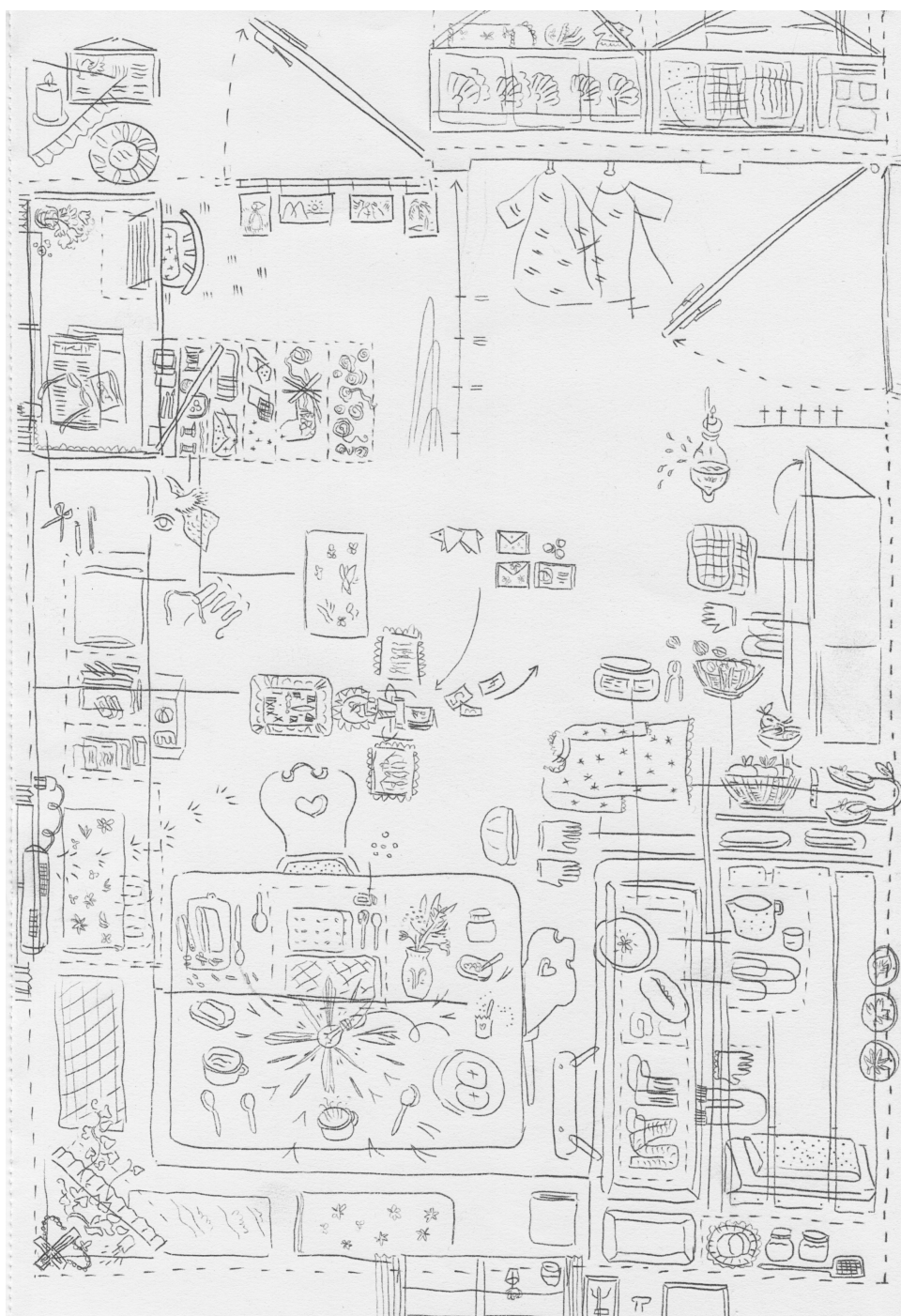


Figure 4 Silvia De Giorgi, *The Living Room*, 29 × 20 cm, map drawing, carbon paper, and bookbinding awl on paper, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

This memory relates to a particular practice connected to the traditional costume of my grandparents' region: the Sarntal Valley, in the province of South Tyrol in northern Italy. Women are required to wear their hair in long braids arranged like a wreath around their heads, covered by a hairnet. This tradition was strictly adhered to during my mother's youth. As hair tends to get thinner and sparser with age, it was common practice to collect all the hair

caught in the comb during brushing since a young age and have it bound in tufts of different lengths. These would then be added to the natural braids when needed. The tufts of hair are often kept in the family and traditionally passed on from mother to daughter (Figs. 9, 11).

Transcription

The phone call was finished once our combined memories of the room were exhausted. Subsequently, I would transcribe the recorded discussion (Figs. 5, 10, 16, 20). The transcript was used not to add details to the drawing but to serve as a map legend to the drawing—a tool to decipher the various signs and identify objects and their stories. For example, the two braids next to the sink in the kitchen denote the previously described childhood memory (Fig. 3).

Transcribing the conversations revealed the complex constellation of relationships between objects and family members. The phone interviews deciphered the functions and biographies of various objects, within the household and its wider cultural setting. The substantial amount of information contained in the room descriptions was surprising. I realized that I had never paid much attention to most tools in the kitchen, including the old-fashioned iron stove, and had no clear idea about how they were used. I learned new words in my mother's native dialect for household utensils and farmer's customs.

The role of language carried further cultural and historical significance in the description of my grandmother's shopping lists. The photographed list captured in Figure 17 is written in German, as the majority of the population in South Tyrol speaks a German dialect, which varies strongly throughout the various valleys of the region. The dialect is used at home and in everyday life, while Standard German is spoken at school and used for official purposes along with the other two official languages of the region: Italian and Ladin. South Tyrol historically formed part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until it was ceded to Italy after World War I. It was culturally and linguistically connected to the populations of modern southern Austria and Bavaria. During the fascist period, Benito Mussolini attempted to Italianize the region and consequently, German was forbidden to be spoken or thought. My grandmother was a child at that time. Although she was able to speak in the German dialect of the region with her family at home, she was denied the possibility of learning to write and communicate in German at school. Throughout her life she wrote in her own version of German, more dialect than written language, dotted with grammatical and spelling mistakes (see Fig. 17).

Obrn tsch obn isch a kreiz ghongen, so gonz a normals. Donebn donn wor die kredenz und af dor seitnwond aui fa dor kredenz isch ollm der kumpf ghongen mit die messor drin. Hel isch aso a behälter aus holz und zem hot sie die groasn messor drin kop. Und drobor obn di broatkroml—so a bretl, a viereckets holzkistl mit a hockmessor innan drin um hertes broat auzuschneidn. Es messor hot man so hinaher bewegn kennen, des wor aso mobil, und nor hot man afn broat manonderghockt dass so brockn sein gwortn. Und drunter ebn der kumpf, des isch eigentlich wo man in wetzstoan innigeton hot wenn man mahn geat af dor wis. So rundelet und untn lafs spitz zua. . . .

Mitl in kloan tatl zem worn ollm die gewürze drin, oborn tirl mit marmelade und kaffe. Zem worn so gewürzfaschln mit nelkn, zimt, des und sel . . . eppes worn in kloane metallschachtelar und suscht holt wia man sie zu kafn kreag. Nor die linke, sel wor die bsteck- tot und druntr wor die broatot! Und die holzane broatschissl hobn mir do no, de total ognutzte. Die unterste tot wor die teetot, do worn behälter mit salbei, wermut, kotznschweaf, gromilln. Fraumontl, hel worn oft vorn haus—des worn so die standart tee. Huflattich, hel sein de gelbn gwedn, obr dor hit wenn no dor schnee isch glegn—praktisch wia gänseblümchen lei knollgelb. Zem wenn dor schnee isch grod gongen und olls no braun isch gwedn hem isch dor huflattich kemmen, hel wor gegn dor huascht, dor huflattich.

Above the table there was a cross, just a simple one. Then next to it there was the cabinet with the whetstone holder hung on its side panel, holding the kitchen knives. That is a receptacle made out of wood, and in there she (grandmother) would store her large knives. And above it, there hung a bread slicer—a small board, a rectangular wooden box with a chopping knife inside to cut old bread. The knife could be moved back and forth, it was mobile, and in this way one could chop the bread into small chunks. And below, there was the whetstone holder—that's where people used to put their whetstones in the past, when they went mowing the pastures. It's roundish with a pointed tip at the bottom. . . .

In the middle of the cabinet, in the small drawer were the spices. Above the drawer with the jams and coffee. There were small bottles with seasoning and herbs containing cloves, cinnamon, this and that . . . the spices were kept in small metal boxes or in their original packages from the shop. Then, the left drawer was the cutlery drawer and below it, that was the bread drawer. We still have here at home the wooden bread bowl, this used and worn-out bowl. The lowest drawer was the tea drawer. There were small containers with sage, wormwood, cattail, chamomile, lady's mantles—it often grew in front of the house. These were the standard teas. Coltsfoot, that's the yellow flower one could find behind the house, when there was still snow—just like daisies but bright yellow. When the snow was just about to melt and everything was still brown beneath the snow then coltsfoot would come up, it's good against coughs, coltsfoot.

Figure 5 Silvia De Giorgi, The Kitchen, audio transcript (excerpts), 2020. Translation by the author.

Photography

After completing the transcription of the phone interviews, I began to collect the artifacts linked to the rooms that we discussed. Subsequently, I began documenting them using a flat-bed scanner (Figs. 7–23). I chose this photographic medium because the fine resolution scanner produced images characteristic of forensic or medical photographs in their sharpness. The images retained in this process resulted in a much more detailed view of the objects compared with the photographs taken with my digital camera. Faint surface markings such as hair, dust, tears, and scratches were reproduced by the scanner.

Some objects in the photographic scans are directly referred to in the phone interviews, such as my grandmother's hair (Fig. 11), her shopping list (Fig. 17), or her sewing tools (Fig. 15). Other scans display items that were not specifically mentioned in our conversations. These objects are either linked to the discussions or hold an especially significant place within the family history, such as the metal spoon my grandfather brought back from his imprisonment in Dachau in 1945 (Fig. 13). Like my grandmother's shopping list previously mentioned, the spoon relates to a part of South Tyrolean history marked by great social upheaval. During the Italianization process induced by the fascist regime, the inhabitants of the region had to choose between immigrating to neighboring Nazi Germany or remaining in Italy, where the German language and culture were being repressed by fascist law. My grandfather's family opted to stay in South Tyrol. However, despite his Italian nationality, my grandfather was called up to do military service in Germany in 1944, which he refused. As a result, he was sentenced to hard labor in the Dachau concentration camp from which he was later liberated by American troops.

Memory Nets: Ancestral Lines and Household Artifacts*Drawing and Narrative*

Canadian artist Marlene Creates's practice is focused on the relationship between senses of place, language, memory, and the land. The centerpiece of her project *Places of Presence: Newfoundland Kin and Ancestral Land, Newfoundland, 1989–1991* is formed by hand-drawn "memory maps" and spoken texts.³ In this work Creates interviewed her elderly family members about the places in which they were born. She then used the descriptions and maps drawn by her relatives to visit the sites, document them photographically, and bring back found natural objects from the various locations. By following the stories and memories, Creates connects to three particular areas: the locations where her grandmother, grandfather, and great-grandmother were born. Family land and

family history embedded in Newfoundland life and culture reveal the intimate and intricate connections between landscape, memory, and identity described by Creates as her “poetic inheritance.”⁴

My own “poetic inheritance” is inextricably linked to my grandparents’ house and the objects inside: a legacy grounded in domestic geographies and a genealogical sense of place. As in the Creates case, my exploration was led by intergenerational communication occurring through space and time, specifically along the matrilineal line of my family. In my mother’s native valley, the farmer’s home is the domain of the “house lady,” who fully determines the organization of the household. My memories of the house were gradually enriched by my mother’s knowledge, who in turn recollected information passed on to her by my grandmother and great-grandmother.

Collaboration and Enactment

Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks have frequently brought together performance art and archaeology in their projects through a shared interest in “forms of (re)collection . . . and site and locale,” in which “the character of documentation of event, site, and artifact” is explored in performed practice.⁵ In his 2000 work *Bubbling Tom*, Pearson rearticulated fragments of his past in a performance: a two-hour guided tour of the environment in which he grew up open to relatives, friends, local inhabitants, and visitors.⁶ Through narration and mimicry, Pearson drew connections between each location and the biographical experiences related to them—memories about family members, friends, and events. As people remember physical space in different ways, his performance was regularly interrupted by the participants of the walk, who pointed out inconsistencies or added further details to his recollections. Similarly, my memories of my grandparents’ house were enriched by my mother’s contributions: our joint imagined tour of the house sparked conversations and recollections that led to further stories and created a new, narrated record of our family history.

Photography and the Veil of Time

In 2004 Shanks began to collect discarded daguerreotypes—silver-plated copper mirrors used as a photographic medium from 1839 on. Interested in documenting the decaying, flawed images damaged by scratches, oxidation, and dust, Shanks photographed the plates with his scanner. He discovered that the scanner could capture details that were impossible to see with the naked eye or reproduce with a camera. In one of his observations, he refers to the damages

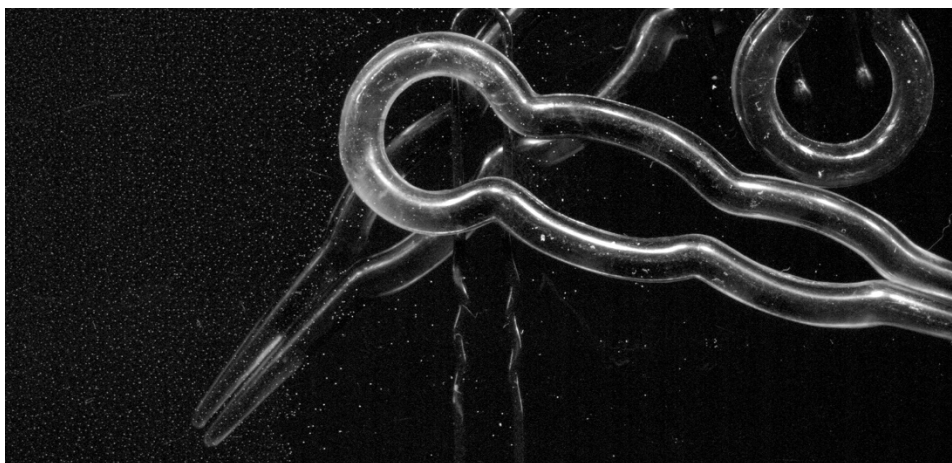


Figure 6 Silvia De Giorgi, Hairnet and Hairpins (detail with dust particles), scanned objects, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

of dust and frequent handling on parts of the plates, as a “veil of decay.”⁷ He argues conversely that this disturbance seems to bring the viewer nearer to the subject. Rather than creating a distance, it makes them look closer and “bridge the temporal gap between then and now through the faintest of traces.”⁸

The scanner I used for the photographed objects from my grandparents’ house is a dated model, which was seldom used in the last years. The interior glass surface is covered by numerous scratches, and dust has gathered in irregular patches on the inside of the machine. These are impossible to clean without dismantling the device. As a result, many of the scans are marked by repetitive dust “imprints,” dirt particles, and occasional gray shapes in the dark background caused by the filtering of light (Fig. 6). These irregularities in the otherwise clean and sharp reproductions preserves the objects in a layer of time, reactivating their past histories and records of usage.

In the images I created as part of my research, the collected items are depicted like archaeological remains, removed from their context and site. But unlike most archaeological material, they do not represent a question or a starting point of a study: they are the connecting points of a memory net built in a collective act of remembrance.

Conclusion

In this short essay I have explored an art-based methodology to retrace the history of my maternal family home through conversation, drawing, and photography. The various historical contexts of the site were examined through the detailed description of domestic artifacts. The documentation method developed in this project led to a new type of family record, composed of map drawings, audio recordings, transcripts, and scanner photography.

The material gathered in this research suggests that collaborative methods of recollection offer unique insight into a contemporary archaeological site. Specific meanings related to domestic life, biographic events, family histories, local customs, and beliefs are revealed and recorded through documentation.

Drawing and mapping are useful processes to reconstruct individual spaces by encouraging the exchange of memories and descriptions related to architectural details, room inventories, tools, and their application. The photographic representation of everyday items, memorabilia, and traditional objects catalogs the connecting elements between subjective memories and inherited knowledge.

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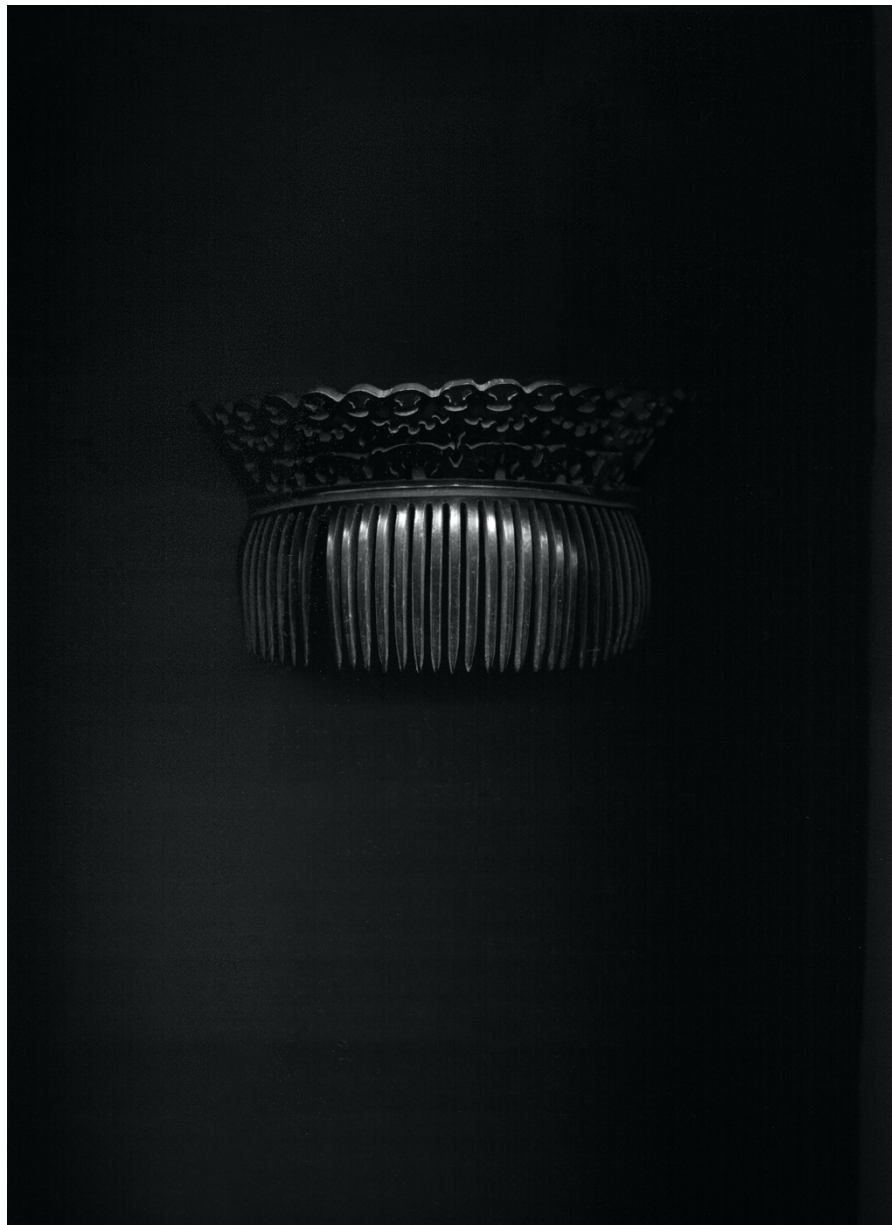


Figure 7 Silvia De Giorgi, Horn Comb, scanned object, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 8 Silvia De Giorgi, Hairnet and Hairpins, scanned objects, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 9 Silvia De Giorgi, Mother's Hair, scanned object, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

Nochor, nebn dor waschmaschin es waschbeckn, mit zwoa beckn und drun-
tor zwoa tirlar auzutian, mit oschpial-
zuig in a weißn kastl. Zwoa wosserhäne,
für jedn beckn, oans wor für ospialn und
oans für oschwenzn. Und obern wasch-
beckn wor dor spiagl mit den kloan
stelele und beim stelele zui isch de bor-
düre ghongen wos i amol junger gstickt
hon. Mit a roatn kreis mit, gigger und
sette zuig. Und untn drin, hinter dor
bordüre isch ollm dor oma kampl
gwedn. Do hot sie ollm gekamplt und
die hoor gonz long oiglossn bis afn
bodn! Gezöpfnt, praktisch.

*Then, next to the washing machine: the kitchen
sink, with two basins and beneath two small
cupboards with cleaning stuff in a white box.
Two water taps, for each basin, one for washing
the dishes and one for rinsing them. And above
the sink was the mirror with that small shelf
and on the shelf hung the trim which I embroi-
dered when I was young. With a red circle and
roosters and such things. And down below, be-
hind the trim was Grandmother's comb. There
she would always comb her hair and let it hang
loose, all the way down to the floor! Making
braids, practically.*

Figure 10 Silvia De Giorgi, 'The Kitchen, audio transcript (excerpt), 2020. Translation from South Tyrolean by the author. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 11 Silvia De Giorgi, Grandmother's Hair, scanned object, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 12 Silvia De Giorgi, Velvet Ribbon, scanned object, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 13 Silvia De Giorgi, Dachau 1945, scanned object, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 14 Silvia De Giorgi, Knitting Spool, scanned object, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 15 Silvia De Giorgi, Scissor, Thimble, Darning Egg, scanned objects, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

Pock Reiferschluss
 Weizenmehl
 Paradeis
 Lorber
 Kichenrolle
 Nötz

Af dor wond nebn dor kredenz hem wor
 ollm die einkaufsliste . . . und wor do net
 a ollm so a kuchluhr? Jo, so a roater we-
 cker und af dor tirleiste fost, hem isch so
 a brett ghongen mit a bleckl zum auf-
 schreibn fa dor einkaufsliste, und a kug-
 lschreiber odr bleistift ba an soalele zu-
 igheng. De wor ollm lustig zu lesn die
 einkaf- liste wos sie gschribn hot, in di-
 alekt und mit rechtschreibfahler.

pack (of) zip fasteners
wheat flour
paradeis (salad)
bay leaf
kitchen roll
(hair) net

*On the wall next to the sideboard was the shop-
 ping list . . . and was there not a kitchen clock?
 Yes, a red alarm clock and, almost on the door
 molding, there hung a small board with a note
 pad to write down the shopping list, and a pen
 or pencil attached to it with a piece of rope. It
 was always funny to read that list she wrote, in
 dialect and with spelling mistakes.*

Figure 16 Silvia De Giorgi, The Kitchen, audio transcript (excerpt), 2020. Translation from South Tyrolean by the author. Courtesy of the artist.

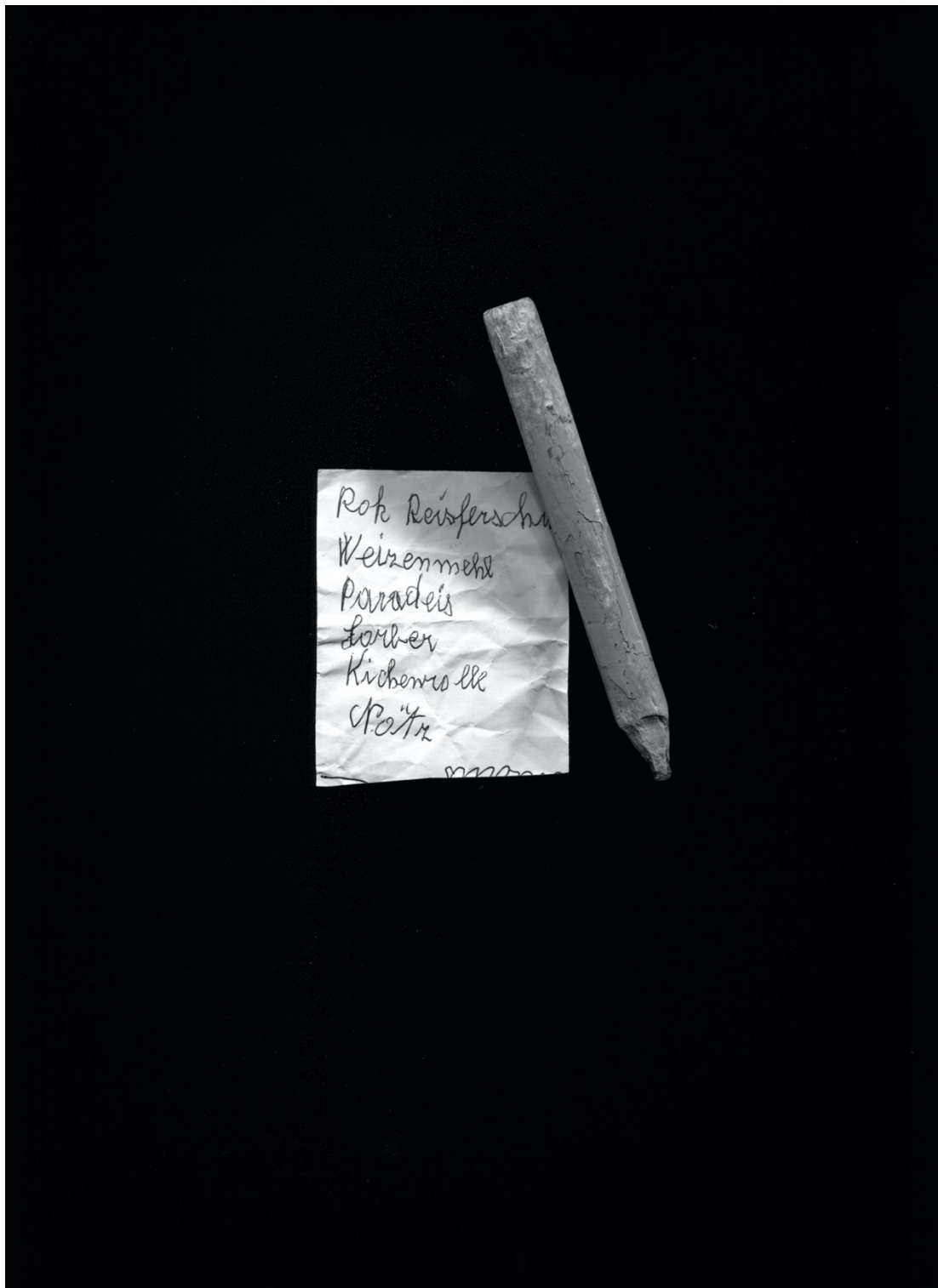


Figure 17 Silvia De Giorgi, Grandmother's Grocery List, scanned object, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 18 Silvia De Giorgi, Gilded Prayer Book, scanned object, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 19 Silvia De Giorgi, All Saints, scanned object, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

Nochor wo dor tisch mit so a beign linoleum obn, sel isch zwor lei a kloaner tisch gwedn obor im summer hot sie in an eggele ollm a vase mit bluamen kop! Obwohl amerscht schun koan plotz isch gwedn af den kloan tisch. Im summer worn iboroll so kloane glasln ummer mit bliamlen drin. Jo, in dor stub, beim fenstor, entn beim kuchlfenstor wor a so a kloans schnopsglasl mit an bliaml. Im summer, wenn lei es äusere fenster wor isch man zuikemmen, hem wor ollm a glasl mit a guggu odr suscht irgend a bliaml.

Then there was the table with a beige linoleum on top, it was just a small table but in the summertime she (grandmother) always kept a small drinking glass with flowers in a corner! Even when there was hardly any space on that small table. In the summer, there were small vases with tiny flowers everywhere. Yes, in the living room, near the window, there, by the kitchen window was always a small liquor glass with a flower. In summer, when there was only the outer window it was easy to put a glass there, with a gentian flower or some other flower.

Figure 20 Silvia De Giorgi, The Kitchen, audio transcript (excerpt), 2020. Translation from South Tyrolean by the author. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 21 Silvia De Giorgi, Grandmother's Drinking Glass, scanned object, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 22 Silvia De Giorgi, Buttons, scanned objects, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 23 Silvia De Giorgi, Grandfather Knife, scanned object, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

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Notes

¹ Rachel Zuanon, Melissa Ramos da Silva Oliveira, Haroldo Gallo, and Cláudio Lima Ferreira, “Drawing Memories: Intersections between the Sites of Memory and the Memories of Places,” in *Digital Human Modeling: Applications in Health, Safety, Ergonomics, and Risk Management*, edited by Vincent G. Duffy (Cham: Springer, 2018), 375–91, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91397-1_30.

² Ibid.

³ Marlene Creates, “Biographical Notes,” *Marlene Creates* website, accessed June 2021, <http://www.marlenecreates.ca/bio.html>.

⁴ Joan M. Schwarz, “Constituting *Places of Presence*: Landscape, Identity and the Geographical Imagination,” in *Places of Presence: Newfoundland Kin and Ancestral Land, Newfoundland, 1989–1991* (St. John’s, Newfoundland: Killick Press, 1997), 14.

⁵ Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, “Pearson|Shanks—Theatre/Archaeology—Return and Prospect,” in *Art & Archaeology: Collaborations, Conversations, Criticisms*, edited by Ian Alden Russell and Andrew Cochrane (New York: Springer, 2014), 199–230, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-8990-0_14.

⁶ Ibid., 210–11.

⁷ Ibid., 220.

⁸ Ibid.

Denis Diderot's "Salons" as Art Conservation in Eighteenth-Century France

Delanie Linden

When the eighteenth-century French philosopher Denis Diderot penned his nine manuscripts of art criticism from 1759 to 1781, known as his *Salons*, he frequently alluded to the fragility of art.¹ His *Salons* described artworks on display at the annual or biennial salon exhibitions of the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. In his account of Carle van Loo's painting *Augustus Closing the Doors of the Temple of Janus* (1765), Diderot imagines the painting on fire, stating:

And yet if, after the artist's death, a fire had consumed this composition, sparing only the group of priests and a few scattered heads, all of us would have acknowledged the impression these precious remains made on us by crying out: What a shame!²

The conception of van Loo's painting ablaze was likely inspired by recent events of natural disaster in eighteenth-century Europe, and in particular, the archaeological findings of antiquities at Herculaneum and Pompeii, first published to a French audience in 1751, and the Lisbon earthquake in 1755. Natural disaster brought into relief the tenuous materiality of art. It catalyzed efforts to improve art conservation.³ In this context, Diderot leveraged writing's duplicatable, mobile, and discursive medium to conserve art. On the chance that art was destroyed, his *Salons*, through the power of description, would stand in for the absent image.

Such an argument expands past scholarship's scope of the *Salons*. Within existing literature, scholars have most often examined Diderot's *Salons* in the

contexts of art discourse and exhibitions. While the art world is an apt place to examine his works, this essay intends to broaden the scope of historical inquiry by situating his writing in the context of natural disasters. By approaching his *Salons* from outside the artistic milieu, I add to existing scholarship by positing that art criticism in France—and especially Diderot’s *Salons*—developed alongside a cultural consciousness of material durability. Writing about art offered a supplementary type of sustainability. It could conserve not only a literary description of the artwork but also the author’s *distinctive* experience of it. The remarkable verbosity of Diderot’s descriptions of art on display at the salon exhibitions demonstrate the power of writing as a tool for art conservation.

Countless scholars have studied the writing style of Diderot’s *Salons*. Many have analyzed the relationship between text and image, and specifically the practice of translating an image into text. Notably, the art historian Norman Bryson has argued that the perennial problem with translating image into text lies in the status of the signifier and the “intransigence or recalcitrance of the sign.”⁴ The difficulty to lucidly describe art resulted in, as Bryson hypothesizes, Diderot’s increased efforts in his later *Salons* to write about artistic technique instead. The art historian Andrew Clark has similarly examined the dialectical tension between word and image, but he considers Diderot’s writing style as suggestive of a linguistic turn, in which even images become a way to rethink language, categories of knowledge, and philosophies of nature.⁵

Several scholars have drawn links between Diderot’s prolixity and ekphrasis. In early Greek rhetoric, the term *ekphrasis* meant “an expression of words” whose “vivid and visual manner of describing intensifies the reader’s sense of being present to the scene or object, and brings about deeper imaginative and emotional involvement.”⁶ According to the historian of philosophy Gary Shapiro, ekphrasis methods vary depending on the author, time, and place. Shapiro argues that Diderot’s in-depth descriptions differ from other types of ekphrasis in history. Diderot did not adopt a master-pupil dialectic, as many ekphrastic poems had previously used. Rather, he wrote with a conversational and dialogical style, permitting his readers to imagine artworks and enter dialogue with him about them.⁷ While numerous scholars productively examine Diderot’s descriptions in relation to ekphrasis, few scholars have considered the physical longevity of ancient ekphrastic poems, which had survived in varying conditions and were widely duplicated by the eighteenth century. In a context in which natural disasters resulted in questions about material durability, it is worth considering how the survival of ancient writing may have encouraged the literary documentation of art in the eighteenth century. The material survival of books—and Diderot’s consciousness of their durability—is explored in this essay.

Recently, two scholars have examined Diderot's *Salons* in relation to materiality, destruction, and conservation. In *Futures and Ruins: Eighteenth-Century Paris and the Art of Hubert Robert* (2010), the art historian Nina Dubin discusses Diderot's meditations over the ruins of art.⁸ As she argues, what made eighteenth-century French culture "modern" was its "capacity to envision its own destruction."⁹ Writers such as Diderot imagined hypothetical catastrophes and sublime events that incited both morbid and pleasurable effects. The "allure for the unthinkable," as Dubin claims, exemplified a culture emancipated from absolutism and the subjection of the church.¹⁰ Diderot's *Salons* typify the unescapable, pleasurable, and "modern" thoughts about destruction in eighteenth-century French culture. Likewise, in "Diderot and the Materiality of Posterity" (2018), the art historian Oliver Wunsch examines Diderot's ideas about the longevity of art. Wunsch argues that Diderot envisioned poetic-description's potential to preserve art for posterity.¹¹ The reproducibility and dissemination of writing ensured the survival of artworks over time. Wunsch examines the lettered exchanges between Diderot and the sculptor Étienne-Maurice Falconet, who both debated posterity as motivation for artistic production of great pictures. Dubin and Wunsch emphasize the cultural value of posterity in eighteenth-century France.

However, less scholarly attention has been given to the context of geological destruction during the 1740s and 1750s in which the *Salons* were produced. By examining the historical conditions of natural disaster leading up to 1759, when Diderot wrote his first exhibition review, this essay explores his reasoning behind using text over image to conserve art for the future. I argue that Diderot's *Salons* were conceptualized as "documentation." The term *documentation*, by its modern definition, is a material that provides *official* information, evidence, or instructions about something.¹² Diderot's *Salons*, in their length and writing style, would afford a future audience necessary description to visualize art objects in their absence. Most important, his textual description would permit the conservation of *his* enlightened way of seeing. Text could fix the author's view of art and transmit—over time—the *period eye's* perceptual experience of it.¹³

Given the popularity of Diderot's *Salons* in art historical scholarship today, it is surprising to learn that in the eighteenth century they were privately circulated in manuscript to only a small number of European individuals through the German expatriate Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm's biweekly journal *Correspondance Littéraire*.¹⁴ There were many reasons for not publishing. It was, on a political level, a safeguard against censorship and imprisonment, which Diderot had experienced in 1749.¹⁵ The manuscripts were so covert that even his close friends likely did not know about them, such as Falconet.¹⁶ The decision to not publish was also an opportunity to write creatively and openly for an esteemed and distant clientele,

many of whom were potential buyers of art at the Parisian exhibitions, all the while maintaining Diderot's neutral political status at home.¹⁷ The choice to not publish on these grounds, however, seems suspicious, especially considering the unique cultural situation of mid-eighteenth-century Paris, a point that Bryson has highlighted. Bryson states that this period was an ideal milieu to widely disseminate the *Salons*.¹⁸ With the public's new interest in art coupled with Diderot's fame and knack for intelligible writing, the choice to privately circulate the *Salons*, for Bryson, was a missed opportunity, a "magnificent waste."

What might seem like a "magnificent waste" to not publish in Diderot's lifetime was actually a strategy of art conservation.¹⁹ The inaction—or, as I see it, *suspension*—of publishing the *Salons* fascinatingly calls into question Diderot's intended audience. Why document art extensively using the labor of manuscript for just a few individuals scattered throughout Europe? While we may never fully know Diderot's intentions, it is safe to assume that Diderot understood the publishing market well, and it is likely that he anticipated the publication of his *Salons* soon after his death. By funneling these documents into the hands of various enlightened individuals in Europe, he ensured their safekeeping and controlled their eventual publication in his own terms. The subsequent publications of these textual objects beginning in 1798, fourteen years after Diderot's death, supports such a speculation.²⁰ By first examining the materiality and discursivity of the *Salons*, and then by tracing the ecological motives behind their conception, I show that Diderot was less concerned about the *Salons* reaching a vast audience in his own time than he was anxious over documenting art, art technique, and eighteenth-century (and *his*) taste for the future.

Diderot's lengthy visual description of each artwork offers us a clue as to why we should rethink the function of the *Salons* as forms of "documentation," as textual records for an audience whose own physical—and temporal—distance could not guarantee the experience of art in situ. In Diderot's description of Joseph-Marie Vien's *Saint Denis Preaching the Faith in France*, shown at the Salon exhibition of 1767, Diderot alludes to his belief in the power of writing to catalog—and conserve—all dimensions of art (Fig. 1):

To give yourself an idea of this crowd occupying the left side of the painting, imagine a woman viewed from the back, crouching on the lowest steps, both her arms extended towards the saint in admiration. Behind her, on a lower step and somewhat further back, a kneeling man listens, leaning forward, his head, arms, shoulders, and back signaling acquiescence.²¹



Figure 1 Joseph-Marie Vien, *Saint Denis Preaching the Faith in France*, 1767, oil on canvas, Musée Fabre, Montpellier. Public domain.

Diderot describes Vien's composition in lucid detail: the placement and disposition of bodies, the gesture of limbs, the relation of figures with one another, and so forth. He uses engaging language to stimulate the reader's attention. The narrator of his *Salons*, presumably Diderot, addresses the readers: "Let's have another look at this composition." The author also encourages the readers to critique the imagined painting, asking them, "But don't you think that with a bit of genius it would have been possible to introduce the most extreme movement?" Such rhetorical devices operate to insert a distant reader into the realm of looking and public discourse.

Diderot's descriptions also have an authorial positionality that undergird uniquely *his* vision of contemporary art as the exclusive referent for future users. In his text, Diderot guides his audience's imagination of the absent image in a way that anchors perception. In other words, the reader is compelled to subsume Diderot's gaze: each step of description simultaneously describes the unfolding of

Diderot's eyes cast onto the painting, moving across, up and down, and focusing in and out. As the reader follows along, they imagine the artwork based off the cognitive sequence of Diderot's own experience. While this process of looking is inherently subjective, I believe Diderot's aim was actually to establish an official description, something that was less opinionated and truer to nature and could, through simple language, transmit information in a documentary-style format to readers of future centuries. This purpose is suggested at the beginning of the section on Vien's *Saint Denis*, when Diderot mentions his experience of the exhibition, stating "public opinion was divided over this picture by Vien." Diderot's description that follows this statement, which I have quoted above, thus ameliorates the "division" of opinion by emphatically and prolongingly rendering his writing as *the* official last word.

The length of Diderot's descriptive writing underscores the *Salons*' "documentation" style unlike most art critical pamphlets or catalogs written in mid-eighteenth-century Paris.²² For example, while Diderot's *Salons* adopted the writing organization of the salon exhibition *livrets*, the official catalogs sold to visitors at the royal exhibitions, his descriptions exceedingly surpassed the *livrets* in length. Diderot's commentary on French artist Joseph Vernet's series of landscapes in the *Salons* of 1767, one of the most commonly referenced sections in art historical scholarship, provides a striking comparison. Unlike the salon exhibition *livret*, composed of only a few words, Diderot's description uses nearly twenty thousand words.²³ The *livrets*'s short length was, on the part of the Academy, pragmatic and economical. They provided salon exhibition-goers with an affordable pamphlet to accompany their visit. Yet the comparative ratio of words used between the two documents is compelling. Diderot does not just describe art: he belabors writing about art with intensive formal analysis, interjections of his personal experience, and ideas about artistic technique. This contrast is also implicit if we compare his commentary with other art critical publications, such as with the writing of the eighteenth-century art critic Étienne La Font de Saint Yenne. By many accounts one of the more infamous critics of the period, La Font sought to inflect his salon exhibition critiques, written from 1747 to 1756, with his theories of art, but he did not describe artworks fully. Whereas both writers discuss contemporary French taste, it is Diderot's verbosity that sets his art criticism apart. One of the primary reasons for this writing style was to supply Grimm's distant and elite readership with ample descriptions of art. Yet this motive alone seems unconvincing, especially if we consider the painstaking efforts it took Diderot to write about nearly every artwork in the exhibition.

Beginning in 1737, the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture displayed several hundred paintings in the *salon carré* at the Louvre for six weeks in

the summer. Diverse audiences of many classes visited the state-driven exhibitions. During the run of the exhibition, Diderot's writing methodology consisted of visiting the exhibition every day, usually in the morning to avoid large crowds. There, he would write copious notes, interview artist acquaintances, and observe public reactions to contemporary art. Once the Salon exhibitions closed, the possibility of returning to view an artwork through direct experience was unlikely. Only a select number of individuals could revisit the artworks in private or royal collections.²⁴ After the close of the exhibition, every artwork from that point on had to be reconstructed from memory. Diderot's diligent in situ notes aided in the recall process of remembering each piece as he wrote in their absence. Writing after the close of the exhibition challenged his long-term memory, because he wrote his *Salons* in varying lengths of time. Diderot's *Salon* of 1765 took fifteen days, in time for Grimm to circulate the critiques swiftly for his readers, while Diderot's *Salon* of 1767 took over a year, from September 1767 to the end of 1768.²⁵ Diderot's scrupulous methods to write comprehensively about contemporary art, especially in art's absence, I suggest, was inspired by an intense desire to document art on the chance that art was destroyed by natural disasters.

Diderot's own words hint at destruction as incentive for the documentation of art through the medium of text. In the introduction to his *Salon* of 1765, in which he addresses his friend Grimm, he alludes to antiquity as a possible inspiration for his *Salons*:

I'll describe the paintings for you, and my descriptions will be just that, with a bit of imagination and taste, you'll be able to envision them spatially, disposing the objects within them more or less as we see them on the canvas; and to facilitate judgement about the grounds of my criticism or praise, I'll close the Salon with some reflections on painting, sculpture, printmaking, and architecture. You'll read me like an ancient author who transmits an ordinary passage instead of a finely wrought line.²⁶

As he states, Diderot's goal in writing the *Salons* was to provide enough visual analysis for his readers so that they could fully imagine each artwork's composition, color, technique, and affective qualities. His words transmit the complexity of vision into "ordinary" and legible discursive codes. Importantly, Diderot signals his rationale for writing with simple prose at the end of the passage, in which he says, "you'll read me like an ancient author." By analogizing himself with writers of the ancient past, with whom his own eighteenth-century existence stood at a temporal distance, he assumes that his *Salons* will be read by an audience with an equal degree

of time, thousands of years in the future. For textual meaning to transfer through time, across cultures and languages, it needed to be “ordinary” and easily translatable. Writing for a future audience required the mediation of a specific “ancient author,” Diderot, whose taste represented the whole of a century and whose writing could successfully deconstruct the intricacies of visual art into comprehensible words.

The proliferation of natural disasters in the eighteenth century likely motivated Diderot to document the century’s French art. In 1709, the earliest excavations at Herculaneum began near Portici, located in the Bay of Naples at the foot of an active, twelve-kilometers-wide volcano that Pliny the Elder called “fields of fire.”²⁷ When a laborer discovered ancient marbles in a well shaft in the courtyard of the Alcantarine monastery at Resina, he quickly sold these finds to the nearest nobleman, a French prince, Emmanuel Maurice de Lorraine, prince d’Elbeuf. The prince later purchased the site at Resina and continued to mine the land for ancient remnants, creating wells and radiating tunnels dug from 1709 to 1716. After stocking his home with his archaeological loot, Elbeuf ceased operations in 1716, and, for the next twenty years, till 1736, no one paid any further attention to the prince’s treasure. Yet his discoveries would no longer remain covert. When he smuggled objects out of Naples—notably three marble statues of female figures to Dresden—knowledge of these objects spread throughout Europe, and eventually the ruler of Naples, Charles VII, who would later become King Charles III of Spain, caught wind.²⁸

Having been ruthlessly exploited by the Austrian viceroyalty, Naples as an independent kingdom reacted with a paranoid fear of mistreatment by outsiders and instituted a policy on absolute domestic control.²⁹ The antiquities found at the buried cities of Herculaneum and later Pompeii would henceforth be hidden from foreigners, and all exclusive rights to the possession, knowledge, and publications of the finds were controlled by Charles VII.³⁰ Despite new measures of control, the archaeological sites had serious problems with theft and illegal exportation, leading Charles VII to declare that anything found there was his personal property and banned the export and images of the objects. This Neapolitan policy built an aura of exclusivity around the finds; only those with special permission from the court could visit the site, but not publish information about it.

The closure of the site to outsiders meant that the Neapolitan kingdom had exclusive control over the archaeological practices and the objects discovered. As the Neapolitan-elected archaeologist Ottavio Baiardi articulates, diplomatic and military conquests would shift its sights “within the viscera of the earth itself.”³¹ The king continued to mine the region and filled his own palace with numerous

finds. Yet the conduct of his excavations was decidedly criticized. For figures such as Horace Walpole and Camillo Paderni, who visited the site in 1740, local excavation efforts were deemed unplanned and destructive, stating:

The first mistake those men they call intendents [the engineers conducting the dig] have committed is their having dug out the pictures without drawing the situation of the place, that is, the niches where they stood: for they were all adorned with grotesques composed of most elegant masques, figures and animals; which, not being copied, are gone to destruction, and the like will happen to the rest. Then, if they meet with any pieces of painting not so well preserved as the rest, they leave them where they are found. Besides, there are pillars of stucco extremely curious, consisting of many sides, all variously painted, of which they do not preserve the memory.³²

Walpole's and Paderni's anxieties over archaeological malpractice reflect fears about the destruction of ancient art. When objects were extracted from their original context, the surrounding decorative wall-paintings were destroyed, and knowledge about display practices was lost, "gone to destruction." As a result, contemporary conservation principles intensified in the later 1740s and into the 1750s, when knowledge of Herculaneum and its archaeological negligence were exposed to the broader European public.

It was not until 1751 that the engraver and art theorist Charles-Nicolas Cochin and the architectural draftsman Jérôme-Charles Bellicard exposed the tightly held secret of Herculaneum and its excavations to a waiting international audience.³³ In November and December 1750, Cochin and Bellicard accompanied the marquis de Marigny to Naples, where they visited Herculaneum and Portici. The group secretly compiled notes and drawings and even likely convinced someone to smuggle building plans for them to copy.³⁴ Cochin quickly returned to Paris and published his descriptions titled "Lettre sur les peintures d'Herculanum: aujourd'hui Portici" anonymously and fictively "à Bruxelles" in the *Mercure de France*, a monthly gazette with an elite readership, in September 1751.³⁵ Cochin foregrounds his essay by repeatedly telling his readers that his drawings and descriptions about Herculaneum were made from memory. He describes the atmosphere of secrecy and his rapid drawing methods, stating:

Never forget that the etchings come from designs made from memory. While leaving to admire the prodigious number of ancient Paintings preserved in the palace of the king of the two Sicilies [Charles VII], I was only able to see the designs with great rapidity; it seems that the Neapolitans are convinced that too repeated looks could destroy them or cause them some damage.³⁶

For Cochin, the knowledge of antiquity's art and architecture justified his illegal efforts of documentation.

Herculaneum generated novel chemical innovations in art conservation and especially with experiments in varnish.³⁷ When objects at the archaeological site were excavated and exposed to light, their pigments often deteriorated quickly.³⁸ Chemists and artists used wax as a conservation material, because its chemical properties improved paint and acted as a varnish ingredient.³⁹ The comte de Caylus, a prominent figure in the arts, advocated for the public dissemination of art conservation practices and recipes, stating, "an honest man should never be suspected of depriving not only his country, but humanity in general, of a helpful invention."⁴⁰ Artists and craftsman were praised for opening up their workshops and unveiling their techniques. In 1754, the comte de Caylus published his discovery of classical encaustic paintings. During several sessions at the Académie de Peinture, he lectured on the "paintings of the Ancients." At the Académie des Inscriptions, he explained the artistic process of encaustic by demonstrating its process on an artwork by Vien.⁴¹ This technique would later become popular in neoclassical decors. By writing about art restoration techniques, written language would obviate the loss of tacit knowledge.

The palpability of natural disasters' impact on art and architecture escalated in 1755. On the morning of November 1, 1755—All Saints Day—an earthquake struck Lisbon, Portugal. This geological calamity killed thousands of people, many of whom were at prayer at the time of the disaster. For several months after, the earthquake resulted in subsequent seismic activity. Shocks vibrated throughout Europe, a huge tsunami followed a few hours after, and Lisbon went up in flames, causing further destruction and loss of life in the city. Damage stretched throughout Portugal all the way to Morocco. Abnormal geological, hydrographical, and meteorological occurrences extended as far north as Scotland and Sweden, and minor effects occurred in the West Indies and the western parts of America.⁴² Some research estimates that roughly sixteen million square kilometers—about 3 percent of the Earth's surface—were affected.⁴³ These events inspired Voltaire to contemplate the existence of evil in the world. In his *Poème sur le Désastre de Lisbonne, ou Examen de cet Axiome: "Tout est Bien,"* he states:

Run, contemplate these awful ruins,
 These debris, these shreds, these unhappy ashes,
 These women, these children piled on top of each other,
 Under these broken marbles lay dispersed members;
 A hundred thousand unfortunates that the earth devours,
 Who, bloody, torn, and still thrilling,
 Buried under their roofs, die without help,
 In the horror of the torments their lamentable days!
 At the half-formed cries of their expiring voices,
 At the frightening sight of their smoking ashes.⁴⁴

In his poem, Voltaire critiques the popular eighteenth-century belief that all is good and meant to be.⁴⁵ He returned to the subject of Lisbon's horrific events in *Candide*, published in 1759, the same year of Diderot's first *Salons*, in which the character Pangloss explains to the protagonist Candide that "all [was] for the very best." Ironically, Pangloss states this at the very same moment that a storm begins to brew while the two characters are en route to the doomed port of Lisbon.⁴⁶

Not only does Voltaire's poem illustrate the loss of human life, but it also sheds light on natural disaster's effects on objects and architecture. When he describes "broken marbles," Voltaire specifically chooses a durable material to enhance materiality's failure and to analogize Lisbon's destruction to the ruins of antiquity. The Lisbon earthquake underscored the precarious reality that objects were susceptible to ruin. Jacques-Philippe Le Bas's series of prints from 1757 show scenes of the earthquake's aftermath, which are void of artworks, wall tapestries, decorative objects, and furniture (Fig. 2). All that remains are crumbling, hollow architectural buildings. The perilous afterlife of objects amplified in the earthquake's aftermath, when ensuing mayhem resulted in an increase in looting throughout the city's ruins. A German print etched in 1755 shows culprits hanging from the gallows at the center of the print; apparently, more than thirty people were hung for looting objects after the destruction of the city (Fig. 3).⁴⁷

Voltaire's poem also draws attention to contemporary conceptions about earth's "devouring" force. Its natural and powerful agency became a popular subject of study among numerous theorists, including for the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. In the span of roughly forty-eight years, from 1754 to 1802, Kant theorized natural disasters, ranging from the aging of the earth to fire, earthquakes, wind, physical geography, volcanoes, moons, and "fireballs."⁴⁸ Kant's *Theory of Earthquakes and Volcanic Action* (1756) responded to Lisbon's natural disaster and questioned the geological impact of minor earth tremors on movements of waters

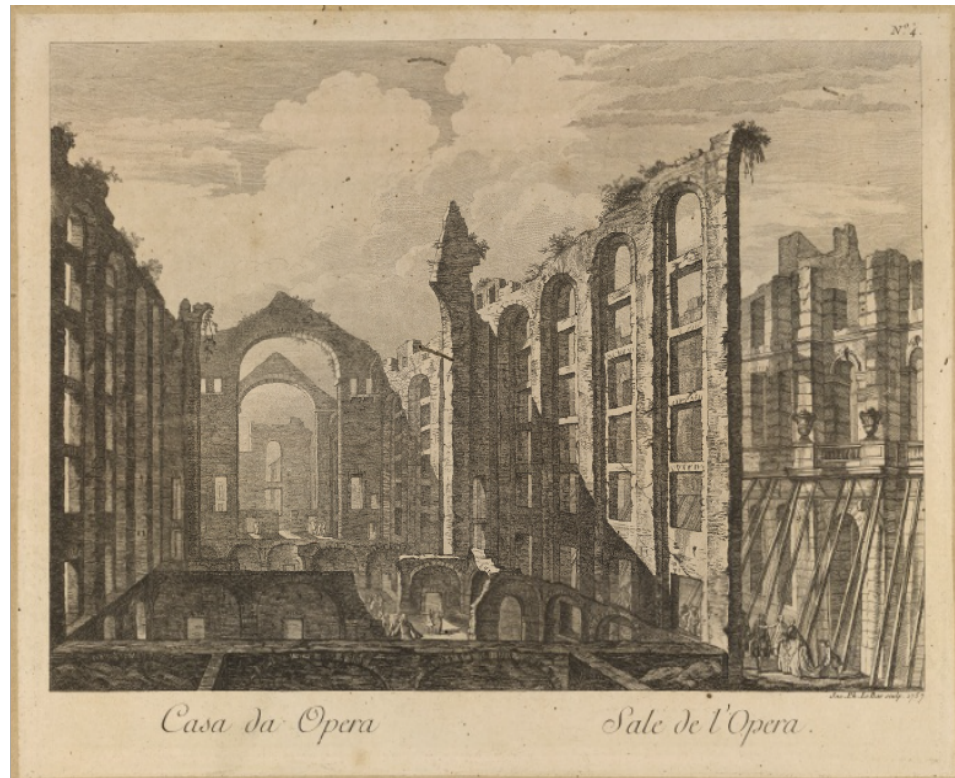


Figure 2 Jacques-Philippe Le Bas, Coleção de algumas ruínas de Lisboa causadas pelo terremoto e pelo fogo do primeiro de novembro do anno 1755 (Receuil des plus belles ruines de Lisbonne causées par le tremblement et par le feu du premier novembre 1755), 1757, BnF Paris. Public domain.

and land.⁴⁹ Notably, Kant's rationale was premised upon the argument that nature alone caused disasters rather than a divine providence.

Diderot's *Salons* were conceived in 1759 and thus are historically inextricable from the conditions of natural disaster, art conservation, and posterity pervasive in this decade. He indicates the relationship in his commentary on Hubert Robert's *Large Gallery Lit from Its Far End (Salon of 1767)*:

Wherever I cast my glance, the objects surrounding me announce death and compel my resignation to what awaits me. What is my ephemeral existence in comparison with that of a rock being worn down, of a valley being formed, of a forest that's dying, of these deteriorating masses suspended above my head? I see the marble of tombs crumble into powder, and I don't want to die!⁵⁰

Like nature and art, humans were subject to death and deterioration. Yet, Diderot suggests that not all materials disintegrate at the same rate. The life-worlds of



Figure 3 The Ruins of Lisbon, 1755, copperplate engraving. Courtesy of the National Information Service for Earthquake Engineering (NISEE), University of California, Berkeley. Original in Museu da Cidade, Lisbon. Museu da Cidade, Lisbon, also reproduced in O Terremoto de 1755, Testamunhos Britanicos (*The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, British Accounts*). Lisbon: British Historical Society of Portugal, 1990.

matter overlap, and they begin and end at varying intervals. I argue that text and image can be conceptualized similarly. While the two mediums converge at the biennial salon exhibitions, Diderot envisioned his *Salons* living longer. Future readers could view and imagine the ancient art of eighteenth-century France, not least by the discovery of its “antiquities,” but also, and even more so, through the ancient author Denis Diderot’s powerful pen.

When the artworks of the salon exhibitions were taken down, visitors far and near could remember the objects through printed reproductions or textual descriptions. However, while prints of artworks could imitate form and signify narrative, they could not conserve an image in other ways. Color printing remained a nascent innovation, and even with hand-enhanced colored prints, reproductions varied. Captions accompanying prints could mediate signification, and certain iconographies could be legible in the future. Yet, more sustained descriptions, such as in Diderot’s *Salons*, fastened culturally-specific meaning and taste to representation. In the absence of the image, Diderot’s description substituted visuality by detailing an artwork’s narrative, composition, scale, color, and paint handling.

Text also permitted Diderot to record his opinions. His *Salons* analyze all aspects of artworks, ranging from the viewer’s affect to visual elements such as “groups” and “masses.” When talking about Nicolas Poussin’s painting *The Manna* or, as it is titled today, *The Jews Gathering the Manna in the Desert* (1637), in relation



Figure 4 Nicolas Poussin, *The Jews Gathering the Manna in the Desert*, 1637, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Public domain.

to the idea of “groups” and “masses,” Diderot proclaims, “In my view, the three women to the left . . . do not form a group . . . a group always forms a mass; but a mass does not always form a group” (Fig. 4).⁵¹ Diderot describes for the readers the general subject of the painting, but he also lends insight into his own “view” about art, which may reflect broader eighteenth-century conceptions of composition. Taste, too, is also captured by Diderot’s pen. As he mentions, a “genuine imitator of nature, and the wise artist, will use groups economically.”⁵² He continues, “an excessive propensity for groups indicates decadence in a painting.”⁵³ Diderot’s opinions fix an artwork’s meaning and allow a future reader to understand eighteenth-century taste, as he admits, whether his writing is “true or false, the reader can always garner something from [my thoughts].”⁵⁴ Writing about art, thus, was a useful conservation method because of its immutable possibilities, especially when a future audience’s taste and customs were presumably different.

Though both art and paper were susceptible to natural disasters, Diderot’s usage of text to document art suggests the eighteenth-century belief in writing as a reliable medium. Text increased the chances of its own survival through scale, duplication, and dissemination.⁵⁵ Though Diderot’s *Salons* were not mass distributed in his lifetime, their circulation in Europe to various enlightened and elite individuals could ensure their safekeeping. The small scale of books permitted easy storage and trade. By scattering his manuscripts throughout different spaces and geographies, the *Salons*—and the memory of art—improved the likelihood of their

own posterity. If one location of one manuscript was subject to destruction or looting, the copies of the *Salons* elsewhere in Europe would continue to conserve eighteenth-century French art.

To an eighteenth-century European audience, writing's sustainable qualities were best exemplified by the ubiquitous existence of ancient texts present in this period. By the 1750s, ancient ekphrastic poetry, the ancient Greek practice of describing art, had outlived much of the artworks they described. This type of ancient writing was first coined in modern times in English in 1715.⁵⁶ Many eighteenth-century European readers knew of this poetic device, including Diderot, who referenced the subject regularly throughout his *Salons*.⁵⁷ For example, in the *Salons* of 1767, he references Homer's work many times, including the *Iliad*, one of the most well-known examples of ancient ekphrasis, in Diderot's section on the artist Vernet.⁵⁸ Ancient writings' abundancy presumably convinced Diderot and his contemporaries that writing could accomplish conservation better than the art conservation methods at the time.

There was, in eighteenth-century France, a consciousness about textual documentation as an art conservation tool. Questions of material durability were fundamental to the way in which people made, criticized, and thought about art in this period. Writing's easily duplicative and mobile properties could, in the face of natural disaster, uphold history when art and architecture failed to do so. Just as effortlessly as a book passes from hand to hand, so could the visual memory of an artwork live on, crossing physical and temporal boundaries. Most interestingly, Diderot's *distinctive* perception of art—the way his eyes cast onto an artwork, traced its composition, and delighted in the pleasurable experience of color—could simultaneously be documented for the future.

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Delanie Linden is grateful for the guidance of her dissertation adviser at MIT, Professor Kristel Smentek, in whose seminar Enlightenment(s) (Spring 2020) this essay developed. She is also appreciative of Professor Cristina Parreño Alonso, who inspired her interest in tectonics and “letting the rock speak,” in her MIT Architecture Summer Pedagogical Experiment “Deep Time Architecture” (Summer 2020).

Notes

¹ In this essay, Diderot’s *Salons* is italicized and capitalized, and the academy’s exhibitions are referenced as “salon exhibitions.”

² Kerr Houston, “Fragments of Artworks, Fire, and Loss in Diderot and Balzac,” *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 34, no. 3 (2015): 32, <https://doi.org/10.1086/sou.34.3.43287855>. Houston argues that this opening description of van Loo’s work also functions as a eulogy, doubly referring to time, since van Loo had recently died. See also Alastair Davidson, “Denis Diderot and the Limits of Reason,” *Diderot Studies* 22 (1986): 41–42, who argues that Diderot’s usage of “hypothesis” in his discussion on van Loo is complicated by Diderot’s belief that knowledge is derived from the senses and experience. See Diderot’s article on “hypothèse” in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, vol. 3, edited by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert, University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, Spring 2021 edition, edited by Robert Morrissey and Glenn Roe, 417.

³ Recently, scholars have examined the technical history of art and conservation. See, e.g., Noémie Étienne, *The Restoration of Paintings in Paris, 1750–1815: Practice, Discourse, Materiality*, translated by Sharon Grevet (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2017); and Sarah Lowengard, *The Creation of Color in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). The discipline of art conservation in France coincided with the events of natural disaster and the archaeological findings at Herculaneum and Pompeii. In this context, French scientists and artists concocted hundreds of new recipes with the aim of inventing durable art materials. The success of these measures, however, as Lowengard and Étienne have recently shown, were few and far between: varnish yellowed; colorants faded; and chemical mixtures eroded over time.

⁴ Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1981), 195.

⁵ See Andrew H. Clark, "Diderot's Encyclopedic Poetics," *The Eighteenth Century* 53, no. 1 (2012): 102. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecy.2012.0009> See also Daniel Brewer, *The Discourse of Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century France: Diderot and the Art of Philosophizing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). His vast analysis of Diderot's larger corpus also examines the function of Diderot's *Salons* language. He argues that in the *Salons*, Diderot constantly grapples with the problem of producing theoretical discourse.

⁶ Romira Worvill, "From Prose Peinture to Dramatic Tableau: Diderot, Fénelon, and the Emergence of the Pictorial Aesthetic in France," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 39 (2010): 151, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sec.0.0055>.

⁷ Gary Shapiro, "The Absent Image: Ekphrasis and the 'Infinite Relation' of Translation," *Journal of Visual Culture* 6, no. 1 (2007): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412907075065>. See also Mary D. Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 54. According to Sheriff, Diderot's ekphrastic-like writing was not simply translations of image into text; it also "recreated" Diderot's experience of looking.

⁸ Nina Dubin, *Futures and Ruins: Eighteenth-Century Paris and the Art of Hubert Robert* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2010).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

¹¹ Oliver Wunsch, "Diderot and the Materiality of Posterity," *Early Modern French Studies* 40, no. 1 (2018), 63–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20563035.2018.1473113>. Wunsch claims that Diderot was fascinated by the material properties that ensured art's longevity.

¹² Lexico Dictionaries, Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "documentation," accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/documentation>.

¹³ Michael Baxandall, "The Period Eye," in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 29–39.

¹⁴ Melissa Hyde, *Making Up the Rococo: François Boucher and His Critics* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2006), 3. Grimm was the editor of the journal, though sources typically call it "Grimm's *Correspondance Littéraire*."

¹⁵ By the end of the 1750s, harsh and honest art criticism affected the economy of art and the livelihood of artists dependent on dealer networks and commissions in Paris and abroad. Authorities sought to suppress unregulated art criticism, yet many writers, including Diderot, resorted to clandestine means of dissemination. See Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

¹⁶ Hyde, *Making Up the Rococo*, 3.

¹⁷ Joseph R. Smiley, “The Subscribers of Grimm’s Correspondence Littéraire,” *Modern Language Notes* 62, no. 1 (1947): 44, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2908676>. Grimm’s readership included the Russian empress, the queen of Sweden, the king of Poland, the duchess of Saxe-Gotha, the duke of Deux-Ponts, the crown princess of Hesse-Darmstadt, the prince Georg of Hesse-Darmstadt, and the princess of Nassau-Saarbruck. See also Shane Agin, “The Development of Diderot’s ‘Salons’ and the Shifting Boundary of Representational Language,” *Diderot Studies* 30 (2007): 14, who remarks on the opportunity for Diderot to have the freedom to write creatively.

¹⁸ Bryson, *Word and Image*, 154.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ In this passage, he addresses the reader with an ambiguous “vous,” expanding the original one-on-one dialogue between Diderot and Grimm to an infinite discursive space between the author and *all* readers.

²² See Richard Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism: From the Ancien Régime to the Restoration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 3.

²³ See the Wikisource digitized transcription of Diderot’s “Vernet” section in *Oeuvres complètes de Diderot XI*: https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Salon_de_1767/Promenade_Vernet.

²⁴ Thomas Crow, introduction to *The Salon of 1767*, vol. 2 of *Diderot on Art*, edited by John Goodman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), xvi.

²⁵ Crow, introduction, xv.

²⁶ Goodman, *Salon of 1767*, 6.

²⁷ Mark Greenburg, ed., *Antiquity Recovered: The Legacy of Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2007), 15. Vesuvius erupted in the fall of 79 CE. According to Alison E. Cooley and M. G. L. Cooley, *Pompeii and Herculaneum: A Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1–2, Herculaneum and Pompeii—two separate towns—were ruined by the volcanic eruption in distinct ways and therefore have a different archaeological record. The town of Herculaneum, six kilometers from the volcano’s crater, suffered a speedy destruction. Pompeii was destroyed hours later given its more southern position next to the eruption. While Herculaneum was completely covered instantly, which also helped preserve it, Pompeii’s roofs were first stacked with ash then covered only partially. Pliny the Elder, who lived from 23 to 79 CE, died in this eruption, and his nephew, Pliny the Younger, recorded twenty-five years later what he had witnessed on the day of the eruption while standing at a distance in Misenum in the Bay of Naples.

²⁸ The antiquarian Johann Joachim Winckelmann viewed the marbles in Dresden.

²⁹ Greenburg, *Antiquity Recovered*, 39.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 38. The former Habsburgs were linked to the Farnese lineage of Carlo Borbone of Spain and the kingdom of Naples.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 42.

³³ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁴ See Hyde, *Making Up the Rococo*, 7. The marquis de Marigny was Madame de Pompadour's brother, and after these expeditions to Herculaneum, he became the directeur-général des bâtiments du roi from 1751 to 1774. Charles-Nicolas Cochin was Marigny's artistic mentor and adviser. Cochin was also a draftsman and engraver and, during Marigny's administration, was the secrétaire de l'Académie. See also Greenburg, *Antiquity Recovered*, 46.

³⁵ Charles-Nicolas Cochin, "Lettre sur les peintures d'Herculanum: aujourd'hui Portici," *Mercur de France* ([fictitiously dated Brussels, January 20, 1751] September 1751), 171–83. Afterward, Cochin reworked this publication for his contribution to a book he coauthored with Bellicard, first published in 1753.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 173. "N'oubliez jamais que les eaux fortes viennent d'après des desseins faits de mémoire, en sortant d'admirer le nombre prodigieux de Peintures antiques conserves dans le palais du roi des deux Siciles, et que l'on fait voir avec une si grande rapidité, qu'il semble que les Napolitains soient persuadés que les regards trop répétés pourroient les détruire ou leur porter quelque dommage."

³⁷ Étienne, *Restoration of Paintings in Paris*, 97.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 30. See also A.-C.-P. Caylus and M. Majaut, docteur de la faculté de médecine en l'université de Paris, *Mémoire sur la peinture à l'encaustique et sur la peinture à la cire* (Geneva, 1755), 23.

⁴⁰ Étienne, *Restoration of Paintings in Paris*, 30.

⁴¹ Marc Fumaroli, "The Comte de Caylus and the 'Return to Antiquity' in the Eighteenth Century," in *Republic of Letters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 287, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5cg9v1.22>.

⁴² O. Reinhardt and D. R. Oldroyd, "Kant's Theory of Earthquakes and Volcanic Action," *Annals of Science* 39 (1982): 248, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00033798300200221>. If one types "Lisbonne" into Google Ngram Viewer, the graphic of 1700–1800 in French shows a striking rise in the word in the 1750s: https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=lisbonne&year_start=1700&year_end=1800&corpus=19&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Clisbonne%3B%2Cc0_

⁴³ O. Reinhardt and D. R. Oldroyd, "Kant's Thoughts on the Ageing of the Earth," *Annals of Science* 39 (1982), 248.

- ⁴⁴ Ibid. “Tout est bien” references Alexander Pope’s dictum “whatever is, is right.”
- ⁴⁵ See the work of Pope (1688–1744), whose poetry inspired theological and fateful thoughts about the world as always good.
- ⁴⁶ Voltaire, *Candide*, translated by Lowell Bair (New York: Bantam Dell, 2003), 25.
- ⁴⁷ Harsh K. Gupta and Vineet K. Gahalaut, *Three Great Tsunamis: Lisbon (1755), Sumatra-Andaman (2004), and Japan (2011)* (London: Springer, 2013), 28.
- ⁴⁸ See table of contents of Eric Watkins, ed., *Immanuel Kant: Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- ⁴⁹ Reinhardt and Oldroyd, “Kant’s Theory of Earthquakes and Volcanic Action,” 250.
- ⁵⁰ Goodman, *Salon of 1767*, 198–99.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 37.
- ⁵² Ibid., 38.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 39.
- ⁵⁵ By “immutable” and “mobile,” I reference the terms used by Bruno Latour, “Visualization and Cognition: Drawing Things Together,” in *Knowledge and Society Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present*, edited by H. Kuklick (Stamford, CT: Jai, 1986), 1–40, <https://doi.org/10.22394/0869-5377-2017-2-95-151>.
- ⁵⁶ James A. W. Heffernan, “Ekphrasis and Representation,” *New Literary History* 22, no. 2 (1991): 297, <https://doi.org/10.2307/469040>.
- ⁵⁷ Countless eighteenth-century French writers and artists reference antiquity, and many referenced ancient writers who were most well known for ekphrasis, such as Homer.
- ⁵⁸ Goodman, *Diderot on Art*, 115.

Neustadt a.d. Aisch¹

Marla Elisabeth Heid

When I was eight years old, my grandfather Friedel passed away. Having spent only very limited time with him, I preserved my memory of his character. He was a kind and caring individual, loved by his family and friends. I grew older with this recollection in my mind, the photographs of him, the books he read, the paintings he created. He was an artist. His works are hanging on my mother's walls, watercolors on paper of broad landscapes, oil and gouache paintings of still life, drawings, and prints. All his artworks are securely collected in a folder my mother holds on to. Over the years his paintings and his books about art inspired me. The physical remains of his existence—an archive of various paintings, drawings, and photographs—provided information that persists. My mental archive, on the other hand, is something I invented for myself, my memory of his persona and the stories I've been told. It provides me information whenever I need it: I carry this mental memory like a hard drive and access it whenever I call for it.

A short while ago I visited my grandmother. The table was set; like always, she had prepared coffee and cake. Two plates, two cups, and a folder were placed on the table. I asked her about the folder, what it was. She told me she found it in her basement while she was looking for something else. She told me it contained documents from my grandfather, that they were interesting to look at. All these documents collected carefully in this folder. She said he kept every little piece of paper, always. The documents were organized by date, latest on top. The first couple ones were about his pension, his health insurance claims, his work accomplishments, all the way back to the 1950s when he received his degree from art school. The certificates and references from his professors confirming his talent, praising his pleasant work ethic. Below those documents was a thin red booklet, no bigger than a passport. It had

a golden swastika on it. Many documents like that appeared on the following pages. I instantly felt a discomfort, anxiety, about what was going to come. When I asked my grandmother again about the documents, she replied with bare vapidness in her voice. My grandfather was a member of the SS.

The end of World War II in Europe in 1945 through to the surrender of the German Wehrmacht symbolized the first attempt to eradicate National Socialism in Germany. Almost sixty million people died because of the war and Nazi rule. In the German language the term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* describes the nation's public confrontation with a problematic period in its late history. In Germany, it especially references the examination of National Socialism. The concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, literally translated as "to overcome the past" or "coming to terms with such," remains an integral part of the present political and social discourse and a necessity to cope with the atrocities committed by the Nazis.

However, the composition of the terms *past* and *overcome* seems to be a contradiction in terms. The past cannot be undone; therefore, it can't be overcome. It needs to be worked through. Theodor W. Adorno, in his 1959 essay *The Meaning of Working through the Past*, critically analyzes the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in German society and the ongoing approach of coming to terms with the Nazi past. This concept of working through the past, however, requires explication, as it is easily expressed as "a formulation, a modish slogan that has become highly suspect during the last years."² In this usage, "working through the past" does not mean seriously working on the past, that is, through a lucid consciousness breaking its power to fascinate. On the contrary, its intention is to close the books on the past and, if possible, even remove it from memory."³ Nevertheless, for Adorno the past will have been worked through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated.⁴ Such elimination, however, requires effort.

Considering the present political situation in Germany and growing right-wing nationalism, the elimination of these causes has not been achieved yet and might never be. Politicians deny the Holocaust, spread racist, antisemitic, and homophobic views, and condemn democratic values. Working through the past means to constantly remember, question the then and now, and generate a responsible memory. Yet creating a method to address this memory and acknowledge National Socialism over the course of Germany's history provokes tensions between public and private abilities to process the past, between general or collective and particular or individual memory, and between the different narratives associated with these forms.⁵ General or collective memory is constructed and established in the public sphere: official forms of remembrance, such as memorial sites and commemorative events, and, rarely, legal disputes and political-programmatic speeches. The particular or individual, on the other hand, exists within traditions, family narratives, and

stories, and the depiction of individual experiences from reports of the parents' or grandparents' generation. The subjective image of history, in which real history is merged with fictional interpretation, frequently has the intention of washing one's own biography clean. With this intention to suppress, forget, or conceal the actions that were made in the past, how can we find certainty in the narratives created?

Uncovering my grandfather's involvement with the SS and the revelation of his uncharted past was emotionally onerous and confusing. Trying to unfold a life I thought I knew was a dreadful experience. I only knew this life through the fragmented memory in my mind, the stories I heard, the photographs, the books, and the paintings on the wall. The documents my grandmother shared with me depicted a different person, someone I had never met before.

When approaching one's own buried past, Walter Benjamin says, "one must conduct oneself like a man digging. Above all, one must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil."⁶ The leitmotif for Benjamin's theory is that what matters and is valuable in history does not necessarily exist in the monumental and the permanent. Rather, it exists in the small, the repressed, and the submerged, which can be accessed and revived only through memory.

Reconstructing my grandfather's past unveiled a world I unconsciously rejected, a memory I never developed. Guided by a certain kind of naivety, I excluded myself, my family, and my relatives from the unpleasantness of the past, before recognizing this history among us. I was unable to understand the life someone had and the decisions someone made; I was unable to find the answers I might be searching for; I was unable to begin a conversation with the person in question—how is one apt to evaluate the situation if this person is represented by a subjective memory and a collection of detrimental documents, unveiling a different truth?

With reluctance, restive conversations about truth, memory, and history evolved between me and my grandmother and between me and my mother. We addressed the ambiguity of my grandfather's life. The conscious choice my grandmother and other relatives took to protect themselves and my grandfather, to not say out loud what this family's past had looked like, shows how present the German history still is, and how it has not been worked through.

These conversations brought to light what only a few were aware of. I felt emotionally torn between my grandmother's and my mother's contrasting memories, the documents, and my perception. The long silence about this matter between me and my mother, between me and my grandmother, and maybe most important between my mother and my grandmother epitomizes the sensitivity and complexity of the subject. The resurgence of a past life and the

unsettling and unexpected dialogue it initiated created multiple potentially unresolvable questions and, on a personal as well as a collective level, demonstrated the urgency to assimilate and test the past, which needs to be comprehended for the purpose of a personal and collective *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

I documented the conversations between me and my grandmother and me and my mother in a three-channel audio-visual installation. The piece is named *Neustadt a.d. Aisch*, after the birthplace of my grandfather. The materials used in this work include original documents from my grandfather's archive, photos, written texts, journal entries, literature, interviews, and conversations.

Immersing myself in the material on such a personal level, I realized how uncomfortable it made me feel. My grandmother, not finding the right words to describe her feelings; my mother, denying the facts that were introduced to her. Very quickly these conversations turned into blaming one another. Talking about National Socialism in the private realm remains taboo.

Using the same visuals with different audio tracks, I establish two narratives around the same topic, attempting to reassess and discuss the past. The audio is transmitted over two sets of headphones, randomly selectable by the viewer. Not only must the viewer choose which audio to begin with, but listening to just one conversation may not be adequate to convey the truth. The installation addresses an inner conflict rather than uncovering facts. It negotiates the ongoing process of emotional confrontations with the past and the present, truth and denial.

After discovering the archive, I asked myself whether I wanted to have this conversation with my family or if it was just too painful to try to work through this past. I felt emotionally conflicted. I was torn between moving on quietly or commencing the examination of the story. It was a hurtful process for everyone involved, a shameful experience, one that I would rather keep hidden. Once it is out, it feels like contracting a disease, something I can't just wash out with pills. It leaves scars. But I decided that this conversation was an inevitable one. It was necessary for many reasons, for the past and for the future. Engaging with a controversial, intricate history of the individual speaks to the collective trauma remaining in German society. The experience of admitting and confessing to this predicament is shared by many German families. This commonality could be used to work through the past, rather than leaving these histories unresolved in isolation.

The examination of the past determines our future. Remembering historical catastrophes challenges us to not get lulled into self-assurance, for memory is a contested space. Looking at the histories and archives prompts us to discover and reflect on what these stories and objects can offer to us in the present. Taking advantage of archivist methods to question the politics of memory and its relation to individual or particular and collective or general minds and use them as the medium to rehabilitate the present is imperative.

Amid the current dynamic generated by right-wing and nationalistic narratives, spaces of memory must be preserved and reassessed. Freedom and democratic structures are not given at any point and need to be secured invariably. Rightist thinking and a progressing polarization of today's German society constitute an existing threat to democratic values. Therefore, we need to remember before there can be a new beginning. Memory is the caretaker of the past; the new beginning is the opening of the future. Memory relies on continuity, while the new beginning relies on rupture. The task of a saving memory is not only to save from oblivion what was once said but also to give voice to what is not said, what is hidden, displaced, kept secret.

* * *

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Notes

¹ The three-channel audio-visual installation can be viewed at <https://scholarship.org/uc/refract>.

² Theodor W. Adorno, "The Meaning of Working through the Past," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, translated by Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 89.

³ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁵ Samuel Salzborn, *Kollektive Unschuld: Die Abwehr der Shoah im deutschen Erinnern* (Leipzig: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2020), 11.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, "Excavation and Memory," in *Selected Writings, 1927–1934*, edited by Marcus Paul Bullock, Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, translated by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 576.

**The Struggle of Memory against Forgetting: Afterlife
and Memorialization of Imagery Surrounding South
Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

Madeleine Bazil

how long does it take
for a voice
to reach another

in this country held bleeding between us

*hoe lang duurt het?
hoe lang voor een stem
de ander bereikt*

in dit land dat zo bloedend tussen ons ligt

—Antjie Krog, *Country of Grief and Grace*
(*Land van genade en verdriet*)

I write love poems, too,
but
you only want to see my mouth torn open in protest,
as if my mouth were a wound

—Koleka Putuma, “Black Joy”

The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.

—Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

Images form much of the basis of our cultural narratives. Those that strike at the nexus of cultural consciousness and visual memorability can “come to represent large swaths of historical experience . . . [acquiring] their own histories of appropriation and commentary.”¹ These exemplary images, which become embedded in the cultural landscape, loaded with significance of an exponentially greater scale than from whence they originated, can be seen to hold value beyond the documentary—witnesses to issues of humanity that surpass the capability of words. Or, as Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites note, they may not. “Perhaps [these images] are important precisely because they are accessible, undemanding images suited to mass-mediated collective memory,” thereby often operating as manufactured representations that reinforce a dominant narrative.² Issues of cultural memory are pertinent to regime changes and their attendant truth and reconciliation initiatives. On both ends of this ideological spectrum, one fact becomes self-evident: that truth commissions are tightly wound up in the social politics of collective memory and the historical perception of events.

South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is a cultural and political event associated with state-managed memory, a reversal or redetermination of narratives—and, as a response to this, it has also become a site for artistic reencounter and reappropriation. Heidi Grunebaum points out that the TRC has come to be portrayed in antipodean and reductive ways: either as a moral victory of “good” (the anti-Apartheid struggle) over “evil” (white supremacy), or as a failed neoliberal experiment giving lip service to the notion of reparations.³ Created by South Africa’s democratically elected Government of National Unity under 1995’s Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, the TRC was intended to reckon with the violence of the apartheid era.⁴ The commission comprised three branches. First, the Human Rights Violations (HRV) Committee sought to investigate human rights abuses that occurred during the apartheid years and to identify victims. Following this, the Reparation and Rehabilitation (R&R) Committee was established to provide support to victims and encourage the formulation of policy proposals and other reparative measures. Finally, the Amnesty Committee accepted applications for requested amnesty from anyone who had committed a politically motivated crime between 1960 and 1994; amnesty would free perpetrators from prosecution for their actions.⁵ The activities of these

committees culminated in an extensive series of hearings throughout the country, presided over by carefully chosen judging panels, in which victims, victims' families, and perpetrators—both of the apartheid regime and of the anti-apartheid struggle—publicly testified on their experiences. Imagery surrounding the hearings, therefore, plays an important role in this memorialization process, participating in and driving conversations surrounding the ambiguities, contradictions, and inadequacies of the TRC.

A number of visual artists produced bodies of work at the end of apartheid and in the transition years in attempts to reckon both with the repercussions of the apartheid state as well as its complicated aftermath and these aforementioned questions of voice, narrative, and dominant paradigms. Many of these works delve into implicit criticism of the TRC's mechanisms and raise concerns about its efficacy and processes. The arts have historically and contemporarily played a central role in reckoning with societal traumas in South Africa.⁶ As Hariman, Lucaites, and Grunebaum suggest, imagery surrounding major societal events is susceptible to functioning as ciphers for a dominant and frequently problematic narrative,⁷ and the narrative surrounding the TRC itself is often characterized in simplistic terms.⁸ It is essential to examine bodies of artistic work that emerged following the hearings, in order to emphasize the work of artists challenging the dominant narrative. There is—as Paul Gready notes—a distinction “between individual truth, which speaks truth to power, and institutional truth, which links truth to power.”⁹ Gready places the TRC unequivocally in the latter category and poses questions about the relationship “between speaking truth to reconciliation and to power.”¹⁰ This is the most common criticism of the TRC, that it centers a specific and convenient dominant narrative paradigm that excludes or overwrites personal narratives and lived experiences which do not align with it. From the contrary perspective, the highly contested nature of the TRC's truth-telling process can be seen as a signifier of the inherently democratic nature of the commission.

This essay investigates how imagery from South Africa's TRC hearings has experienced an afterlife—by which I mean a reinvigorated or reimagined purpose or impact, and their potential to unsettle or alter the memorialization of the TRC over time—and how this afterlife may differ from the images' original values and/or purpose. Focusing specifically on bodies of work produced by the artists Sue Williamson, Jo Ractliffe, Penny Siopis, and Berni Searle, which incorporate such archival elements (whether literal or metaphorical), I examine the extended life of said images beyond that of straightforward media representation of the TRC. I look at how these archival elements have been reappropriated and incorporated into fine-art bodies of work by artists and documentarians working in photography in order to respond to the TRC by participating in and driving conversations surrounding the commission's ambiguities, contradictions, and inadequacies. I argue that in

these bodies of work, the reinterpretation of archival imagery—whether literal or metaphorical—becomes, effectively, a radical act of decentralization: a rejection, or at minimum an investigation, of the dominant paradigms and narratives surrounding the commission and all that it entailed. In doing so, the artists broaden and deepen the conversations around the TRC and its questions, contradictions, nuances, and perceived failings. Through a semiotic analysis of the imagery itself, and analysis of the contextual placement and dissemination of the imagery in both its original and subsequent usages, this research therefore seeks to holistically understand the role of visual media in South Africa’s era of transitional justice and reckoning.

Part 1 focuses on Sue Williamson’s *Truth Games* series and links the cultural moment, her earlier work in activism, and her later artistic work. Part 2 focuses on the piece *Vlakplaas: 2 June 1999 (Drive-By Shooting)*, by Jo Ractliffe. Her work brings to the forefront questions about trauma and its lingering effects, and how trauma survivors continue to be “haunted” by the past.¹¹ Part 3 centers on *Three Essays on Shame*, by Penny Siopis, the dichotomy and overlap between the personal/private sphere and the political/public sphere, and Sigmund Freud’s notion of a “second wounding”—a dredging up of a memory fragment from where it has been buried.¹² Part 4 looks at *Discoloured*, by Berni Searle, homing in on the implications of the piece’s physicality and framing her work within the sociological context of the Coloured community’s heritage and history.¹³

Part 1: Sue Williamson

Madeleine Bazil: Even in trying to be unbiased and be a mediator or a vessel for this conversation, do you think there is a role that the artist plays in shaping it in one direction or another? Like, the choice of making that work—do you think that speaks to one particular side of the argument?

Sue Williamson: I suppose that it does . . . I was trying to be as neutral as I could be, under the circumstances. But obviously, when a policeman says he is a committed Christian, there is an irony in putting that up [in *Truth Games*] as his reason for why he had to kill somebody.

Williamson’s 1998 *Truth Games* series is a prime example of the repurposing of news media imagery from the TRC into a new and critical context. Williamson worked briefly in advertising and copywriting prior to her transition into fine art and social activism,¹⁴ and much of her work is informed by her experience in the businesses of crafting and spinning news. Equally, though, Williamson’s work as an anti-apartheid activist informs her transitional era work. Williamson

recounts: “I had been involved in quite a few of these cases, or at least known about them, for many years through human rights work and general activism. I was really interested to see what was going to come out of the cases and what was going to be said. And it was clear that the whole process of amnesty was the only way that was going to bring the truth out.”¹⁵ Dominique Pen writes that within South Africa, the rise of democracy was a “liminal phase of rebirth for South Africa,” and for artists in particular—this transformative moment calling them “to think critically about their role in post-apartheid society and ways their art might, or if it should, evolve from the so-called ‘resistance art’ that had been at the forefront of the South African artistic scene since the mid-1970s.”¹⁶ This is certainly true for Williamson, who draws inspiration from the nuances of the transitional justice mechanism with just as much clarity and investigative nature as her earlier work does from her activism.

Williamson’s collage series *Truth Games* highlights her varied experience, incorporating archival images from the TRC’s media coverage and reimagining it with a sharp critical eye on the transitional justice system. *Truth Games*, as per Williamson, was borne out of a compulsion to speak on or investigate TRC cases:

I didn’t know how I was going to tackle it . . . I just kept saving newspapers, piles and piles of newspapers, and I would just—every now and again—periodically go through them and cut out everything . . . I knew that something would emerge.¹⁷

The series comprises fifteen pieces, each of which follows the same layout and organizational structure, and each of which features collaged images and text pulled from news reports on particularly high-profile cases heard by the TRC. Every panel follows the same format: from left to right, an image of the victim, the “crime scene,” and the perpetrator. Overlaid atop this are fragments of quotes from further news articles; as Pen describes, these excerpts “can be slid across the faces in the panel so as to foreground the shifting, uncertain nature of recollections and evidence out of which the past is constructed.”¹⁸ The body of work is therefore intentionally interactive; the horizontal slats can be angled, like blinds on a window, to reveal or obscure different facets of the same case. Williamson describes her role in this body of work as that of “an editor, or mediator of received information. I didn’t use anything except what was in the press. I didn’t feel it necessary to go to people and ask them, ‘Is it alright if I use your picture?’ because it was already in the public domain.”¹⁹ The viewer is unable to see both the information and the imagery on a case at any given time—notable given the public domain, news-media, origins of the source materials. How comprehensive, nuanced, or accurate, the pieces seem to ask, is media coverage of the TRC after all? This artistic decision exemplifies the

subjectivity and state of flux in which collective memory of the TRC—like memory of any collective historical event—inevitably must inhabit. In an echo “of the televised montage of the broadcast Truth and Reconciliation Commission sessions . . . [the photographs in *Truth Games*] become as heavy as objects, like blackboards magnifying messages, or like windows concealing familial tragedies.”²⁰ By interacting with the cases, both the artist and the viewer engage in the “circular uncertainty of culpability and injury, fabrications and truth, which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process and participants painfully explored.”²¹

Throughout the series, Williamson’s major preoccupation is the TRC’s focus on “straightforward acts of politically motivated violence rather than broad structural violence” that occurred during the apartheid era.²² Her attention to the subjectivity and fluidity of memory is tightly interwoven with this—after all, to remember an era via the specific events of which it is composed can create a vastly different composite memory than would have emerged if considering the era holistically and on a larger scale. This variability is something of which *Truth Games* is undeniably aware. The artist herself acknowledges that her use of archival imagery speaks to this point: “I like to make work people feel ready to get engaged with, so they don’t just walk past. Lots of images are quite familiar images so I represent them so viewers are seeing something quite familiar to them in a new or different context. In many ways, I am acting as an archivist. I am presenting material in a serious way.”²³ Yet Williamson does not submit to the dominant narrative of the TRC. Rather, as Erin Mosely posits, she actively and radically decenters it—largely by placing the onus of rememorialization on the viewer:

In addition to simply acting as an archivist, however, and facilitating the cultural entrenchment of the TRC hearings, Williamson manages to subtly question the TRC’s legitimacy. By creating a space in which observers become the “authors” of the truth—and moreover by referring to this process of truth-telling as a game—Williamson complicates the very notion of collective truth, emphasizing instead how the TRC produced multiple, and sometimes incompatible or incommensurable, truths.²⁴

Notably, Williamson tends to place the human subjects of the pieces eye-to-eye with each other: pairing the victim (or victim’s relative) of a case alongside—or in some cases facing—the perpetrator. This decentralization of narrative manifests semiotically via the—literally—opposing viewpoints of the artworks’ subjects, and by viewers’ ability to filter or alter their perception of the pieces by manipulating the slats. The effect is adversarial yet intimate—a

tense ballet between individuals who are irrevocably connected—with the human element serving as a stark reminder that these situations are rarely cut-and-dried and never simple. The viewer becomes implicated in the characterization of the cases as represented by the body of work, and forced into being an active participant in the interpretation of events: an act of understanding or contextualizing which is impossible to holistically or objectively conclude.

Even, therefore, as *Truth Games* permits—or even encourages—the viewer to interact with it, the body of work is ultimately inherently unknowable: all sides to the stories being told cannot be simultaneously digested. By disrupting the viewer’s quest for an objective understanding of each case, the series methodically stymies all attempts to draw neat conclusions about an inherently complicated chapter of human nature. Ultimately, *Truth Games* appears to suggest that there exists no objective truth with regard to the TRC and its impact, merely a composite collection of subjective experiences.

Part 2: Jo Ractliffe

My first visit to Vlakplaas undid me. I was utterly unprepared for what I saw—or rather, didn’t see—that the “Vlakplaas” I was looking for was nowhere to be found.

—Jo Ractliffe

Ractliffe’s piece *Vlakplaas: 2 June 1999 (Drive-By Shooting)* was commissioned for the 1999 *Truth Veils* exhibition at the University of the Witwatersrand’s Gertrude Posel Gallery, which was held in collaboration with an academic conference staged at Wits surrounding the TRC’s impact. Within the show, Ractliffe’s series was exhibited in relationship to *Prime Evil*, a 1997 television documentary by Jacques Pauw centered on the notorious farm’s commanding officer Eugene de Kock. Vlakplaas, situated twenty kilometers west of Pretoria, functioned as the headquarters for the apartheid-era South African Police (SAP) counterinsurgency unit; though the unit’s official name was C10 (later changed to C1), it was instead generally known synecdochally as Vlakplaas. Vlakplaas—to a degree not fully revealed to the public until after the end of the apartheid state—operated as a paramilitary hit squad supported by and working under the various knowledge of the apartheid government, and was responsible for the kidnapping and execution of the regime’s political opponents. The farm often acted not merely as the unit’s headquarters but as the location of its assassinations and torture scenarios.²⁵

Through an awareness of her own privilege, Ractliffe is well-positioned to leverage her status as a white woman into a self-reflexive commentary about which factions of South African society are, and are not, affected by

institutional injustice and the subsequent transitional justice measures instituted to correct them. She recounts her first trip to Vlakplaas as startling for the dissonance between the horrifying mythology of the farm and the visual reality that she encountered. “There was nothing but a seemingly innocuous farmhouse, surrounded by a country landscape next to the Hennops River,” remembers Ractliffe. “I went back and shot it with my Holga camera, in two continuous strips of black and white film, on the day of the country’s second democratic elections.”²⁶ Ractliffe then put contact prints of the photographs onto sheets of eight-by-ten-inch photographic paper, with these strips nailed at all four corners into a set of nine black boxes for presentation.²⁷ In their presentation format, the long, horizontal rows of landscape images have the appearance of panorama. Upon a closer look, however, this is not the case; the perceived panorama is in fact constructed of a full roll of various photos that do not add up to a single contiguous image. In some, the edges of a building are visible, peeking out of the side of the frame; others comprise merely trees, fence, rolling pastoral fields. This disrupted pseudo-panorama effect evokes the sense of visual dissonance that so discomfited the artist on her first visit to the site. “The traumatic past,” Shane Graham posits, “cannot be assimilated into memory and consciousness as other events normally are, because the trauma survivor continues to be haunted by the past and is compelled to relive it literally.”²⁸ Considered in this regard, Ractliffe’s relationship to the large-scale trauma of Vlakplaas is striking in its ambivalence. Situated within this work is a keen acknowledgment of her own privilege, as exemplified by her decision to self-reflexively build this work around the sense of detachment that she feels at the site. The title of the piece hints yet further at this, with “drive-by” functioning as a pun signifying her fleeting, passing relationship with Vlakplaas as a place as well as evoking the violent connotation of a drive-by shooting, a nod to the executions that took place there.

Notably, it was not until the TRC hearings that Eugene de Kock’s testimony first shed light on the full and horrifying extent of Vlakplaas’s activities—the details of which had, for the most part, previously been highly classified. By visually manifesting the dichotomy between the farm’s idyllic appearance and, via the distorted panorama effect, the dark underbelly of its true nature, Ractliffe acknowledges the disturbing, antipodean disparities of the apartheid era but also delves deeper into questions about the TRC as a response. The body of work harnesses imagery and language around implicit violence, unseen yet present—the suggestive dual meaning of “drive-by”; the invisible specter of SAP violence—and in doing so, evokes a semiotic register of trauma that adds another layer of subjectivity and interpretation to the viewer’s understanding of events and aftermath. The artwork therefore proposes that, similarly, the TRC itself is also a fragmented reality: composed of a vast spectrum of painful, inconvenient truths that have been marshalled

by state institutions into an unnatural attempt at a cohesive narrative of healing and amnesty.

By recontextualizing imagery of this prominent and significant apartheid-era location within the framework of TRC-related criticism, Ractliffe's work raises questions about the efficacy of the TRC as a whole: prompting the viewer to engage with the way that the politics of privilege and whiteness are reflected and embodied in the artwork semiotically—and to examine the viewer's own relationship to Ractliffe's ambivalence or detachment, and how this too is embodied, in ways similar or dissimilar to the artist. The viewer is therefore situated effectively to investigate the impact of shoehorning into a dominant narrative, and whether to do so can be seen as true justice or merely as a facade. If the latter, the question becomes, is it a valid and valuable stab at accomplishing the impossible task of reparations, or is it a state-sponsored dredging up of wounds for the sake of erasing and overwriting them? Ultimately, *Vlakplaas: 2 June 1999 (Drive-By Shooting)* puts forth a claim as to whom, exactly, the TRC was built to benefit: implicitly positing that those who benefit most from it in embodied or tangible ways may well be those who were least affected by the traumas that begot it.

Part 3: Penny Siopis

Not to allow the apartheid state to use our work . . . For me that was straightforward. What was complicated—and it was not unlike things now in some ways—was how art itself figured in that context. It was a strange moment.

—Penny Siopis

Commissioned by London's Freud Museum, Siopis's 2005 multimedia exhibition *Three Essays on Shame* was created to commemorate the centenary of Freud's famous 1905 "Three Essays on Sexuality" by "grafting present-day South African social circumstances onto Freud's work and milieu,"²⁹ using signifiers from Freud's research and life in order to explore the theme of shame across cultures and contexts. Siopis began her career painting, and by the mid-to late 1990s had begun experimenting with multimedia works and sculptural found-item installations, eventually moving toward the conceptual multimedia pieces that have continued to define her career ever since. Her multimedia works consistently utilize video and audio recordings to engage in juxtaposition of the personal and political, innocent and complicit, private and public; *Three Essays on Shame* further evinces Siopis's interest in the overlap and interplay between these seeming dichotomies. Throughout her career, Siopis's work has consistently held "a tension between materiality and image—[which] coalesces

with her explorations of history, sexuality, race, memory, estrangement, and violence” in her work.³⁰

The exhibition, made up of three essays, or “interventions,” was situated within Freud’s house (the location of the museum). First, in Freud’s study, Siopis streamed seven audio recordings made by South African public figures on the subject of shame, including Antjie Krog (eminent writer; former reporter for the TRC), Edwin Cameron (judge; AIDS and LGBT activist), Fatima Meer (sociology professor; former political detainee under apartheid), and Paul Verryn (bishop of the Methodist Church of Johannesburg; activist priest). The second intervention was set up in Freud’s dining room and constituted a series of “objects, artworks, and film combined to orchestrate a chain of cultural and psychological associations reflecting the psych-sexual state of shame in its broader cultural context.”³¹ The third intervention was made up of Siopis’s paintings situated amid a collection of found objects and personal items belonging to Freud. In building from, and existing in conversation with, Freud’s life and work, Siopis’s body of work draws on a multiplicity of disciplines and schools of psychological as well as artistic thought, ultimately exploring the intricacies of shame as both a sexual and a political concept.

Three Essays on Shame is significant largely for its unflinching engagement with the complexities and horrors of recent South African history; Siopis astutely homes in on the nuance of the TRC and transition era as a time characterized largely, indeed, by shame, stemming from a variety of sources and for a variety of reasons. Siopis’s decision to intersperse archival audio with objects both artistic and historical is a highly intentional visual choice that situates her to raise issues of memory and history: the ways in which they intertwine or are distinct from each other surrounding shame. As she articulates to the *Daily Maverick*, repurposing found film reels allows her to

take what’s in the world and remake something. From something old and obsolete, you make it a new story. . . . I’m not going to film it, it’s already in the world; it already had stories in one form or another. It already comes inscribed with a sort of history and value. Then I find it and I recreate something from its material body.³²

Claire Pajackowska and Ivan Ward point out that this body of work “generates questions of relating political, social practices to the ‘private’ practice of psychoanalysis”; a relationship which is compounded by the placement of the exhibition within Freud’s house—a house that also functioned as an office, thereby further blurring the distinctions between private and public.³³ Likewise, the audio recordings straddle the line between

personal and political; reminiscent at times of confessionals, private thoughts, or intimate conversations, the recordings place the viewer in a position of intentionally uncomfortable voyeurism: the type that elicits secondhand shame in a visceral, embodied way that—crucially—is difficult to articulate semiotically via solely one medium or in a single objective narrative. The incorporation of these audio snippets, therefore, invites the viewer to consider the inevitability of these disparate spheres of personal/private and political/public intersecting, much like the reality of the TRC itself. Siopis expands on this idea, noting that her works on shame are intended to “reflect on the public and psychological state of shame in our current times. However powerfully shame is recognised as part of our human condition it is difficult to represent. Like love, which may be shame’s antidote, it is often only manifest in clichéd and mannered forms.”³⁴ In recordings such as that of Krog, for instance, wherein the writer recounts her experiences sitting in on TRC hearings, these spheres spill into one another to the point of inextricability; the voyeuristic shame of Siopis’s audience melts into the bystander’s shame of Krog, which melts into the shame of long-suffering victims and families who have been made to relive their traumas, which melts into the guilt-ridden collective shame driving the commission itself. The distinctions of public and private, political and personal, become collapsed under the weight of a larger, all-encompassing conversation surrounding the many manifestations of shame that the TRC raises and inhabits.

The inclusion of physical items and the centering of a physical geography (i.e., a home environment and the quotidian trappings of it) is therefore significant, implicating meaning with regard to time and space—taking the conversation around shame out of a vacuum and into reality, and taking the political and rendering it intimately personal. Gerrit Olivier notes that Siopis’s installation works tend to heavily involve the tangible physicality and age of the objects that are incorporated:

The residue of time is shown as much through the differentiated surface textures of each object and the physical making the installation as through the historical biography that could be associated with that object . . . In [Siopis’s] work, the personal is not divorced from the political. Instead . . . the personal and the political are irretrievably intertwined.³⁵

Just as the personal and political are inextricable in Siopis’s work—and the physical with the historiographical—so too is the relationship between traumatic truth and shame. Siopis’s work therefore raises questions of the trauma that both emerges out of and births shame. To this end, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela argues—paraphrased by Marijke van Vuuren—that

“because trauma shatters one’s life narrative . . . fragments are shored against the ruins of one’s life, and these are the images more easily recalled. ‘Deep memory,’ on the other hand, where unspeakable pain lies buried, cannot be accessed without a second wounding.”³⁶ Considerable criticism has been made against the TRC for what some see as the unnecessary dredging up of painful memories; for many individuals and families who were called in to testify about the most traumatic and devastating events of their lives, the visceral pain and shame of recounting and reliving these memories of lost loved ones outweighed the intangible impact of amnesty or collective memorialization that the commission intended. The TRC, in the eyes of its detractors, can then be viewed as this “second wounding” exemplified—an exercise, essentially, in shame.

In pairing personal artifacts belonging to Freud with the equally personal and individualized stories of specific South Africans, and by situating both of these within large-scale allusions and references to philosophical tendencies and the failings of human nature, Siopis renders evident the disparities among personal narratives, as well as between personal and governmental, which apartheid fostered—the painful echoes of which reverberated throughout the transitional justice era. Throughout her practice, Siopis consistently places a focus on what she describes as “the poetics of vulnerability”; SFMOMA sums up this tendency succinctly as one in which the artist challenges memory and seeks to promulgate a counternarrative in opposition to the one instituted by the apartheid regime:

In her films, human vulnerability is given form in fragile images and materials that tell stories about anonymous, everyday people, their lives shaped by political violence and domination. These stories speak also to larger political concerns: to histories of migration, exile, colonialism, and apartheid.³⁷

Adam Yates in the *Daily Maverick* takes a similar interpretation, understanding Siopis’s use of personalized archival audio and visual materials as a way to

demonstrate how one could rewrite a story with archives from their own lives. . . . The narratives conjure up questions about how historical moments are formed through collective memory, and the music introduces the impact of emotions on story recollection. Taken together, the videos, the text, and the music, one is forced to consider whether it’s objective reality or subjective experiences that constitute what they understand as true stories.³⁸

This line of analysis becomes particularly pertinent when considering the decision to include this work in an exhibition centered on the concept, both theoretical and practical, of shame; Siopis's line of questioning and criticism of apartheid can also be applied to the TRC. The disparate elements of the exhibition—these disparities manifested both in content and in form—beg the question: Can South Africans ever agree on a single narrative when it comes to an era or subject matter that is shrouded in such collective shame?

Three Essays on Shame seems to suggest that the answer is no: that much as one person's personal narrative differs from that of another, so too one person's amnesty and forgiveness can serve as another person's "second wounding" or experience of shame. Memory in the post-traumatic imaginary, this body of work appears to posit, may well be disparate, individual, and most certainly nonlinear and/or noncohesive. Ultimately, Siopis appears to argue, such a multiplicity of narrative is not just inherent but moreover useful, even essential—that the only path forward toward a truly healed nation is, in fact, not just one path at all. Rather, there are many.

Part 4: Berni Searle

I think [my work] operates on different levels and reflects different racial and political experiences—but I don't think my pieces are limited by that. I hope they transcend and go beyond that, and provide a space for illusion and fantasy. They reflect a desire to present myself in various ways to counter the image that has been imposed on me. Race is inevitable in South Africa. The self is explored as an ongoing process of construction in time and place. The presence and absence of the body in the work points to the idea that one's identity is not static, and constantly in a state of flux.

—Berni Searle

Searle's *Discoloured* is an installation made up of a group of photographs, each named for a part of the body ("The Palms of the Hands," "The Small of the Back," "The Nape of the Neck," "The Soles of the Feet"). It takes a metonymical approach to rememorializing TRC-related imagery. Like Ractliffe, Searle opts not to use literal archival imagery, instead consciously choosing to invoke the personal, filtering themes of societal and historical heft through the lens of her own lived experience. Rather than repurposing existing imagery, Searle, a Capetonian artist, weaves its motifs and narratives into her own reimagined imagery that evokes it on a metaphorical level.

Within each self-portrait, the eponymous part of the body has been dyed using henna to give the appearance of extensive physical bruising; these body parts are then pressed closely up against glass for the photograph. As a woman of mixed-race, Searle was categorized as "Coloured" under the

delineations of apartheid. In this body of work the artist investigates the parameters and semiotics of identity as determined by external, societal forces as compared/contrasted to a more fluid, personally driven understanding of self.

The title of the series is the first hint at this train of analysis; it is a play on words that alludes to the sense of “othering” and subjugation that the Coloured community experienced under apartheid. Indeed, Mohamed Adhikari points out that the conversation of family history and identity is a sensitive one in many Coloured families, who felt pressured under apartheid to assimilate as much as possible to a system that applied a proportional value judgment to skin color.³⁹ The physicality of the body pressed against glass throughout the photographs, like the title of the piece, alludes to “the idea of deploying pseudo-scientific categorizations to construct identities”;⁴⁰ Coombes posits that this is a visual reference to the concept of scientific specimens or medical investigation—in this case, as Brenda Schmahmann writes, speaking to “an apartheid history in which degrees of pigmentation in the skin could . . . position people socially in positions of privilege or lack thereof.”⁴¹ Moreover, the viewer has not asked to be granted this intimate access, and so the proximity and vulnerability that Searle imposes on the viewer is discomfiting.

Visually, the glass effect not only speaks to the racial and social categorization that apartheid promoted but also evokes the sense of scrutiny that women suffered within TRC courtrooms. Kim Miller writes:

As a body positioned uncomfortably beneath glass, it appears as if this violated body is being manipulated and scrutinised even further, increasing the physical pain and the psychological detachment of the subject. Here, as Searle alludes to the re-victimization that many women experience during courtroom testimony, she makes a reference to the uncomfortable environment of the TRC for survivors of sex crimes.⁴²

Gobodo-Madikizela’s notion of the “second wounding” is crucial here: helping us see that *Discoloured* raises the possibility that the intense scrutiny of the TRC ultimately added insult to injury, rather than provided healing, for the surviving—mainly female—family members of victims. Arguably, this second wounding ought also to be understood in Searle’s body of work as a manifestation of compounded violence rather than separate wounds. The second wounding is exponential: layered with both the interlinked traumas of experience and of revisited memory, and additionally with the trauma of oppression as a member of not one but two marginalized groups.

Searle takes her exploration into the implications of gender in identity politics and dehumanization a step further, and this becomes evident when the viewer considers the bruising that is key to the images. Schmahmann explains that not only is the title *Discoloured*, an invocation of the “complexities surrounding the nomenclature ‘Coloured,’ and the bruising therefore suggestive of metaphorical injury or psychic pain, the discolouration of skin may additionally be read ‘as testimony to acts of torture suffered by political detainees.’”⁴³ It is therefore no coincidence that the body parts on which Searle chooses to focus are ones “most commonly associated with tenderness and intimacy”: the neck, the small of the back, and so on.⁴⁴ This intimate glimpse is not sensual, however, but instead seeks to force the viewer’s hand into a voyeuristic and violent gaze when confronted with distorted, discolored bruising. This is a politicized act—one that both alludes to the gender-based physical and ideological violence which women of colour suffered under the apartheid regime but also recalls and honors the “black South African women who . . . have used their bodies to protest aggression, violence, and oppression.”⁴⁵ In applying a self-reflexive gaze, and forcing an embodied encounter, *Discoloured* is a reclamation of control over—in the words of Tiffany Lethabo King—“the black body as an object of inquiry” or as a site of desire, discomfort, and/or disembodied interest by white or nonblack viewers.⁴⁶

Searle’s decision to create this work specifically for *Truth Veils* can, then, be interpreted as a commentary on the TRC’s inadequacy in addressing or adequately making reparations for the human rights abuses that women underwent during apartheid. Miller elaborates further on this, arguing that the heavily bruised feet allude to “a crippling torture technique frequently used by the apartheid police: forcing political prisoners to stand for hours, even days at a time on rock-hard surfaces,” and that the bruises and swelling on the lower back and elsewhere imply violent sexual assault, or the physical abuse suffered by pregnant activists during the struggle.⁴⁷ On the whole, *Discoloured* puts forth a visceral glimpse of the residual and embodied trauma of apartheid’s institutional violence and subjugation and applies a critical feminist eye to the TRC’s approaches in reckoning with the past. By opting to (literally) zoom in on a site of compounded trauma rather than to offer a path forward, the body of work takes a distinctly radical stance that is both awake to the flaws in the TRC within the post-traumatic paradigm as well as sharply critical of the commission’s dominant narrative of amnesty.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most significant commonality that these bodies of work by Williamson, Ractliffe, Siopis, and Searle share is their keen sense of self-

reflexivity—all four engage in a self-conscious commentary on the TRC and the impacts of the apartheid regime through the lens of their own personal experiences, privileges, oppressions, and situations. In differing ways, their works touch on the same central criticism of the TRC’s functionality: the idea that it revictimized or rewounded those who had already experienced significant trauma, or that the commission’s focus on amnesty was not universally sufficient or beneficial. These pieces of art speak to pertinent questions: whether and how individuals had the space to voice opinions or lived experiences surrounding the TRC without pressure or obligation to align with the dominant state-endorsed paradigm; to what extent the discourse about the TRC’s efficacy is a sign of its democratic nature or of its inadequacy; and whether truth, subjective as it is, can be composed of many layers of kaleidoscopically different and valid perspectives. To these questions, none of the artists offer a conclusive answer, solution, or path—nor can they. Instead, they hold up a self-reflexive mirror to their own lived experiences and interactions with South Africa’s transitional justice mechanism, navigating the gray area of the TRC’s efficacy through the self-aware lens of their own experiences and perceptions.

All four artists, in their differing ways, deal in the knowledge that truth commissions are heavily intertwined with how a collective society or state remembers and historically contextualizes an “event” like the TRC and the apartheid regime before it. As such, the four artists call into question and destabilize the dominant or state-sponsored narratives surrounding the TRC and its impact via the reimagination of archival imagery. Through this, they investigate the impact of eliciting an embodied or semiotic response from viewers, offering an alternative mechanism for acknowledging and processing the nuances, perspectives, and traumas of the past—filling in where the official commission has proved inadequate or incapable of doing so. These bodies of work therefore not only revise the viewer’s perspective on the TRC and its framework for truth but provide and model new ways to relate to this history as well as new, embodied ways to conceive of truth at large.

* * *

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Notes

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- ³ Heidi Grunebaum, *Memorializing the Past: Everyday Life in South Africa after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 1, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203785836>.
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²⁶ “1999, Jo Ractliffe, Vlakplaas: 2 June 1999 (Drive-by Shooting),” Stevenson, accessed May 2019, http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/ractliffe/index_vlakplaas.html.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Graham, “Truth Commission,” 13.

²⁹ *Three Essays on Shame*, Freud Museum London, October 30, 2018, <https://www.freud.org.uk/exhibitions/penny-siopis-three-essays-on-shame/>.

³⁰ Penny Siopis, “*A Painting Looks*,” Stevenson Gallery, Frieze London, 2016, <https://www.stevenson.info/sites/default/files/Penny%20Siopis%20A%20Painting%20Looks%20-%20Frieze%20London%20-%202016%20-%202016%20September%202016.pdf>.

³¹ *Three Essays on Shame*.

³² Adam Yates, “In New Exhibit Penny Siopis Rescues Lost Histories,” *Daily Maverick*, May 10, 2018, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2018-05-10-in-new-exhibit-penny-siopis-rescues-lost-histories/>.

³³ Claire Pajaczkowska and Ivan Ward, eds., *Shame and Sexuality: Psychoanalysis and Visual Culture* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315787626>.

³⁴ Derek Hook, Critique of “*Truth Veils*” at the Gertrude Posel and Market Theatre Galleries, ArtThrob, 2019, <https://artthrob.co.za/99july/listings2.htm>.

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³⁶ Van Vuuren, “Truth of Wounded Memories,” 51.

³⁷ *This Is a True Story: Short Films by Penny Siopis*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2013, <https://www.sfmoma.org/event/this-is-a-true-story-short-films-by-penny-siopis/>.

³⁸ Yates, "In New Exhibit Penny Siopis Rescues Lost Histories."

³⁹ Adhikari, "Hope, Fear, Shame, Frustration."

⁴⁰ Brenda Schmahmann, "Bodily Issues as Subject Matter: Abjection in the Works of Penny Siopis and Berni Searle," in *Expressions of the Body: Representations in African Text and Image*, edited by C. Baker (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 114.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴² Kim Miller, "Trauma, Testimony, and Truth: Contemporary South African Artists Speak," *African Arts* 38, no. 3 (2005): 49, <https://www.jstor.org/oca.ucsc.edu/stable/3345922>.

⁴³ Schmahmann, "Bodily Issues as Subject Matter," 112.

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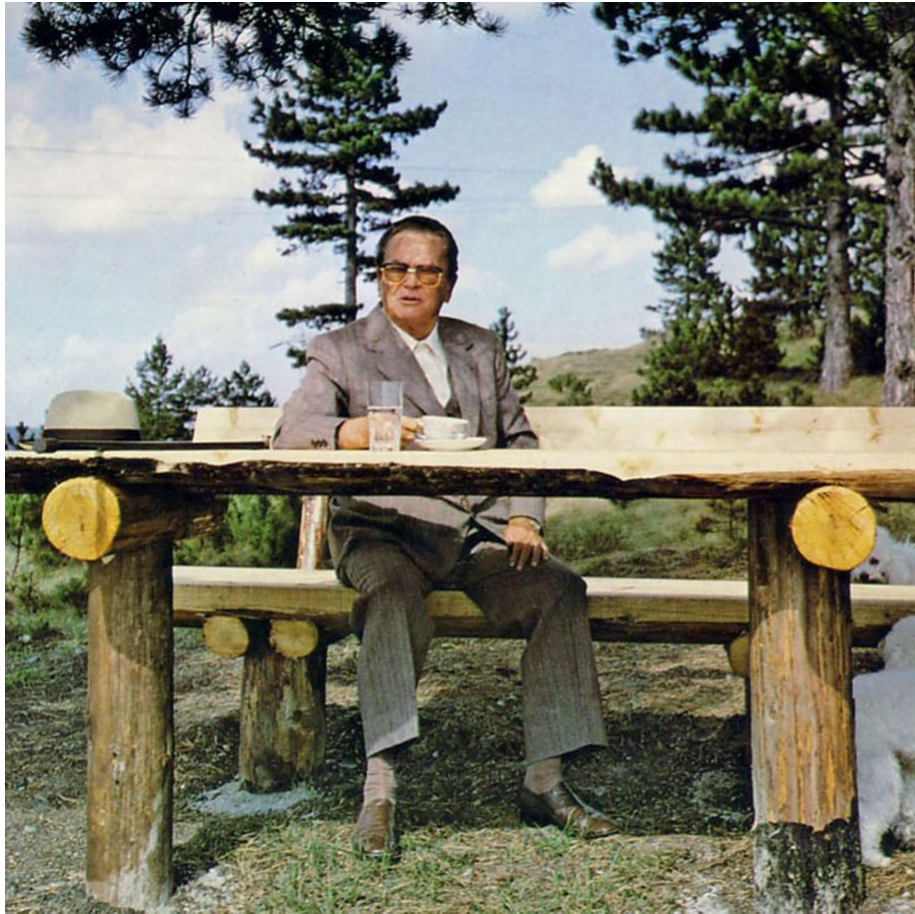
⁴⁶ Tiffany Lethabo King, "Off Littorality (Shoal 1.0): Black Study Off the Shores of 'the Black Body,'" *Propter Nos* 3 (2019): 42.

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***Tito/Tata*: Fiction and Factuality in Documentary Photographs of the
Father Figure in Communist Yugoslavia**

Paula Muhr























All images above: Paula Muhr, from the series Tito/Tata, 2008. Courtesy of the artist, photographers unknown.

None of the photographs that constitute my work *Tito/Tata* were taken by me. In fact, most of the photographs included in this work were taken by anonymous individuals, people I have never met. Moreover, these images document events that had taken place long before I was even born or that I was too young to remember. Yet both men whose moments of purported glory and social importance were captured in these photographs had fundamentally shaped my childhood. In fact, both men embodied two symbolically always present but physically perpetually absent patriarchal figures. The first, Josip Broz Tito, was the founder and “president for life” of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), the country where I was born and grew up and whose violent dissolution in the early 1990s I reluctantly witnessed. The second is my now-retired father (Serbian: tata), the former general manager of one of the largest Yugoslav state-owned confectionary factories, conveniently named Pionir (English: pioneer).

Tito died on May 4, 1980, when I was three years old. Despite this, photographs of him were everywhere as I was growing up. They hung prominently in every official building as well as quite a few private homes. They were also printed on the first page of all my schoolbooks. Even more confusingly, year after year, we sang songs about Tito at school (“Comrade Tito, you white violet, the whole youth loves you”) and were instructed to pledge allegiance to him as if he had still been alive. At the age of six, during my first school year, I was inducted as one of Tito’s pioneers and received a red scarf and a blue hat with a red star on the front. According to the gender norms of the time, and to my endless chagrin, as Tito’s pioneer I was also expected to appear at official school events wearing a white blouse and a dark blue skirt. At that point, becoming Tito’s pioneer was not a matter of personal choice, as it was still considered obligatory. In fact, becoming a pioneer was the first official preparatory step toward becoming a future member of the Yugoslav Communist Party, which for those who became adults in the early 1980s was equally obligatory.¹

During most of my childhood, in a curious parallel to Tito, my own father was a similarly spectral presence. I hardly ever had any contact with him; he was constantly away on some business trip or in an important meeting. Or, perhaps more mundanely, when not busy, he failed to find time for me because he was currently divorced from my mother (they divorced each other altogether three times.) But in my hometown, my father was an important public figure. Thus wherever I went, people seemed to know my father and could not stop talking about him. And although I rarely saw him in person, I kept seeing his pictures and reading about him in the local

newspapers. The public sphere and private life strangely intermingled throughout my childhood, as I kept growing up surrounded by images of Tito and “Tata,” as I used to call my father.

Many years later, while I was living in a different country as a practising visual artist, I decided to revisit the images of the two absent men who had informed my childhood. As a child, I had taken these images for granted. Having been surrounded by them and repeatedly exposed to them ever since I can remember, I had perceived these images naively as mere windows into the lives of the two men who had otherwise eluded me. As a child, I looked at the image and had the impression that I was partaking in the events that were beyond my reach except through the photographs. Owing to these photographs, both Tito, as the father of our country (or so I was told), and my absent father felt less distant, less out of reach. As a child, I viewed these photographs as apparently authentic records of the reality to which I had no alternative access. As long as I viewed them in this way, I never considered the images’ formal qualities or asked myself how their visual makeup and iconography may have affected me while I was growing up. All of this changed when I decided to actively and critically engage with these images to create the work I titled *Tito/Tata*.

The individual images I used as source material for my work *Tito/Tata* come from various sources. Images of Tito were primarily taken from the internet, where I found them posted on various blogs and chat forums, in most cases without any accompanying information about their provenance.² Searching for images of Tito, I visited various websites that, in one form or another, dealt with Yugonostalgia. Broadly “defined as nostalgia for the fantasies associated with a country, the SFRY, which existed from 1945 to 1991,” Yugonostalgia is inevitably intertwined with nostalgic fantasies about Tito.³

By contrast, the images of my father were culled from his private photo album. Yet, like photographs of Tito, all images of my father were documentary photographs of official events in which my father took part as the general manager of a large and strategically important factory. To be more exact, these images were taken by various photographers hired by and paid for by Pionir and were used by the factory’s PR department as well as sent to the local press. Although they were initially intended for public purposes, the images of my father in his role as the general manager ended up in our private family album for two reasons. The first was that my father always received a copy of the photographs taken of him in his official capacity as the general manager of Pionir. The second was that there were almost no images of my father participating in our private family events. Thus the official images of my father as the general manager were imported

into our family album to fill in the visual gap left by the conspicuous absence of his private images as a family man.

Hence, although one set of images (of Tito) stem from the internet and the other set (of “Tata”) from a private photo album, both sources can be termed as informal archives. There was no designated historian, art historian, archivist, editor, curator, or even a censor, who selected, catalogued, classified, and systematised these images. For reasons they left undisclosed, internet users chose to upload some images of Tito and to ignore others. Google’s search engine led me to some websites while omitting others. For reasons probably not known even to herself, over the years my mother threw away some images of my father while keeping others. Even my father, while perennially moving in and out of our family home, managed to lose some of the images that documented what he perceives as his “golden past.” Therefore, the fact that I have come across particular images of both Tito and Tata as opposed to others that remained beyond my reach was entirely accidental, or better yet, serendipitous. Notably, both the randomness of their selection and the informal character of their original sources are reflected in the poor technical quality of the images that I have collected over the years. Pixels and other digital artefacts are apparent in the enlarged images of Tito, while the large scratches and usage marks are evidence of the wear and tear of my father’s photos.

However, despite my decision to retain the visible marks of their vernacular origin, by selecting the particular photographs out of the larger collection and then bringing them in relation to one another, I do not aim to emphasise their purported documentary character. In other words, I am not treating any of these images as authentic “pictorial evidence” of things as they were.⁴ Instead, in pairing the photographs of Tito with those of my father, although these were often taken years or even decades apart, I am following a different agenda. Just as importantly, whereas the range of individual images in my personal collection was largely governed by chance, my pairing of particular images is neither random nor arbitrary. Instead, my carefully constructed juxtapositions of the archival material aim to disclose striking formal similarities in the framing and the posturing of both Tito’s and my father’s bodies in the respective photographs. Such resemblances, so I argue, point to the underlying stereotypes that have influenced how powerful men had been photographed in communist Yugoslavia. The fact that these photographs spanned decades and had been taken by many different individuals suggests that the similarities were not intentional but an expression of what Walter Benjamin had pertinently termed “the optical unconscious.”⁵ Admittedly, the optical unconscious is a vexingly elusive concept whose definitions kept changing across Benjamin’s oeuvre.⁶ Yet broadly speaking, and this is the definition used here, the optical unconscious

encompasses “all that is not consciously controlled in the making, circulation, and viewing of photographs, the contingency involved in the production and consumption of images, as well as the unexamined motivations and effects of this technology’s pervasive spread.”⁷ And, based on the careful scrutiny and visual analysis of the numerous photographic images of Tito and my father, it appears to me that, in this particular context, the optical unconscious operated at two distinct levels.

First, the optical unconscious structured how powerful male figures—from the head of the nation (Tito) to the head of a large factory (my father)—gestured and presented themselves to the photographic camera of whose unavoidable presence at any official event they were keenly aware. Second, the optical unconscious also influenced how various photographers across decades chose at which specific moments to capture powerful male figures and how to frame them in relation to their surroundings. In other words, I suggest that the optical unconscious consisted in implicit visual codes of which neither the individuals who repeatedly reenacted the role of patriarchal masculinity in front of the camera nor photographers who documented and thus perpetuated these reenactments in the form of reproducible two-dimensional images were entirely aware.

Yet these unconscious visual codes did not just fundamentally shape the behaviour of the individual actors—both the powerful men and their photographers. Instead, through the resulting stream of images disseminated in the local and national press, these codes also substantially informed the collective perception of patriarchal masculinity. Thus both in their elevated (Tito) and more local (my father) versions, such images effectively cocreated and perpetuated the shared unconscious fantasy of an authoritarian yet also lovable and loving father figure who presided over our personal and collective safety. The unspoken and unspeakable undercurrent of this essentially infantile fantasy was the perpetual fear of a future without the father figure and his purported protection or, simply put, the fear of having to grow up. The images thus not only glorified the all-around presence of the powerful father who always watched over us but also implicitly nurtured the fear of losing him. Just as importantly, these images cultivated the kind of a docile spectator who approached them uncritically with childlike admiration and unconditional love for the father figure that they represented. Such an intended spectator, and I as a child unknowingly and wholeheartedly occupied this role, necessarily remained oblivious to the optical unconscious content of these images.

The optical unconscious, in the sense that I have delineated above, informed every single image in my work *Tito/Tata*. Nevertheless, even for a less docile spectator than I was as a child, the presence of the optical unconscious content is not immediately apparent in any of the single

photographs of either Tito or my father when these are viewed in isolation. Instead, the shared unconscious visual codes of the patriarchal masculinity become fully visible only through my intervention of carefully selecting and then repetitively pairing particular photographs of Tito and my father. It is the repeated juxtaposition that reveals the visually formulaic nature of these purportedly transparent documentary images. The pairing also uncovers an almost comical element of the images' implicit theatricality. Moreover, this particular arrangement of images allows me to foreground the uncannily repetitive character of the two men's gestures and postures. In doing so, I open up these images to a variety of possible interpretations, none of which were initially intended by their producers and original users. Admittedly, the intervention of pairing is seemingly minimal, as it changes neither the content nor the visual makeup of the individual images. But nevertheless, my intervention has a transformative semantic effect, as it subverts the purported uniqueness and factual authenticity of these images. It does so by unseating the images' intended aura, that is, "the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be."⁸ In fact, through the juxtaposition of the individual images, the seductively "auratic appearance" of the powerful male figure is revealed to be a mere pose.⁹

Hence, to an observer of *Tito/Tata*, more than actual photographic documents of a bygone era, the paired images may appear as highly artificial, fictional scenarios enacted with slight variations by two different actors. Another observer may even detect that, when viewed as a whole, the series of the paired images seems to reveal that the two main actors are caught up in a relentless compulsion to obsessively perform the same gestures across different contexts. Or to borrow Sigmund Freud's words, both men appear unable to break free from rhythmically repeating their performance in front of the camera "with wearisome monotony" that keeps them "isolated from other actions."¹⁰ Yet another observer might suggest that far more than documenting particular historical events, the paired images, in fact, visually embody the oppressive and fundamentally contradictory fantasy of the omnipotent yet benevolent patriarchal figure. And who is to say that such observers would be wrong? Even when reflected in purportedly factual documentary photographs of that era, one's memories of childhood might, in retrospect, appear stranger than any fiction.

* * *

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Notes

¹ For a detailed analysis of how becoming Tito’s pioneer necessarily entailed an initiation into the ideological values of the Communist Party, which were imparted to schoolchildren by their teachers, see Ildiko Erdei, “‘The Happy Child’ as an Icon of Socialist Transformation: Yugoslavia’s Pioneer Organization,” in *Ideologies and National Identities: The Case of Twentieth-Century Southeastern Europe*, edited by John Lampe and Mark Mazower (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2006), 154–79.

² Consequently, for many of the photographs of Tito from my personal collection, I have no direct provenance information. If you are the photographer of these works, or know who the photographer is, I would love to gather this information. For all images captioned “photographer unknown,” I welcome any additional background information.

³ Nicole Lindstrom, “Yugonostalgia: Restorative and Reflective Nostalgia in Former Yugoslavia,” *East Central Europe* 32, no. 1 (2005): 229, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1876330805X00108>.

⁴ Ian Walker, “‘Things as They Are’: The Problematic Possibilities of Documentary,” in *A Companion to Photography*, edited by Stephen Bull (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), 371, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118598764>.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography” (1931), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol. 2, 1927–1934*, translated by Rodney Livingstone et al., edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 511–12. See also Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (1936), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol. 3, 1931–1938*,

translated by Rodney Livingstone et al., edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 117–18.

⁶ For an overview of this concept’s multiple meanings, see Shawn Michelle Smith and Sharon Sliwinski, introduction to *Photography and the Optical Unconscious*, edited by Shawn Michelle Smith and Sharon Sliwinski (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 1–31, esp. 4–9,

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⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸ Benjamin, “Little History,” 518.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 517.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, “General Theory of the Neuroses (1917 [1916–17]),” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 16, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis: Part 3 (1916–1917)*, translated and edited by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 270.

The Somatic and Textural Language of Patricia Belli: Recrafting Social and Political Bodies in 1990s Nicaragua

Lesdi C. Goussen Robleto

Different from a scar on skin, that can surge from automatic mechanisms of the body, the scars on fabric evidence a conscious and voluntary restoration. This was crucial in my investigation: the conscious decision to heal.

—Patricia Belli

In 1996, the contemporary Nicaraguan artist Patricia Belli showcased her textile assemblage *Femalia* (Fig. 1), made the same year, in the exhibition *MESOTICA II: Centroamérica/re-generación* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San José, Costa Rica.¹ Curated by the Costa Rican artist and curator Virginia Pérez-Ratton, and the Nicaraguan artist Ronaldo Castellón, *MESOTICA II: Centroamérica/re-generación*, mediated on the idea of regeneration, following the aftermath of the Central American Crisis, which lasted from the 1970s through the 1990s.² Made from the remnants of a secondhand dress, Belli's *Femalia* brings together fragments of pink, georgette fabric that are stretched and stitched onto the armature of a wooden frame—replacing the traditionally white, gessoed canvas with the exposed folds of an unstitched garment. Across the composition, Belli punctuates the surface with



Figure 1 Patricia Belli, Femalia, 1996, secondhand dress on wooden frame, 39.76 × 30.11 in (101 × 76.5 cm), Artists Collection. Courtesy of TEOR/éTica. Photographed by Daniela Morales Lisac.

tight stitches that create a constellation of textures that take shape through a series of wrinkles and folds—mirroring topographies of the body, and more specifically, genitalia. In certain passages, *Femalia* evokes the fleshy slits of vaginal openings, punctuated by the delicate wrinkles of cascading labia—yet around tight stitches, where the fabric puckers and pulls, the composition morphs from vaginal folds into scapes of mutilated skin. Along these textures, stitches blur into sutures, where the corporeal labor of healing is made evident through fibrous lesions that resemble scars.

In all of its somatic provocations, *Femalia* challenges how we read the body against the textures of gender constructions and trauma. By manipulating the delicate qualities of georgette, Belli unravels demure notions of femininity by remaking a dress into a tapestry of unruly textures. Through references to skin and body parts, the work exposes the multiplicity of the body and its relationship to the indeterminacy of subjectivity. Set against the postwar context of Nicaragua, *Femalia* also becomes entangled with the mutilated social and political body of the country, revealing the fragile physicality of healing in the aftermath of war. By engaging these multiple registers, the work allows us to consider how the body is implicated in corporeal, social, and political discourses that condition subjectivity—and how these entanglements reveal the intimacies of postwar aesthetics.

Working within these affective folds, Belli's work centers the body, and the textures of everyday objects, such as clothes, to locate alternative modes of expression and documentation that reimagine the possibilities of art making as a radical act. In the context of *MESOTICA II*, her work speaks to a counter-archive that gives form to repertoires of artistic practice that exist outside official discourses of Central American art and expand heteropatriarchal archives that shape collective memory production in the region.³ As the performance theorist Diana Taylor writes, "The repertoire . . . enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge."⁴ Extending beyond the archive, the repertoire emerges as a feminized space that refutes containment, creating a rupture in the archive that unravels into possibility. Spinning out of these unravelings, *Femalia* provide us an entry point into the textural space of the repertoire, offering us threads through which to theorize within feminine—and feminist margins.

Building on a framework of regeneration offered by *MESOTICA II*, this essay lingers on material and somatic qualities that condition the corporeal, political, and social labor of healing and regeneration present in Belli's textile assemblages from 1990s. Throughout the essay, I am interested in how Belli performs feminine disidentifications with materials and practices that have been gendered, or otherwise feminized, to give form to the precarity and fragility of trauma—both

embodied and externalized. Through her works, I also consider Belli's desire to engage and undo constructions of femininity and the containment of bodies through the disciplining of subjectivity. In the context of Nicaragua, which is dominated by a *machista* culture that casts women as feminine, docile, and submissive, I am particularly interested in her refusal to conform to gender normativity by unraveling the feminine. To think through these gestures, I turn to José Esteban Muñoz's formulation of disidentification to explore how Belli performs feminine disidentifications that rework the codes of femininity to make room for the unruly and undisciplined. By tending to the textures of her works, I go on to argue that textile is codified as an affectual medium—emerging as an archive of memories that documents the experiences endured by personal and collective bodies, allowing us to tap into repertoires that exist beyond the archive. The material and ideological residues of textiles also speak to asymmetrical power relations between Nicaragua and the United States, as clothes circulate through networks of foreign aid that are shadowed by the histories of foreign intervention and economic blocking. Ultimately, I propose that Belli's textile assemblages initiate a somatic language that reworks gendered materialities into fluid and capacious textures, giving rise to undisciplined subject formations that directly respond to social and political realities during this period.

Unravelings in the Aesthetic Field

Having studied in the United States during the peak of the US-backed Contra Wars, Belli returned to Nicaragua in 1986 and quickly became a leading force in a rising cohort of visual artists in the country. This radical group challenged the masculinist revolutionary ideologies and aesthetic militancy of the generation before—exemplified primarily by artists' groups such as Praxis and Gradas.⁵ Coming out of a shared desire to “speak out” and “speak back” to the revolution, this group of artists mobilized their work to critique political and social life and expose the mechanisms of control and unofficial censorship that had been disguised through Sandinista ideologies of liberation.⁶ Referring to this group as the “other generation” in an essay titled “The Nineties in Nicaragua,” the cultural theorist and artist Raul Quintanilla writes:

No one wants to remember the revolution anymore. Not even the commanders who ended up burying their hearts in the enemy's mountain. . . . For what it's worth, it did happen. The revolution I

mean. It was when this new generation of artists, who came of age in the late nineties, got to work.⁷

Remarking on the temporal disjuncture separating the (failed) love for patria upheld by the commanders from the “work” that this new generation embarked on, he goes on to state,

[This] eclectic group is connected through light-hearted critical and conceptual approaches, instead of any homogenizing or thematic concern (ranging from drawing to installations and performance on the one hand, and from openly political speech to subtle psychological hints on the other).⁸

In 1990, many members of this “new generation” would consolidate into a collective called ArteFacto, pioneering an experimental and pedagogical component known as ArteFactoría. Working in tandem, the two entities were committed to radical aesthetic experiments that would upset and transform the status quo. As Quintanilla notes, the plurality of practices showcased by this group shed light onto a shared interest in exploring new materialities and strategies for intervention, without adhering to the rubric of a consolidated movement. At tension with the idyllic vision of the Sandinista Revolution and its unitarian rhetoric that hinged on the active militancy and collapsed differences of its constituents, artists working within ArteFacto showcased a vision of multiplicity that undermined the monolithic ideologies of unity and coalition posited by the radical Left at a time when the social and political tapestry of the country was coming undone.

While Belli had been working primarily as a painter after returning to Nicaragua, she began to experiment with other media in the late 1980s—a shift that would become more pronounced in the mid-1990s, when she began to construct a series of textile assemblages. Remarking on this transition, she states, “due to circumstances that affected me profoundly, the pictorial language that I had developed during those years, which was figurative and symbolic, no longer served me for expressing the emotions and ideas that inhabited me.”⁹ Replacing the pictorial with the material, Belli calls our attention to the relationship between feelings and the affectual quality of certain materialities. Turning to textiles, and specifically clothing, she begins to develop a textural language that finds form at the intersection between textiles and the body. Sourcing secondhand clothes imported from the United States to thrift stores in Managua, she explores and experiments with a variety of ready-made garments by disassembling, ripping, tearing, folding, and re-crafting them into new forms. Accounting for the many encoded meanings that

clothes, and especially secondhand garments, inherently carry, she states, “I knew of its relationship with skin, with the histories of other people, with my own history, but I did not want to determine a narrative, instead I wanted something to happen to me in the process, to encounter surprises.”¹⁰ Guided by intuition and her rudimentary knowledge of sewing by hand, which she learned from her mother who was a seamstress, she created textile assemblages by stretching and sewing fabric onto wooden frames. Drawing on a maternal repertoire rooted in the practice of sewing, Belli develops her own somatic language to find expression at the nexus of social, political, and personal transitions. Throughout the 1990s, she experimented with textiles and garment pieces to create textural works that are reminiscent of the body. Through her works, Belli homes in on the body to unravel tidily discourses surrounding gender, sexuality, and the feminine, more broadly.

Recrafting Bodies

Thinking about the relationship between materiality, texture, and constructions of gender, Belli becomes particularly interested in working with georgette fabric for its association with femininity. As she notes, “The clothes that are made with georgette are mainly women’s blouses and dresses, which was important in my imaginary because I used them during a period in which I began to construct my political positions in regard to gender, based on the experiences of my sexuality and maternity.”¹¹ Piercing through the somatic and semiotic registers that are evoked by garments made with georgette fabric, Belli constructs a politic around textile that allows her to explore and critique the heteronormativity of textiles-turned-garments, and the ways in which garments become a disciplining and pedagogical tool for conditioning feminized subjectivities. As I explored earlier, we see this in works like *Femalia*, where Belli exploits the feminine codes of a once-worn, pink georgette dress into an unruly tapestry of excessive folds that return us to the body. Even more, Belli homes in on the epidermic qualities of georgette by bringing the viewer’s attention to its semitranslucent and supple materiality that mirrors the elasticity of skin. Once gendered through the form of a garment, Belli recrafts georgette to reveal the tension between feminine and feminized experiences by relocating the body within these discourses. Through this gesture of recodification, Belli recalls the ways in which the queer theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz discusses the strategy of disidentification, “by work[ing] on and against dominant ideology”—in this case, the ideology of clothes, bodies, as well as feminine and feminized subjectivities.¹² As Muñoz tells us, “Disidentification does not dispel . . . ideological contradictory elements; rather . . . a disidentifying subjects works to

hold on to this object and invest it with new life.”¹³ Doing just that, Belli reworks georgette to imbue it with new meaning, new significations, and associations that are otherwise working against the grain of its normative markers. In this deconstructed state, *Femalia* recuperates and remakes the body (through fabric) into a site of somatic and textural signification that moves beyond imposed containers and forms.

Like *Femalia*, her textile assemblages from the 1990s continue to engage the body to document feminized experiences. Writing about her work, the curator Miguel A. López notes that “representations of cut extremities . . . explore the implications of inhabiting a body, and the angst, shame, and inadequateness that it entails at different life stages.”¹⁴ These themes are further exacerbated by the fact that Belli was born with atrichosis—a condition that marks the absence of hair on the body.¹⁵ By evidencing her own experiences through the abstract and somatic language of textiles, the artist gives visibility to internalizations that entrap women into feeling inadequate due to the construction of gender and gender roles in society. As López writes, “Her work is clearly conscious of what it means to live in a woman’s body in a patriarchal and sexist society.”¹⁶ Even more, her work contends with “the western hegemonic norm, which regards a woman’s long hair as a form of verifying what a healthy, desirable, female, heterosexual body should be.”¹⁷ Through her refutation of femininity, Belli works to remake the feminine into an expansive field that moves beyond the container of gender normativity. These interventions are exemplified by the ways in which Belli utilizes fiber to texturize lived experience, working with threads to mediate between the personal and collective. With this context in mind, we come to see how the feminine becomes a subversive site of activation in Belli’s work, where she performs feminine disidentifications that reclaim the feminine as an unruly and undisciplined force.

Made the same year as *Femalia*, *La Columna Rota (The Broken Spine)* (Fig. 2) gives material contours to the crippling weight of patriarchal and sexist pressures as they take hold of the body. Through its construction, the work alludes to the malleability of the body as it endures and even transforms, despite societal pressures—leaving room for possibility and desire. The work is made from a series of clasped hooks taken from brassieres and women’s shapewear that are stitched along a vertical axis to create the effect of a meandering spinal cord that appears fractured and disfigured. Through billowing folds that run down the composition, an overlay of cream and dusky pink fabrics creates a constellation of textures and dimensions that pucker and wrinkle across the surface. At the top of the work, an inverted brassiere is suspended across the frame, orienting the viewer’s perspective to read the work in accordance with the structural logics of the human body.



Figure 2 Patricia Belli, La Columna Rota, 1996, brassieres, corsets, and secondhand dresses on wooden frame, 37 × 26.7 in (94 × 68 cm), Artists Collection. Courtesy of TEOR/éTica. Photographed by Daniela Morales Lisac.

Through its title and textile references, *La Columna Rota* gestures to Frida Kahlo's *The Broken Column* from 1944. In this arduous self-portrait, Kahlo depicts herself nude in order to expose the nails pierced into her body as she stands against a barren landscape wearing a fabric-lined metal corset that both constrains and supports her. Running down the axis of her torso, an almost shattered and broken column stands in for her spine. Painted shortly after a spinal surgery, the composition alludes to the constant pain that afflicted her body in the subsequent months following the surgery. Toward the bottom of the composition, a billowing swath of cream fabric runs over her pubic area, similar to the way in which a skirt would cover the lower body. The movement evoked by the fabric creates a tension between the fluidity of the textile and the rigidity of Kahlo's body—creating a performative, and even liberatory attribute of the composition that allows the artist to express mobility beyond physical constraint.

Working out of these registers of pain, the work is imbued with Kahlo's iconicity today and the many stories that trail her tormented relationship with her husband, Diego Rivera. Despite these framings, which have been the subject of themed exhibitions, scholarly essays, and countless books, there remains something to be said about the intimacy of this composition that refutes any singular reading or interpretation. Through the entanglement of pain, Kahlo looks out at the viewer with an enduring gaze that foregrounds fracture as a condition of survival and transformation. Alongside each other, Belli's and Kahlo's works build on pan-Latin American repertoires that intersect with historical feminist struggles and gestures of resistance that recodify the body, and the limits of subjectivity, through allusions to textile.

Building on Kahlo's endurance, Belli's piece evokes the material and corporeal elasticity of women's bodies and selves in becoming. By working with feminine intimate wear, Belli gives visibility to the physical contortion perpetuated by heteronormative ideals of femininity. Yet, in recrafting these garments, she also leaves room for the possibility of subversive wear. To put this another way, while the work itself utilizes the gendered materiality of corsets to stage a critique of the violent pedagogy that conditions femininity through physical constraint, the textile itself yields multiple possibilities that remind us of the liberatory potential that comes with refashioning garments. In this way, the corset emerges as an extension of the body that serves to support practices of radical self-expression that move beyond containment.¹⁸

Fiber Cords of Memory

While some of Belli's works function as metaphors for life experiences, others take on a more mnemonic valence, referencing specific events in the artist's life. One such work is her textile assemblage *Sacos Vacios* (*Empty Sacks*) (Fig. 3) from 1997, which was created after the artist suffered a miscarriage.¹⁹ Made from several articles of clothing stretched on a frame in the shape of a uterus, the work depicts empty, flattened sacks out of which knotted threads resembling umbilical cords fall to the ground. Working through the state of corporeal and emotional emptiness, as signaled by the work's title, *Sacos Vacios* is about mourning and remembrance.

Though the work represents an event specific to the artist's life, the sheer number of empty sacks and lifeless cords that fall into the viewer's space initiates a social dialogue that implicates the viewer. In a country where family values are dictated by the ideologies of the Catholic Church, which restrict women from taking birth control or having abortions, the empty sacks and lifeless umbilical cords show the repression of reproductive rights in Nicaragua.²⁰ As López notes: "The work . . . shows the body as a fragile container, in which the battle between living and dying coexist."²¹ Through this lens, the dual disposition of *Sacos Vacios* speaks to the precarious conditions of women's lives and their right to their own bodies while referencing the indeterminacy of the body at the threshold of containment. Through these registers, the work refutes heteronormative ideologies of reproduction by reclaiming a more personal and dynamic relationship to maternity.

Protruding into the viewer's space, the splayed knotted cords representing umbilical cords also resemble quipus—a system of communication developed by the ancient peoples of the Andes. As the poet and artist Cecilia Vicuña tells us, "Quipo (quipu or khipu, knot in Quechua) was an ancient recordkeeping system in use for 5,000 years in the Andes, until the European conquerors banned it."²² Despite the violence of colonial erasures, Vicuña asserts, "Quipus are a metaphor for the union of all. They were forbidden in 1583, yet they went on undercover, still weaving our breath."²³ In a 2006 performance titled *Skyscraper Quipu* (Fig. 4), Vicuña activates one of her quipus by holding it up to the wind—forming part of the collective weave that keeps the practice alive.

Made of knotted cords, quipus signal the relationship between memory and fiber, textiles and the body, bringing to bear the ways in which the body is a source of knowledge—both a repertoire and an archive—that finds translation through the textures of memory. As the art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson notes, "Quipus, or 'talking knots,' were used as an embodied mnemonic device for recordkeeping, as touching the chords trigger the recall of information in a somatic



Figure 3 Patricia Belli, Sacros Vacios (Empty Sacks), 1997, secondhand clothes and fiber cords on wooden frame, Artists Collection. Courtesy of TEOR/éTica. Photographed by Daniela Morales Lisac.

or tactile form of reading, a literal pivot between text and textile.”²⁴ Working at this intersection, Vicuña mobilizes the quipu as a “central metaphor of the spatial poetics of the land, the umbilical cord connecting us to the cosmos and the Andean imagination.”²⁵ By resorting to the imagery of the body, Vicuña brings our attention to the dialogic relationship between the quipu and the body, citing the quipu as a fibrous umbilical cord that is a vital source of knowledge and memory that mediates the interconnectivity between land, body, and cosmos.

Working with fiber to construct amorphous cords and open forms, Vicuña’s works speak to the “spirit of the quipu.”²⁶ In an artist statement for the exhibition *Cecilia Vicuña: Quipu Desaparecido (Disappeared Quipu)*, Vicuña writes, “My quipus are impossible weavings. Not spun, not piled. They simply hang. Their knots are loose and about to fall off. Nothing holds them together, except desire.”²⁷ Through her works, desire emerges as an affectual thread that weaves together the ephemeral and precarious. Looking back to her first quipu, for which there is no documentation, she tells us that “my first quipu was *The quipu that remembers nothing*. I was offering my desire for memory.”²⁸ Through the (non)documentation of this first work, Vicuña brings our attention to the relationship between desire and memory and how they come together to weave repertoires even in the absence of documentation. In this way, the quipu speaks to practices of “embodied memory”—as Taylor has noted—that contest oppressive mechanisms of documentation that construct the archive and reject indigenous forms of record keeping.

Building on the quipu and Vicuña’s practice, we come to see how Belli’s *Sacos Vacios* emerges as a site of memory and personal testimony that draws on fiber—and specifically fiber cords—as an affective medium for memories and knowledge production. While Belli does not directly reference the quipu herself, it is worth engaging with the visual and somatic symmetries between her splayed, knotted cords and the “talking knots” of quipus, particularly as we consider the potential of fiber as a medium and mechanism for documentation. Guided by her intuition and the tactile sensations of disparate materials, Belli develops her works along the textures of repurposed garments. Within the larger breadth of Belli’s work, we come to see how other fibrous attributes, such as scars, wrinkles, and knots, speak to conditions rooted in lived experience—revealing how the body is a fibrous landscape of knowledge and interconnection, as Vicuña has previously noted. Through this texturization, Belli mobilizes textiles within the folds of language, unraveling the distance between the documentary, the corporeal, and the affective. As Bryan-Wilson has previously noted, “Often used as tactile forms of communication or kinds of writing, textiles offer themselves as objects to be understood, but as with any system of language, they are dense with multiple mean-



Figure 4 Cecilia Vicuña, *Skyscraper Quipu (Incan quipu performance)*, 2006. Cotton, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, and London. Photographed in 2018 by Matthew Herrmann.

ings and are available for a range of readings and conflicting interpretations.”²⁹ Working within these fields of signification, Belli’s works poignantly illustrate her search for an intimate language rooted in textural encounters.

(Text)ural Translations

Through these early textile assemblages, Belli evidences the corporeal labor of enduring societal constructions. As I have shown, the material quality of her works evokes visceral passages that allude to the body—and the memories and experiences triggered by textural surfaces. In works like *Femalia*, *La Columna Rota*, and *Sacos Vacios*, tight stitches, puckering folds, fibrous lesions, and knots indicate conditions of affliction and processes of healing. Registered through the logics of the body, her works evidence somatic and epidemic processes that often emerge through the symbolism of scars. Working at the intersection between textiles and the body, she mediates the (text)ural qualities of fiber against her own body to explore and identify the uncharted terrain of deeply personal emotional processes.³⁰ Speaking to the function of scars in her works, she states: “Different from a scar on skin, that can surge from automatic mechanisms of the body, scars on

fabric evidence a conscious and voluntary restoration. This was crucial in my investigation: the conscious decision to heal.”³¹ By giving material contours to this process, we can begin to see how her textile assemblages emerge as affective containers for past afflictions—an archive of scars that document personal and collective traumas.

Driven by her own interest to understand this process, Belli crafted a short story titled “Cicatrices” to explore the language of textiles through the poetics of her imagination. Published in 1997 in *ArteFacto*, the story centers on the imagery of scars through themes of shame, affliction, and ultimately desire. Narrated from the perspective of the protagonist, “Cicatrices” tells the story of a woman who falls in love with her guardian angel, Guillermo, after he appears to her on the night on which she is about to commit suicide. Driven by her fascination with Guillermo’s “monumental and sad” beauty, the protagonist’s depression is quickly supplanted by sensuality and desire.³² Over time, the protagonist tries to reconcile Guillermo’s internalized feelings of difference by repurposing the cape of a magician’s costume to resemble his smooth, majestic wings. In the end, Guillermo cuts off his wings in order to stay in the human world, and the protagonist, who longs for him as he was, is haunted by the fibrous scars left behind by his severed wings.

Throughout the story, Belli foregrounds sensuality through descriptions of the body. In the text, her voice becomes conflated with that of the protagonist, rubbing up on each other to illustrate these moments of textural encounters. In certain passages, she narrates the ways in which Guillermo’s skin is “tight and virgin” due to its lack of hair, giving texture to his “almost feminine” and “adolescent” beauty, which renders him “suspicious” to others—returning us to queer subjectivity.³³ In other passages, skin surfaces as a site of affliction, referenced through the imagery of lesions and scars—most poignantly described by the “stumps of cartilage and bone (that) were left as piercing stumps under the skin” where Guillermo’s wings once were.³⁴ These epidermic tapestries in Belli’s writing remind us of the textural surface of her compositions, bringing us back to the smooth quality of georgette and the puckering folds that create fibrous lesions on the surface of her works.

Within Belli’s body of work, “Cicatrices” directly speaks to the gestures of translation present in her practice. As she tells us, “I wrote the story after having made many textiles and I was interested in being able to describe the sensations that I had been experiencing through the manipulation of material in those works. There is so much sensuality in fabric, above all in fabric made into clothes.”³⁵ Through the intermediary language of textiles, the artist brings our attention to the somatic implications of the slippage between textiles and text, and the liminal space between these modes of expression that is marked by an underlying sensuality.

Reaching beyond the confines of language, these textural encounters point to the irreconcilable yet sensual fraying between emotions, affects, words, and their containment within the body—offering a counter-archive that gives material form to these repertoires of translation and documentation. Even more, this gesture of translation reminds us of the textural folds of language, urging us to consider how language itself is an open form.

Contested Threads

Working alongside the textures of language, Belli's works also confront the material memory conjured by repurposed garments—returning to the sensuality that is indexed by clothes and the affectual residues of the bodies that once wore them. In her works, fragments of clothes are stitched together to create a web of narratives, forming a constellation of textures that materialize collective memories, both at home and abroad. Working with secondhand clothes imported from the United States in the 1990s, the artist recalls, “It was during that time . . . that they started commerce for second-hand clothing in Managua, imported from the United States, [and] sold in mountains for very cheap.”³⁶ Belli touches on the emergence of thrift stores in Managua, pointing to the philanthropic efforts of the United States as it shipped clothes to a country it once shipped arms to. In the aftermath of the Contra Wars, these circuits of exchange come to be mediated by clothes and “sold in mountains for very cheap.”

Joined together, these secondhand garments make visible the economic and political discrepancies between the United States and Nicaragua—and the violence trailing the philanthropic rhetoric driving commerce in the 1990s. As Bryan-Wilson notes, used clothes not only function as bodily substitutes but also point to “the imbalance of markets, and the ‘residue’ of circuits of exchange.”³⁷ In Belli's works, fragments of clothes are patched together to capture the affectual residues on both sides of this exchange: on the one hand, they index the histories of all those bodies that perhaps unconsciously bore the privileges that ride on the back of US imperialism and violence; on the other, they stand in for those who scaffolded those liberties by having their lands, resources, and bodies exploited. Thinking back to the Contra Wars, we are reminded of the ways in which local bodies were repurposed and discarded to serve US interests, mirroring the “mountains” of clothes sold “for very cheap” in thrift stores in Managua.

While this is a long and contested history that cannot be captured within the bounds of this essay, I want to foreground the residues of these garments to remind us of the liberties that have been historically denied to Nicaraguan people

and continue to be denied to this day due to US hegemony and xenophobia. Piercing through these many layers, Belli mends clothes into a metaphorical and visual community of marginalized and nonconforming bodies that emerge to tell their stories through the affectual texture of her works.

Feminist Knots

Threading through these histories, Belli's works also pick up feminist knots that extend back to the early 1970s, with the rise of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). Without conforming to any specific ideology or feminist formation, Belli's work provides a counterpoint to the militant (yet conditioned) feminisms that had emerged during the revolutionary years. In this way, her works unravel feminist discourses to create an uncontainable, open weave of what feminism can mean in the country. To understand this history, let us briefly consider feminist efforts in Nicaragua as it pertains to revolutionary struggle.

While women had figured prominently in the Sandinista Revolution, the rifts between ideology and practice illuminated the precarious position of feminist efforts during the revolution. During this time, women in the FSLN came together and created an organization known as the Association of Women Confronting the National Problem (AMPRONAC), which later became the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women (AMNLAE) in 1979. Through these organizations, women advocated for the transformation of traditional gender roles by foregrounding equality at the level of human rights. Through the rhetoric of equality, they sought to illuminate and combat the oppressive constraints of machismo.

Faced with the tensions and contradictions of deeply ingrained family values, and the ideologies of the Catholic Church, many women resisted identifying themselves as feminists in the public domain. As the sociologist Norma Chinchilla writes: "Some AMNLAE members during this period may have individually considered themselves feminists, but were reluctant to argue the point publicly, since feminists had often been portrayed negatively as anti-family, anti-male, or borderline prostitutes by the Latin American mass media in the 1970s."³⁸ Often seen in a negative light, feminism was considered a frivolous, Western diversion that "pitted women against men and diverted class struggle, the success of which depended on unity."

Without flattening the complexities and tensions at play within these emerging, and at times undeclared, feminisms, I want to call attention to how Belli picks up on these sentiments and gives texture to a feminist struggle in Nicaragua

that disavows notions of equality and, by extension, ideas of a unified nation by homing in on the difference and the plurality of feminized bodies outside gender binaries and the nation-state. By unraveling and recycling women's garments, Belli retools the feminized labor of sewing into a subversive act of undoing and remaking. Often spilling beyond the frame, her works are also marked by excess and unruliness—signaling to the possibilities and spaces that exist beyond containment, returning us to Muñoz's ethos of disidentification. Through these subversive gestures, her works not only remake aesthetic discourses but also recraft sociopolitical bodies that refute normativity. In this way, her work becomes part of a feminist weave—or repertoire, as Taylor would put it—that radically reimagines practices of living that go beyond the flattening textures of dominant culture. By tuning into texture and sensuality, rooted in a politic of desire, Belli directly engages with a somatic sensibility that unravels gender constructions and expectations by remaking bodies into new forms. In doing so, she also recuperates the wounds that exist within the repertoires of feminist movements in the country by making scars and mechanisms of healing an inherent part of her practice.

Becoming Part of a Feminist Jungle

To conclude, I return to *MESOTICA II* to explore how the exhibition served as a bridge that brought together a range of practices taking place regionally. The exhibition surveyed experimental and affectual practices that spoke to a shifting disposition in the 1990s. Writing about this shift, Virginia Pérez-Ratton notes, “The Central American artist looks to exercise their liberty, and choose whether or not they want to be a collective voice, or assume the personal ‘I’ in their artistic practice, without the bad conscious of years past.”³⁹ This pivot, from the social to the personal, evidences the ways in which artists broke with traditional models of collective expression driven by ideology to explore subjectivity amid the textures and materialities of an ever-shifting and contradictory environment.⁴⁰

Taken as a collective corpus, the works evidence recurrent themes that give affective contours to the residual pain of the Crisis—serving as a reminder of the liminality of trauma as well as the iteration of memory and the self in becoming.⁴¹ In this way, the exhibition serves as mediation on the dialogic relationship between the personal and political, the minor and the dominant. It is through these works that we see a critical position take root in disidentifying gestures of expression that challenge dominant modes of art making, such as painting and sculpture. Working at the intersection of disciplines, Belli's textile assemblages are an example of how clothes, and the practice of sewing, are recrafted into more expansive forms that

draw on everyday repertoires. As Pérez-Ratton notes, we also begin to see a disposition toward self-representation that radically reimagines the social tapestry of the region, and Latin American imaginaries more broadly.

The exhibition also marks an important moment that speaks to larger questions haunting the region. Through their works, we come to see that artists inherently interrogate the violence of heteropatriarchal structures, by questioning subjectivity, marginalization, and the right to life. Meditating on these conditions, López notes:

The end of armed conflicts, the peace accords and the democratic transitions in countries such as Nicaragua (1990), El Salvador (1992) and Guatemala (1996) called for a complete revision of the ways in which aggression (whether on behalf of the state or the insurgency) against civil society had become institutionalized, and particularly against those bodies which still exist at the periphery of the social structure: homosexuals, indigenous communities, racialized bodies, and especially women, feminized bodies and all those who take on the role of femininity in society.⁴²

Working out this context, I return to the centrality of femininity—and feminization—within discourses of power. As I have shown, these tenets become a subversive site of activation within Belli’s work through her recodification of garments. More broadly, the exhibition created an intimate space of encounter that brought together aesthetic projects across the region that turned inward to position subjective experiences over national aesthetic constructions. Coming out of years of dictatorship, bloody wars, and “democratic” transitions rooted in neoliberal ideologies, these works give form to mechanisms that privilege softness, process, and experimentation.

Among the artists included in *MESOTICA II*, we find Central American women who, like Belli, were also turning to craft-based materials and everyday objects such as cooking utensils and furniture. Through a range of media, these artists rework the textures of feminized materials to disrupt gender normativity and intervene in sociopolitical discourses. We see this through works like *Viaje al Abismo* (*Trip to the Abyss*) by the Honduran artist Regina Aguilar, *Memorias* (*Memories*) by the Honduran artist Xenia Mejía, and *Historia Sitiada* (*Situated History*) by the Guatemalan artist Isabel Ruiz. By reworking objects such as a *molacajete* and *comal*, seen in Mejía and Aguilar’s work, or burning a set of empty chairs with candles, materialized in Ruiz’s installation, these artists make room for more expansive

modes of communication and remembrance.⁴³ In this way, these works linger between indigenous modes of record-keeping and transmission, evidenced by the quipu, and practices that mobilize mixed-media within experimental art and performance. Looking back on the exhibition, Belli recalls

It was when I attended the inauguration of *MESOTICA [II]* that I felt that first chill of recognition, of seeing myself in those other women, understanding from which jungle my species came from. Those were moments of revelation and shock, of feeling that there was a corpus to which I belonged—that I was not alone, and that I would not be alone.⁴⁴

Through this moment of identification, Belli brings our attention to the relational networks that were forged by the exhibition and the affirmation that came with seeing herself in other women. As she notes, this revelatory experience reorients her understanding of self and place, collapsing the idea of isolation by bringing into focus the rhizomatic relationships that animate her practice as part of a collective body.

By facilitating these moments of encounter, *MESOTICA II* becomes an entry point for dialoguing with an affective corpus of feminist artistic practices in the region—emerging as a feminist jungle, as Belli has put it, that holds multiplicity and unruliness. Tending to the textures of their works, I argue that these artists perform disidentifications with the codification of gendered materials to move beyond the limitations of language and societal constructions. Like textile, the materialities deployed throughout these works allow for interpretations that mediate the encounters between textures and the body, forging affectual proposals that are rooted in the personal. Whether along the textures of textile, *comales*, *molcajetes*, or found everyday objects, these artists forge a repertoire of somatic languages that document what is left hidden or unspoken.

* * *

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based materialities in the artist's oeuvre, the dissertation considers feminist rearticulations of media specificity that forge a dialogue around questions related to gender, sexuality, and the conditions of the body, at the nexus of social and political transition in the region.

Notes

¹ Virginia Pérez-Ratton, "Mesótica II: Centroamérica/re-generación," in *Del Estrecho Dudoso a Un Caribe Invisible: Apuntes Sobre Arte Centroamericano* (Valencia: Universitat de València, 2012), 68. The exhibition forms part of a larger three-part exhibition series of *MESÓTICA*, launched in 1995 by Pérez-Ratton, as the newly appointed director of the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MADC) in San José, Costa Rica. From its inception, *MESÓTICA* was a call for visibility in the region that challenged the ongoing erasure of artists from Central America in the contemporary Latin American art scene. While challenging emerging canons of Latin American art, the exhibition positioned itself in the in-between and historically exoticized space of Mesoamerica to recast the isthmus as a critical bridge between North and South. What emerged was a mediative space and site of possibility that had otherwise been overlooked, if not overtly essentialized. *MESÓTICA II: Centroamérica/re-generación* is the second iteration in the series.

² The Central American Crisis refers to a period in Central American history that is marked by communist revolutions and civil wars. During this time, Central American countries were overwhelmed by social, economic, and political instability—as well as anticommunist foreign intervention led by powers in the global North. In Nicaragua, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) led a revolution that successfully overthrew the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza in 1979. Following the victory of the FSLN, the country was again at war in the 1980s when the United States funded and trained a conservative rebel group known as the Contras (many of whom had formerly fought for the Somoza dictatorship). During this time, the United States worked to destabilize and block Nicaragua while committing infringements such as the Iran-Contra Affair. Following the Contra Wars, Nicaragua has continued to face instability and political repression. Since 2007, the country has been under the dictatorship of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo—both of whom are original members of the Sandinista Party.

Please note that the exhibition title *MESÓTICA II: Centroamérica/re-generación* translates to *MESÓTICA II: Central America/re-generation*—referring to the moment of regeneration following the Central American Crisis.

³ Pérez-Ratton, "Mesótica II," 65.

⁴ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 20,

<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smz1k>.

⁵ Raul Quintanilla Armijo, “The Making of a New Generation in the National Arts,” in *Area of Turbulence: Art in Nicaragua, from Revolution to Neoliberalism* (San José, Costa Rica: TEOR/ética, 2018), 31–34. Praxis and Gradas came out of a rising generation of artists in the 1960s that trained under the Nicaraguan painter Rodrigo Peñalba, who, along with the intellectual vanguard of the country, was aligned with the revolutionary cause of the FSLN. Peñalba and his contemporaries utilized art to bring attention to class struggle and the oppressive regime of Anastasio Somoza. After the victory of the Sandinistas in 1979, Praxis and Garda formed part of the “New Generation” of artists in the 1980s, working under the programming of the Ministry of Culture and the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers. As part of these cultural facets, these two artist groups upheld a revolutionary outlook in which art was seen as an integral tool in culture and nation building. Writing about this process in 1987, Quintanilla states: “We are participating in a revolutionary process directly as militants, in a more clearly defined manner, which confers true meaning to our movement” (“The Making of a New Generation,” 34). As a result of the militancy underpinning art practice, this period saw the development of national competitions that sought to stimulate and refine a National Visual Arts program that was firmly grounded in the country’s “national roots” while also appealing to universal values.

⁶ Quintanilla, “The Making of a New Generation,” 34.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 124. Given Quintanilla’s role in the Sandinista Party’s nation-building programs, this quote marks a shift in Quintanilla’s views regarding militancy and art. Like many artists of his generation, memories of the revolution—and its ideological underpinnings—radically shift with the passage of time indexed by the conditions of lived reality and political unravelings.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 128–30.

⁹ Patricia Belli, email interview with author, April 19, 2018.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² José Esteban Muñoz, introduction to *Disidentifications: Queer of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴ Miguel A. López, “Fragiles: Obras de Patricia Belli, 1986–2015,” *TEOR/ética*, 2016, <https://teoretica.org/2016/01/05/fragiles-obras-de-patricia-belli-1986-2015/?lang=en>.

- ¹⁵ Miguel A. López, “The Political Alchemy of the Body: Art and Feminism between Revolution and Neoliberalism,” in *Patricia Belli: Equilibrio y colapso* (San José, Costa Rica: TEORÉTica), 51.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ López, “Frágiles.” This excerpt is taken from López’s analysis of another work in the artist’s oeuvre, titled *Pelo (Hair)* from 2001.
- ¹⁸ Even in the case of Frida Kahlo, we see the artist mobilize her fashion as a means of expression by including her cast corsets as pseudo-garments. In fact, even in their materiality, the casts themselves are made of fibrous materials. At certain moments throughout her life, the artist is documented painting on her cast corsets, adorning them with images and motifs. In this way, Kahlo, too, performs a disidentification with the cast corset as a marker of limitation, recoding this pseudo-garment as a mechanism for imagination and possibility.
- ¹⁹ López, “Frágiles.”
- ²⁰ Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, “Revolutionary Popular Feminism in Nicaragua: Articulating Class, Gender, and National Sovereignty,” *Gender and Society* 4, no. 3 (1990): 371.
- ²¹ López, “Frágiles.”
- ²² Cecilia Vicuña, “QUIPOem / The Precarious: The Art and Poetry of Cecilia Vicuña,” in *New and Selected Poems by Cecilia Vicuña* (Berkeley, CA: Kelley Street Press, 2018), 213.
- ²³ Cecilia Vicuña, Artist Statement, *Cecilia Vicuña: Disappeared Quipu*, Brooklyn Museum, May 18–November 25, 2018.
- ²⁴ Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Threads of Protest: Cecilia Vicuña Concepts and Quipus,” in *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 109.
- ²⁵ Vicuña, “QUIPOem / The Precarious: The Art and Poetry of Cecilia Vicuña,” 213. This quote is taken from the artist statement for this exhibition.
- ²⁶ Jameson Johnson and Cecilia Vicuña, “Weaving with the Thread of Time: In Conversation with Cecilia Vicuña,” *Boston Art Review*, no. 03: “Tracing Movement” (May 14, 2019).
- ²⁷ Cecilia Vicuña, Artist Statement, *Cecilia Vicuña: Quipu Desaparecido (Disappeared Quipu)*, Brooklyn Museum and MFA, Boston, 2018, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/3359>.
- ²⁸ Vicuña, Artist Statement, *Cecilia Vicuña: Disappeared Quipu*.
- ²⁹ Julia Bryan-Wilson, introduction to *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 4.
- ³⁰ López, “Frágiles.”
- ³¹ Belli, interview.
- ³² Patricia Belli, “Cicatrices,” *ArteFacto*, no. 14 (August–September 1997): 238.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 239.

³⁵ Belli, interview.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Bryan-Wilson, “Threads of Protest,” in *Fray*, 174–75. Bryan-Wilson makes this point in regard to an exhibition titled *Residuos Americanos*, led by the group CADA in 1983.

³⁸ Chinchilla, “Revolutionary Popular Feminism in Nicaragua,” 374–76. The AMPRONAC later became the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women (AMNLAE) in 1979, which continued to advocate for the transformation of gender roles as part of social reconstruction in the aftermath of the Somoza dictatorship. The continued efforts of the association were articulated and further developed in the second phase of the movement, to ensure that the urgency for women’s liberation would not dissipate after the successful overthrow of the dictatorship.

³⁹ Pérez-Ratton, “Mesótica II,” 75.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 76.

⁴² López, “Frágiles,” 59.

⁴³ Pérez-Ratton, “Mesótica II,” 77–78.

⁴⁴ Belli, interview.

Grandmother's Garden: Artist Statement

Amy Reid

Can a quilt block be considered a document? Like a photograph of a person, can a quilt—its stitches, patterning, and assemblage—be read to understand its maker? Furthermore, can a quilt gesture beyond the personal, revealing larger political and economic histories embedded in its very fabric?

By treating the quilt as a document, *Grandmother's Garden*¹ considers how we can look at what are perceived to be innocuous objects, women's quilts, to gesture toward histories such as slavery, westward expansion, and the Great Depression.

Unprocessed cotton used as batting in a quilt made by an enslaved woman in Mississippi. Wedding quilts that traveled from Missouri to Montana, family heirlooms that endured the long journey by foot for the promise of the new frontier. Feed sacks, with faint remnants of text and advertising, used because there was no money to buy cloth.

Through the components in the document, the materials that make up a quilt—fabric, thread, and cotton batting—we can see and feel histories that often remain unassociated from the lives of women in the United States. As a document, a quilt weaves wider histories within the personal stitches of its makers. Stitches become words that can be read as questions.

Was quilting an escape for her? Did this quilt bring her joy? Was she afraid, lonely, fed up? Did she know how brilliant she was?

Using the artifacts of quilting, from unfinished quilt blocks to completed quilts; *Grandmother's Garden* explores how quilts can be used as evidence to construct women's histories in the continental United States. These narratives,

from the pioneer woman working alone on her quilt on a winter's night, to the midwestern church-going woman at a quilting bee, often articulate a white, working-class, female, heterosexual quilter. Furthermore, these narratives reinforce a particular type of American citizen: a resourceful mother, a patriotic do-gooder, an industrious homemaker. While there were and continue to be women quilters who adhere to some of these identities, there are also those who fall outside the usual archetypes of an American quilter, including enslaved women creating their own quilts during the antebellum south, to Mexican American stay-at-home mothers making quilts in the 1980s.

In treating the quilt as a historical document to be questioned, *Grandmother's Garden* also interrogates the documentary form. From prompting participants to "read" a collection of quilt blocks to asking women to reflect on their associations with quilting, *Grandmother's Garden* hinges on speculative interpretations of quilts and in so doing unstitches the documentary claim to factuality and truth. *Grandmother's Garden* looks at how quilting at large has transformed from a necessity, during periods such as the Great Depression, to a leisure activity at present, requiring resources and time that are not available to all in the twenty-first century. Through interviewing quilters, and hearing snippets of conversations, *Grandmother's Garden* points to the ways in which quilting has become an activity mostly enjoyed by recently retired baby boomers, and considers how quilting as an activity and artform will change as retirement security becomes more precarious for future generations. *Grandmother's Garden* gestures toward the materiality of the moving image, fluctuating between 16 mm and video, interweaving quilts held in museum, university, and state archives filmed on 16 mm, along with video footage of contemporary quilters, working and sharing their quilts. Moving between these two mediums, *Grandmother's Garden* points to the ways 16 mm and video gesture toward nostalgia, fiction, and the lived moment of the moving image. Through these formats, *Grandmother's Garden* shows how both the past and present instantiations of quilting are intermingled in our cultural imaginary in the United States. A temporal rerouting takes place, in which previous assumptions of quilting's history shot on 16 mm are held against the enactment of quilting in the present through the medium of video. Using the document of the quilt, *Grandmother's Garden* examines women's domestic labor of the past in relation to the neoliberal economy of the present.

Probing at the document and the documentary form, *Grandmother's Garden* attempts to upend neatly defined histories of American quilting to a more realistic and complex history.

* * *

Amy Reid is a filmmaker whose work examines the intersections between gender, national identities, and labor. By exploring observational approaches and expanding on formal cinematic notions of time, structure, and narrative, Reid's work questions how labor is constructed in the filmic form. They have participated in selected screenings nationally and internationally including in New York, Shanghai, and California. Reid received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Cooper Union before graduating with an MFA in Visual Arts from UC San Diego. Residencies include the Whitney Independent Study Program, Snug Harbor Artist Residency, and Seniors Partnering with the Arts Citywide. Reid is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in film and digital media at the University of California, Santa Cruz where they have been awarded a multiyear fellowship through the Feminist Media Histories Initiative.

Notes

¹ *Grandmother's Garden* can be viewed at <https://escholarship.org/uc/refract>.

Review of *An-My Lê: On Contested Terrain*

Rachel Klipa

The first comprehensive survey of the photographer An-My Lê's work, *An-My Lê: On Contested Terrain* at the Carnegie Museum of Art, was a stunning and challenging experience. Lê's wide-angle photographs posed difficult questions about the American psyche, escapism, and artistic intervention. The photographs included groupings of images that spanned a thirty-five-year period: *Việt Nam* (1994–98), *Silent General* (2015–), *29 Palms* (2003–4), *Small Wars* (1999–2002), *Events Ashore* (2005–14), *Sculpture* (1986–2002), and *Trap Rock* (2005–7).¹ Viewing this exhibition in July 2020 became more poignant as the pandemic and unrest in the United States raged on.² The exhibition's works confronted the complexity and politicization of the American landscape and the people found within it.

Born in Vietnam, Lê and her family evacuated from Saigon in 1975, and she did not return to her homeland until 1994.³ It could be said that her first trip back to Vietnam after twenty years marked the beginning of her artistic career.⁴ *On Contested Terrain* opened at the entrance of the museum's Heinz Galleries with eleven black-and-white photographs from the series *Việt Nam*. "Using a large-format camera and shooting from an elevated perspective," Lê captured Hanoi, the Mekong Delta, and Ho Chi Minh City.⁵ The Vietnam landscape presented a visual starting point that served as a source of comparison for the photographs that followed. The scenes seem to be innocuous, neutral depictions of a lush terrain, and the images of American landscapes in the series that follow seem to be similarly legible as documentary photographs. However, Lê purposely focused on the contradictions evident in the landscape: the foregrounding of thriving gardens against a background of crumbling ruins; the hard, geometric lines of



Figure 1 An-My Lê, Fragment VIII: US Customs and Border Protection Officer, Presidio-Ojinaga International Bridge, Presidio, Texas, 2019. From the series Silent General, inkjet print 40 in. × 56.5 in. (101.60 × 143.51 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.



Figure 2 An-My Lê, Fragment VIII: Cars along the Rio Grande at the US-Mexico Border, Ojinaga, Mexico, 2019. From the series Silent General, inkjet print 40 in. × 56.5 in. (101.60 × 143.51 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

architecture in a foggy and wet environment; and the domination of Xerox, Hitachi, and Compaq advertisement billboards along waterways in an untitled work. While looking at these images, I was reminded of the industrial decay in the Rust Belt of the United States and the signs of consumerism that I see every day.

Already making the comparison between these images of Vietnam and the American landscape, I examined the next series in the Heinz Galleries, which featured scenes from across the United States. The largest series in the exhibition, *Silent General*, is named after Walt Whitman's tribute to Ulysses S. Grant, in *Specimen Days*.⁶ Lê grouped the photographs in what she calls "fragments" as an homage to the "literary structure" of the book.⁷ The fragments were photographed in color and focused on a spectrum of themes such as immigrant labor in California, the US-Mexico border in Texas (Figs. 1–2), student protests in New York City, and Confederate monuments in Louisiana (Fig. 3). Some of the most striking images are of the US-Mexico border, which were reminiscent of paintings by Thomas Cole (1801–1848) and J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), whose work was included by way of Lê's photograph of Turner's *Port Ruydael* restoration at the Yale Center for British Art. Lê's craft as a photographer draws on the history of photography and painting, in particular the magisterial gaze used to portray the concept of Manifest Destiny by early American painters such as Cole. Like Lê, Cole's works were highly crafted, and they connected the legacy of the United States to places such as ancient Rome by depicting tamed and romanticized landscapes full of classical architecture.

As mentioned earlier, the placement of images throughout *Silent General* was deliberate. For instance, *Fragment VIII: US Customs and Border Protection Officer, Presidio-Ojinaga International Bridge, Presidio, Texas* (Fig. 1) and *Fragment VIII: Mexico Customs and Border Protection Officer, Presidio-Ojinaga International Bridge, Ojinaga, Mexico* are two side-by-side portraits of Latina women who work on either side of the US-Mexico border. Flanking both portraits are images of a vast Texas landscape and the Rio Grande (Fig. 2). The photographs highlight the grandeur of Texas and its land, but then its neighboring images remind the viewer of how the landscape can be manipulated and patrolled to divide a nation or practice violence in the name of protecting borders or national interests. These types of juxtapositions continue throughout *Silent General* to emphasize the duality of a nation's conscience and actions. At what cost must the United States secure its southern border so that the Texas landscape maintains its aesthetic integrity?



Figure 3 *An-My Lê*, Fragment VI: General Robert E. Lee and P. G. T. Beauregard Monuments, Homeland Security Storage, New Orleans, 2017. From the series *Silent General*, inkjet print 40 in. × 56.5 in. (143.51 × 101.60 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.



Figure 4 An-My Lê, *Mechanized Assault*, 2003–2004, printed 2018. From the series *29 Palms*, gelatin silver print 26.5 in. × 38 in. (67.31 × 96.52 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

What kinds of people do Americans expect to see guarding the border? The assumption might be that it is white men who enact the rules at the border, but here we see it is Latina women on either side. What kind of conflict is embodied within these women who work in these positions?

The photographs in *Silent General* were not displayed chronologically. *Fragment VI: General Robert E. Lee and P.G.T. Beauregard Monuments, Homeland Security Storage, New Orleans* (Fig. 3) shows two New Orleans monuments of Robert E. Lee and P. G. T. Beauregard in a makeshift shed after their removal in 2017. Elsewhere in this section are three additional images that show these former monuments as they existed in the public realm: one is displayed before seeing *Fragment VI: General Robert E. Lee and P.G.T. Beauregard Monuments, Homeland Security Storage, New Orleans*, and the other two occur after. If the images had been in chronological order, it would not have had the same effect. Although the monuments were removed, the layout of the photographs in the exhibition make it feel as if the monuments still exist in the landscape. Even though monuments will be de-installed, the ideas they embody will continue to exist within the country. Strangely enough, the monuments seen in storage seem harmless when they are out of their context in the public realm.



Figure 5 An-My Lê, Night Operations VII, 2003–2004. From the series 29 Palms, gelatin silver print 26.5 in. × 38 in. (67.31 × 96.52 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.



Figure 6 An-My Lê, Colonel Greenwood, 2003–2004. From the series 29 Palms, gelatin silver print 26.5 in. × 38 in. (67.31 × 96.52 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.



Figure 7 *An-My Lê*, Seaman on Bridge Rotation, USS Tortuga, South China Sea, 2010. From the series *Events Ashore*, inkjet print 26.5 in. × 38 in. (67.31 × 96.52 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

Lê's desire to organize images and document the United States' landscape, people, and culture without judgment or resolution becomes increasingly more prominent as the exhibition shifts its attention to the US military. Following *Silent General* is the series *29 Palms*, which refers to the nickname for the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in San Bernardino County, California. The black-and-white photographs of rolling tanks, falling bombs, and aiming howitzers appear to have been taken abroad during wartime (Figs. 4–6). Therefore, it was jarring to learn from the wall text that part of the California landscape resembling Afghanistan and Iraq was turned into a simulated war field.⁸ To look at these images is to be displaced, as *29 Palms* elicits feelings of distress because, at first glance, it seemed that Lê embedded herself in the front lines of war with American soldiers—but she did not. What was jarring was not really how the twenty or so photographs were arranged or that the images captured anything particularly gruesome; rather, it was the performative nature of military training and the idea that the landscape can be so easily manipulated to mimic an actual war zone. My distress originated from the realization that photography can fool us into thinking we are witnessing the “truth” of an actual event.



Figure 8 *An-My Lê*, Ship Divers, USS New Hampshire, Arctic Seas, 2011. From the series *Events Ashore*, inkjet print 40 in. × 56.5 in. (101.60 × 143.51 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

War mimicry continues in the next series, titled *Small Wars*. Lê photographed Vietnam War reenactments performed by civilians (who had little to no military experience) in North Carolina and Virginia. Lê participated in the reenactments as a North Vietnamese soldier or as a Viet Cong rebel, and staged and directed scenes to re-create “authentic” moments from the Vietnam War. However, if there had been no wall text or labels, it would be impossible to know that the black-and-white photographs in *Small Wars* were not of its time—even the North Carolina and Virginia landscapes look very much like Vietnam in comparison with Lê’s *Việt Nam* series at the beginning of the exhibition, yet all the content of each image is a fabrication.

On *Contested Terrain* almost concluded with *Events Ashore*, for which Lê traveled to over twenty countries with the US Navy and glimpsed into the daily lives of sailors as they traversed the globe to prepare for potential conflict (Figs. 7–9). It was in this section that the US Naval Ship Hospital *Mercy* appears, floating along the horizon in Vietnam’s calm waters on a partly cloudy day. Positioned below the US *Mercy* was *Fresh Water Wash-Down of Super Structure Ronald Reagan, North Arabian Gulf*, where sailors ardently scrub the side of a ship in bright red shirts with tangled green and yellow water hoses at their feet. *Events*



Figure 9 An-My Lê, *Manning the Rail, USS Tortuga, Java Sea, 2010*. From the series *Events Ashore*, inkjet print 40 in. × 56.5 in. (101.60 × 143.51 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

Ashore would have been a good place to end the exhibition. The concept of conflict moves from the notion of site-specificity toward more unknown and possibly unrecognizable conflicts as the navy sails “peacefully” at sea. Here, the curatorial team would have left the viewer with a more open-ended question about when the next conflict will begin or even end. The sea is vast. The mechanisms and people that incite conflict are on the move. It is just a matter of time when it will happen, who will be involved, and how it will be depicted.

However, two series followed *Events Ashore: Sculpture* (1986–2002, Fig. 10) and *Trap Rock* (2005–7) from when Lê was an MFA student at Stanford University and later when she became interested in the Hudson River Valley. These two groupings were not properly integrated into the larger exhibition due to their location outside a lesser-used entrance to the gallery. These images are far less arresting and seemed out of place and unnecessary in a tightly focused and overall strong exhibition. For instance, a small group of the photographs are from Lê’s summer in France in 1987 while working with the guild *Compagnons du Devoir et du Tour de France*. The images from this period capture the work at the guild, which was responsible for the preservation and restoration of French architectural heritage. Although an interesting experience, snapshots of a



Figure 10 An-My Lê, *Fonderia Marinelli, (David)*, Florence, Italy, 1991. From the series *Sculpture*, inkjet print 26.5 in. × 33 in. (67.31 × 83.82 cm). Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

guild member's studio with large, carved stone did not produce the same, jarring experience as the previous series and were not as meaningful to me in comparison with the other works presented.

Despite this stumble, *On Contested Terrain* was beautiful in its execution and overwhelming in its attempt to present content from the point of view of a balanced artistic perspective, especially at a time when the United States was ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic, policy brutality, civil unrest, and the divisive Trump administration. Not a single image indicates whether a situation, place, or action is right or wrong, good or bad, true or false. There was a constant need to pause and reflect throughout the exhibition, as Lê's seemingly neutral stance clashed with the reality that was 2020. However, reflection also revealed that much had been made about notions of war and conflict from the start of the exhibition in the text panel for *Việt Nam* and throughout the rest of the wall text in the exhibition. Curiously enough, none of the photographs in the exhibition recorded actual war or real physical conflict. There is no violence or blood. The suggested conflict lies in the careful organization of photographs

depicting military training, war reenactments, sweeping landscapes, portraiture, and documentation of America in transitory or staged moments. It became clearer, walking through each section of the exhibition, that the real conflict was an inner one, deep within an American national consciousness that does not question the official narrative of our history, just as I failed (at first) to question the legitimacy of the war zone I thought was depicted in Lê's *29 Palms*. Moreover, consumerist culture has led to an onslaught of images through social media that are quickly consumed by people without any question of whether the images they see are "true." The use of technology also affects how people depict and view (through their phone's screen) their landscape and surroundings based on their consumption or specific experiences they have. Lê challenges this by requiring slow looking with her large-format photographs; however, even with her attempt to render imagery that is "objective," she too tricks the viewer with her knowledge of aesthetics, documentary photography, and the references to the history of photography itself. She poses the question: Is any photograph true? What are all the layers and perspectives that go into photography, whether it is well-crafted like hers or a quick photograph on a smartphone? People use photographs as evidence of memories or current events, but what kind of evidence can photographs provide when it is a medium that is readily available and can be easily manipulated? And just because a series of photographs comes from a "sanctioned" artist like Lê, does it make her work anymore truthful than something raw and quickly taken on the street? How do the roles of technology and the accessibility of photography shape our collective thinking and identity about the United States and what we know about the country itself?

* * *

Rachel Klipa is a Pittsburgh-based arts administrator, curator, and writer.

Notes

¹ *An-My Lê: On Contested Terrain* was exhibited from May 14, 2020, to January 18, 2021, at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and was organized by Dan Leers.

² From this point on, the exhibition title is shortened to *On Contested Terrain*.

³ Lê's biography is used as an interpretive tool for her work, but she has stated that it is a "red herring," which is why it is not covered in great length for this

review. See Brian Scholis, “An-My Lê Seeks Complicated Beauty in Landscape Photography,” *Art in America*, March 3, 2020, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/interviews/an-my-le-interview-complicated-beauty-landscape-photography-1202679272/>.

⁴ She returned to Vietnam three times from 1994 to 1998. See Scholis, “An-My Lê Seeks Complicated Beauty in Landscape Photography.”

⁵ Quote from *Việt Nam* (1994–98) text panel, in the exhibition *An-My Lê: On Contested Terrain*, at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, PA, seen on July 1, 2020.

⁶ Quote from *Silent General* (2015–) text panel, in the exhibition *An-My Lê: On Contested Terrain*, at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, PA, seen on July 1, 2020.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ 29 Palms was also used as a training facility during the Vietnam War. From *29 Palms* (2003–4) introduction text panel, in the exhibition *On Contested Terrain*, at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, PA, seen on July 1, 2020.

A Catalog of American Things

Marisa J. Futernick



Figure 1 Marisa J. Futernick, still image from A Catalog of American Things, 2021, single-channel video slideshow with sound, 10:18. Courtesy of the artist.¹

¹ Marisa J. Futernick's *A Catalog of American Things* (2021) can viewed at <https://escholarship.org/uc/refract>.



Figure 2 Marisa J. Futernick, still image from A Catalog of American Things, 2021, single-channel video slideshow with sound, 10:18. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3 Marisa J. Futernick, still image from A Catalog of American Things, 2021, single-channel video slideshow with sound, 10:18. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4 Marisa J. Futernick, still image from *A Catalog of American Things*, 2021, single-channel video slideshow with sound, 10:18. Courtesy of the artist.

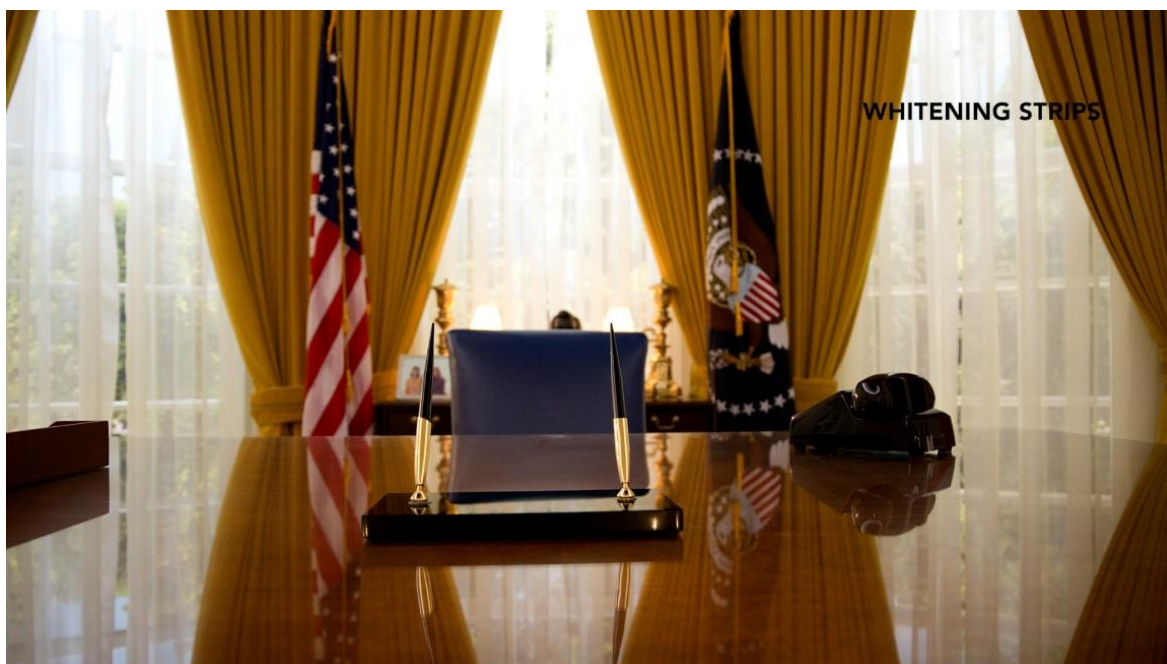


Figure 5 Marisa J. Futernick, still image from *A Catalog of American Things*, 2021, single-channel video slideshow with sound, 10:18. Courtesy of the artist.

Artist Statement

Presented as a video slideshow, the ongoing work *A Catalog of American Things* borrows the notion of the encyclopedia—an “exhaustive” record of the world. Alternately sardonic and deadpan, the work consists of original photographs overlaid with text and is itself an active archive with the potential to be continuously added to and updated. The attempt to catalog “American things” (from government policies to consumer goods) highlights the impossibility of including everything. What is intentionally omitted or missing due to the subjectivity of organizing material? What are the limitations of a catalog and its presumption to be an “official” document?

This work was originally conceived as an ongoing piece that would expand over time (hence the “Volume I” subtitle). As with anything that purports to be an exhaustive collection of something as vast and unwieldy and in flux as the “things” that make up an entire nation, there is no definitive end point; even the category of things itself is unlimited in scope. The expansion and updating of the work could theoretically go on forever. And indeed, this is what historically happened with traditional encyclopedias, in the days before Wikipedia. Printed encyclopedias, which claimed to be collections of all human knowledge, were revised, updated, offered in “new expanded editions.” Since 1925, *The World Book Encyclopedia* (first published in 1917, and familiar to many generations of American schoolchildren) has released a new edition every year. Wikipedia, the contemporary descendant of the now-obsolete encyclopedia, is a “living document” (a phrase most often associated with the US Constitution). It, too, is constantly being added to, expanded, changed, but without the physical limitations of a set of printed books. And rather than impose the presumptive authority of a traditional encyclopedia, Wikipedia offers a democratically gathered repository of knowledge through its method of open-sourced entry creation and editing. Wikipedia aims to be a catalog of everything, everywhere—and made by everyone. Alternatively, *The World Book*, whose very name implies that it is a definitive record of the world, prompts the questions: Whose record? And whose world? The same can be asked of *A Catalog of American Things*: Whose America is being cataloged? And who is recording it? Like histories, and archives, and documentaries—who is telling the story? Who decides what gets included and what gets left out?

The majority of photographs in *A Catalog of American Things* (in its present iteration) were taken from 2018 to 2020, in places across the United States. In many ways, these photographs are a factual record of a contemporary America questioning its identity more than any other period in my lifetime. The

photographs serve as a record, as evidence of the present and the very recent past, as an act of preservation of what this place is made up of right now. But this is also an artwork, and one of the great advantages of being an artist—and not an academic—is being able to play fast and loose with material, even if that material is “history” or “fact” or “truth.” That is not to suggest that artists are not responsible. In my practice, I have my own parameters for historical accuracy and faithfulness to upholding the facts. But I also make a lot up, weaving rigorous research together with invention. This leads to a different kind of truth: a deeper understanding of history that can come from using fiction to humanize true stories.

There is subjectivity in the ordering of images too. *A Catalog of American Things* is not a reference volume. It is not arranged alphabetically or chronologically. It is not searchable. The sequencing of the photographs and phrases is based on artistic choices—aesthetic, intuitive, narrative. It is not made for looking things up; rather, it takes the viewer on a “road trip” through the accumulation of material, of images and text. Sometimes the words feel connected to the images; sometimes they seem like non sequiturs. Some are pointed; some are funny. They reference “American things” spanning the clichéd and the ubiquitous: from food to religion, politics to consumer culture, “free refills” to the “atomic bomb,” “same-day delivery” to “Manifest Destiny.” The way the texts are used borrows from vernacular signage, the billboard, roadside advertising—the very American feature of language made visible in the landscape. But it also alludes to television advertising, the rapid cut, and other familiar forms of commercial visual communication. The aphoristic mode of the phrases references the disembodied, authoritative voice of on-screen text, of product descriptions, of the “truth telling” of an advertising slogan. Placing a piece of text with an image changes both. They add to each other and alter each other. The phrases in *A Catalog of American Things* are not directly illustrated by the photographs and may sometimes seem arbitrary, but something new is created through each combination. In the format of a slideshow, words can intensify or politicize images in powerful ways.

So, too, can music. The soundtrack was a later addition to this work. There is a ridiculousness in the juxtaposition of John Philip Sousa’s “The Stars and Stripes Forever” (1896),¹ the official national march of the United States of America, with phrases like “all-you-can-eat” and “whitening strips.” The driving rhythm of the march sweeps the viewer along, through Amish country and butter sculptures and cattle auctions and country clubs and Black Lives Matter protests and Confederate monuments and corn dogs at the gas station and a NASA control room and payday lenders and the opioid crisis and whiteness and masculinity and

patriotism in the age of Donald Trump. “The Stars and Stripes Forever” is edited together with two versions of the Duckworth Chant, the military cadence familiar from countless movie depictions of the army. This famous “Sound-off” call-and-response work song, also known as a “Jody call,” is attributed to Willie Duckworth, a Black soldier in the segregated US Army of 1944.² *A Catalog of American Things* includes excerpts from the original 1945 V-Disc recording of the chant,³ as well as another 1945 V-Disc featuring a unit of the Women’s Army Corps doing a WAC-specific version of the chant.⁴ And two songs by Mister “Yankee Doodle Dandy” himself, George M. Cohan, complete the soundtrack: “Over There” (1917)⁵ and “You’re a Grand Old Flag” (1906).⁶

The aggregation of this military music, the building up of images and phrases through the work, becomes a collection in and of itself—an archive—that begins to form a vision of America. America is all of these things together and all of the things that are missing from this work too. Like an encyclopedia, *A Catalog of American Things* attempts to gather and organize information about what a world is made up of, but it is as much about what is left out—not just the omissions, both willful and overlooked, but the sheer volume of what could potentially be included if it were not for the limits of time and space (a six-hour-long work would not pack the same punch as this ten-minute edit does). Whether I will actually add to *A Catalog of American Things* remains to be seen. What matters is that, like the very idea of Americanness, it could be endlessly expanded to be newer, bigger, and broader.

* * *

Marisa J. Futernick is an artist and writer who tells stories about the promise of the American Dream and expressions of “Americanness,” intertwining the personal with the historical and fact with fiction. Through the combination of text and images, she explores the less visible social and political histories of the United States and its complex mythologies, from the Hollywood Sign to home ownership in Detroit, the corn industry to the ten missing floors in Trump Tower. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, she uses a variety of media including photography, film/video, installation, writing and artist’s books, radio, and painting. She weaves rigorous archival research together with fictional narratives filled with deadpan humor and the poetry of the everyday, in an ongoing effort to understand and humanize history. Her work has been presented at such venues as Whitechapel Gallery, London; Royal Academy of Arts, London; ICA, London; British Library, London; Arnolfini, Bristol, UK; Oxy Arts, Occidental College, Los Angeles; Monte Vista Projects, Los Angeles; Orange Coast College, Costa Mesa, California;

Harvard University; and Yale University. She is a recipient of the prestigious Deutsche Bank Award and holds a BA from Yale and an MFA from the Royal Academy Schools. Books by the artist include *13 Presidents* (Slimvolume, 2016), *How I Taught Umberto Eco to Love the Bomb* (RA Editions and California Fever Press, 2015), and *The Watergate Complex* (Rice + Toye, 2015). Her work has been featured in the *Los Angeles Times*, *LA Weekly*, *Die Tageszeitung (taʒ)*, and *Art Papers*. She lives and works in Los Angeles.

Notes

¹ “The Stars and Stripes Forever,” Official National March of the United States of America, written and composed by John Philip Sousa, 1896. Performed by “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band, <https://www.marineband.marines.mil/audio-resources/patriotic-favorites/>.

² “Sound Off: Where the Military’s Rhythm Came From,” Frannie Kelley, *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, June 16, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/06/16/322589902/sound-off-where-the-militarys-rhythm-came-from>.

³ Duckworth Chant, Fort Slocum, New York, composed by Pvt. Willie Lee Duckworth Sr., led by TSgt Henry “Jack” Felice, 1945 V-Disc, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6bhv4i8qso>.

⁴ Duckworth Chant, Fort Slocum, New York, composed by Pvt. Willie Lee Duckworth Sr., led by S/Sgt Gladys “Woodie” Woodard of the WAC detachment, 1945 V-Disc, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mq2_1S_ZPAs.

⁵ “Over There,” 1917, written and composed by George M. Cohan, performed by the “Hellcats” of the West Point Band, 2010, Wikimedia Commons and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxxu0SzH8YE>.

⁶ “You’re a Grand Old Flag,” 1906, written and composed by George M. Cohan, performed by the United States Army Europe Band and Chorus, 2013, *Wikimedia Commons*, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0e/%22You%27re a Grand Old Flag%22%2C performed by the United States Coast Guard Band of New London%2C Connecticut.wav](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0e/%22You%27re%20a%20Grand%20Old%20Flag%22%2C%20performed%20by%20the%20United%20States%20Coast%20Guard%20Band%20of%20New%20London%2C%20Connecticut.wav)

I'm New Here: Black and Indigenous Media Ecologies: Curatorial Statement

Tao Leigh Goffe and Tatiana Esh

About the Exhibition

The Dark Laboratory, a humanities and technology collective that centers race and shared ecologies, presents the photography exhibition *I'm New Here: Black and Indigenous Media Ecologies*. The exhibition explores the intersecting ideas of race and ecology through the visual and literary interpretation of the work of seven photographers from across the Western Hemisphere. In landscape photographs and portraiture, the artists engage with entangled Black and Native presences in unnamed grasses, fields, and shores of seas across the hemisphere. Linking the histories of the dispossession of Native sovereignty and African enslavement, the photographs offer a visual commentary on how any just vision of the future must reckon with race, Black being, Indigeneity, and climate crisis.

With roots in the United States, the Caribbean, and Latin America—from North Carolina to Peru to Trinidad and Tobago to Wisconsin to St. Vincent and the Grenadines—the photographers draw from Afro-Indigenous worlds situated between personal geographies as well as imperial histories. Collectively, their images offer a planetary portrait and constellation of Black and Indigenous relationality.

I'm New Here: Black and Indigenous Media Ecologies gathers a dark chorus of contemporary voices who illuminate how art continues to answer the call for a vision of ecological justice that must include racial justice. Drawing from the perspectives of the Afro-diasporic Americas and the Amerindian Native Americas (Quechua, Oneida, Trinidad and Tobago, Dominica, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines), the photographic essays connect across Black and Native vernaculars

and geographies. As part of the Dark Laboratory's commitment to art, design, digital humanities, and community-oriented collaboration, the artwork is placed in conversation to entangle geographies and histories that often become racially segregated across the hemisphere. The photographs are not merely fragments of disappearing histories but, rather, a symbolic meditation on survivance and combined Black and Indigenous futurity. Together the artists reflect on climate crisis, historical erasure, and the power and poetry of nonlinear storytelling to narrate the ongoing nature of conquest. Toward a planetary vision of Earth within the grander cosmos, the artists draw on the visual language of race, origin, and myth in nature.

The exhibition is a component of the Dark Laboratory Photographic Narrative Prize conceived by Dr. Tao Leigh Goffe (Cornell University). It is accompanied by a virtual reality gallery, film, and print exhibition catalogue. The featured artists are Abigail Hadeed, Nadia Huggins, Kai Minosh Pyle, Allison Arteaga, steve núñez, Melia Delsol, and Dóra Papp; the curators, Tao Leigh Goffe and Tatiana Esh; and the consultants, Ayelen Simms, Tracy Rector, and Accra Shepp.

* * *



Figure 1 Mapping I'm New Here, 2021. Courtesy of Tao Leigh Goffe.

Map

We begin with a map (fig. 1) to orient and disorient. Beyond the continental and archipelagic binary and the rural and urban dyad, we map seven artists in a hemispheric call-and-response of shared histories and ecologies from Trinidad to St. Vincent to Dominica to Wisconsin to Minnesota to North Carolina to Peru.

Native Peoples in the lands featured include but are not limited to Taíno, Kalinago, Wahpekute, Oneida, Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo), Ochéthi, Šakówiŋ, Myaamia, Bodéwadmiakiwen (Potawatomi), Kaskaskia, Peoria, Menominee, Sauk and Meskwaki, Ashinabewaki, Waazija (Ho-Chunk/Winnebago), Coharie, Sissipahaw, Eno, Sappony, Shakori, Skaruhreh/Tuscarora, Lumbee, Pamlico (Pomouik), Quechua, Aymara, Achuar.

Curator Statements: Tao Leigh Goffe

I did not become someone different that I did not want to be. But I'm new here. Can you show me around?

—Gil Scott Heron, *I'm New Here*

How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?

—Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts"

Subverting the colonial origins of the camera as a tool of ethnographic capture, some of the most cogent critiques of racial capitalism are being produced by visual artists across the Americas. Presenting the lens of visual culture otherwise for thinking critically about a planetary vision for climate and racial justice, seven artists center Black and Indigenous visual aesthetics as a rhetorical argument to not look away from crisis in the exhibition *I'm New Here: Black and Indigenous Media Ecologies*. In six series of photographs, we turn to the seven visual storytellers for perspectives collectively considering shared ecologies and the meaning of Black and Indigenous as adjectives in the term *BIPOC*, *Black and Indigenous, People of Color*. The unevenness of mortality rates determined by race and geography has only been magnified by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The multiple catastrophes of 2020 required a global reframing of race and renewed attention to the periodization of modern capitalism. Capitalism is racial capitalism, as the geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore tells us, and it requires inequality and thus invents it.¹ Race enshrines social difference, and the vulnerable are exposed to state-sanctioned violence, neglect, and ultimately premature death, Gilmore explains. What does photography enshrine about race? Ethnographic photographs enshrine the concept of race as if it were a biological fact. The camera transforms subjects into data, case studies, and specimens. Why ask these questions now? Because all people of color do not sit in equal proximity to whiteness or colonial power the term BIPOC emerged. The emergence of the term distinguishes between differing processes of racialization, and proximity to whiteness signals a global demand for the differentiation of reckoning with race as an algorithm that determines who lives and dies.

I, Tao, began the Dark Laboratory in July 2020 as an engine for the exploration of race and ecology through technologies of storytelling and "playing in dark," inspired by the great philosopher Toni Morrison's use of that phrase.² I interpret the dark as the beauty of Afro-diasporic and Native co-presence. The beauty is also the haunting of the hemisphere founded on stolen lands, stolen

labor, and stolen lives. As the work of curating this exhibition unfolded, it became clear there was no better answer to the question of what the Dark Laboratory is than photography, born in a dark room, a *camera obscura*. *I'm New Here* answers.

The photographers featured in this exhibition present a vision of Black and Indigenous shared ecologies that hinges on the speculative capacity to imagine these entangled and distinct histories of struggle and survival. Beyond the narrative of racial suffering as totalizing, the Dark Laboratory is a space where campfire stories, fables, ancestral myths, and legends come alive at night. The trickster gods Anansi and Nanabozho reign here. At the lab, we situate the dark as a space of possibility and artistic production. The dark is an imaginative space for study and the possibility of new theories. Together members of the collective imagine and are inspired by the clandestine and fugitive itineraries of Native and Black people across the Americas of refusal. We understand what blooms at night and what needs the dark to grow.

The title of this exhibition evokes the line “But I’m new here. Can you show me around?” A lyric from one of the most perceptive musicians and storytellers, Gil Scott-Heron, it is a phrase of wonder, and it is a plea. The words signal the entangled temporality of blackness across the Americas, the disorientation of being new and alone, natal alienation. We are born alone and die alone, but somehow we find one another along the way. Scott-Heron says, “I did not become someone different that I did not want to be.” Entangling the temporality of standard grammar, he poses a puzzle of Black origins, himself with Black roots in the US South and Jamaica. The future tense is projected to speak of past intention, and the listener becomes the audience of a speculative call-and-response. In a speculative manner as curators, we imagine a conversation between Afro-diasporic and Native people across deep time.

We listen *for* echoes of this Afro-Indigenous dialogue in the landscapes and seascapes of the Americas. Native presence for thousands of years across the Americas is often overlooked or taken as a given and distant past. The dialogue of call-and-response that we imagine between Black people, forcibly transported here, and Indigenous people is taking place all at once in the future, present, and past. Since at least the sixteenth century, the Black Native dialogue has existed over generations, and it is one of shared bloodlines and extended kin. Black and Indigenous relationality must also take into account that Black and Indigenous are not mutually exclusive terms of identification or political affiliation, and the artwork displayed here shows that entangled history through striking images of nature. At times human subjects are framed by nature, as in the work of Hadeed and Delsol; at times nonhuman animals or nature itself is the subject, as in the

photographs of núñez and Pyle. Nature photography might seem to be vacant of human life, disembodied, depopulated; however, these images can also narrate a history of possibility and what nature witnessed beyond genocide, beyond human-centric frames such as the Anthropocene.

We wish to suggest that centering the entanglement of the dispossession of Native sovereignty and African enslavement as the bedrock of any American history disrupts the myth that the United States is a nation of immigrants. To tell the story of the Americas without beginning with Afro-Indigenous presence is to participate in the selective amnesia of traditional US historiography. Such histories ignore the hemisphere as a unitary frame, instead reifying the nation-state. Segregated histories erroneously rewrite Christopher Columbus's arrival at Plymouth Rock instead of the Caribbean island known as Guanahaní (Bahamas) by its Native peoples at the time.

Hadeed's black-and-white photographs of the last band of Carnival mas performers of African and Amerindian heritage, Black Indians, show us the power of ritual in the contrast of light and dark shadows (see Fig. 4-6). A renowned visual artist on the island of Trinidad, she has been documenting the Black Indians at Carnival for over thirty years. Hadeed's photographs help us to see that blackness could be defined in relation to the Carnival performanc as a certain set of politics that emerge from the simultaneity of being both new here and old here. The Trinidadian warriors conjure the Indigenous god Huracán, paying homage to the cyclic might of hurricane season. The coronavirus pandemic has brought Carnival to a halt, and Hadeed's images offer a portal of remembrance. The most vulnerable hold tight to rituals that are even more precarious in the ongoing period of global emergency and inequity. Moving across the archipelago to Dominica also in the eastern Caribbean, Delsol and Papp present a visual elegy of what it means to survive the devastation of Hurricane Maria (see Fig. 9-10). Their method involves superimposing portraits, the faces of those who survived, on the leaves of plants central to the ecosystem of Dominica. In familiar unfamiliar ways, the photographers gesture to how Black people have been here before with Native peoples in wetlands, bogs, bayous, and mountain ranges from Caroni to the Great Dismal Swamp.

The visual ecology of relation *I'm New Here* centers is a scene beyond what Saidiya Hartman poetically describes as the pain and spectacle of subjection.³ Beyond the capture of the camera and the racial enclosure of the plantation, these artists present an offering with liberatory potential. As curators, we chart the mutual coordinates of a plot where Black and Native life meet. Taking the duality of how Hartman and Wynter read the plot as land and a story, we look beyond the



Figure 2 I'm New Here: Black and Indigenous Media Ecologies, *Virtual Reality Gallery*, 2021. Courtesy of Tao Leigh Goffe.

violence of the plantation. The focus on the knottedness of nature refuses the singular plot of suffering and genocide for people of color.

A conventional gallery space would not be sufficient to celebrate these forms of visual culture by artists who are in excess of the European colonial archive. They tell their own stories as a collaborative process of personal geographies. A virtual reality (VR) gallery of photographic essays by seven artists tells a collective story, better than words alone could. Born-digital media components offer alternative ways to engage the human sensorium through sound and video.⁴ By experimenting with VR as a gallery platform for showcasing the artwork, we were able to explore the immersive aspects of being in nature. The sensorial experience of placing the art in the great outdoors became enlivened with the possibility of simulating the experience of looking at a virtual constellation in the night sky.

Dark Laboratory Theoreticians J. Kameron Carter and Sarah Jane Cervenak offer a rich conceptual frame in *Black Outdoors: Innovations in the Poetics of Study*, which they define as “the forms of social life exceeding the racial, sexual, gendered, economic, and neurological protocols of self and civic administration and of the normatively human.”⁵ Their ethos inspired us to place the artwork around a virtual campfire in order to meditate on philosophical and cosmological questions. Our logic of curation involved looking up at the night sky. As a key term media ecologies signified being able to experiment with intergalactic proportions of scale, temporality, relation, and curation. Who has always been placed outside the bounds of humanity? How does religion or other origin stories play a role in determining the outside and inside? Whose art did we see in direct

conversation and juxtaposition? As a platform, VR allowed us to add another spatial layer of visual dialogue between the collective visions of shared Black and Indigenous ecologies. The photographs formed an unanchored constellation of floating images—holograms projected in simulated night sky. The technology opened other dimensions of visualizing and curation, as we were able to experiment with scale and transparency.

Tatiana and I wanted to let the work speak for itself, but also wanted the creative and imaginative labor of having seven artists who have never met before speak to each other. A common thread in their art practice is an appreciation for the stillness of nature. Each forms a commentary on time and the velocity of technology in our contemporary world accelerating toward climate crisis. Each artist also engages in an ethical and participatory intimacy with their subjects whether a bee as in *núñez's* work (see Fig. 13-14), a herd of buffalo as in *Pyle's* images (see Fig. 15-16), Peruvian llamas as in the work of *Arteaga* (see Fig. 3, 11-12), or swimming adolescents as in the photography of *Huggins* (see Fig. 7-8). The photographers narrate, giving context in captions and essays about their practice. The artists tell us why it is important to try to understand the vantage of these subjects, human and nonhuman. The intimate gaze of storytelling performs something entirely other than the extractive and colonial gaze of ethnographic photography. We were inspired to bring these stories to a virtual campfire to celebrate mysticism, oral histories, poetry. As curators, we were inspired to “play in the dark.”

Many Black thinkers have reflected on Afro-diasporic presence in the Americas, narrating a time before Columbus and beyond European colonial capture. In so doing, some have not adequately addressed Native presence. Dark Lab Theoretician *Tiffany Lethabo King* guides the way in attending to the meanings of these omissions and locates the meaning in the landscape of the natural environment.⁶ For them the space between the land and the sea answers, the shoal. *King* is fascinated by the shifting nature of the shoal as geological formation. They unpack the metaphorical work of the geological to show us what gets shipwrecked and who has a deep embodied knowledge of tidal zones and the shores of the Americas. *King* also cautions against presuming solidarities where there are junctures. The histories of our relation are asymmetric and thus our poetics are too.

The fields of Black ecologies and Black feminist thought have long taken up questions of the relationship between the land, the archive, and the body. Black Native solidarities cannot be discussed without Black Native genealogies of Seminole, Maroon, and Garifuna histories, for instance. For this reason, *Julie Dash* presents the visuality and fact of this Afro-Indigenous relationality of cultivation

in her classic film *Daughters of the Dust*. These intimacies are not new; rather, they are recurring Black and Native coalitions. One example embedded in midwestern geography: born in Haiti in 1750, the founder of Chicago, Jean-Baptist-Point Du Sable, was of African descent and was married to a Potawatomi woman named Kittihawa. Two-Spirit artist Kai Minosh Pyle writes of the significance of the Du Sable Bridge, how it was constructed in downtown Chicago to keep out Black protestors after the murder of George Floyd. Contemporary activist for Black Indigenous sovereignty Melanin Mvskoke reminds us of these figures and genealogies because Black Natives have existed for centuries across the Americas.

Hartman's poignant question echoes, "How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?" We offer the analytic framework of media ecologies as one possible answer. Visual arts and sensorially engaged media become a bridge for connecting diasporic communities. Huggins uses her camera to exalt her subjects, framing the playfulness and innocence of adolescent Saint Vincentian boys of African heritage. The teenagers swim in Indian Bay, named like the West Indies for spice trade routes mistaken for Asia. Beyond the keeping of European colonial power, Huggins's subjects are embraced by the Caribbean Sea as they plunge into its blue depths. Indigenous presence continues not only in Caribbean place-names but in the people, too, and their traditions, rites, and celebrations. The distinct poetics of the visual offers a way to distill and crystallize the aesthetic register of how meaning is made transcending words. Huggins does this by submerging herself with her subjects in St. Vincent's Indian Bay. Like Dominica, St. Vincent is a remarkable locus of Afro-Indigenous presence and refuge. A visual grammar is created across the archipelago from Trinidad to St. Vincent to Dominica and extending farther south to Peru. *I'm New Here* is a scene of survivance composed of images and words, portraits and landscapes; documents intimate oceanic possibility across the Americas. The Caribbean Sea is an ancestor. The Andes are ancestors. Black and Indigenous ecologies and technologies converge at a crossroads in the exhibiting of the artwork in this multimodal format.

We echo the theorist Fred Moten, who asks, "Is the idea of *place* possible without settlement?"⁷

The work unsettles normative understandings of place. Featuring artists who were born in and who reside in the Caribbean and Latin America, we emphasize *indigenous* as a global keyword beyond the bounds of the nation-state. Documented and undocumented intimacies form the poetics of relation between ancient and new tongues, Quechua and Kreyol. We revel in the bad grammar and utterances that are indecipherable to the colonial authority. Beyond colonial

languages, visual culture offers a way to embrace a language otherwise, a patois. Drawing on Mojave phrases and West African braiding patterns, the Dark Laboratory's decolonial glossary project is aligned with the aims of this photography exhibition to outline a new codex for expression beyond European grammars. Old and new expressions of Black and Indigenous self-organization and structures form new ways to order society based on ancient patterns toward new origin stories.

To frame the artwork in a new language of expression, Tatiana Esh weaves the six narratives written by the photographers together to form a single poetic voice. She combines captions and phrases from the photographer's written essays to form a collective chorus, a dark chorus of Black and Indigenous ecologies. Together we produced a film, splicing in poetic interpretation with the photographs and essays. The fifteen-minute film intertwines a hemispheric story shuttling between Trinidad, Wisconsin, Peru, and North Carolina, the places given to us by the seven artists. The rhetorical argument of *I'm New Here* requires visuality to unfold. The photographs are braided strands. The online gallery component interplays with the virtual reality component and the print component. In the visual soundtrack, we juxtaposed the images with a voice-over recorded by us forming a call-and-response, as curators. We also took our inspiration in the narrative and editing style from the filmmaker Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962). The French film is a postapocalyptic love story about time travel and fate. We chart an optimistic postapocalyptic future where nature continues to be a place of refuge for Black and Indigenous peoples across deep time. Though each series is site-specific, together the images represent a universal commentary on why race *should* continue to matter in the far future. A raceless postapocalyptic future would mean the conquest and thus the genocide was complete.

Individually Hadeed, Huggins, Pyle, Arteaga, núñez, Delsol, and Papp answer the call to form a visual interpretation of Black and Indigenous ecologies in intimate relationality. The written and visual narratives engage in the practice of speculative geography across deep time to imagine nonlinear Black and Native past, presence, and futurity. In what forms are these histories inscribed in the mud, the silt, and the soil? What stories does the tide recite? We know that Black and Indigenous peoples found refuge together, stealing away in swamps, bogs, the mountains, the hinterlands beyond the racial enclosure of the plantation. *I'm New Here: Black and Indigenous Media Ecologies* is a codex of the speculative possibility of unfolding and ongoing relationships.

Turn around, turn around, turn around
And you may come full circle

*And be new here again*⁸

Dark Chorus: Tatiana Esh

I'm New Here is a collective rallying call against colonialism. Seven artists interpret the relationship between Black and Indigenous communities both to each other and to the land. Myriad artistic traditions tackle this question in different ways, but self-expression is the underlying current. Reclaiming nature, space, and place for colonized people in the wake of ongoing colonialism is a radical act. From Hadeed's celebration of the Black Indian mas Carnival bands of Trinidad to núnñez's practice of shooting on privatized lands, unceded Indigenous territories in North Carolina, the work of each artist is a revolutionary act in its own right.

The camera and its visual language cannot be removed from colonization. Point and shoot. Capturing an image. One person acts on another with or without the subject's participation. Photography as an art form is an encounter between people *from here* engaging with people *from there*. The historian Tina Campt writes of photography as a quiet tool of identification imposed by empire, science, or the state.⁹ She asks, What does it mean to *listen* to an image rather than simply *look*? The former implies relationality between subject, photographer, and the viewer, whereas the latter distances the subject, dangerous in its nature to otherize and exoticize. Like artifacts or specimens in an ethnology museum, people become items in the catalogue of anthropology. *I'm New Here* closes the distance between photographer and subject through self-expression. Each photographer resets the power of the visual medium and participates with their subjects to form a meditation on their personal geographies. Regardless of whether the image depicts a person, an animal, the land, or the sea, the artists focus on intimacy, relationality, and ultimately life.

As curators, Tao and I sought to

1. Sew together the work of each artist to produce a shared vision.
2. Create an experience that submerged viewers into a story from which they could not look away.
3. Be accessible.

In an experimental manner and to make the artwork more accessible, we produced a film to accompany *I'm New Here*. Fifteen minutes long, it features moving footage of nature scenes from across the hemisphere woven between stills



Figure 3 Alli ruraqmi kanki. Peru. Courtesy of Allison Arteaga.

of the photographs by Hadeed, Huggins, Delsol, Papp, núñez, Arteaga, and Pyle. Tao and I recited their words with Gustav Holst's song "Venus" from *The Planets Suite* as the score. This music was chosen in connection to the night sky and as an ode to astral bodies. Venus, the Roman goddess of love and beauty, is a symbol of femininity and creation, but we know that there are other deities and orishas from other cosmologies, too, that light up the night sky. Venus, whichever name she goes by, is the brightest planet able to be viewed from Earth. The mythology embodied in Venus is that of an erotic reclaiming of pleasure that was important to us. Often a feminine power of defiance denied within a capitalist system, we were inspired by claiming Black and Indigenous feminist and feminine genealogies in nature as a life-giving force. Each work of art could stand on its own; however, by coming together, the photographs glow as stars of a greater constellation.

Interweaving the words of Kai Minosh Pyle, Allison Arteaga, steve núñez, Melia Delsol, and Dóra Papp:

What centuries live, not in the highlands but the lower hills, just outside Lima, Peru, tells much about the reality of a dutifully forgotten majority. Latin America's

national amnesias of their Black and Indigenous, of hands that toiled and land swept away, are unflinching with time. Peru preaches peace for stomachs full of misery.¹⁰

What does a field mean? To a Black person? To an Indian? Do we ever find ourselves on common ground? I was born half a mile from this sign, on the border of the Oneida reservation in Green Bay. In 2016, my friend Stephanie, an Afro-Latina Oneida woman, co-founded the group Black Lives United here. In 2018, my friend Danielle's cousin, Jonathon Tubby—an Oneida man—was murdered by the Green Bay Police.¹¹

Enslaved Africans mined the gold and enslaved Indigenous people mined the silver, and all have yet to see the fruits.¹²

And so, their leaves became the canvas of our work.¹³

While meaningful ferns, vines, flowers and herbs also featured, signaling human connections with the plant world, everyday healing practices and memories of loved ones—in fragile form.¹⁴

I've heard many stories about why the Dakota and other nations called Black soldiers "Buffalo Soldiers." I'm not sure which I want to believe.¹⁵

The ocean itself takes on a personality—that of the embracing mother providing a safe space for being—which is both archetypal and poignant.¹⁶

These ancient plants are abundant in Dominica, bearing evolutionary memory of countless adaptations. Their spongy trunks carried into villages by flood waters kept a slow fire burning throughout long nights after Maria—carrying hope for days to come.¹⁷

The boys climb a large rock, proving their manhood through endurance, fearlessly jump, and become submerged in a moment of innocent unawareness.¹⁸

Fewer and fewer locations can be “freely” accessed, and many landscapes reside in spaces that are considered private property, and “public” spaces often require financial resources to visit, payments to access, and are frequently limited to daylight hours.¹⁹

The Warriors of Huracán is Trinidad’s last surviving Black Indian band, part of a transgressive traditional mas culture rooted in the island’s history of slavery and resistance . . . of master and slave mocking and reinterpreting each other behind costumes and masks, and of the enslaved’s faiths, rhythms and imaginations subverting fierce suppression.²⁰

Today, as capitalism drives the hyper-development of natural sceneries, human waste litters sacred landscapes, and artificial light drowns the majesty, mystery, and splendor of heavenly skylines, photography enables us to capture the beauty emanating from the natural world as well as reflect the ecological devastation that human society continues to wreak on the planet.²¹

Hibiscus leaves are often steeped in water and drunk as tea to soothe a cough.²²

Though marginalized by Carnival administrators and mass-produced party bands, they reclaim with apt ceremony what was denied during slavery and post-emancipation: the freedom of the individual, and of a people, to choose and celebrate their own spirituality, and to express themselves culturally.²³

The group exhibition brings together communities that span beyond borders, of people who subvert the colonial technology of the camera to create the conditions for intimacy between themselves and the people with whom they create the image,

together. Combined with their words, the participatory sentiment across all the works of art is what Toni Cade Bambara calls the irresistible call for revolution: resilience against oppression and connective threads between people and their surrounding ecologies.

Portraiture

Portraiture is not most readily associated with nature or landscape photography. Yet the three series of portraits featured form a photographic essay on the African diaspora and the Indigenous Americas featuring close-up portraits. The photographers—Hadeed, Huggins, Delsol, and Papp—grapple with the tradition of the camera as an ethnographic tool of European colonialism. “The Afro-Indigenous Carnavalesque: Cosmology, Contrast, and Intimacy in *Warriors of Huracán*” considers Hadeed’s reckoning with the anticolonial and satirical history of Black rebellion inherent in the Carnival tradition of burning the sugarcane fields in Canboulay (*cannes brulées*). “Indian Bay Baptism: Black Boyhood and Oceanic Freedom in *Circa No Future*” explores how Huggins sees swimming as a ritual and the sea as a fluid space beyond the constructs of gender, full of possibility. “Tall Is Her Body after the Storm: Afro-Kalinago Ecologies, Elegies, and Cultivation in *Drifted Away*” examines how Delsol and Papp partner to honor Dominica’s provision grounds of enslavement as a continual resource. In each series the face beckons, inducting the viewer into a social contract and demand for justice from which one cannot look away. The visceral emotionality of the faces is framed by the vastness of nature.

Aware that the lens can function as the tool of the voyeur, the artists instead choose a closeness and proximity with their subjects, whom they know intimately. The captions and writing about their subjects form the necessary context and consent for the art to have more value beyond aesthetics. The photographs have a texture through which you can almost hear the rustling of the leaves and the crashing of the waves. The viewer becomes immersed in a fluid space of Afro-Indigenous survivance and futurity.²⁴ The Trinidadian photographer Hadeed pictures the last Black Indian band, people of shared African and Amerindian heritage who carry on the tradition of traditional mas at Carnival. For over thirty years she has photographed them. The Trinidadian-born artist Huggins, who also calls St. Vincent home, documents her islands in an ongoing process and the recent devastation of the eruption of the volcano La Soufrière. Huggins is as much a griot as a photographer, recording visual histories that mythologize the precolonial natural environment of the Caribbean archipelago. In a like manner Delsol shares a story of the cycle of natural disaster and loss

translated through ethnobotany. A friendship forms between Delsol, a native of Dominica, and Papp, a researcher from France, who arrives after Hurricane Maria's devastating landfall as part of a relief effort. Together the two use photography to meditate on how the faces of survivors of the hurricane and their kin heal after the storm. Delsol and Papp write an elegy through images for the island nation as it prepares for the next hurricane season.

For each artist, the focus on the natural environment does not preclude the human form. As the Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter teaches us, the Enlightenment tradition of Western thought invents a false binary between the human and the nonhuman.²⁵ Narrating from three nations in the eastern Caribbean—Trinidad and Tobago, Dominica, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines—each photographer frames the visuality of the faces of Black and Indigenous people in order to tell the story of survival despite the cataclysm of European colonialism.

Abigail Hadeed* The Afro-Indigenous Carnavalesque: Cosmology, Contrast, and Intimacy in *Warriors of Huracán

From New Orleans to Rio de Janeiro, Carnival is a hemispheric arena of anticolonial theatricality, and in Trinidad and Tobago it is the national culture. Over thirty years of knowing members of Trinidad's last surviving Black Indian band, Hadeed has photographed them. In doing so, she introduces the viewer to a tradition of Black and Indigenous performance and survivance. Showcasing traditional mas in contrast to more contemporary commercial forms, the series the *Warriors of Huracán* testifies to the importance of ritual. The band are part of a transgressive traditional mas culture rooted in the island's history of racial slavery and rebellion that led to the burning of sugarcane fields during emancipation in the former British West Indies. French and Spanish influences are present in Carnival; in satirical performances, the enslaved mocks the master, repeating and reinterpreting choreographies and costumes. Over a decades-long career as a portrait photographer, Hadeed is invested in replacing the colonial gaze of ethnography with the lens of the Caribbean vantage.

The Warriors dance, cry out, and chant in a language that combines Aruacan, Yoruba, and Creole through the streets and across the Carnival stage, wearing mostly black costumes handmade from local corbeau feathers, river beads, chip-chip or snail shells, and cow horns in contrast to the bright colors of commercial Carnival, Hadeed tells us in her captions. Drawing on West African-derived cosmologies, Hadeed highlights the spiritual world of the Black Indians

and how the Trinidadian ceremony Orisha was practiced in secret, “hiding” within Catholicism as a mask. The artist Accra Shepp celebrates Hadeed’s use of space and her ability to be present before her subjects and consequently allow them to be present for the viewer in the photograph “The Paying of Respect.” He notes resonances in the work of the artist Phyllis Galembo in Bahia and how the visuality of Yoruba-derived aesthetics and cosmology speaks across the South Atlantic. Hadeed’s captions enliven the images, giving context to the names and stories of the men: Burton Sankeralli, Sango Fayomi, Ogun Moewa, Chief Wadaga Raja, and Ifa Moloko, Darlington “Boysie” Henry, Ogun Moewa Narrie Approo, Joan Sansavior.



Figure 4 The Warriors of Huracán_Flying Agitan: Ifa Moloko (2019), second in command after the Okenaga/King. In traditional encounters between two groups of Black Indians, the Flying Agitan would test his rival with questions and answers. The ability to correctly ask and answer questions was the measure of whether respect would be paid or whether insults and a battle would ensue. Songs and distinctive dances are also key aspects of Black Indian mas. Caption by Artist. Courtesy of Abigail Hadeed.



Figure 5 The Warriors of Huracán: Chant down Babylon (2019). Black Indian is a speech mas. Warriors cry out and chant in a language that combines Aruacan, Yoruba, and Creole. Teenagers and children also play mas with the Warriors of Huracán. It is a multigenerational family-type band. Caption by Artist. Courtesy of Abigail Hadeed.



Figure 6 The Warriors of Huracán: The Guardians of Eshu (2019). Sango Fayomi and Ifa Moloko, members of the Black Indian band Warriors of Huracán, at the entrance to the Palais. Caption by Artist. Courtesy of Abigail Hadeed.

* * *

Abigail Hadeed (b. Trinidad and Tobago) is a Trinidadian photographer and producer who has been documenting the Caribbean and the Americas for the past thirty years. She is synonymous with her black-and-white photographs of steelbands, traditional carnival, theater, Caribbean descendants in Central America (*Trees without Roots*, published in 2006), and the indigenous people of Guyana's Rupununi savannah (Commonwealth Photographic Awards winner, 2006). Hadeed's archives owe much to her ability to discover people and places at the crossroads of an unresolved past and an impending future, torn between pain and possibility, disquiet and hope. Her deeply felt images are the fusing of eye and instinct, a stalking through shadow and light of what can only be glimpsed. Hadeed's work has been featured at Biennials in São Paulo, Brazil 1998, and Havana, Cuba 2006, in *Pictures from Paradise: A Survey of Contemporary Caribbean Photography*, at the Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival in Toronto, and is also part of the permanent collection of *Light Work*, in Syracuse, New York.

Nadia Huggins Indian Bay Baptism: Black Boyhood and Oceanic Freedom in *Circa no future*

Located in the eastern Caribbean, St. Vincent and the Grenadines is one of the most vibrant nexuses in the Caribbean of Black and Native presence. Home to the Garifuna and other Amerindian and Black Indigenous communities, the island is also one of astounding ecological biodiversity. As a visual storyteller, Huggins introduces the viewer to the beauty in the everyday moments of her verdant island. Capturing the way the light fragments across the island, Huggins frames adolescent rites of passage as everyday sacraments. An ode to innocence and play for young Black boys, in the series *Circa no future*, which is ongoing, she explores the link between what she describes as "Caribbean adolescent masculinity and the freedom of bodies in the ocean." Shepp remarks on Huggins's "command of the pictorial space" and how it supports her vision. He sees true tenderness expressed for her subjects and connection to place. The ocean embraces the boys as a mother providing safety and freedom. Indian Bay hugs the swimming boys. The name of the bay points to the misnaming by Columbus of European colonialism. Who is the Indian? Where is the Indian? Are the boys Indigenous?

Huggins's signature underwater lens immerses the viewer, allowing the viewer to ask unresolved questions. By involving herself in the ritual swimming



Figure 7 Circa no future, Indian Bay, Saint Vincent & the Grenadines, 2014–ongoing. Courtesy of Nadia Huggins.



Figure 8 Circa no future, Indian Bay, Saint Vincent & the Grenadines, 2014–ongoing. Courtesy of Nadia Huggins.

with the teens, she finds creative ways not to interrupt but to show the vantage of intimate moments of bonding between the boys on the cusp of manhood. The scene is at once carefree and depicts masculine joy as noted by the artist Tracy Rector (Black, Choctaw descent, Jewish, French, Scottish and Irish). As they plunge into the water, the young men stop posturing and performing for Huggins and her camera. She captures the joy of masculine vulnerability and play. As the critic Ayelen Dolores Simms notes, the bubbles add an ethereal quality in addition to the life-force of the sea to Huggins's portraits.

* * *

Nadia Huggins (b. Trinidad and Tobago) grew up in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, where she is currently based. A self-taught artist, she works in photography and, since 2010, has built a body of images that are characterized by her interest in the everyday. Her work merges documentary and conceptual practices, which explore belonging, identity, and memory through a contemporary approach focused on re-presenting Caribbean landscapes and the sea. Nadia's photographs have been exhibited in group shows in Canada, USA, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Barbados, Ethiopia, Guadeloupe, France, and the Dominican Republic. In 2019, her solo show *Human stories: Circa no future* took place at Now Gallery, London. Her work forms part of the collection of the Wedge Collection (Toronto), the National Gallery of Jamaica (Kingston), and the Art Museum of the Americas (Washington, DC). Nadia was selected for the *New York Times Portfolio Review* (2018), and her work has been included in several publications, including *A to Z of Caribbean Art*. She is the cofounder of *ARC Magazine* and *One Drop in the Ocean*—an initiative that aims to raise awareness about marine debris.

Melía Delsol and Dóra Papp Tall Is Her Body after the Storm: Afro-Kalinago Ecologies, Elegies, and Cultivation in Drifted Away

Located near Trinidad and Tobago in the eastern Caribbean, Waitikubuli (Tall is her body), otherwise known as Dominica, is a mountainous island of Afro-Kalinago ecologies. Full of forests, Dominica, formerly under French and British dominion, has always functioned as a refuge for Amerindians and Maroon communities in part because of these ecologies. Visited by hurricane season each year, survivors cycle through grief and loss, but catastrophe yields cultivation. To



Figure 9 Drifted Away. Courtesy of Melia Delsol and Dóra Papp.

tell this story, Delsol, who was born in Dominica, collaborates with the French botanist Papp to craft a visual elegy and meditation on repair in the wake of Hurricane Maria (2017). Dedicated to two beloved daughters lost to the storm, *Drifted Away* is a multilayered photographic work of mourning through the lens of ethnobotany. It also features an [audio accompaniment](#) that shows how friendship is cultivated after catastrophe. Striking portraits, faces of Dominicans, are superimposed onto leaves of plants native to the island. As a formal strategy, the human and the nonhuman become sutured together. The leaves become canvases inscribed with histories through which nature speaks. The provision grounds of racial slavery are a storyteller from the plantation to the present. The captions and audio component narrate the story of a mother whose name remains anonymous. She loses two of her daughters to María's floodwaters, and a botanist, also



Figure 10 Drifted Away. Courtesy of Melia Delsol and Dóra Papp.

unnamed, comes to the island on a boat with supplies from neighboring Martinique, and stays on. The intimate portraits feature subjects from Dominica's most vulnerable communities affected by Hurricane María, Pointe Michel and Loubiere.

Delsol and Papp note that “as one of the last isles colonized, the proud presence of its Indigenous inhabitants and the strength of its post-plantation small holders” are resilient and palpable throughout the island. They feature the earthiness and sustenance that the ecology of “ground provisions” vegetables provide, found in Dominican gardens. Yam, dasheen, tania, kassav, and green fig (banana) become Delsol and Papp’s canvases to tell a story of survival. The tubers survive because of their deep rooting underground, able to be harvested days after the storm. The artists explain, “Dominicans bear a close relationship to the land. Such provisions—which remain a common feature of the landscape—evoke the Afro-Indigenous past/present.” Everyday healing practices and memories of loved ones—creating a fragile connection between what is gone and what remains. The cultural critic Adom Philogene Heron lingers on the significance of the bounty provided by Dominican provision gardens to nourish and restore after the storm in his essay “Besides Rivers: Abundant Life and Ecologies of Hope.” For Heron, the leaf portraiture evokes sorrow and peace. He writes that the “organic human portraits also gesture towards a slow process of human and ecological healing.” There is vitality in the visuality and the faces of the island’s Black Indigenous communities.

* * *

Melia Delsol (b. Dominica) is a craft-based artist and mother who lives in the Commonwealth of Dominica. Her work includes sculpture, organic photo-collage and experimentation with madras (creole) cloth. She is inspired by the rich landscape that surrounds her, the love of her children and common-law husband, as well as her spiritual groundings in Yaweh and Rastafari. She hails from the village of Loubiere, on the southwest coast of Dominica.

Dóra Papp (b. France) creates work that accommodates conversations on the interconnections between people and nature. The creation of personal, intimate memory-work is an essential part of her vision, aligned with an interest in affective ecologies. Organic photography and mixed-media collage are central to her practice. As a biologist, she has co-created “a food forest” for broadening the diversity of human-nonhuman connections. Her curiosity for the plant world inspires her to explore repair, adaptation and diversity, and narrative challenges to dominant neo-Darwinian paradigms. Her research is grounded in ecology, ethnobotany, and evolutionary biology and she is trained in environmental science and basic developmental biology.

Landscape

Landscape photography is most readily associated with nature photography, by orientation and subject matter. The three series of images featured form a hemispheric photographic statement on the outdoors by Arteaga, núñez, and Pyle. Each attends to the entanglement of African and Indigenous presence from the Native reservations of Wisconsin to the Andean Mountain range to the unceded Indigenous territories of North Carolina. They frame stolen land and life stolen too soon by slow and fast forms of state-sanctioned violence. “Latin America’s National Amnesias: Black and Quechua Echoes in the Lower Hills in *Alli ruraqmi kanki?*” considers Arteaga’s strategies of playing with contrast, light and dark, to illuminate what state memory forgets in South America. The essay “*Free the Land’s* New Afrikan Philosophies and Native Cosmoscapes” examines núñez’s macro lens as a statement about the hyperfocus of hypercapitalism’s racial and ecological violence. “Northern Coast Visual Melancholia of Black and Indigenous Ecologies in *Fields Have Eyes, Woods Have Ears, and Waters Have Memories*” explores Pyle’s visual techniques of framing metropolitan ecologies as a commentary on Indigenous social protest and freedom movements for Black lives.

Activist rallying cries are inscribed as collective demands for undoing the ecological and racial violence of colonialism in the United States and Latin America. As a movement, Land Back includes the ocean and includes the mountains and the sky. The bucolic and the pastoral celebrated by traditions of paintings of nature and later photography stand in contrast to the way each artist here offers a visual critique of racial capitalism and the reach of the carceral landscape beyond prisons. Through the camera lens the photographers seek freedom by shifting the frame toward the expanse of the cosmos. Zooming out from the hemispheric vision of racial justice, the planetary vision of the future for people of color comes into focus.

Documentary as a form of witness is important to each photographer’s vision of racial justice. Whether their context is the ecologies of the rural or the urban, each meditates on genocide past and ongoing. Making demands for a more just future, the Quechua photographer Arteaga focuses on the suffering of those in the lower hills outside Lima, Peru, due to centuries of colonization. núñez, who calls Wilmington, North Carolina, home, meditates on the long history of antiblackness in philosophical and political thought through their photography and writing. Decolonization requires Land Back, as Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang powerfully remind us. So núñez considers what it would mean for the US to give national parks back to Native people and how this would need to involve

reparations for Black Americans. Also challenging US state-power, Two-Spirit Michif and Baawiting Nishnaabe artist Pyle has a story to tell of police violence and activism, in their native Green Bay, Wisconsin, extending to metropolitan ecologies of Minneapolis. Together the photographers observe the silent narratives inscribed in nature by looking outward to the possibility represented by the open sky. There is an intimate stillness and a timeless continuity to the images that encourage the viewer to pause and consider what justice looks like. Each artist uses their camera to reclaim the land for Black and Native futures.

Allison Arteaga* Latin America's National Amnesias: Black and Quechua Echoes in the Lower Hills in *Alli ruraqmi kanki

Arteaga's photographic series *Alli ruraqmi kanki* focuses on the exploitation of Latin America's Black and Indigenous communities. Centered on the lower hills just outside Lima, Peru, Arteaga's use of black and white, like Hadeed, is stark enough to leave an impact but nuanced enough to lead our eyes into an otherworldly space narrated by their poetic words. Their photographs are thoughtful, painful, and alive. Arteaga defines the hypocrisy of Peru preaching peace while its people continue to suffer as part of a campaign of national amnesia. Peru's majority are Black and Indigenous, yet those in power have white hands, Arteaga tells us. The photographs narrate a story of those who live in the upper hills. Not only has the Peruvian government exploited its racialized citizens, but the capitalist extractivist imperialism of nations beyond Peru's borders also draw vampiristically on their life, labor, and land.

The way Arteaga shoots landscapes, with faceless silhouettes or people from a distance, sutures the human into the ecologies. Arteaga does not separate people from land but, rather, shoots such that a commentary on extractive capitalism is formed. The hills are symbolic of the people who have lived in them for centuries. There are those who fled to this land, escaping gamonales, or leaving the countryside in pursuit of the right to live. Seeking refuge, the work is powerful and undeniably loud. Arteaga says, "A society created for a few white hands in the city of Lima, the port of Spaniards, cannot expect to outlive the millions bordered in the periphery. Not only in the highlands but in the lower hills, not in the limelight but in the forgotten brush and the bits of land left for us to partition, we come to clarity."



Figure 11 Alli ruraqmi kanki, 2019. *Courtesy of Allison Arteaga.*



Figure 12 Alli ruraqmi kanki, 2019. *Courtesy of Allison Arteaga.*

* * *

Allison Arteaga (b. Peru) is a Peruvian American artist, working in photography, video, and prose. Arteaga's work explores questions of imperialism and war; collective memory and living history; and the possibilities of true liberation for the oppressed, specifically in Peru and Latin America. These nations live at the junction of a negative peace and hard domination, facing a national amnesia in the midst of violence and poverty and continued extraction by global powers. Born to a Quechua family, Arteaga is guided by the philosophy of liberation, mainly by the ideas of Jose Carlos Mariategui and revolutionaries like him, as well as their experiences as a working-class and Indigenous person, which are all tied to a long history of struggle. Arteaga's work demands a reimagination of the future, and to reexamine what is viewed as humanity, and what is understood to be peace. They received a bachelor's degree in fine arts from Cornell University.

steve núñez ***Free the Land's* New Afrikan Philosophies and Native Cosmospaces**

With their camera pointed at the sky, núñez uses photography to tell a story about Black and Indigenous solidarity and the centrality of land as reparation. Echoing the rallying cry "Free the Land" by Black activists of the Republic for New Afrika (RNA), núñez also calls on recent policy recommendations to "return the national parks to the tribes."²⁶ They see landscape photography as a decolonial praxis in the spirit of Sankofa, the Ghanaian Akan symbol for going back to the past to retrieve something. Centering Black self-determination, núñez considers the philosophers Betty Shabazz's, Amiri Baraka's, and Robert F. Williams's connection to the land—Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. They also center their hometown Wilmington, North Carolina, as the infinite and the infinitesimal. The expanse of the horizon and Milky Way allow núñez to experiment with not only scale but deep time centered in Black and Indigenous philosophies and ecologies. Focusing on the sky forms a visual critique of the uncritical celebration of the United States' national parks that are often seen as one of the greatest US institutions; núñez writes, "in reality, they are one of the most evident sites of colonial violence and the genocide of indigenous peoples requisite to their establishment."

Shepp describes núñez's narrative as "an organic expression of his world view (and reflected his personal history)." Noting that the big-sky landscapes are indebted to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century painters such as Caspar David Friedrich and J. M. W. Turner and the photographer Gustave Le Gray, Shepp sees



Figure 13 Free the Land, 2020. Courtesy of steve niñez.



Figure 14 Free the Land, 2020. *Courtesy of steve núñez.*

the entangled temporality and stakes of núñez's visual exploration. The visual language begs the intergalactic questions of time travel, Afrofuturism and Indigenous futurism. The high dynamic range in these images goes beyond what the natural eye can see, creating a universe within every frame and a capturing of the past for the present to see. From the lens of cinematography, núñez's images meditate on spirituality, existence, and hope. They offer a critique of racial capitalism and the accumulation of human waste that litters landscapes sacred to

Black and Indigenous peoples. Light pollution drowns the majesty, mystery, and splendor of heavenly skies; photography enables us to capture the beauty emanating from the natural world as well as reflect the ecological devastation that human society continues to wreak on the planet. Access and ownership are vitally important. But nobody should be able to own a landscape. As Rector (Black, Choctaw descent, Jewish, French, Scottish and Irish) notes, the East Coast of what is now known as the United States is the traditional territory of the people of the dawn to which núnéz pays homage. Their attention to minute details requires the slowness of a spiritual pause to take notice of nature's vastness.

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steve núnéz (b. United States) is from Wilmington, North Carolina. His practice explores the politics and ethics of revolutionary counterviolence predominantly through the philosophical thought of David Walker and Frantz Fanon. núnéz's interests include Africana philosophy, philosophy of racism, existential phenomenology, Black aesthetics, philosophy of education, carceral and abolition studies, and philosophy of photography. He has been involved in grassroots abolitionist movements and prison divestment campaigns and is the founder and lead organizer of the University of Connecticut Defund and Divestment Project. He completed undergraduate studies in philosophy, religion, and anthropology from University of North Carolina–Wilmington before receiving a master of theological studies degree in religion, ethics, and politics from Harvard Divinity School.

Kai Minosh Pyle Northern Coast Visual Melancholia of Black and Indigenous Ecologies in *Fields Have Eyes, Woods Have Ears, and Waters Have Memories*

Born on the border of the Oneida reservation in Green Bay, Pyle's eye for detail tells a melancholic story of Black and Indigenous peoples living in the North Midwest and how their pains, though different in origin and history, mirror each other in the present. Pyle explores the relationality of Black and Indigenous ecologies to each other and the land, resulting in a narrative of union to the earth. The fields have eyes, the woods have ears, and the waters have memories because the souls of those who died reside in these spaces, etched into the natural history, and passed down through storytelling. Pyle shows us the national amnesia, to draw



Figure 15 Fields Have Eyes, Woods Have Ears, and Waters Have Memories, 2020.
Courtesy of Kai Minosh Pyle.

on Arteaga's poignant phrase, residing in this country and community. Though present-day colonialism, police violence, and institutionalized racism try to erase these narratives, engaging with the Earth as an ancestor is a form of resisting this violent erasure.

Pyle describes the myriad stories they have heard about the Dakota people and other nations calling Black soldiers "Buffalo Soldiers," though they note that they do not know which stories they *want* to believe. Buffalo Soldiers were Black soldiers serving as members of the Tenth Cavalry Regiment of the United States Army. Pyle's wanting is something that cannot be ignored. Metahistorically, they meditate on the illusory nature of colonial histories. Like Leslie Marmon Silko, they favor so-called gossip and stories passed down and altered among Native peoples with each voice that comes to share them. Pyle writes of the grassroots



Figure 16 Fields Have Eyes, Woods Have Ears, and Waters Have Memories, 2020.
Courtesy of Kai Minosh Pyle.

history of the American Indian Movement (AIM) based in Minneapolis, founded in 1968 to rally against police violence against Indigenous people. Four years after moving to the city, Pyle watched as Minnesota came under global awareness after the murder of George Floyd in June 2020. Floyd's death was a catalyst for social movements and protest not just across this country but across national borders and seas. Pyle speaks not only to the shared pain of Black and Indigenous people in Minneapolis but to a worldly pain of the abuse of power and policing as a tool for imperialism and state control.

Scaling back to urban Minneapolis, Pyle touches on one final parallel between the Indigenous and Black experience in the city: "Once year a teacher and I traveled to Ojibwe country to talk about why Indigenous Studies matters. The only Black person we met was the waitress. She said to my teacher privately, 'This

is not a good place to live.’ My great-auntie went to school in Door County on Green Bay. She was the only Indian in class. She told me once, there was a young Black boy in her school too. She said he always seemed lonely. What does a field mean? To a Black person? To an Indian? Do we ever find ourselves on common ground?” As Rector notes, there are ways Pyle is anchored in the landscape but has a curious eye for detail that is both speculative and childlike, seeing the land and those who inhabit it as storytellers and creators of their own realities and pasts. In this way, the people can choose which of their histories to believe, thereby existing in protest against the states and institutions that strive to oppress.

* * *

Kai Minosh Pyle (b. United States) is a Two-Spirit Michif and Baawiting Nishnaabe, originally from Green Bay, Wisconsin. Currently residing on the Dakota peoples’ homelands in Bde Ota Othunwe (Minneapolis, MN). They earned their doctorate from the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities, researching Anishinaabe Two-Spirit history. Their work has previously been published in *This Magazine*, *PRISM Magazine*, *Feminist Studies*, and *Transgender Studies Quarterly*. In addition to their creative work, they are dedicated to revitalizing the Michif and Anishinaabemowin languages of their ancestors.

* * *

Tao Leigh Goffe is a curator, writer, and artist whose work specializes in sound design and virtual environments. Her practice explores the narratives that emerge from histories of race, colonialism, and technology. Born in the UK and based in New York City, her work negotiates the haunted legacies of Atlantic crossings. She is an assistant professor of literary theory and cultural history at Cornell University, where she teaches literatures and theories of labor that center Black feminist engagements with Indigeneity and Asian diasporic racial formations. Committed to building intellectual communities beyond institutions, she is the founder of the Dark Laboratory, an engine for the study of race, technology, and ecology through digital storytelling (virtual reality [VR] and extended reality [XR]). She studied literature and visual culture at Princeton University and Yale University.

Tatiana Esh is a storyteller who centers her practice on writing, visual art, and filmmaking. Collaboration and community are deeply important to her practice, and she belongs both to an artist collective called Queerstar and to a broader unnamed community of friends who support each other artistically. Blackness and

its inherent artistry, mystery, and power is a core value of her artistry as she decolonizes her own gaze and reflects on the ancestral past. In her role as lab manager of the Dark Laboratory, she coordinates and curates data collection and digital storytelling projects. She studied Africana studies and film at Cornell University.

The Dark Laboratory is a collective for collaboration, design, and the study of race and ecology through creative technology. Situated at the intersection of scholarship, artistic praxis, theory, and performance, members use modes of nonlinear born-digital storytelling to attend to histories shaped by racial capitalism and the futures beyond it.

*There are so many voices and visions present in I'm New Here. Many thanks to the artists for their offerings, for the substance they provided to meditate on shared ecologies and histories. The exhibition is dedicated to the memory of the two daughters who were lost, referenced in *Drifted Away*. With thanks to Adom Philogene Heron, who shared his essay "[Besides Rivers](#)," which is in its way an elegy wherein he dwells on the memory of time spent in Dominica with Yakairah and Destiny. In honor of Melia Delsol's beloved daughters and the nameless others lost to the hurricanes, we dedicate this exhibition. In Kai Minosh Pyle's *Fields Have Eyes, Woods Have Ears, and Waters Have Memories*, we dedicate this exhibition to the memory of Jonathon Tubby, who was murdered by the Green Bay Police.*

*Adding to the collective chorus, we give thanks to Accra Shepp, Ayelen Dolores Simms, and Tracy Rector, whose analysis of the artwork is featured and woven throughout. Many thanks to the subjects of Abigail Hadeed's artwork: Burton Sankeralli, Sango Fayomi, Ogun Moewa, Chief Wadaga Raja, and Ifa Moloko, Darlington "Boysie" Henry, Ogun Moewa Narrie Approo, Joan Sansavior. Special thanks to digital storytellers and fellow travelers Felicia Chang and Zaake De Coninck for their inspiration. We would like to thank Leah Sweet (Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art), who selected artwork drawing on Black and Indigenous themes from the museum's collection that helped us think alongside this photographic work by contemporary artists. Thanks to Sarah Jane Cervenak and J. Kameron Carter for the inspiring ideas and conception of the *Black Outdoors*. Thanks to Bam Willoughby and Toya Mary Okonkwo, whose contributions are featured in the virtual reality component of the exhibition. We would also like to thank the Dark Laboratory Theoreticians, Technicians, and Advisory Board for being part of the intellectual community we are building on racial and climate justice. Thanks to Paul Fleming, Tim Murray, and Jeremy Braddock for their support and belief in the urgency of this work. This exhibition was possible in part through support from Cornell University Media Studies, Cornell University Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and the Rural Humanities, an initiative of the Mellon Foundation.*

Notes

¹ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Geographies of Racial Capitalism” *Antipode* Foundation, directed by Kenton Card, 2020,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CS627aKtII>.

² Ibid.

³ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁴ Born-digital refers to content made for digital dissemination as opposed to being formatted for the digital. It was important to embrace the frame of media ecologies as one that was the argument for how this story needs to be told, not simply a supplemental or convenient form.

⁵ Duke University Press, *Black Outdoors: Innovations in the Poetics of Study*,
<https://www.dukeupress.edu/books/browse/by-series/series-detail?IdNumber=4201822>.

⁶ Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019),
<https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478005681>.

⁷ Fred Moten, lecture, Migrants, Refugees, and the Politics of Sanctuary course, New York University, 2018.

⁸ Gil Scott Heron, “I’m New Here,” *I’m New Here* (XL Recordings, 2010).

⁹ Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017),
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1134dm3>.

¹⁰ [Allison Arteaga](#), *Alli ruraqmi kanki*.

¹¹ Kai Minosh Pyle, *Fields Have Eyes, Woods Have Ears, and Waters Have Memories*.

¹² [Arteaga](#), *Alli ruraqmi kanki*.

¹³ Melia Delsol and Dóra Papp, *Drifted Away*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Pyle: *Fields Have Eyes, Woods Have Ears, and Waters Have Memories*.

¹⁶ Nadia Huggins, *Circa no future*.

¹⁷ Delsol and Papp, *Drifted Away*.

¹⁸ Huggins, *Circa no future*.

¹⁹ steve núñez, *Free the Land*.

²⁰ Abigail Hadeed, *Warriors of Huracán*.

²¹ núñez, *Free the Land*.

²² Delsol and Papp, *Drifted Away*.

²³ Hadeed, *Warriors of Huracán*.

²⁴ Gerald Vizenor, *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

²⁵ Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being / Power / Truth / Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—an Argument,” *The New Centennial* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015>.

²⁶ David Treuer, “Return the National Parks to the Native Tribes,” *Atlantic*, April 12, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/05/return-the-national-parks-to-the-tribes/618395/>.

Olympic-Scale Subversion: Poster Art, Architecture, Performance, and the Afterlives of Mexico 1968

J. Nathan Goldberg

On October 2, 1968, only ten days before the opening ceremonies of the highly anticipated 1968 Summer Olympics, the Mexican Army surrounded students at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas. The plaza, holding remnants of Mexico's past—an Aztec pyramid and the Spanish church of Santiago Tlatelolco—would soon become the site of state massacre. After months of strife between the government's single-party regime and student protestors in the lead-up to the Games, tensions reached a crescendo. Snipers mounted the surrounding apartment buildings of Nonoalco Tlatelolco—the new modern housing complex designed by the architect Mario Pani—while armed plainclothes troops, distinguished by white gloves, seamlessly assimilated into the crowd. Shortly after 6:00 p.m., a helicopter dropped a flare into the plaza, signaling the beginning of “Operation Galeana.” A cacophony of violence ensued. The snipers, positioned atop the modernist buildings, fired into the unaware crowd. Simultaneously, troops in the plaza, stationed in the burial ground of Mexico's past, fired machine guns at citizens, attempting to cut off escape routes. After the violence was over, while maintenance crews spent the subsequent hours sanitizing the plaza and picking up abandoned shoes and purses, the army searched the nearby apartments, looking for protestors being harbored by Nonoalco Tlatelolco residents.¹ On that night, in the space of Mexico's Aztec and Spanish ruins yet surrounded by its modern present, temporal and spatial order was contested and disrupted. It was a moment when the habitual violence of Mexico's “miracle” was made shockingly clear.²

In the years leading up to the 1968 Summer Olympics, Mexico, as a “developing” country, anxiously prepared to present a coherent image to the world, one of a modern nation, suited to hosting such events. However, despite the Mexican government’s attempts, the architectural structures and Olympic iconography produced before the Games exemplified the same tension that revealed itself in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas on October 2. The Mexican government presented an anxious modernism, juxtaposing its miracle with its history, blurring past and present.³ The state attempted to assert a coherent image through its control of almost all cultural production, co-opting architecture, television, and Olympic symbols. However, despite the oppressive dominance of the Mexican government’s cultural regime, protestors, like those that night in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, circumvented state power through counterpractices such as poster art and political street theater. While the government sought to present a coherent past, present, and *future* Mexico, protestors harnessed these oppositional tactics to bypass and critique the state. Posters and performances in the street functioned as communication apparatuses outside the state-dominated media and culture, and directly addressed both the government’s affirmation of economic miracle and its oppressive tactics by directly confronting modern symbols of the Olympics and the regime’s violence. As I hope to suggest, despite the demise of the 1968 student movement on October 2, these subversive countercultural practices themselves ruptured temporal and spatial order, promising an afterlife to Mexico 1968. In short, the future—the legacy of the student movement—resides in the 1968 foundation of oppositional strategies like posters and performances, which promoted collective action, speech, and, most important, an engagement with public space.

This essay examines both the official culture crafted by the government in anticipation of the 1968 Olympics and the countercultural practices that produced a lasting fracture in the temporal and spatial order of modern Mexico. However, I am not proposing that this rupture marks a break, a demarcation of before and after, a paradigm shift in democratization efforts in Mexico. Instead, I insist on a *strategy* of spatial fracture that effectively permeated the afterlife of Mexico 1968. I begin by establishing the conditions of both official culture and counterculture in the lead-up to the Olympics. As I stress, throughout the 1960s, and especially in the summer and fall of 1968, the state’s utilization of architecture, communication apparatuses, and Olympic symbols was both in direct tension with, and the topic of, poster art and political street theater. Students employed such subversive countercultural approaches as a way to counteract the manner in which the dominant image regime documented and constructed claims to the truth, namely, how the interweaving web of television, Olympic iconography, and architecture played a prominent role in suppressing political dissent and constructing a coherent state

teleology. Through this government propaganda machine, Mexico's Aztec and Spanish past seamlessly bloomed into the modern Mexican nation, whose very modernity, for the state, was at stake on the world stage of the Olympics. Indeed, as the Games and the massacre approached, a multiplicity of competing and colliding visual and communicative platforms emerged. While the state's powerful network of mediums called Mexican citizens and the world to *witness* the nation's miraculous development into modernism, students staked competing claims to the truth through alternative communicative apparatuses and media forms that were utilized in public spaces. These tactics, however, were not suppressed and eradicated on the night of the massacre but instead left a permanent trace on Mexico's future. As the student movement ended that night, the legacy of its subversion was almost immediately resurrected through the undermining and reclamation of space by the residents of the Nonoalco Tlatelolco housing complex. As I argue, this active engagement with space represents a shift in how strategies of capturing and remembering the 1968 student movement are commonly understood. While most analysis of remembrance and memory following the massacre focuses on the creation of archives, I highlight spatial ruptures that overcame the limitations of archive.⁴ In doing so, I trace confrontations with space from 1968 to Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's 2008 installation, *Voz Alta*, which continued this practice by producing a new site-specific alternative media apparatus, channeling October 2, 1968, amid the ruins of Mexico's Aztec, Spanish, and modernist past—in the space of the plaza itself.

Olympic Subversion

Before the Olympics, the Mexican government was actively involved in promoting the image of the nation at World's Fairs, both in an effort to present as a modernized nation in the postwar era and to secure its position as host of the Games. At those events, such as the 1964 New York World's Fair, the tension between Mexico's developmentalist image and its "folkloric present," as the art historian Luis Castañeda calls it, was already ever present.⁵ Postwar fairs were important sites of contact between former colonies and imperial nations. As Castañeda points out, this division was replaced by comparable categories that distinguished between more-developed and less-developed nations. While decolonization and diplomacy played out at the fairs, the classification of colonial and imperial power was replaced by a new kind of post-colonial language. Under this new classification system—that is, more or less "developed"—Mexico was categorized as the latter and, as a result, was pressured to assert its "exotic characteristics" just like many post-colonial states seeking to separate their identities from Euro-American nations.⁶

While attempting to convey its economic development internationally, Mexico was simultaneously pressured to present its “folklore” because of this binary division set up in the postcolonial era.

At the New York World’s Fair, four years before the Olympics, the pressure from US organizers was evident. After a successful 1958 Brussels World’s Fair, Mexico was given one of the best spots at the New York fair, with expectations higher than six years prior. Bruce Nicholson, an organizer of the fair, made clear what he wanted to see from the Mexican pavilion: “We feel [they] should design their exhibits to stress the ancient cultures and the modern cultures as seen through their artists, and how one was affected by the other.”⁷ Nicholson desired to see narrative unfold at the Mexican pavilion, to see the relationship between ancient and modern Mexico linked together. To adjust to the demands of New York officials, Mexican organizers added “folkloric” content to their pavilion early on. Writing in response to Nicholson, a commissioner for the Mexican pavilion, Jorge Canavati, announced that Mexico would put on a performance that was “a spectacle derived from ancient Aztec tradition in which, hanging by their heels from ropes attached to a platform atop a 50-foot pole, the performers, acting as the four cardinal points, fling themselves into space and spiral headlong to earth in ever widening arcs, while a lone musician seated aloft calls out ritual melodies on a reed flute.”⁸ In his letter, he attached a news clipping of the performance at the Pyramid of Niches, on the ancient site of El Tajín. The flyers who performed in New York were staged to mimic the same position they held in front of the pyramid, this time in front of the modern facade of Mexico’s 1964 Pavilion (fig. 1).⁹ The mimicking constructed a harmonious relationship between the “exoticized” performance at El Tajín and the displaced performance in a modern context, thereby instituting a narrative connection between a “folkloric” past and a modern present.

The buildup in tension between Mexico’s past and present was evident in the dissemination of propaganda and Olympic symbols in 1968. The government’s overall dominance of visual arts and architecture reflected its imposition of a totalizing official teleology in the lead-up to the Games. Promoting this teleology through culture, the government aligned cultural productions, such as stadiums and Olympic design, with the single-party state, which was positioned at the helm of Mexico’s indigenous, colonial, and revolutionary history, all under the flag of modernity.¹⁰ As the historian Eric Zolov has described, the yearlong arts and performance festival beginning in January 1968, Cultural Olympiad, was central to garnering popular support for the Games and establishing this local teleology along with Mexico’s image abroad. The planners of Cultural Olympiad were well aware



Figure 1 Flyers of Papantla perform in front of Mexico Pavilion, New York World's Fair, 1964–65. Image courtesy of Corporation Records, Manuscripts Archives Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

that Mexico was judged internationally as an “underdeveloped” nation, and therefore sought to frame cultural productions leading up to the Games carefully for foreign absorption, often exoticizing the nation through aesthetic display and folkloric performances like the spectacle in New York.¹¹ At the same time, however, the cultural display was also of local importance. For one of the main organizers,

Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, Cultural Olympiad was a way to “reenergize” domestic support for the Games, redirecting the narrative away from a rising student movement that attacked Olympic iconography and the reckless spending by the government for the Games. Olympic symbols, cultural productions, and stadiums were a central point of tension between the state and the students. For the government regime, control over culture permitted a narrativization of its modernization miracle via a smooth unfolding from past into present.¹² For the students, on the other hand, Olympic symbols and cultural events represented state oppression and violence on a local level.

The two major symbols disseminated and displayed around Mexico City in 1968 were the white dove and the official logo of the Mexico Olympics. The dove, as symbol of peace, became a central icon in the Cold War era, with Mexico positioning itself as a “peacemaker” on the international stage. Doves lined the streets of Mexico City, along major thoroughfares. The Olympic logo, designed by the American artist Lance Wyman and his partner Peter Murdoch, was likewise widely disseminated, but also reflected the Cultural Olympiad’s anxiety in finding a design that would fit an international perspective while breaking from Mexican stereotypes (fig. 2). The psychedelic, op art design invoked international modern practices but also channeled Mexican folk forms, simultaneously invoking Mexico’s cultural heritage alongside its modern economic miracle.¹³ As Wyman later recalled, the organizers of the event gave him free rein, with one exception: “The only thing I remember as a guideline was the sleeping man with the sombrero did not properly represent Mexico.” As Wyman described, “The 5 rings to the 68 to the MEXICO’68 was a very natural progression that was preceded and influenced by many visits to the Museum of Anthropology [*sic*] to study Mexican pre-Columbian design and Mexican folk art, by taking in the vitality and aesthetic of the Mexican markets, and by the influence of ‘Op’ art and the powerful work of Bridget Riley and [Victor] Vasarely.”¹⁴ At stake in the symbols disseminated around Mexico City, such as Wyman’s logo, were encounters that transcended Mexico’s past and present—a drive to accommodate both modernity and heritage under the watchful eyes of the world.

The Mexican government’s image management did not go uncontested, however. At the Academia San Carlos at the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas

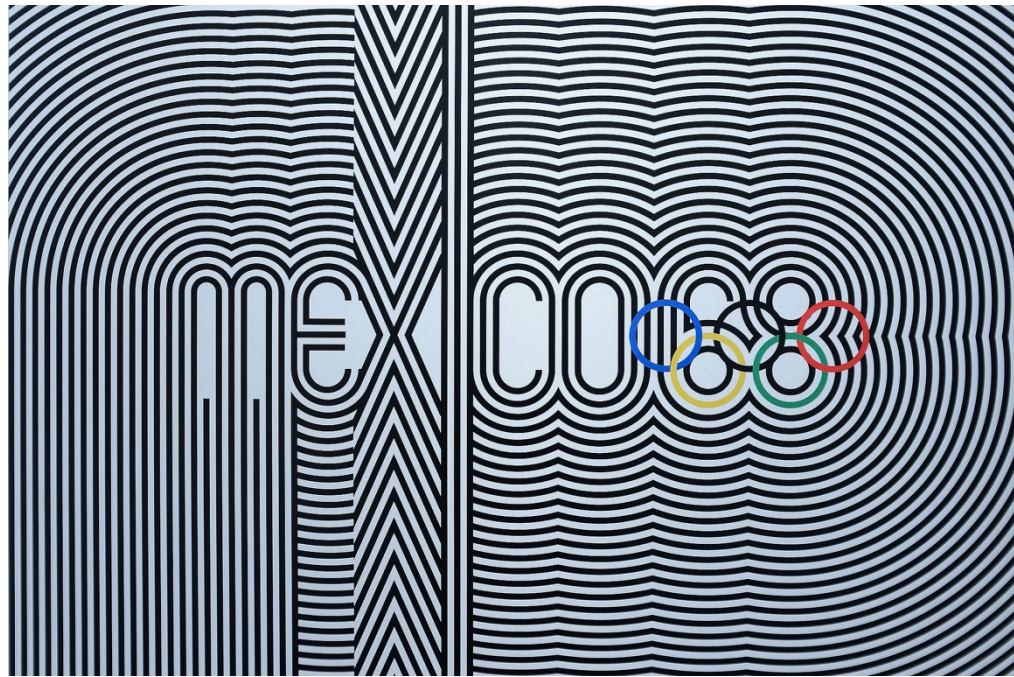


Figure 2 Lance Wyman and Peter Murdoch, Official Logo for the 1968 Olympics. Image courtesy of Tomaz Silva, Agência Brasil, and Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Exposi%C3%A7%C3%A3o_Design_%26_Utopia_dos_Jogos_\(28262056573\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Exposi%C3%A7%C3%A3o_Design_%26_Utopia_dos_Jogos_(28262056573).jpg).

of UNAM, students established a poster production house, designing posters that parodied and mocked symbols of the Olympics. White doves were blotted with red spray paint, destabilizing the state's symbol of a peaceful nation through a reminder of its violent oppression.¹⁵ Protestors also addressed the regime's use of weapons of war on civilians, frequently juxtaposing these modern tools of destructions with modern icons of the Olympic Games. One such poster squares off a tank operated by two soldiers (Fig. 3). The wheels of the tank resemble the five Olympic rings and are accompanied by a parody of Wyman's psychedelic design. The op art aesthetic, crudely distorted by the thick lines of the letter *M* and the blotched *I*, is countered and paired with a technology of war, oppression, and state violence. Other posters directed scrutiny toward the administration of President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, often depicted as a monkey in posters.¹⁶ His monkey caricature, featuring ferocious, jagged teeth, is rounded off by a military helmet and accompanied by the Olympic logo. In another poster, Díaz Ordaz-as-monkey is placed at the command of the Olympic tank, with the same five circles, and the official logo above.¹⁷ Paired with both military and Olympic symbols, the president is placed at the helm of not only the state's violence but also its Olympic image machine.



Figure 3 Esther Montero, Mexico 68, undated. Image courtesy of Historical Archive of the UNAM, Mexico City, Mexico.

President Díaz Ordaz, paranoid about outside interference in the events and cultural productions of the Olympics in the wake of May '68 in Paris, had his worst nightmare come true when the French student Claude Leveque, who had participated in the poster production of the Atelier Populaire during the May movement, arrived in Mexico. Upon his arrival, Leveque trained Mexican students in the silk-screen method, which permitted the quick and cheap production of posters.¹⁸ As I detail later, while the Atelier Populaire had openly criticized the American neo avant-garde and its use of silk screen, to keep pace with printing volume for posters, they adopted the pop art technique. Posters, produced at a rapid rate, became a countermedia form that responded to, captured, and shaped the events of May 1968.¹⁹ The use of the opaque projector and silk screen became



Figure 4 Lance Wyman, postage stamp for Mexico '68, 1967. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mexico_Stamp_Olympiade_1968_Field_Hockey.jpg.

important tools for the Atelier Populaire, but, as the art historian Liam Considine points out, their posters were also in tension with pop art practice: through the use of these apparatuses for public discussion and distribution, the group's poster production was simultaneously a *détournement* of pop art's appropriation of images from mass media.²⁰ Likewise, the posters produced at the Academia San Carlos engaged in a similar material and technological hijacking. Through the use of silk screen for public means, the Academia designed posters that themselves *détourned* prominent Olympic iconography.

Symbols of the Olympics, such as Wyman's op art designs, were often paired with images of stadiums. The Aztec and Olympic Stadiums became grounds for the spectacular display of the op art aesthetic. Bright colors of pink, orange, and blue, similar to those featured on the logo design, were splattered on the grounds outside the stadiums.²¹ The relationship between the Olympic logo and architecture can also be seen in a set of stamps that feature Wyman's op art logo (fig. 4). The design is paired with Mexico's brand-new Sports Palace. Psychedelic lines of the logo emanate out of the jagged, turtle-shell-shaped dome of the Palace (fig. 5). The Sports Palace, like Wyman's logo, was an important mediator between folkloric content and modern developmentalism, and was geared to the construction of a coherent national identification through propaganda.²² Félix Candela, a

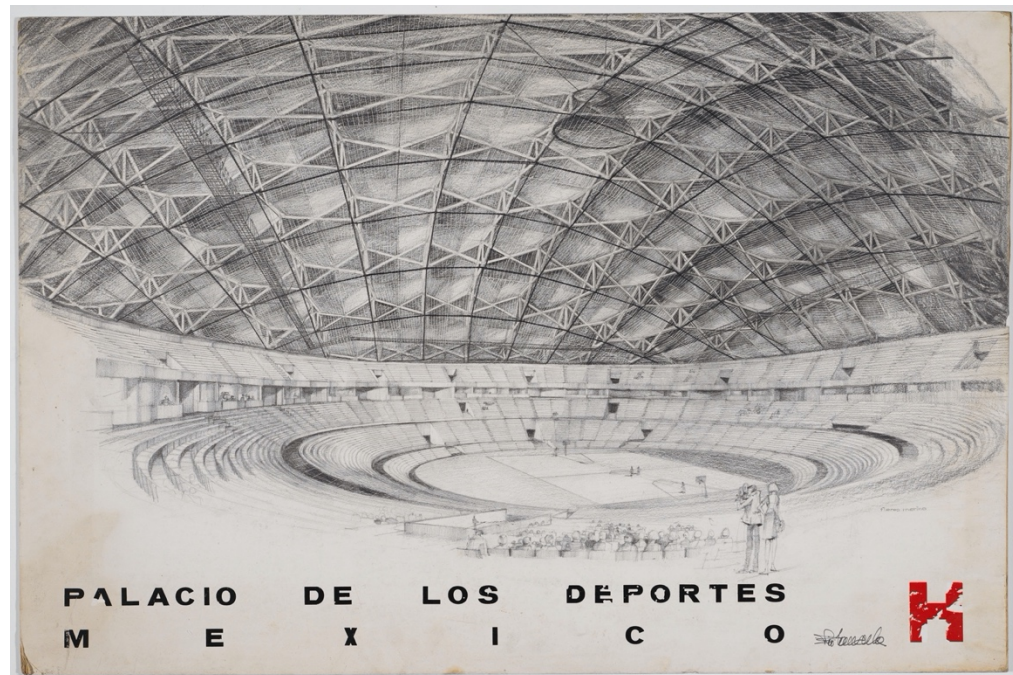


Figure 5 Drawing of Palacio de los deportes, Mexico, Dr 116, designed by Félix Candela, Enrique Castañeda Tamborel, and Antonio Peyri, 1968. Image courtesy of Félix Candela architectural records and papers, Drawings and Archives, Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.

Spanish exile living in Mexico, designed the model for the Sports Palace, inaugurating its hyperbolic paraboloid as both a uniquely Mexican design and an international modern style. As Castañeda has described, Candela attempted to “Mexicanize” his work, asserting his own authorship of Mexico’s hyperbolic paraboloid design while insisting on its original status as a modern French form developed in the 1930s. In doing so, he framed the design as being “of Mexico” while situating it in a context of international modernism.²³

While exemplifying the “Mexicanization” of the hyperbolic paraboloid, the Sports Palace was also a reflection of state control and surveillance. Indeed, the stadium functioned as a spectacular “image machine,” like the Aztec and UNAM stadiums, curated to provide televised views from any vantage point, either in the interior or exterior of the stadium.²⁴ In part, this television-friendly design was meant to make up for the disjunction between new and old stadiums in Mexico City, through camera angles that avoided any building flaws. While Mexico City was set up for in-person spectatorship as well, it must be stressed that television in 1968, for planners like Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, was recognized as the technology that would drastically increase the number of spectators watching the Olympics. TV was seen as a potential remedy to counteract any potential building flaws

and could, perhaps, replace the role of architecture itself. As Ramírez Vázquez revealed at the time, “The placement [of cameras] has not been disclosed in order not to interfere with the sports events; but they will be in every angle and place so as to reveal to the remote observer aspects of the development of the competitions that those sitting in the grandstands will naturally be unable to perceive.”²⁵ But this televisual setup also offered another route for state propaganda. As a result of its rising popularity in Mexico in the years leading up to the Olympics, TV became the state’s key cultural and communicative apparatus. Paired with Olympic symbols and architectures, television was effectively utilized to promote a spectacle of social cohesion and Mexico’s miraculous development. Furthermore, it functioned as a technology of surveillance and social discipline. TV fundamentally controlled how political dissent was presented and ultimately played a major part in downplaying the government’s role in the massacre on October 2.²⁶

While the pairing of modern architectural structures with Olympic symbols projected the government’s image of Mexico to the world and offered a way to surveil and control a population, attempts to slow down student criticism through such propaganda proved ineffective. Instead, students founded counterdiscourses based on what the journalism historian Celeste González de Bustamante has termed a “hybridity of framing”—a practice of reinterpreting and critically engaging events and issues broadcast through dominant media forms.²⁷ As a student, Jorge Perezvega, remarked, protestors saw the press and media companies like Telesistema as corrupt and complicit, condemning them for spreading false information: “You had to read between the lines. You would read a newspaper and you had to look for the truth within the report, and that happened with television.”²⁸ Student protestors realized that the state controlled all major cultural and communication forms. To assert a different kind of national subjectivity outside the state’s teleology, students circumvented dominant forms of culture and communication, instead harnessing the potential of political street theater and poster art, and even University Radio, as subversive art forms and communication devices.

Poster art directly challenged government control of media, seeking a space outside the dominant regime. One such poster from the Consejo Nacional de Huelga (CNH) (fig. 6) depicts an enlarged reporter gobbling cash stuffed in his mouth by the palm of the government; his cheeks puff out with the accumulation of paper bills. The stiff wrist of the government asks “¿VERDAD QUE VAS A DECIR LA PURA VERDAD?” (Are you going to tell the truth?). The crooked press man, wearing an equally sinuous hat, pinned with a “*prensa*” (press) tag at its band, compulsively responds, “YES, JEFE” (Yes, boss), passively absorbing the deviously ironic message as he is inflated with pesos. The press and mainstream

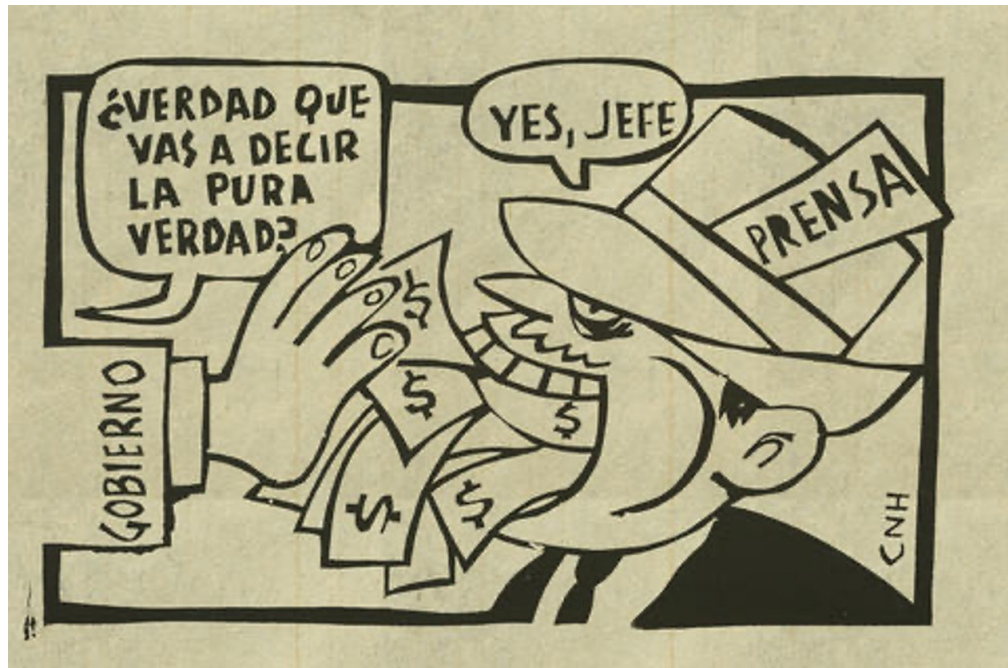


Figure 6 Esther Montero, “¿Verdad que vas a decir la pura verdad?”, undated. Image courtesy of Historical Archive of the UNAM, Mexico City, Mexico.

media, complying with the government’s coercive propaganda tactics and deception, cannot be reconciled. The poster self-reflexively acknowledges the purpose of its production and display; its status as a countermedium posted on the street, one enlisted to circumvent the dominant cultural forms.

Focus on state dominance of media at the Academia San Carlos parallels similar efforts by the Atelier Populaire in May 1968. Early in May, like Mexican students who parodied iconography of the Olympics and the icon of President Díaz Ordaz, the Atelier Populaire mocked words and images of French leaders like Charles de Gaulle. However, after three weeks of strikes in France, the international press began to lose sympathy for the May ’68 movement. Posters of the Atelier Populaire, designed, debated, and produced nightly, then became a way to disseminate information about the movement and denounce the press as toxic and controlled by the government.²⁹ Moreover, as Jean Baudrillard described in his essay “Requiem for the Media,” the significance of such posters during May centered on their subsequent placement on the street, turning city walls into sites of speech. This countermedia form, activating speech on the wall and in the space of the street, stood in stark contrast to the mechanisms of mass media, which, for Baudrillard, functioned to create a one-way transmission network, projecting speech across the airwaves while muting the possibility of response.³⁰ Posters from



Figure 7 Esther Montero, “Luto y Protesta,” undated. Image courtesy of Historical Archive of the UNAM, Mexico City, Mexico.

the Academia San Carlos, like those from May, were pasted on any surface available, as a seizing of space and a projection of speech. Additionally, like the Atelier Populaire, Mexican students not only labeled the government-controlled media as toxic but also used posters for practical communication. Many posters produced by the Academia San Carlos announced plans, locations, and times for protests, including for the famous Silence March of September 13 (fig. 7). A poster for the demonstration, headed by a ribbon—a symbol of unification and solidarity—announces: “¡Luto y protesta. Todos a la gran manifestacion popular en silencio! Cita: Viernes 13 4 p.m. Museo de Antropologia” (Mourning and protest. Everyone to the great popular demonstration in silence! Date: Friday the 13th 4 p.m. Museum of Anthropology). The poster here, as a communication device, acts to seize street space for speech when posted on walls, announcing time, date, location, and most

important, message: the poster declares that the demonstration will be conducted in silence. Even when the Mexican government's military presence increased, students resorted to small pocket images that could be concealed and distributed, to keep communication networks alive.³¹ This effort underlies the importance of posters as communication apparatuses outside the dominant media. Pocket-sized leaflets were a way to sustain the immediacy of the countermedia form, along with its ability to animate the movement's messages and speech in public spaces.

Similarly, students harnessed the potential of political street theater to circumvent the government-controlled media and share important ideas of the movement. The CNH, which had joined into a multi-university coalition in August, had a strict division of labor—external relations, finances, propaganda—which permitted the organization of street theater. The finance commission formed about 150 brigades that traveled the streets, informing citizens about the movement and asking for donations.³² These groups would travel to local markets and other public spaces to perform conversations (and sometimes arguments) between members. The group would act out and dramatize a scene in which current events were discussed. Citizens listening in to these loud discussions would be informed of news and events that were shunned by newspapers and television.³³ In this sense, student performance in public turned local settings, like the market, into modern agoras. The agora, as a public space built for collective power, functions, like the wall and the street, as a stimulating and anticipatory medium for speech. Less reliant on a demarcated enclosure of space, the agora instead flourishes in open settings like the market; its emptiness signals a potential to gather and communicate, to see and be seen, to speak and respond. Speech is made common and available to all; communication, information, and dialogue unfold in the space of the agora. As one student, Ana Ignacia “La Nacha” Rodríguez, remarked, the brigade's use of speech was “the simplest medium but the most effective. We were like mobile newspapers.”³⁴ The student movement's founding of modern agoras not only created spaces of news but also injected dialogue into the public realm.

Modernist Ruins at Tlatelolco

Poster art and brigade performances reflect the student movement's overall engagement with public space and the built environment, which became fully evident on the night of October 2. Poster art's encounter with the spatial order is crystallized in another CNH poster (fig. 8), which again attacks the corrupt press in bold letters, “PRENSA CORRUPTA” (Corrupt Press). Above the text, a lanky neck juts into the squared-off design, curving into an extraterrestrial alien skull. The corrupt press, deaf from thick wine-bottle-cork ear plugs, and blinded by rippled



Figure 8 Esther Montero, “Prensa Corrupta,” undated. Image courtesy of Historical Archive of the UNAM, Mexico City, Mexico.

money, nevertheless speaks: its medusa-like dotted snake tongue creepily slithers out and projects; the snake, taking on a life of its own, extends its own venomous vitriol through its jagged tongue. While the corrupt press as a venomous snake is consistent with other examples of protestor engagement with state-dominated media, this image is unique for its display of buildings. Modernist towers, which seem to reflect Pani’s now infamous Nonoalco Tlatelolco—the archetype of urban planning for Mexico’s miracle—frame medusa’s skinny and sly neck in the CNH

poster. The likely inclusion of Pani's housing complex in the work, supporting the fragile neck of the press, points again to the tension between the state's architectural and cultural productions and the student movement's countercultural practices. Moreover, the inclusion of Nonoalco Tlatelolco reflects the significance of the site as *the* epitome of modernist architecture in 1960s Mexico. It signals why Nonoalco Tlatelolco was a pivotal site for both the state and the student movement: a critical *space* and meeting ground for both.

What was the significance of this site? In the 1960s, Pani was commissioned to design and plan the housing complex, the largest of its kind in Mexico City. Pani, influenced by Le Corbusier while studying in Paris, sought to create a "radiant city" in Mexico. He believed in razing neighborhoods, destroying all structures of the past not worth preserving.³⁵ For the Nonoalco Tlatelolco project, Pani planned to divide the complex into three "superblocks," all with towers from four to twenty-two stories tall. However, upon starting the project, he encountered roadblocks. Archaeologists opposed the project because it was on pre-Columbian city grounds. When workers were preparing the foundations, they hit the base of a pre-Columbian pyramid that had been flattened by the Spanish to build the Santiago Tlatelolco church in the sixteenth century. Fixtures of Mexico's past thus derailed Pani's project.³⁶ The relationship between the modern block, ancient pyramid, and Spanish church again reflects a tension between Mexico's modern present and its "folkloric" past in this moment of rapid development during the 1960s.

Pani ended up overcoming the past by building around the pyramid and the church. He conveniently combined three cultures—Aztec, Spanish, and modern Mexican—by designing the Plaza de las Tres Culturas to contain the church and pyramid, surrounding it with new towers. The plaza became a symbol of modern Mexico, of a national culture emerging out of the remains of Mexico's Aztec and Spanish history. Moreover, the constructed site was not only cultural but also, as Rubén Gallo points out, racial.³⁷ Pani placed a plaque in the plaza stating: "On August 13, 1521, after being heroically defended by Cuauhtémoc, Tlatelolco fell to Hernán Cortés. It was neither victory nor defeat, but the painful birth of the mixed-blood country that is Mexico today."³⁸ Built over and on top of a fragmented past, the plaza served to artificially construct and bolster the teleology of the state. Mexico's Aztec and Spanish ancestry unfolds into modernism, now weaponized to assist the single-party state's developmentalist regime. As Pani himself reflected in his celebration of the housing complex in the magazine *Arquitectura/México*: "Today this exemplar of modern Mexican culture rises, before all and above, as an act of faith in national destiny."³⁹

Nonoalco Tlatelolco consisted of 102 buildings on the three superblocks (fig. 9). It was designed with extensive leisure and welfare spaces: schools, clinics,



Figure 9 Nonoalco-Tlatelolco Housing Complex, designed by Mario Pani, 1957. Image courtesy of ProtoplasmaKid and Wikimedia Commons, [CC-BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Conjunto Urbano Nonoalco Tlatelolco Mexico City.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Conjunto_Urbano_Nonoalco_Tlatelolco_Mexico_City.JPG).

and a movie theater. Pani insisted that the complex accommodate any needs of its residents.⁴⁰ But, like Ramírez Vázquez's stadium designs—namely, their relationship to disciplinary mechanisms of television—Pani also designed Nonoalco Tlatelolco as a machine of surveillance and control. The complex was arranged according to the strict orthogonal grid of the superblock. Its rigid arrangement strictly regulated the interactions and social dynamics of residents. But despite the oppressive regulation and surveillance, from the date of its inauguration, Nonoalco Tlatelolco was subverted by residents who transformed the complex. Many established familial and communal living and utilized extra space by subletting bedrooms and patios for income. Additionally, and more significantly for my purposes here, in the lead-up to the massacre, residents assisted students as they resisted state violence. Before the massacre, to stop the movement of troops to the University Campus, the CNH put up barricades near Nonoalco Tlatelolco, bringing down electricity poles, disabling traffic signals, and blocking roads with buses. As students and government soldiers fought in the area for eight hours, Nonoalco Tlatelolco residents transgressed their own modernist housing complex—its social control and surveillance—by dumping trash and even scorching hot water, boiled

by modern appliances, on the troops.⁴¹ As I argue below, the tension between the surveillance mechanisms of the complex and the circumventing of modernist space by its residents would manifest most explicitly on the night of the massacre. On that night, the residents of Nonoalco Tlatelolco came to the aid of fleeing students, not only demonstrating the wide support of the movement,⁴² but also the overall embrace of the movement's radical *détournement* of space, as seen in posters, brigade performances, and the seizure of the Plaza de las Tres Culturas on October 2.

While Pani's buildings controlled the environment, leisure, and movement of its residents, it also limited access points, and permitted only one space for large congregations—in the plaza. Designed for control and surveillance, on the night of the massacre the housing complex became a panopticon: an imprisoned space where the students at the center are seen from all points of Nonoalco Tlatelolco.⁴³ The students were sitting ducks, observed and plucked out by army snipers who had an unimpeded view.⁴⁴ As one student quoted in Elena Poniatowka's *La Noche de Tlatelolco* described, modernist architecture became a weapon:

I told everyone that the Plaza of the 3 cultures was a trap, I told them so. ¡There's no way out! It's so obvious. I told them there would be no way to escape, that we would all be boxed in, penned in like animals I told them so many times. . . .

The Plaza of the 3 cultures became an inferno. Every few seconds you could hear shots and the outbursts of machine guns. I could hear High power rifles shooting them from all directions.⁴⁵

Escaping from the gaze of the panopticon—where one is seen but cannot see—protestors sought shelter in Nonoalco Tlatelolco. Once inside, residents came to the aid of the students, hiding them in their apartments. As soldiers rushed the building, residents threw garbage out their windows to distract them. Despite its transparent plan, once inside, the complex was difficult to navigate for government troops—it was a blur.⁴⁶ As the actress Margarita Isabel, a resident of Nonoalco, also recounted in Poniatowska's text, this was a result of modernist design turning on itself. The overwhelming accumulation of apartments, coupled with resident support for the student movement, made Nonoalco Tlatelolco impossible to navigate:

When I got to the corner, I ran down the street to my building as fast as my two legs would carry me, dashed up the stairs to my

apartment, and locked myself in! About five seconds later, I heard the downstairs door open, but those two dumb bastards never dreamed they'd be confronted with so many apartments inside my building—from outside it looks as though there are only two or three of them, but once you're inside it's a labyrinth, like an [Michelangelo] Antonioni film—you know?—a real maze, with forty apartments or so, and you go out of your mind if you don't know your way around.⁴⁷

At the same time as these accounts describe the brutal violence of the massacre, they also reveal this fundamental contradiction in the modernist design.⁴⁸ Despite the rigidity and order of the outside space functioning as a panopticon—an all-seeing weapon of state violence—once inside, the space was radically flipped, both by the incoherence of the complex's own design and by the seizing of space by residents. While the hygienic buildings were eventually turned into bloody “holding cells,”⁴⁹ with troops rounding up students in building lobbies, this tension between the surveillance state and the reclamation of space by residents illustrates the prominence of this effort to subvert the spatial order.

Counterpractices against the government were fundamentally played out in space, whether the modern agora of the street, the local market, the burial ground of Mexico's past in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, or Nonoalco Tlatelolco. As I hope to convey in the following sections, this engagement with space also took on a temporal dimension, reverberating to future attempts to remember and capture the 1968 student movement.

Afterlives of 1968 and the Problem of the Archive

In the years after the massacre, artists and intellectuals sought to reflect on, respond to, and capture the student movement of 1968, often through photographs and testimonies. While Octavio Paz's *Labyrinth of Solitude* contains his own personal meditation on 1968, Poniatowka's *La Noche de Tlatelolco*, as indicated above, is quite different. *La Noche de Tlatelolco* is not a narrative of the movement and the massacre but is instead an archive, one that contains remnants of the past in both photographic and textual form. Poniatowska offers testimonies from those inside and outside the movement and massacre, both affected by the events of October 2. For the art historian George Flaherty, Poniatowska's archival collection calls readers to the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, “asking them to witness the massacre as well as the Mexican miracle's routine violence.” These testimonies, Flaherty argues,

“ask readers to go away also, in the hope that they may yet tell others and seek resource.”⁵⁰

Flaherty’s analysis of Poniatowska’s text, I believe, reflects the difficulty of remembering and capturing 1968, but also points to the very problem of the archive—the feverish gathering of testimonial texts and photographs. The “evidentiary” photograph, rather than revealing the truth, conceals it, violently severing the image from its moment. Such severing is evident on the front cover of the magazine *Proceso* from December 9, 2001.⁵¹ Having received a few concealed government images of the massacre from an anonymous source, the magazine published a special edition, featuring a former student leader, Florencio López Osuna. On the front cover, López Osuna stands mangled and transfigured, his chest scraped and his mouth bloodied. His clothes are ripped down like his arms handcuffed behind his back, hidden as if amputated. Directly behind López Osuna stands a government soldier distinguished by his helmet, shimmering in the camera light. He watches over other protestors, positioned with their hands up. One protestor is yet to have his shirt removed like the others. The white of his shirt matches the bright shining white of López Osuna’s underwear and ripped shirt. At the same time, it also meshes with the clothing of a government soldier, who is not in riot gear but in white plainclothes. He dangles a white glove, juxtaposed to his casual hand in pocket. The photograph, with this stark contrast between black and white, brightness and darkness, brandishes one final claim to evidentiary truth: the soldier’s white attire and gloves stand as proof that he is a member of the paramilitary group, Batallón Olimpia, who meshed into the student crowd, only to open fire, with their white gloves worn to distinguish them from the protestors.⁵² White, bright and rendered hypervisible, became a weapon of violence, bluntly illuminated in the darkness.

The magazine, like Poniatowska’s archive, calls readers to report their stories, to call about victims or perpetrators featured in the photograph, reflecting what Jacques Derrida called “archive fever,” a nonstop desire to complete the always incomplete archive.⁵³ The archive of massacre is briefly opened to reveal a *fragment* of the past. For Derrida, the partial appearance of this kind of state archive functions only as an illusion of controlling the archive; the fragment is always irreconcilably partial and forever incomplete.⁵⁴ “For somewhere in the state’s archive,” Derrida writes, “is every possible photograph, from every possible angle, of every face.”⁵⁵ The partial and fragmentary photograph functions as a microcosm of the state’s panoptical, all-knowing archive. The images in Poniatowska’s project, like the photograph of López Osuna, are incomplete chips and illusory captures of the government-controlled, complete archive. Such images demand us “to bear

witness” to fragments, calling us to behold incomplete claims to archival truth after the event of the massacre.⁵⁶

To properly analyze 1968, we must read its political register through what Samuel Steinberg calls a “double repression,” which fundamentally conditions the way the event is received in the present. This double repression is directed to not only the massacre but also the policing before the mass killing. Focusing solely on the massacre and efforts to open up the archive encases and protects the state in a “symbolic shelter” of its violence, merely affirming its outward appearance without piercing the deeper issues behind its violent facade. As Steinberg argues, we should instead look to precisely what was revealed on the night of October 2.⁵⁷ The plaza, as I have argued, consigns three remains of Mexico’s past; signs of the nation’s Aztec and Spanish history are gathered under the banner of Mexico’s modern present. On the night of the massacre, however, the plaza’s space, confining these incongruous and disparate temporalities to an unstable modern harmony, was bluntly revealed to be foundationally artificial, constructed by a fundamentally incoherent state teleology.

On October 2, upon the activation of all three temporalities and spaces, a state teleology of modern Mexico was forced to reveal itself, to come out of its shell. Pani’s project, the attempted razing of ruins, revealed a “topography of trauma,” making visible the very histories that threatened the single-party state’s teleology.⁵⁸ Following Steinberg, instead of engaging in a task of accumulating and searching the archival fragments—photographs and testimonies—we should instead search for traces to find what was revealed that night. Understanding Tlatelolco 1968 as an engagement with space is, again, paramount. Action, like that of the student movement, always runs the risk of falling into oblivion, of being forgotten. We desire for acts to be recorded and for glory to last. And, as Hannah Arendt would tell us, public space is where we seize the past and guarantee the possibility of intergenerational justice.⁵⁹ But memory is not solely carved in stone, embedded in monuments that insert memory into the public realm. Instead, memory of action can be remembered by spatial impressions and marks of light and trauma that permanently stained the site of massacre, revealing the radical *disruption* of the teleology that the state hoped to conceal.⁶⁰ Memory of action and massacre, is, indeed, carved into space, but is also remembered, resurrected, and *reconstituted* in that very space.

While the photograph will always remain irreconcilably fragmented, illusory, and ruptured from the past, focusing solely on the archival elements of Poniatowka’s *La Noche de Tlatelolco* unfairly reduces the power of the work to *reconstitute* the spatiality of action. *La Noche de Tlatelolco* is not merely archival: it is full of testimonies from residents of Nonoalco Tlatelolco that reveal a subversion of

space after the massacre, indicating potential longevity—the afterlife of 1968. As the writer María Luisa Mendoza, quoted in *La Noche de Tlatelolco*, defiantly described, residents laid claim to the housing complex:

I'm never going to leave Nonoalco-Tlatelolco, even if [the secretary of defense] General Marcelino García Barragán shows up in person, with all his gold stripes, and troops armed with bazookas to try to get me out of here. This is my own little bit of breathing space, my trench. . . . Oh, no, listen: Don't put that down, that I said it was my trench, because they'll think I've got a stock of bombs and hand grenades in here, when even my kitchen knives are so dull they won't cut!⁶¹

Nonoalco Tlatelolco became a “trench” and fortress, a metaphorical munitions arsenal, *détourned* and boldly defended by its residents. Testimonies like Mendoza's indicate that while the complex was a physical place, a modern structure, it was also, importantly, a specific site of remembrance and collective memory, where both the violence and student movement could be remembered in space. The site is a meeting ground, where the tension between the Mexican miracle and the acts of citizens who sought to subvert Nonoalco Tlatelolco was played out. The complex marked the efforts of those who forcefully *flipped* the spatial order. While Pani envisioned Nonoalco Tlatelolco as the “centripetal” force of the city,⁶² the complex and the plaza below instead became the lasting centripetal strength of the movement, the beating heart of resistance. In short, the actions of residents on October 2 embedded these strategies of modernist sabotage in the spatial order. Their continued occupation of space maintained and strengthened the fortress.

Voz Alta

In channeling Tlatelolco as a centripetal force of resistance, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's 2008 installation, *Voz Alta* (figs. 10–12), marks the longevity of the movement's intense engagement with space, stemming from poster art, brigades, and the subversion of Nonoalco Tlatelolco by residents. In 1985, Nonoalco Tlatelolco was completely destroyed by an earthquake. Pani's *ville radiense* model was turned on its head by natural disaster—the housing complex, and modernism, was left in ruins.⁶³ For *Voz Alta*, Lozano-Hemmer used the adjacent Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tlatelolco Square as part of the installation. The building, designed by Ramírez Vázquez, had not been decimated like Nonoalco Tlatelolco but had been



Figure 10 Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Voz Alta Relational Architecture 15"*, 2008, Mexico City, Mexico. © Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, courtesy the artist.

empty since the earthquake. The ministry, like Pani's housing complex, had symbolic significance: it reflected the Mexican government's unwillingness to grapple with the memory of 1968. It is fitting then, that in 2004, the building was transferred over to the National University on the condition that the university build a memorial to 1968; the government wanted no part in memorializing Tlatelolco.⁶⁴

Voz Alta, installed atop the ministry building and in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, used digital technology, light, sound, and speech to create public dialogue in space, reflecting a continued engagement with communication outside dominant media. In the northeast corner of the plaza, Lozano-Hemmer constructed a small stand with a megaphone. But ironically, the speaker could be heard only from

close by—there was no sound system to project the speech emanating from the plaza. For ten nights, the stand served as an open mic. Anyone could speak on the stand, but always to a close crowd, due to the muted megaphone. Atop the ministry building, however, every time a word was uttered from the plaza setup, light beams on the rooftop would activate, turning words into light. Once the words from the plaza were converted into luminous beams, the speaker's statements were recorded and broadcast on University Radio (one of the largest stations in the city). Once the radio signal was broadcast, three additional beams would be activated at three points in Mexico City, reflecting the movement of the speaker's voice across the airwaves, and conveying that the speech from the plaza was broadcast across the country.⁶⁵

Voz Alta, by harnessing the spatial capacities of communication—the ability to broadcast across geographic bounds through both light and speech—functions to rupture time, enacting a temporal shift by recalling the past and bringing it to the future. As the art historian Cuauhtémoc Medina has remarked, *Voz Alta* inserted public dialogue into the ghostly space. Speakers used their speech for numerous purposes: while some spoke about the 1968 student movement and the massacre, others proposed on the airwaves, and others complained about contemporary neighborhood problems. The work renewed the student movement's use of street art for social function, resurrecting the potential of activating the public.⁶⁶

But this revival of the public was also fundamentally reliant on Lozano-Hemmer's channeling of 1968 through space. His installation of a new counter-media apparatus resurrected student utilization of subversive media forms to now generate and *reactivate* an arena for speech and response communication within the plaza itself. While acknowledging the evacuated, sanitized, and ghostly space of the plaza through the muted microphone and absent crowd, Lozano-Hemmer also reestablished a public and expanded it via light and the airwaves. He channeled the movement's posters, remembering student activation of the street as a site of speech, along with their focus on the modernist towers as the symbol of the miracle. He recalled the brigades and their performances in public markets in order to not only reassert the student movement's agora but also expand it, extending speech through luminous rays and sound waves. Lastly, Lozano-Hemmer reactivated the actions of Nonoalco Tlatelolco residents, reinstating fortress status to ruins. Without succumbing to archival madness, or protecting the state in a "symbolic shelter" of violence, the open mic setup, critically, allowed for an *opening up* and *extension* of the public in space. No longer restrained to recollections of massacre, the agora was unlocked to include all public speech. *Voz Alta*, in its insistence on an expanded open forum, fully captures a student movement not hidden



Figure 11 Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Voz Alta Relational Architecture 15", 2008, Mexico City, Mexico. © Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, courtesy the artist.



Figure 12 Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Voz Alta Relational Architecture 15", 2008, Mexico City, Mexico. © Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, courtesy the artist.

behind a spectacular miracle—monumental architecture, Olympic iconography, television, and the like—or shadowed by massacre. Instead, the student movement

is recalled and brought out of the past, its profound promise intact. *Voz Alta* resurrects the movement's radical potential to subvert the spatial order, seizing and circumventing space to create a truly public form of communication.

Conclusion

In the lead-up to the 1968 Olympics, Mexico was riven by contradiction. The state attempted to assert a coherent teleology for the image of modern Mexico through its co-opting of cultural forms, such as the dove and the official logo of the 1968 Olympics. Students resisted by subverting such iconography, spraying red paint on peace doves and parodying Olympic circles, appropriating them as tank wheels in posters. In doing so, the students not only revealed government violence but also illuminated a direct link between the state's brutality and its oppressive image regime.

While the state's pairing of stadium architectures and television served as a way to manage political dissent before the Games, the students revealed their own narrative through counterpractices engaged with communication in the space of the street—poster art placed on walls and brigade performances in public markets. The student movement's subversion of the spatial order would become most evident on the night of October 2. The Plaza de las Tres Culturas and Mario Pani's surrounding Nonoalco Tlatelolco housing complex became a pivotal site for both the state and the students. The state, seeking to conceal its contradictory teleological underbelly embedded in the plaza, confronted the students, who saw the potential of the space to open up Mexico's past, present, and future. On the night of the massacre, this spatial antagonism was immediately taken up by residents of Nonoalco Tlatelolco, who hid fleeing students in their apartments. Residents of Nonoalco Tlatelolco *détourned* their modernist housing complex, flipping it into a fortress.

Understanding the student movement's engagement as fundamentally spatial allows us to reconsider the afterlives of 1968. While Elena Poniatowka's *La Noche de Tlatelolco* includes testimonies in both textual and photographic form, reducing it to the status of archive unfairly limits its potential to reconstruct the spatiality of action. Indeed, as I have argued, in the aftermath of the massacre, effective attempts to remember 1968 have focused on maintaining and resurrecting the student movement, seeking to reestablish a truly public form of communication in space. While the tension of 1968 reared its ugly head on the night of October 2, student engagement with the spatial order reverberated across time, maintaining an afterlife to the movement. Forty years later, the student movement

of 1968 was recalled in *Voz Alta*, which reestablished and extended the movement's modern agora—its development of speech and communication through its encounter with public space.

* * *

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Notes

¹ George F. Flaherty, *Hotel Mexico: Dwelling on the '68 Movement* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 19,

<https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520291065.003.0007>.

² The *Mexican miracle* is a term used to describe the consistent but unequal economic growth and urban industrialization in Mexico between the mid-1940s and 1970s. The “miracle,” however, was not merely economic but also a social, political, and cultural project orchestrated by the single-party state. The Mexican government effectively utilized stadium architecture, television, and cultural events in the lead-up to the Olympic Games to showcase Mexico's miraculous economic growth, as well as to suppress political dissent that focused on uneven development and reckless government spending. See Luis Casteñeda, *Spectacular Mexico: Design, Propaganda, and the 1968 Olympics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ By archive I am referring to a frequently utilized strategy of gathering photographic and testimonial evidence after the Tlatelolco massacre. Elena Poniatowska's *La Noche de Tlatelolco* has been considered paradigmatic of this archival impulse after 1968. See Samuel Steinberg, *Photopoetics at Tlatelolco: Afterimages of Mexico, 1968* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016),

<https://doi.org/10.7560/305485>.

⁵ Castañeda, *Spectacular Mexico*, 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷ Bruce Nicholson, quoted in Castañeda, *Spectacular Mexico*, 25.

⁸ Jorge Canavati, quoted in Castañeda, *Spectacular Mexico*, 29.

⁹ Castañeda, *Spectacular Mexico*, 28–29.

¹⁰ Flaherty, *Hotel Mexico*, 202.

¹¹ Eric Zolov, “Showcasing the ‘Land of Tomorrow’: Mexico and the 1968 Olympics,” *Americas* 61, no. 2 (2004): 163, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tam.2004.0195>.

¹² *Ibid.*, 168–70.

¹³ The Olympic logo is notable for its op art aesthetic, characterized by swirling, psychedelic lines. As Zolov has argued, the logo also fused Mexico’s “indigenous cultural heritage” with its “cosmopolitan aspirations” through the pairing of the avant-garde style with indigenous Huichol design. The Olympic logo was frequently featured on Huichol yarn painting, for instance (“Showcasing,” 171–74).

¹⁴ Lance Wyman, quoted in Zolov, “Showcasing the ‘Land of Tomorrow,’” 174.

¹⁵ Zolov, “Showcasing the ‘Land of Tomorrow,’” 184. Image of spray-painted red dove can be found at <https://walkerart.org/magazine/lance-wyman-mexico-68-olympics-tlatelolco-massacre>.

¹⁶ Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year That Rocked the World* (New York: Random House, 2004), 323. The image can be seen on 322.

¹⁷ See Celeste González de Bustamante, “1968 Olympic Dreams and Tlatelolco Nightmare: Imagining and Imaging Modernity on Television,” *Mexican Studies* 26, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 26, Figure 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 336.

¹⁹ Liam Considine, “Screen Politics: Pop Art and the Atelier Populaire,” *Tate Papers*, no. 24 (Autumn 2015), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/24/screen-politics-pop-art-and-the-atelier-populaire>.

²⁰ *Détournement*, for Considine, is a strategy of hijacking and diverting the technical and visual conventions of pop art that was harnessed by the Atelier Populaire for poster production in May. For my purposes here, *détournement* stands as a tactic of not only diverting pop’s imagery and technologies for the mass production of posters but also of hijacking Olympic iconography and countering the Mexican government’s image machine (“Screen Politics”).

²¹ Zolov, “Showcasing the ‘Land of Tomorrow,’” 180.

²² For image of postage stamp with Candela’s Sports Palace see Lance Wyman, Postage stamp for Mexico ’68 including Candela’s Sports Palace undated. Figure 3.17. Castañeda, *Spectacular Mexico*, 148.

²³ *Ibid.*, 139–42.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

- ²⁵ Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, quoted in Castañeda, *Spectacular Mexico*, 104–13.
- ²⁶ Castañeda, *Spectacular Mexico*, 104–13.
- ²⁷ Celeste González de Bustamante, “1968 Olympic Dreams and Tlatelolco Nightmare: Imagining and Imaging Modernity on Television,” *Mexican Studies* 26, no. 1 (2010): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1525/msem.2010.26.1.1>.
- ²⁸ Jorge Perezvega, quoted in González de Bustamante, “1968 Olympic Dreams and Tlatelolco Nightmare,” 24.
- ²⁹ Considine, “Screen Politics.”
- ³⁰ Jean Baudrillard, “Requiem for the Media,” in *Utopia Deferred: Writings for Utopia (1967–1978)*, translated by Stuart Kendall (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006), 84.
- ³¹ González de Bustamante, “1968 Olympic Dreams,” 24.
- ³² Brigades were organized into groups of six to fifteen and were each named after a cause or personality of the sixties (e.g., Brigade Alexander Dubček). See Dolores Trevizo, *Rural Protest and the Making of Democracy in Mexico, 1968–2000* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 61, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780271056753>.
- ³³ Kurlansky, *1968*, 336.
- ³⁴ Ana Ignacia “La Nacha” Rodríguez, quoted in González de Bustamante, “1968 Olympic Dreams,” 23.
- ³⁵ Rubén Gallo, “Modernist Ruins: The Case Study of Tlatelolco,” in *Telling Ruins in Latin America*, edited by Michael Lazzara and Vicky Unruh (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 108–9, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230623279>.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ Mario Pani, quoted in Flaherty, *Hotel Mexico*, 206.
- ⁴⁰ Flaherty, *Hotel Mexico*, 199.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 207–11.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 191.
- ⁴³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1995), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822390169-058>.
- ⁴⁴ Gallo, “Modernist Ruins,” 113.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.
- ⁴⁶ Flaherty, *Hotel Mexico*, 210.
- ⁴⁷ Margarita Isabel, quoted in Flaherty, *Hotel Mexico*, 210.
- ⁴⁸ Flaherty, *Hotel Mexico*, 210.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 195.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 209–13.

- ⁵¹ For image of *Proceso* cover, see Samuel Steinberg, *Photopoetics at Tlatelolco: Afterimages of Mexico*, 1968 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 73, Figure 2.3.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 73–74.
- ⁵³ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, translated by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1–19, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/465144>.
- ⁵⁴ Steinberg, *Photopoetics at Tlatelolco*, 79.
- ⁵⁵ Jacques Derrida, quoted in Steinberg, *Photopoetics at Tlatelolco*, 79.
- ⁵⁶ Steinberg, *Photopoetics at Tlatelolco*, 85.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.
- ⁵⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 204.
- ⁶⁰ Steinberg, *Photopoetics at Tlatelolco*, 34.
- ⁶¹ María Luisa Mendoza, quoted in Flaherty, *Hotel Mexico*, 212.
- ⁶² Flaherty, *Hotel Mexico*, 212–13.
- ⁶³ Gallo, “Modernist Ruins,” 115.
- ⁶⁴ Cuauhtémoc Medina, “A Ghost Wanders about Mexico: Tlatelolco 1968–2008,” *Archivo Artea* (2008), <http://archivoartea.uclm.es/textos/a-ghost-wanders-about-mexico-tlatelolco-1968-2008/>.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

Authoritative Forms

Sayward Schoonmaker

In my art practice, I study the material world and how something forms, catches meaning, gets named, and becomes embodied. I am interested in how abstract things like feelings, love, and perceptions of lived experience take form, and how concrete things form, as in how an object becomes identifiable and understood. For example, why is an object, say a chair, its particular shape? What set of assumptions, beliefs, and materials underlies the formation of said object? I often explore these questions through language and materials. I play with instances where the material/formal (the visual and sonic) and semantic properties of language converge and blur, and potentially both describe *and* create alternative modes of seeing and knowing.

Authoritative Forms is a participatory poem-object that invites playing and reordering of how formal entities—for my purposes, what is bound into something named and known—shape and construct our belief systems and assert authority on our ways of being. The work comprises a sheaf of handmade watermarked abaca and cotton paper arranged on a handmade wood table surrounded by work stools (figs. 1–2). Viewers are invited to take a seat at the table to handle, look at, read, and rearrange the papers.

This work began with ruminations on how authority and information are expressed, concretized, and embodied through and with materials. These ruminations led me to the power of the document, the authority of the written word, and the materials used to assert this authority. One such material is paper.



Figure 1 (left) Sayward Schoonmaker, *Authoritative Forms*, 2019–20. Handmade watermarked paper; original text; text drawn from the work of John Berger, James Schuyler, and Hito Steyerl; handmade table; work stools, 2019–20. Image courtesy of Evan Jenkins and Weinberg/Newton Gallery. Figure 2 (right) Sayward Schoonmaker, *Authoritative Forms*, 2019–20. Image courtesy of the artist.

Paper is one of the foundational physical manifestations of a human need to record, account, and communicate. The materiality of paper is easily overlooked: it is the carrier of the message, a substrate for mark making, but is not often the message itself. Because I strive to make work at the convergence of material and meaning, and to question the seeming boundary between form and content, I began to think about the material meanings of paper. While digital technologies abound in our contemporary moment, paper remains an important form of document, a materialization of legitimization with bodily consequences. Paper documents like birth certificates and passports concretize the abstraction of nationality, granting or denying bodies the right to move across borders, to be accounted for. The construct of a document gives a kind of evidence of being, a legitimacy of personhood, that can supersede the body as a document in its own right, which I find absurd, frightening, and fascinating. Papermaking became the site to explore this odd murk of what makes something or someone authoritative: it is a material holding both high and low stations (the diploma and the scrap for jotting notes one plans to discard) and contains the potential to be a document in its own materiality and a vehicle to create one.

Considering paper as a material of legitimization, I explored processes that add additional layers of certainty or authority to paper. Watermarking is a papermaking technique used to authenticate the maker (claiming author[ity/ship]), to prevent counterfeiting, and to trademark, and is a site of artistic expression. Watermarks are patterns or marks impressed during the wet stage of the papermaking process, which produces a variation in the thickness of paper fibers.



Figure 3 Sayward Schoonmaker, *Authoritative Forms*, 2019–20. Image courtesy of Evan Jenkins and Weinberg/Newton Gallery.

When the sheet is dry, the pattern is visible when held up to light (fig. 3) or by reflected light when the paper is backed by a darker surface (fig. 4). Because the watermark is made during the wet stage of forming a sheet, when the fibers are not yet cohered, the pattern/mark/word is inextricable from the paper's material body. A watermark cannot be made or reproduced on an already formed sheet of paper; it is not a mark made on the paper but in the paper. The mark *is* the paper itself.

In *Authoritative Forms*, the watermark serves as a metaphorical proxy and a physical example of the inextricability of form (the paper) and content (the text) or form (the body) and content (the dialectic of reading/looking/touching). One cannot exist without the other. The materiality and participatory nature of this work attempts to interrupt the process of establishing a conferred authority or belief and play around with it. To materialize this attempt, I made 222 paper sheets, each containing a watermarked word, phrase, or image. There was no original order to the text. To invite participation, the papers lay atop a table surrounded by work stools, familiar furniture that assert their own authority by posturing our bodies and telegraphing their intended use. The table, which is narrower and shorter than the standard dimensions of a dining table, creates a physical intimacy between the viewers. This closeness aims to evoke the domesticities and friendships from which meanings, new world formations, and revolutions emerge, oftentimes around the kitchen table. The stools, common fixtures in art studios and schools, speak to the collaborative work of making meaning: that a seat at the table is a potential place of transformation and creativity.



Figure 4 Sayward Schoonmaker, *Authoritative Forms*, 2019–20. Image courtesy of the artist.

The physical and textual presence of *Authoritative Forms* tries to frustrate the assumption of authority: the papers can go in any order, the text resists syntactic coherence, the viewer can read or not read, sit and chat at the table and never touch a paper. The papers meander through objects and ideas of authority. Some refer to the precarity of our contemporary information-seeking habits within the overwhelming scale and speed of the internet age. Others invite a visual deconstruction of the document (figs. 5–6) and visually experiments with the word *form*. Amid original text are excerpts from texts by John Berger on the power of the gaze;¹ James Schuyler on the contextual nature of language;² and Hito Steyerl on perspectival space.³ Throughout, refrains repeat (LOVERS HOLD THE PAGE/ MOM! / DAD!), as a kind of invocation or prayer for deciding our own

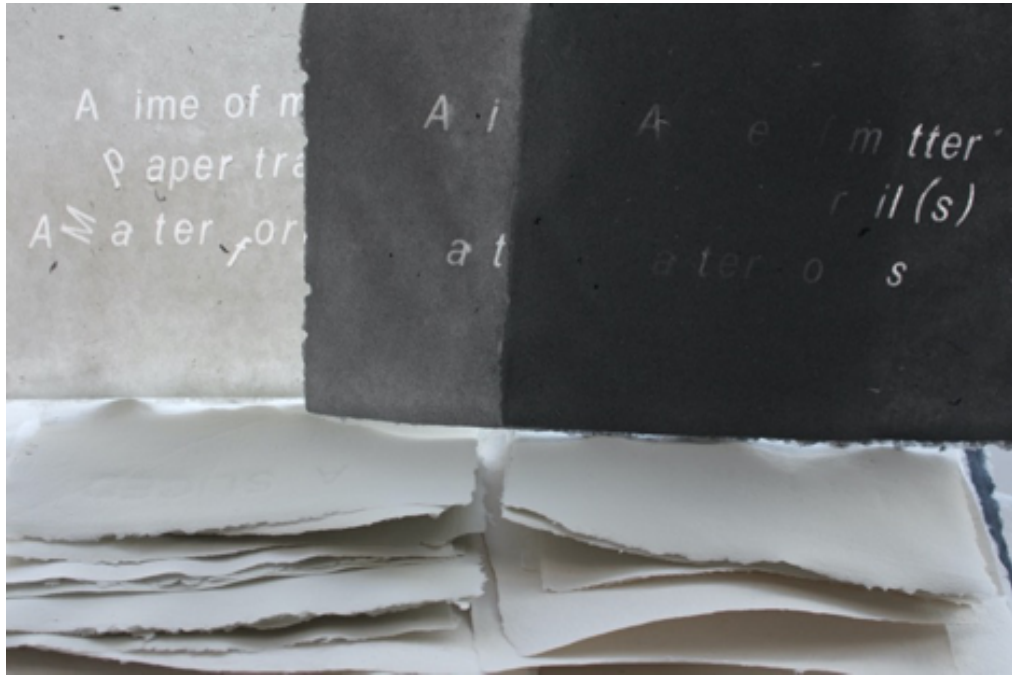


Figure 5 Sayward Schoonmaker, *Authoritative Forms*, 2019–20. Image courtesy of Kyle Flubacker and Weinberg/Newton Gallery.

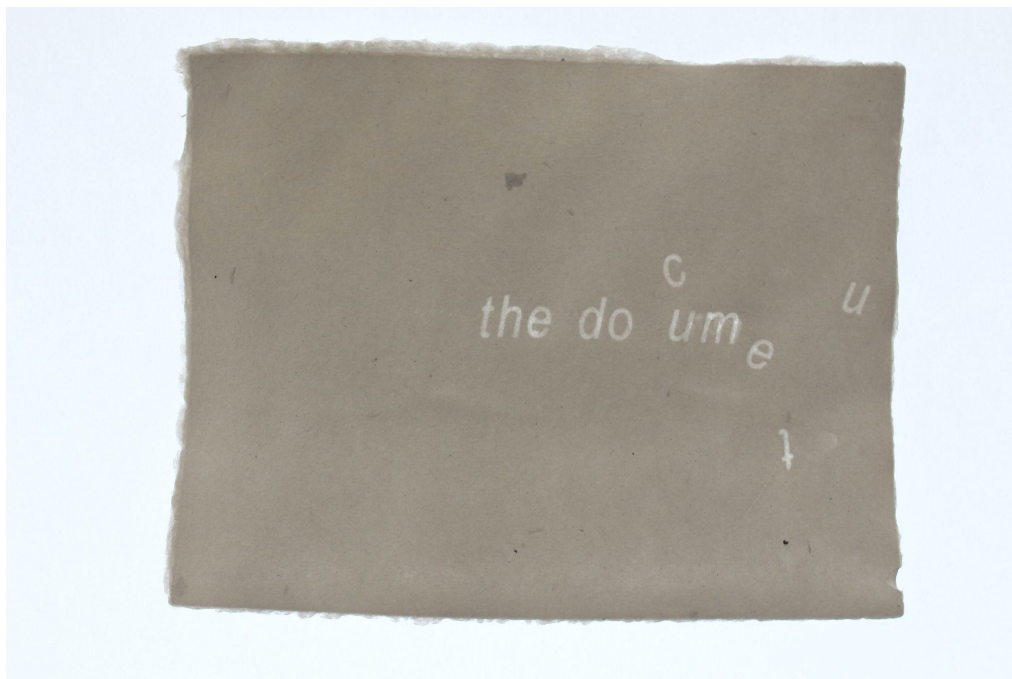


Figure 6 Sayward Schoonmaker, *Authoritative Forms*, 2019–20. Image courtesy of the artist.

metric of value and an anxious call for some grounding. An excerpt from [the complete text](#):

Shape, arrangement of parts.	<p>A matter of time A paper trail(s) Are you counted? You are the document</p>
The shape of the different parts of a body.	<p>Conform uniform Forming cons Forms a framework</p>
<p>Abstractly considered as one of the elements of the plastic arts. An image, representation, or likeness (of a body). A body considered in respect to its outward shape and appearance; esp. that of a living being, a person.</p>	<p><i>FOR !! MAT</i> <i>SPLAT</i></p> <p><i>FORMLORN</i></p> <p>the fact of the matter the matter of the fact a matter in tatters a matter of form a form of matter a tatter of matter a matter of tatter a formal matter what matters is let's hold hands?</p>
<p><i>for for ! m</i> <i>for for ! m</i> <i>for for um !</i></p>	



Figure 7 Sayward Schoonmaker, *Authoritative Forms*, 2019-20. Image courtesy of the artist.

In participating, in playing along, viewers unmake the work's uniformity:

You see a table and set of stools from across the room, their authority, yet uncontested, is in their familiarity. A meandering trail of deckle-edged papers of soft whites, warm grays, and deep blacks covers the tabletop. You pull the stool up and sit. You notice the paper before you, the range of weight and texture. Some are feathery light and wispy, others thick and soft with the density of fiber, another has the tooth of drawing paper, smooth yet subtly bumpy under hand. [At first glance, the papers appear blank, but when you lift one and the surface catches light, words appear. The letters glow. You are seeing a watermark.](#) Viewing/reading each mark on each paper is situational and positional. Depending on the paper's tone and the light in the room, the position of your hands and body, the mark appears, disappears, flickers. Some watermarks are so diaphanous that the text nearly breaks the formal boundary, nearly disappearing. The black papers swallow light, and reading becomes more tactile and visual. The words, shaped by an absence of fibers (a slightly thinner surface) appear more as embossment, the words' edges discernible by the slightest ridge where thinness meets thickness (fig. 7). The words appearing and disappearing



Figure 8 (top) Sayward Schoonmaker, *Authoritative Forms*, 2019–20. Image courtesy of the artist. Figure 9 (bottom) Sayward Schoonmaker, *Authoritative Forms*, 2019–20. Image courtesy of Kyle Flubacker and Weinberg/Newton Gallery.

constitute fragmentary thoughts, an inside voice searching, calling, and asking for a foothold in form. That is to say, the voice asks what in the material world is bounded and therefore is formed. How you read is an invitation to play. The papers are unbound, awaiting order and disorder; they do not demand a sequence. With time and hands and people, the tidy trail becomes a disheveled pile, a beautiful tatter of matter, a conversation among those at the table floats over the papers (figs. 8–9). For a time, the table gains the intimacy of a dinner table, the papers become the cups and dishes, handled with intention and sometimes completely ignored, and then absent-mindedly fondled while talking, as if your hands are working up a thought, forming it to pass through your lips.

Within the paper trail, an invitation: PERMEABLE PREAMBLE. The hope is that *Authoritative Forms* creates a microcosm for remaking meaning, a site to hold authority to the light and sense a possibility of shifting the structures around us,

just as a hand stirs and swirls a haze of paper fibers in a vat just before the sheet forms.

* * *

Sayward Schoonmaker is an artist and educator. Her work has been exhibited across the United States, most recently at Weinberg Newton Gallery, Illinois; the Hyde Collection, New York; and Adds Donna Gallery, Illinois. She is a coauthor of award-winning research on diversity and bias in library information systems and the author of one poetry chapbook, *3259* (Dancing Girl Press). She holds a BS in studio art from Skidmore College, an MFA in fiber and material studies from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and an MLIS from Syracuse University. Sayward's creative practice, scholarship, and approach to arts administration spring from a common root: a lifelong dedication to exploration, critical engagement, and experimentation. She is currently artistic director of Stone Quarry Hill Art Park, Cazenovia, New York.

Notes

¹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corp., 1973).

² James Schuyler, *Collected Poems* (New York: Noonday, 1998).

³ Hito Steyerl and Franco Berardi, *Hito Steyerl: The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012).

Thinking of Water as a Material Witness: An Attempt to Fill the Voids in the Archive of the Moscow Canal (1932–37)

Nastia Volynova

This essay revisits the Moscow Canal and explores the water in the trapezoid hollow as matter that bears witness to the violence experienced by human and nonhuman actors during the waterway construction between 1932 and 1937. By attending to the canal's flow, I argue that water can operate as an alternative archive, adding to more conventional forms of documentation, and suggest three functions that it can perform: registering, disclosing, and preserving traces of power abuse. These traces provide ways in which archival voids of the hydraulic project can be illuminated and possibly restored. To deliver this argument, I begin by contextualizing the Moscow Canal within the narrative of Soviet industrialization during the 1930s. I continue by providing a brief overview of the methodologies developed in the field of Gulag studies and situate the idea of “material witness” within them. Then, I look into the waterway's flow and examine its registering capacities by studying the canal's technical organization, describe its disclosing capacities by exploring the submerged town of Korcheva, and analyze its preserving capacities by discovering erratic underwater graveyards.

The Moscow Canal, which the Soviet politician Lazar Kaganovich referred to as “the blood brother” of the region's first metro line,¹ was one of the earliest projects of Soviet industrial development, part of the major renovation of Moscow in the 1930s. Most of its construction works were executed by the people sent to the Gulag correctional imprisonment system²—criminals, dispossessed peasants, racialized bodies, settlers, political prisoners, and others³—and coordinated by the Dmitrov Correctional Camp. Between 1934 and 1936, its busiest period, Dmitlag⁴ supervised more than 190,000 inmates.⁵ The latest death toll counts report 22,842 lost lives;⁶ many independent researchers

note that this figure does not encompass individuals who were assassinated or who passed away at work or while escaping from Dmitlag.⁷ Together with deforestation, swamp draining, river rerouting, and multiple other forms of brutal environmental reorganization, the inmates' forced labor enabled the construction of the canal.

The shift to water as an alternative register of exploitation and power abuse is proposed for several reasons. First, most of the documents produced at the Dmitlag camp remain missing. While the historian of the Stalinist period Oleg Khlevniuk argues that around 90 percent of the archive was winnowed in preparation for the World War II evacuation,⁸ the former chief power engineer of the canal, Valentin Barkovsky, suggests that records were burned during the evacuation.⁹ Second, accessible archival materials reveal ideological constraints that informed their organization. Though they persist as the primary source of information about the Gulag network, some suffer from distortion.¹⁰ Third, state institutions continue to keep some documentation classified without providing details about its condition.¹¹

Based on the available materials from archives, Soviet publications,¹² oral histories, field research, and other sources, Russian-based local historians have retrieved various histories of the Moscow Canal.¹³ Although they continue to be the only active group that explores the waterway and former construction site, their work reproduces violence inherent to the narrative of Soviet industrialization.¹⁴ Building on this work, the scholar of Soviet prewar culture Cynthia Ruder provides a detailed description of the canal in *Building Stalinism: The Moscow Canal and the Creation of Soviet Space*, which remains the only monograph about the hydraulic project.¹⁵ Ruder brings together official documents, historical and literary accounts, and art objects to expand the canal's narrative. She argues that this body of water was exemplary of "a Soviet space"¹⁶—a conceptual proposition that Ruder develops to describe the construction of the Soviet state through the practice of placemaking, relying primarily on Henri Lefebvre's work on space. Yet, despite meticulous work with the artifacts, Ruder does not provide critical commentary on their content and therefore situates her study within similar constraints.¹⁷

In attempting to bypass limitations that characterize both archives and research publications, a turn to the waterway as an assemblage of material agents may be helpful. Owing to its critical role in providing the capital city with water and electricity, the body of the canal has experienced only seasonal maintenance, which suggests that the traces of industrial transformations have been preserved for more than eight decades. Using the idea of "material witness" developed by the artist-researcher Susan Schuppli as a framework for this essay, I argue that some of these traces can be reconstituted by looking into the flow of the canal's waters. As an operative concept, "material witness" proposes to produce new forms of knowledge by examining "nonhuman

entities and machinic ecologies that archive their complex interactions with the world.”¹⁸ Drawing on this proposition, I seek to explore the evidential agency of water not simply as visual representation and justification of the events that happened at the construction site but as “entanglements of materials [that] activate their narrative potential” and therefore expose the constraints of the dominant modes of narration.¹⁹

While approaching a body of water as a potential archive, I engage with the academic work of the researchers who investigate European colonization of the Americas. By referring to this scholarship, I propose a different methodological approach to the Gulag network—that which examines the imprisonment system as a mode of coloniality produced and perpetuated by the Soviet state between the late 1920s and the 1960s.²⁰ This approach opens new ways to address the Gulag as a political, economic, social, and cultural system, challenging already developed research framings, such as the Gulag as a penal institution,²¹ comparative studies of the Gulag and the Holocaust,²² and the Gulag in memory studies,²³ as well as contributing to these discussions. However, I do not suggest inscribing Gulag histories into a preconceived rubric. Rather, I call for expanding the notion of coloniality to account for the Gulag variable.

Situating the Moscow Canal within the Soviet Industrialization of the 1930s

The Moscow Canal is an engineered body of water that connects the Volga, the country’s major waterway, sprawling for more than 3,500 kilometers across its western part, with the Moskva River that traverses Moscow, which used to be the capital of the former Russian Soviet Republic and the Soviet Union. It runs for 128 kilometers starting from the Ivankovo Reservoir, also known as the Moscow Sea, along the town of Dmitrov to the southwest of Moscow (fig. 1), as the map found in one of the technical reports shows. However, back in the 1930s, the Soviet government imagined the water flowing in the opposite direction—from the capital city to the rural areas. The ambition to deliver a new industrial lifestyle to remote areas by means of the waterway was captured in its original title, the Moskva-Volga Canal.²⁴

This industrial lifestyle was introduced to transform the agrarian state into a powerful modern empire—a socialist opponent to the capitalist system—and to urbanize the territories. To achieve the transformation of the state economy, a series of Five-Year Plans were implemented, each designed for a particular goal.²⁵ Forced industrialization, with heavy industry, steel, and machine building as priority fields, and collectivization remained the main objectives for the Second Five-Year Plan, which involved the construction of the

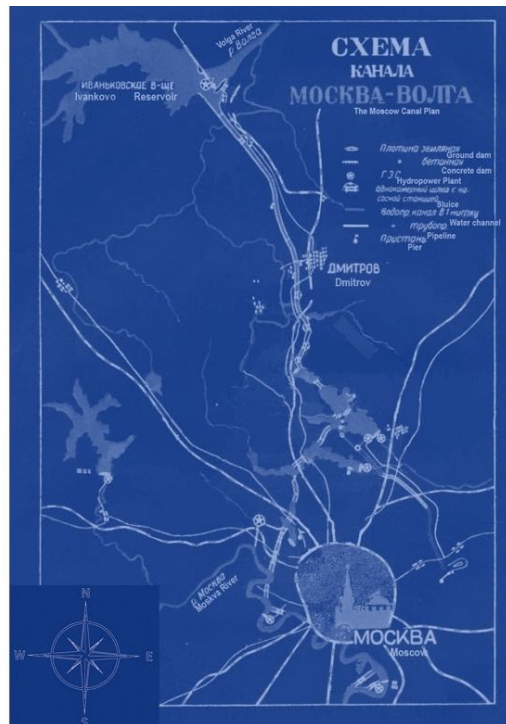


Figure 1 The Moscow Canal plan, 1940. Original image courtesy of the Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo stroitelnoy literatury (State Publishing House of the Construction Literature). Image edited by the author.

Moscow Canal. The waterway contributed to the development of megaprojects—referred to as the Great Construction Projects of Communism—which encompassed large-scale industrial infrastructures such as Dnieper Hydroelectric Station, Ural metallurgical combines, and White Sea-Baltic Canal, all built during the prior five-year program.²⁶

While experiencing changes brought by rapid industrial development, Moscow, as the capital, became exemplary of them. The General Reconstruction Plan of the City, approved in 1935, reflected these changes by suggesting a renovation of the cityscapes. The plan included reorganizing residential areas, expanding the railway network, creating highways with new modes of transport, and constructing bridges and other urban infrastructures.²⁷ Among these transformations, granite embankments were of special importance because Moscow was envisioned as a harbor city with the Moskva River as its artery, which a photograph found in the General Plan publication illustrates (fig. 2).

Together with population and city growth, the renovation project exhausted the capital's water resources, and some areas of the Moskva River dried up. The Moscow Canal was built to resolve this problem and sustain the city with both technical and domestic water, therefore ensuring further urban development. Its construction also aimed to increase the production of hydroelectricity, taking the GOELRO plan further,²⁸ by building eight hydropower

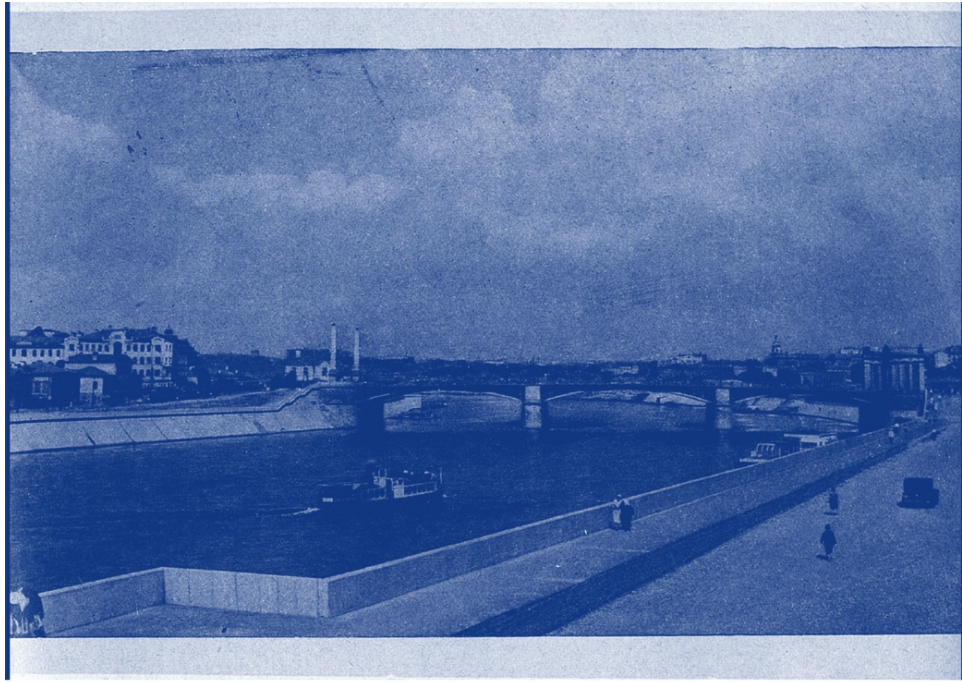


Figure 2 The renovated embankment near Borodinsky Bridge, 1936. Original image courtesy of Poligraphkniga. Image edited by the author.

plants on the canal's flow. The waterway was planned to facilitate the transportation of raw materials, such as oil, coal, and wood—the outcomes of forced industrialization—and to accompany the railroad, which was a more expensive means of transportation.²⁹ The size of the canal had to accommodate this flow of resources, especially oil tankers that carried up to twenty-two-thousand-ton loads.³⁰ It was designed in the shape of a trapeze: 85.5 meters wide on the surface and 46 meters on the bottom, reaching 5.5 meters deep (fig. 3).³¹

Besides economic reasons, ideological advantages also stimulated the construction of the canal. The capacity to master nature and put it to the service of industrialization became an important ideological framing, with every conquest demonstrating the strength of the Soviet state.³² Particularly successful was the completion of the projects that were left unfinished during the imperial rule, since they emphasized the advantage of Soviet power. Under this framing, water was imagined as a savage, uncontrollable force that required taming as well.³³ The Moscow Canal constituted one of the largest projects that demonstrated how water can be civilized—Moscow as a Port of Five Seas. This endeavor sought to create an inland waterway system that connected the land-locked capital with remote territories of the country through five seas: the White, the Baltic, the Caspian, the Black, and the Sea of Azov, and therefore enabled control over them and reinforced the dominant position of Moscow, both strategically and symbolically (fig. 4).



Figure 3. The trapezoid waterway bottom of the canal, 1936. Original image courtesy of Типо-литография имени Ворожского (Vorovskoy Printing House). Image edited by the author.

To insert the new industrialized rhythm into daily life, a new temporality was instituted. Beginning with the events of 1917, time was thought to follow a linear progression oriented toward an imagined communist future, with the present being a transitional stage divided into a consecutive series of five-year programs. Acceleration became its vital characteristic. The urge to reach and bypass the development of other empires in the fastest possible manner required this temporality to move more rapidly and outstrip itself. The flow of time, already set to industrial rhythms, was to quicken further and outrun its own limitations, therefore increasing the productivity of modernization.

Situated within this temporal orientation, the project of the Moscow Canal struggled to follow the accelerated pace. Originally, the construction works were planned to terminate between 1932 and 1934.³⁴ Based on the successful completion of the White Sea Canal—the northern part of the Port of Five Seas project (fig. 4)—in less than two years, engineers estimated that the Moscow Canal would meet the same deadline. However, by 1934 the organization of works proved to be dysfunctional: it was at least twice less productive than expected.³⁵ Yet the dysfunctional management was not restructured. Instead, the construction site was sustained with the incessant flow of various resources, primarily human labor.

The refusal to improve the project's management indicated that the canal was no longer imagined as a strategic body—a time-limited innovative project that required advanced technological tools and skills to operate them in the most efficient ways. Rather, it was adjusted to a time-stretched absorber of resources, both human and nonhuman, distributed unrestrainedly to the



Figure 4 Map of the Moscow River as a Port of Five Seas Project. Original image courtesy of Riverflot.ru. Image edited by the author.

waterway and without an outlined plan. When discussing the development of modernity, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten argue that its origins have been marked by the shift to the logistics organization that enables ceaseless commodity supply to the site of production. They continue by saying that the core of every modernity lies in this movement of “things, unformed objects [and] deformed subjects,”³⁶ what they define as “the hold”³⁷—bodies and entities, including humans, animals, energy flows, and other exploitable materials that are being shipped and containerized for the benefit of capital. To adapt this thinking to Soviet modernity,³⁸ the “hold” of the Moscow Canal would be composed of bodies and entities delivered to the Dmitlag camp.

Initially, Moscow’s administration oversaw the hydraulic project, but already in 1932, its supervision was passed to the ministry of home affairs.³⁹ Operating mainly as a policing body, it regulated the Gulag network, which sought to sustain rapid economic and political development of the state by exploiting forced labor of the inmates, cheap and unlimited, since their bodies could be distributed and redistributed across the country once needed. When the management crisis occurred at the Dmitlag, the number of workers tripled from 50,000 to 150,000.⁴⁰ However, this measure failed to accelerate the construction of the waterway. The termination of works was postponed twice, allowing the navigation to begin only in mid-1937, three years later than scheduled.⁴¹

Situating the Concept of “Material Witness” within the Studies of the Gulag Camps

As Leonid Borodkin observes, the Gulag network was organized as a highly bureaucratic structure.⁴² The daily life of convicts was explicitly recorded to monitor their productivity. According to a document found in the Russian State Archive, these records were arranged based on their expiration date and grew into complex storage systems, with some materials kept at the camps and others in the main directorate of the Gulag.⁴³ However, as many scholars emphasize, most of the files were classified until the early 1990s.⁴⁴

Prior to the “archival turn” in Gulag studies activated by official decree in 1992,⁴⁵ oral histories, diaries, memoirs, and other literary accounts served as the main forms of information about life enclosed within the thick walls of the camps. Works by imprisoned writers Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Varlam Shalamov are among the most well-known texts that describe living and working conditions at the Gulag. In *Kolyma Tales*, Shalamov writes:

Envy, like all our feelings, had been dulled and weakened by hunger. We lacked the strength to experience emotions, to seek easier work, to walk, to ask, to beg. . . . We envied only our acquaintances, the ones who had been lucky enough to get office work, a job in the hospital or the stables—wherever there was none of the long physical labor glorified as heroic and noble in signs above all the camp gates.⁴⁶

Yet many writers and poets left descriptions of their imprisonment.⁴⁷ The publication of personal correspondence, memoirs, autobiographies, and other forms of personal memories that narrate camp histories started in the mid-1950s and intensified in the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁴⁸ These materials represent an important source of knowledge about the Gulag network, as they depict the experience of convicts that is missing in the archival documentation. Still, some of them lack accuracy, while others remain constrained by the traumatic experience that is central to their plot.⁴⁹

The opening of archives fostered monographs and papers that introduced particular research strategies. These strategies approached the archive as a collection of statistical and numerical data invoked to support an argument, without considering its politics and analyzing its systems of order and preservation. Simon Ertz points to the inconsistencies that such strategies produce. While working with paper-based documentation and comparing it with other forms of evidence, Ertz notices that the signed orders sometimes significantly differed from the orders given at the Gulag camps. He challenges the credibility of the files and proposes the search for additional proof, of another char-

acter, to validate the documents before referring to them in research publications.⁵⁰ Therefore, activation of archives requires problematizing their organization and operation, as otherwise the violence enacted in their structures can be reproduced.

In this gap between personal accounts and the archive, “material witness” becomes instrumental. Schuppli borrows this concept from the legal context to explore matter as an active and expressive witness and analyzes institutional protocols that render certain orders of knowledge legitimate while dismissing others. Drawing on the notion of “informational enrichment” by Andrew Barry,⁵¹ who develops it further from Isabelle Stengers and Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent, Schuppli emphasizes the possibility of reading histories from the material strata of things in order to contest existing narratives by interpreting “informed materials.”⁵²

Schuppli’s proposal to attend to matter without metaphorization and compose new histories challenges common research approaches to archival materials where they are considered as records that prevail over other forms of documentation. Instead, it refers to matter as the primary resource mediated by archival files. To do so is to approach water as an assemblage of nonhuman entities and to think through and with its properties, movement, and other parameters, following the work of scholars like Astrida Neimanis, Melody Jue, and Stacy Alaimo.⁵³ This turn allows us to engage with the Moscow Canal as a material and political body that can register and accumulate information. It provides new ways to retrieve the histories of the Gulag, where the water flow appears as an informative resource, capable of revealing artifacts overlooked by both personal accounts and archival documents.

The Flow of the Moscow Canal

Flow is the motion of water in its liquid state. It is mainly generated by gravity but can also be produced by factors such as wind, salinity, and temperature differences. The flow defines the organization of a body of water, be it an ocean, a sea, a mountain river, or a lake. It varies in speed, direction, and intensity, and, as Stefan Helmreich argues, these qualities require different accounts—those that recognize the parameters of salt and fresh, still and moving waters—to capture and describe the heterogeneity of the aquatic spaces.⁵⁴ The flow allows nonhuman inhabitants and human residues to connect through the water as well as to remain concealed by its layers and preserved by its chemical properties. Understood by fiction and scholarly literature in its materiality, not as a metaphor,⁵⁵ it makes the aquatic a flexible and mobile space resistant to mastery due to its fluid nature.

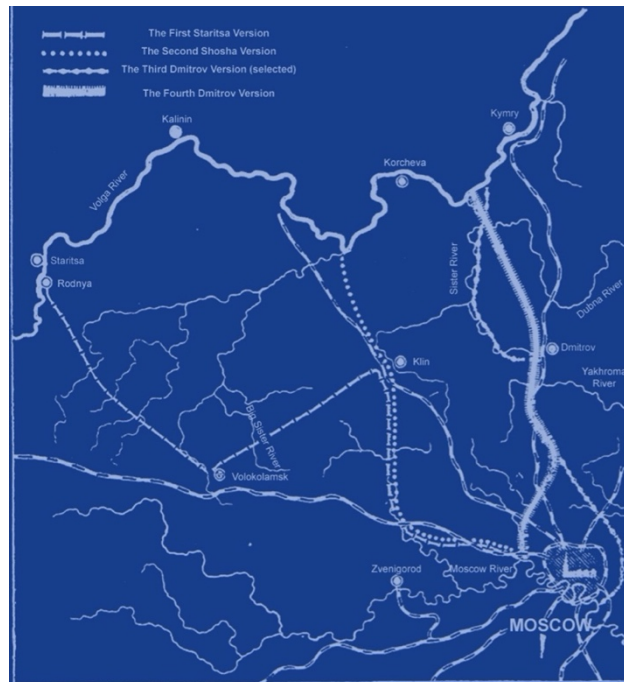


Figure 5 Comparative map of the Moscow Canal pathways, 1940. Original image courtesy of Typo-litographia imeny Vorovskogo (Vorovskoy Printing House). Image edited by the author.

In contrast to the bodies of water that are shaped by the flow produced by inherent elements, their artificial analogues—canals—emerge in a cyborgian manner: they are half natural and half human-made. Canals may appear anywhere the land can be excavated and water transported to create a flow—here meant metaphorically—of power. The hollow spaces are being filled with standing water, as in a reservoir. To repossess the dynamism, the waterway should be sustained by the external structures, such as dams and sluices. The water masses need to be transported up and down and passed through various gates in order to become mobile again. Their amount should be carefully monitored, otherwise the cyborgian body of a canal may be injured by floods, mudflows, and other obstructions. Their schedule should be accurate too. If the tainter gates are not opened on time and the water does not reach the required level, the navigation may be damaged.

The Moscow Canal is an artificial body of water—only nineteen kilometers of its way is unaltered by human engineering. This route was selected out of the three possible paths as the most cost-effective, saving the construction and maintenance expenses and shortening the distance between Moscow and the towns of Saint Petersburg and Nizhny Novgorod, as a comparative map of the canal pathways demonstrates (fig. 5). Yet topographically it was the most challenging option. The canal commences in swampy lowlands, proceeds through steep slopes and ravines, then continues in the forests and descends to the meadows where it flows before arriving at the capital city. To

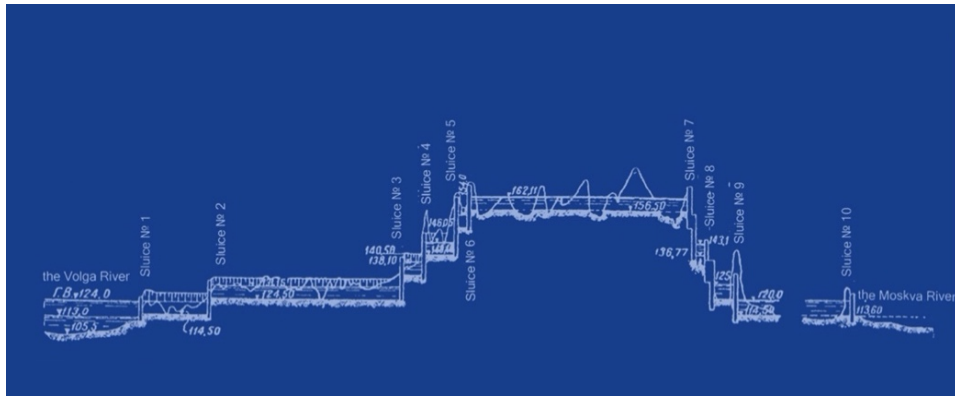


Figure 6 The topographical profile of the canal, 1936. Original image courtesy of *Typo-tytographia imeny Vorovskogo (Vorovskoy Printing House)*. Image edited by the author.

enable the running of water, these elevation differences—with some of them reaching seventy meters⁵⁶—were balanced by various mechanical units (fig. 6). In total, 240 structures were built to maintain the water flow.⁵⁷

Since the running of the canal results from complex geophysical calculations and engineering efforts, it is worth looking into the structures that enable the artificial flow to consider their organizational patterns as forms of documentation that have recorded violence at the construction site and have preserved these traces in ways alternative to the archive.

The Flow and Environmental Infrastructure: A Capacity to Register

If the water masses flow, they have a direction. They can go upstream or downstream, turn left or right. Regardless of how twisted their path is, or what obstacles occur on their way, the masses will still be directed to a particular point where they connect with other bodies of water. Their course can be visible, as in rivers, or obscured, as in underwater currents. However, once the landscapes that they traverse become engineered, reorganized by external forces to extract resources, the flow of waters encounters disturbance too. It might weaken, shallow, and dry up. It might also gain power, break from its banks, and cause floods. These forms of adaptation to the rebuilt environments register human interventions, keep traces of the transformations in their bodies, and therefore perform witness in the redesigned modes of operation.

In late April, when the navigation season begins, the Moscow Canal, half empty after the winter period, is refilled by the Volga. The waterway interrupts the river on its right side, 370 kilometers away from its source, close to the Dubna River inflow. The old maps, produced before this area was reshaped to accommodate the canal, show that originally the Volga ran along the town of Korcheva, then descended to the village of Ivankovo and from there went upstream to reach the town of Rybinsk (fig. 7). However, this path was



Figure 7 The map depicting the flow of the Volga River before the Moscow Canal construction, 1892. Original image courtesy of *Izdaniye tverskogo gubernskogo zemstva* (Publishing House of Tver Provincial Zemstvo). Image edited by the author.

rerouted. Near Ivankovo, the flow was divided into three separate streams (fig. 8). One continued the original route to the north toward Rybinsk, another proceeded directly to the first sluice of the canal, and the third descended farther to the south, merging with the human-made waterway.

The rerouted path required external mechanisms to facilitate the flow. These mechanisms transformed the bottom and banks of the Volga. For instance, its riverbed was widened and elevated to create the Ivankovo Reservoir—or the Moscow Sea—where the waters were stored. After being modernized, the Volga could no longer sustain itself. The river became dependent on the restraining elements that reorganized its environments. Stefan Helmreich proposes to analyze such industrial interventions into the natural worlds as environmental infrastructures, which he calls “infranatures.”⁵⁸ Helmreich introduces this idea to revisit the boundaries established between the “natural” and “the artificial” and analyzes how these categories might be assembled in a different way.

In his proposition, Helmreich shifts from thinking about “the first ‘organic’ nature” as supplanted by the mechanical structures and observes their collaborative, engineered forms.⁵⁹ Yet he does not seek to point to the impotence of the natural worlds. Rather, he suggests that once intruded on, they obtain new “technologies” that become their immanent “techniques,”⁶⁰ therefore transforming “the putatively natural order of things.”⁶¹ In an “infranature,” processes that are considered natural to a particular environment are involved in an expanded infrastructure that maintains systems of control and communication and enables the movement of various bodies and material flows. The production of hydroelectricity at the Ivankovo Hydropower Plant

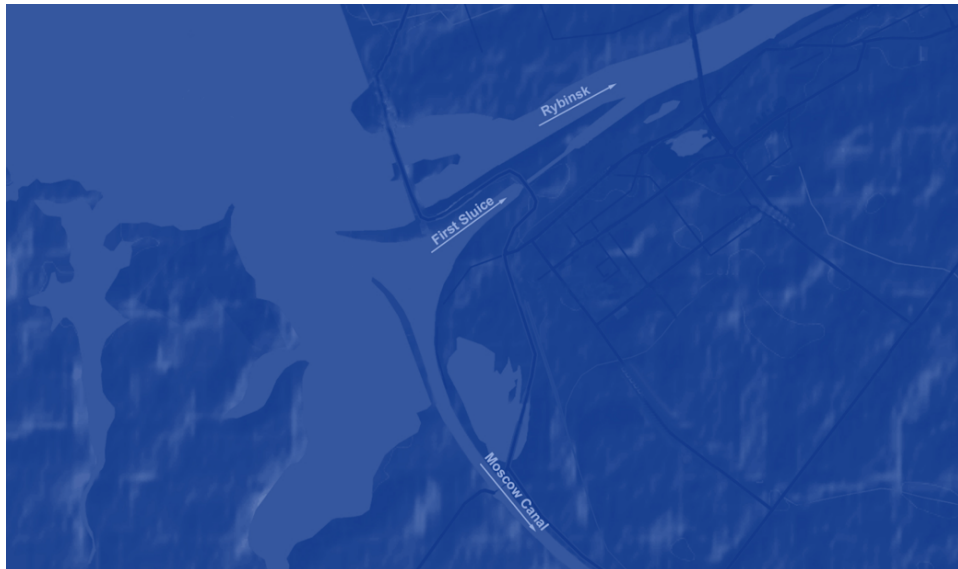


Figure 8 The map depicting the Volga River rerouting. Image courtesy of the author.

is an example of how the technologized Volga River operates as an “infranature.” While the water masses run in the adjusted riverbed—a “technique” inherent to the waterway—they turn into an operative entity that produces electricity and thus implicitly become constituent of a complex industrial process. Though the outcomes of such an “infranature” might be immediate, the consequences of the interventions may take longer to emerge, and natural environments would be the first to signal the changes.

The completion of the Moscow Canal was celebrated as the major success that demonstrated the capacity of Soviet industrial culture to master natural worlds.⁶² This “achievement,” to use the official language of the 1930s, enhanced the dominant narrative of development and, in particular, the urgency to urbanize territories and bring them to the service of Soviet modernity. However, looking at this complex structure as an “infranature” allows its insufficiencies to be registered too. Besides illuminating the exploitation of various resources, this conceptual proposition recognizes the core aspect that ensures the functioning of the canal: maintenance. “Infranature,” like any other infrastructure, fails to operate as intended without regular maintenance. If abandoned, technologized natural worlds lose their acquired “techniques” and begin to malfunction in an environment that was reconfigured by and for the industrial infrastructure. They mutate as did the Ekaterininskiy Canal, an earlier attempt to connect the Volga and the Moskva Rivers, which was built between 1820 and 1844. Today it exists as a semidraind creek overgrown with reeds and other vegetation, illustrating the fragility of an “infranature” rather than its durability (fig. 9).



Figure 9 The Ekaterininskiy Canal today, 2020. Original image courtesy of Arseny Khabalin. Image edited by the author.

The Flow and the Geologic Fossils: A Capacity to Disclose

Besides running on the horizontal axis, from the source to the mouth, the flow stays operative in the vertical dimension too. At various depths, aquatic environments are organized in different ways, with each layer inhabited by particular living organisms. While the water masses rise and fall depending on various factors, including abundant precipitation and droughts, the artificial flow has no control over its oscillations. Instead, sluices, dams, and other mechanisms regulate the motion of the waters. They are delivered and pumped out to provide certain services like navigation, which disturb underwater communities. If the level goes below the required point, these communities are exposed to new environments, which they would not encounter otherwise. The flow discloses what is concealed by the watery layers, bringing to attention artifacts that lie on its bottom.

Returning to the area where the Moscow Canal branches off from the Volga, two islands—less than a couple of meters in their diameter—unexpectedly appear (fig. 10). When the water level is slightly lower than usual, these islands grow and become more noticeable. Together with the fragments of the bricked embankment covered today with bushy greens, a desolate house on the right bank of the river and other remnants of life such as coins constitute the residues of Korcheva, a town that was submerged for the purposes of the canal. First inhabited between the eighth and twelfth centuries,⁶³ Korcheva was populated by around five thousand people in the late 1920s.⁶⁴ Historical accounts depict Korcheva as a town that reminded many of a village.⁶⁵ However, it had a regular plan, developed infrastructure, including factories, educational institutions, a hospital, and three cathedrals, with two built of stone—unusual



Figure 10 Two islands discovered in the Moscow Sea, 2020. Original image courtesy of Den Solotareff. Image edited by the author.

elements of the architectural ensemble, since wooden churches were more common in semirural areas (fig. 11). Still, it was not as large and busy as other towns on the Volga, such as Rybinsk and Yaroslavl, with which Korcheva was connected via roads.

However, for the Moscow Canal, intent on reshaping the existing pathways and introducing new modes of transport, Korcheva was an obstacle. It occupied the territory arranged for the Ivankovo Reservoir, thereby hindering the construction of the waterway. Given the size and organization of the town, incomparable to that of the canal, it was drowned to free the way for the industrialized water. For its residents, this intervention resulted in displacement. People were forced to move to the villages and small towns nearby, with some wooden houses transported by steel tractors while others, primarily built of stone, were demolished.⁶⁶ However, propelled by the acceleration imperative, Soviet modernity rushed the decision to submerge Korcheva and miscalculated the amount of land for flooding. When the water filled the canal's bed in 1937, one third of the town was left outside the watercourse.

Though Korcheva remains underwater, the two islands and other residues of the town are frequently disclosed by the flow of the canal. While the documents that registered the drowning and residents' accounts of this event remain missing, these residues act as fossils within the geological materiality, to refer to Kathryn Yusoff's terminology. Yusoff imagines fossils as "left-over forms of organisms and creatures that no longer have belonging in the world"⁶⁷ and argues that besides leaving traces that keep historical records, fossils also "attest to the inverse of [this] which is the outside genealogy, of leaving no trace."⁶⁸ She proposes approaching them in search of the missing archives to reconstitute the histories folded in and by them "for the possibility of others"⁶⁹—those suppressed by the normative modes of narration. In the case of Korcheva, studying the residues of the town empowers the shift from the industrialization narrative, which disregards any experience outside the idea of progressive development, to the stories of "the others," residents and their



Figure 11 The town of Korcheva, 2005. Original image courtesy of S. I. Kurdin. Image edited by the author.

relatives, nonhuman assemblages who endure the existence of the town, both above and below the water surface. For instance, until 1993 former residents met and traveled together to Korcheva by boat every year.⁷⁰ There, people passed by the streets and revisited places where the churches and other destroyed buildings were located, acknowledging and prolonging the life of the town.

Yusoff adds that geological fossils operate as “empirical knots of time,”⁷¹ which in the absence of corresponding experience allow for speculative stories and therefore push us to think about the future differently. This approach breaks away from the linear passage of history and time and challenges imaginaries of the future that rely on progressive narratives. Thus, reading the traces produced by fossils—like the peaks of the two islands found in the Moscow Sea—is a practice not necessarily of justifying or refuting certain events, as the work with archival documentation suggests. Rather, it is a practice of world making where the experiences of “the others” are retrieved in the present to allow for other futures.

The Flow and the Weather: A Capacity to Preserve

Together with the function of disclosing that activates when the water is below a certain level, the artificial flow has the capacity to preserve nonhuman agents and residues that circulate in the aquatic motion or lie on the bottom of the waterway. The physical and chemical properties of various bodies that inhabit different depths interact in the watery space. They share common environ-

ments and leave traces of coexistence in their bodies. These traces remain discernible as long as the residence time of particular elements—for instance, calcium—allows them to stay in solution. Therefore, any activity that involves a body of water becomes archived and settles in as a residue. In the absence of documents and artifacts, such residues might operate as evidential matter, which also appear to be a more durable form of documentation, as the case of the Moscow Canal illuminates.

In his memoirs, Valentin Barkovsky noted that the Moscow Canal had preserved a particular group of residues, disclosing them to a smaller group of people.⁷² These residues were found near sluices and other external structures that were considered to be of military importance. For that reason, they were guarded and accessible only to the employees of the canal, like Barkovsky. He wrote that the residues appeared only when the soil was washed away from the bulk banks by the water streams, which happened rather frequently. These streams disclosed bones of the convicts who passed away at the construction site without being officially registered and included in the death toll. Their bodies were thrown in pits organized erratically around the waterway, as many local historians have described and as the residues have illuminated.⁷³ Many similar mass graves have been discovered along the canal. As Barkovsky recalls, some were found unexpectedly in the 1970s, during the excavation works for the public amenities in Moscow.⁷⁴ Such mass graves were left undocumented to conceal the mortality level and other adverse information about the Dmitlag.

The pits were built to manage an increasing number of exhausted bodies that facilities designed to handle human remains could not accommodate (fig. 12). Treated as a disposable force, Dmitlag convicts executed around 55 percent of the workload, including soil extraction, swamp draining, and forest destruction.⁷⁵ Combined with lack of the equipment—mechanical tools appeared at the construction site in late 1934—and austere living conditions, extreme workloads resulted in fast exhaustion and debilitation. These measures operated as what Christina Sharpe calls “weather,”⁷⁶ produced intentionally at the Dmitlag to enable control over the inmates and ensure their productivity. Discussing violent environments that have supervised the life of Black bodies, Sharpe proposes an expansion of the meteorological notion of weather to consider socioeconomic, political, and cultural conditions—“a total climate”⁷⁷—produced to “allo[w] certain communities to thrive and others to completely languish.”⁷⁸

While acknowledging the differences between the experiences of the enslaved people of African descent in the United States and that of the people imprisoned at the Gulag, Sharpe’s proposal offers a way to think about policy-making as a material practice that sediments in various bodies. In such terms, the “weather” of the Moscow Canal was designed to ensure rapid industrialization of the country and sustain exploitation of the bodies at the Gulag by



Figure 12 Map indicating a mass grave between sluices number 6 and number 7, 2007. Image courtesy of Valentin Barkovsky.

means of multiple measures, such as workload, poor diet, and sleep deprivation. Dmitlag convicts who passed away exhausted by the conditions created at the camp remain present underwater, but are missing from the archival record. This disturbing discovery exposes the gap between the documents stored in the archives and the evidence collected from the construction site, proving the claims made by independent researchers who have challenged the official death toll figures.⁷⁹

Yet Sharpe also explores how residues produced by violent “weather” are being preserved by other conditions, which resist the “total climate” and which she defines as “microclimates.”⁸⁰ She invites us to think of residence time in the water that prolongs the existence of the bodies at sea—and, therefore, in the world—and depends on the properties of the elements that compose the aquatic environments where these bodies rest. In the Moscow Canal, the corporeal presence of Dmitlag convicts is maintained by the residence time of the elements like water, soil, sand, and other matter. In this capacity, the waterway itself operates as a body that preserves the entities sedimented on its bottom in the brutality of the dominant “weather.” Besides challenging the imperatives of such a “weather,” illuminating forms of resistance inherent to the canal allows us to imagine the waterway as a documentary site.

The Flow as the Archive

A body of water can be approached as an archive and create forms of narration that contribute to existing narratives and/or challenge their assumptions. The concept of material witness and its epistemological propositions provide an opportunity to study some of the records enclosed in the Moscow Canal and offer a way to fill the voids in its fragmentary, paper-based archive.

Approaching the flow of the canal as an environmental infrastructure makes it possible to engage the registering agency of the waterway. Rerouting and technologization of the river reorganized, but did not halt, its flow. Still visible today after more than eighty years of exploitation, these transformations express the brutality of the industrial interventions that otherwise remain underrepresented in the archives. Observations of the artificial fluidity of the flow illuminate the canal's capacity to disclose its residues. Encountered as fossils within the geological materiality, they inspire the creation of speculative stories that acknowledge the incompleteness of existing narratives and propose to undo them for the possibilities of nonextractive futures. The canal also functions to preserve. As a set of conditions resistant to the dominant "weather" of Soviet industrialization, it manages the residence time of its sediments in water and subverts their timescales. By extending temporalities of these bodies, the flow extends their evidencing capacity and thus hints at the vulnerabilities of the weathering modes that produce archival files.

Studies of the waterway have revealed the possibilities that the yet-unarchivable nonhuman agents offered to retrieve the missing records of the Moscow Canal and renarrate histories previously dependent on the reductive structures of the archive. In other words, the flow of the aquatic is an archiving body itself and documents a range of interactions. However, to engage with such data, new regimes of perceptibility and representation should be activated, those which recognize water as a material and political body capable of collecting information about violent interventions it experiences and challenging the official narratives that perpetuate the production of violence.

* * *

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The author thanks Dr. S. Ayesha Hameed for her comments on this research and for inspiration.

Notes

¹ Cynthia A. Ruder, *Building Stalinism: The Moscow Canal and the Creation of Soviet Space* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018), 64, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350985612>. For the original quote, see Lazar Kaganovich, *Pamyatnye zapiski rabochego, kommunisto-bolshevika, profsozonnogo, partyninogo i sovetско-gosudarstvennogo rabotnika* (*The Memoirs of a Working, Communist-Bolshevik, Trade-Union, Party, and Soviet-State Worker*) (Moscow: Vagrius, 1996), 442.

² This system of imprisonment was termed *reforging* by Ida Averbakh, who worked as Moscow's deputy prosecutor in the 1930s, and suggested hard, and more frequently, manual work as a way to transform culprits back into reliable citizens, regardless of how serious their crime was. For more details describing this method, see Averbakh, *Ot prestupleniya k trudu* (*From Crime to Labor*) (Moscow: OGIZ, 1936).

³ By distinguishing different groups of people within the homogeneous notion of "prisoners," this research emphasizes the urgency to address racial, socio-economic, political, and ideological factors that structured hierarchies within Gulag camps and organized working and living conditions for each group accordingly. Though the words *convicts* and *inmates* appear throughout the essay, the author signals her awareness of the challenges implied. For an article that analyzes these distinctions, see Oleg Khlevniuk, "The Gulag and the Non-Gulag as One Interrelated Whole," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 16, no. 3 (2015): 480–85, <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2015.0043>.

⁴ Dmitlag is the acronym for the Dmitrov Correctional Camp.

⁵ Aleksander Yakovlev, ed., *Stalinskiye stroiki Gulaga, 1930–1953* (*The Stalinist's Projects of the Gulag, 1930–1953*) (Moscow: MFD Materik, 2005), 71–77.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁷ Valentin Barkovsky, Mikhail Bulanov, and Sergey Gor can be mentioned among those researchers who have discussed this question in their work.

⁸ Oleg Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 5–6.

⁹ As an employee, Barkovsky had access to the classified archive of the Moscow Canal Authority, where he found proof for his argument. Thereafter, many researchers have referred to this finding without challenging its credibility. During a personal interview conducted in February 2020, Galina Ivanovna Gerke, a guide at the Museum of the Moscow Canal and a former employee of the canal's central management, hesitated to confirm Barkovsky's claim. For

more information, see Valentin Barkovsky, *Tainy Moskva-Volgostrya (The Mysteries of the Moscow-Volgostrya)* (Moscow: Typographiya STD RF, 2007), 17–18.

¹⁰ Khlevniuk addresses the problem of archival credibility and the implied research challenges in the introduction to *The History of the Gulag*, 2–8.

¹¹ As was discovered by the GULAG History Museum in 2018, some records are being destroyed while staying concealed. See Anastasiya Kurilova, “Terror snimaut s arkhivnogo ucheta” (“Removing Terror from the Archival Records”), *Kommersant*, no. 99 (2018): 1.

¹² These works were mainly published during the construction period and encompass technical reports, such as eleven volumes of *Moscow–Volga Canal, 1932–7*, by NKVD Office of Technical Reports; operation manuals; tourist guides, like *Na Teplobode po Kanalu imeni Moskvry (By Boat on the Moscow Canal)*, by B. Pashkin; and agitational fiction, such as *Volga idet v Moskvry (The Volga Flows to Moscow)*, by P. Lopatin.

¹³ *Kanal Moskva-Volga: Khronika volzhskogo rayona gidrosooruzheniy (The Moskva-Volga Canal: The Chronicle of Hydraulic Structure in the Volzhsky District)* by Mikhail Bulanov; *Byla li tachka u ministra? (Did the Minister Have a Barrow?)* (Dimitrov: Spas, 1997), by Nicolay Fedorov; *The Canal, 1932–1937* by Gor, can be mentioned among other publications produced by local historians.

¹⁴ The online project “Moskva-Volga” illustrates how numerous artifacts discovered by local historians are being analyzed without critical reworking of the Soviet socialist world-building narrative. To explore the project, see Igor Kuvyrkov and Sergey Gaev, “Moskva-Volga: Istoria stroitelstva kanala Moskva-Volga” (“Moskva-Volga: The History of the Moskva-Volga Canal Construction”), Moskva-Volga.ru, accessed July 5, 2021, <http://moskva-volga.ru>.

¹⁵ Ruder, *Building Stalinism*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1–3.

¹⁷ A rare remark that Ruder makes about the challenges of working with the 1930s Soviet narrative can be found in the introduction to the *Building Stalinism* (10).

¹⁸ Susan Schuppli, *Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 3, <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9953.001.0001>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁰ This proposal both draws on and adds to the works by researchers who have studied Soviet colonial policymaking, such as Vitaly Chernetsky and Viatcheslav Morozov, and those who have investigated ethnic deportations, kulak exile, special colonies and settlements, and other forms of Gulag forced-labor organization, like Oxana Klimkova and many others.

²¹ Judith Pallot, among various scholars, has thoroughly explored this topic. See Sarah Badcock and Judith Pallot, “Russia and the Soviet Union from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century,” in *A Global History of Convicts and*

Penal Colonies, edited by Clare Anderson (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 271–306, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350000704>.

²² The literature that compares the Holocaust and Gulag systems is voluminous. See Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds., *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511802652.001>.

²³ See *Gulag Voices: Oral Histories of Soviet Incarceration and Exile* and other works by Jehanne M. Gheith for one account of this question.

²⁴ The canal acquired its current name in 1947 to honor the eight hundredth anniversary of Moscow.

²⁵ *XV s'ezd Vsesouznoy Communisticheskoy Partii (b): Dekabr 1928 goda; Stenographicheskiy otchet (XV Congress of the All-Union Communist Party (b): December 1928; The Stenography)* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1928), 783–814.

²⁶ The literature that engages with Soviet planned economy and industrialization project in particular is ample. For one detailed analysis of industrialization in Soviet Russia, see seven volumes of *The Industrialization of Soviet Russia*, edited by Robert William Davies. To explore each mentioned megaproject separately, see *The Generation of Power: The History of Dneprostroy* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), by Anne Dickason Rassweiler; *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), by Stephen Kotkin; and *Making History for Stalin: The Story of the Belomor Canal* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), by Cynthia Ruder.

²⁷ For a detailed description of the General Reconstruction Plan of the City, see Karl Schlögel, *Moscow, 1937* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012). For the original text, explore Ya. Tsvankin, *Generalnyi plan rekonstruktsii goroda Moskvy (General Plan of Moscow Reconstruction)* (Moscow: Poligrafkniga, 1936).

²⁸ GOELRO is a transliterated acronym that stands for the State Commission for Electrification of Russia, a body that supervised the country's electrification project.

²⁹ A. Berezinskiy, *Kanal Moskva-Volga, 1932–1937 (The Moscow-Volga Canal, 1932–1937)* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatelstvo Stroitelnoy Literatury, 1940), 21–22.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

³¹ Semen Firin and Serey Zhuk, *Kanal Moskva-Volga (Moskva-Volga Canal)* (Dmitrov: Typo-lytographia imeny Vorovskogo, 1936), 14.

³² For a thorough analysis of this topic, see the works by Paul R. Josephson, in particular, *Industrialized Nature: Brute Force Technology and the Transformation of the Natural World* (Washington D. C.: Island, 2002).

³³ Ruder discusses the role of water for the Soviet statecraft in her publication on the Moscow Canal. See Ruder, “Water as Power: Real and Imagined,” in *Building Stalinism*, 21–57.

³⁴ SNK decree no. 859, June 1, 1932, “O stroitelstve vodnogo kanala Volga-Moskva” (“On the Construction of the Volga-Moscow Waterway”), in Yakovlev, *Stalinskiye stroiki Gulaga*, 82.

³⁵ Gor, *Canal*, 24–25.

³⁶ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, “Fantasy in the Hold,” in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, NY: Minor Compositions, 2013), 91–93.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁸ When referring to Soviet Union as Soviet modernity, the essay draws on the works by Madina Tlostanova, a pioneer of decolonial thought in post-Soviet Russia. For instance, see Tlostanova, “Russia within the Frame of Imperial and Colonial Differences,” in *A Janus Faced Empire* (Moscow: Block, 2003).

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⁴⁰ Yakovlev, *Stalinskiye stroiki Gulaga*, 71–77.

⁴¹ SNK decree no. 2640, December 7, 1933, “O Kanale Volga-Moskva” (“On the Moscow Canal”) and SNK decree no. 2011, September 7, 1933, “O stroitelstve Kanala Moskva-Volga” (“On the Construction of the Moscow Canal”), both in Yakovlev, *Stalinskiye stroiki Gulaga*, 85–89.

⁴² Leonid Borodkin, “Trud v GULAGE: mezhdru prinuzhdeniem i stimulirovaniem” (“Labour in the Gulag: Between Compulsion and Incentive”), in Leonid Borodkin, Paul Gregory, and Oleg Khlevniuk, *Gulag: Ekonomika prinuditelnogo truda (The Gulag: The Economy of the Forced Labor)* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2008), 153.

⁴³ GARF. R-9489.2.1: 23.

⁴⁴ For a comparative reading of two works that present an overview of the Gulag studies before and after the opening of archives, see Andrea Graziosi, “The New Soviet Archival Sources: Hypotheses for a Critical Assessment,” *Cahiers du Monde Russe: Russie, Empire Russe, Union Soviétique, États Indépendants* 40, nos. 1–2 (1999): 13–63, <https://doi.org/10.3406/cmr.1999.990>; and Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Impact of the Opening of Soviet Archives on Western Scholarship on Soviet Social History,” *Russian Review* 74, no. 3 (2015): 377–400, <https://doi-org.oca.ucsc.edu/10.1111/russ.12021>.

⁴⁵ Decree no. 658, June 23, 1992, “O snyatii ogranichitelnykh grifov s zakonodatelnykh i inykh aktov, sluzhivshih osnovaniem dlya massovykh repressii I posyagatelstv na prava cheloveka” (“On Declassifying Legislative and Other Decrees That Served as the Basis for Mass Repressions Human Rights Violation”), in *Vedomosti syezda noridnykh depytатов Rossiiskoy Federatsii I Verhovnogo Soveta*

Possiiskoy Federatsii (The Statements of the Congress of People's Deputies of the Russian Federation and the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation), no. 26 (1992): 1510.

⁴⁶ Varlam Shalamov, "Condensed Milk," in *Kolyma Tales* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), 80–85.

⁴⁷ Many monographs have recently been written on the artistic production at the Gulag. See, for instance, the collection of essays by Fedorov discussing the life of writers, poets, and artists at the Moscow Canal: *Did the Minister Have a Barrow?*

⁴⁸ For an extensive overview of different forms of the Gulag memory, see Irina Shcherbakova, "Remembering the Gulag: Memoirs and Oral Testimonies by Former Inmates," in *Reflections on the Gulag: With a Documentary Appendix on the Italian Victims of Repression in the USSR*, edited by Elena Dundovich, Francesca Gori, and Emanuela Guercetti (Milan: Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, 2003), 187–208.

⁴⁹ Andrea Gullotta analyzed in detail the topic of trauma in the Gulag literature in "Trauma and Self in the Soviet Context: Remarks on Gulag Writings," *Autobiografia*, no. 1 (2012): 73–87.

⁵⁰ Simon Ertz, "Lagernaya sistema v 1930e–1950e gody: Evolutsiya struktury i printsipov upravleniya" ("The Camp System in the 1930s–1950s: The Evolution of the Statecraft Structure and Principles"), in Borodkin, Gregory, and Khlevniuk, *Gulag*, 91.

⁵¹ Andrew Barry, "Materialist Politics: Metallurgy," in *Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy, and Public Life*, edited by Bruce Braun and Sarah J. Whatmore (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 89–117.

⁵² Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent and Isabelle Stengers, *A History of Chemistry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 206.

⁵³ To engage with their work, see Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474275415.ch-001>; Melody Jue, *Wild Blue Media: Thinking through Seawater* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478007548>; and Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

⁵⁴ Stefan Helmreich, "Nature, Culture, Seawater," *American Anthropologist* 113, no. 1 (2011): 133, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1433.2010.01311.x>.

⁵⁵ For a detailed analysis of these methodological approaches to the water, see Philip Steinberg, "Of Other Seas: Metaphors and Materialities in Maritime Regions," *Atlantic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2013): 156–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2013.785192>.

⁵⁶ Starting here, all figures are calculated according to the Baltic Sea level.

⁵⁷ Firin and Zhuk, *Kanal Moskva-Volga*, 20.

⁵⁸ Stefan Helmreich, “How to Hide an Island,” in *New Geographies, 8: Island*, edited by Daniel Daou and Pablo Pérez-Ramos (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Graduate School of Design, 2017), 84.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ By juxtaposing “technologies” and “techniques” as separate notions, the research follows John Durham Peters and his thinking about sea mediums. Peters suggests that technologies are crafted by the human species, while techniques are tools inherent to one’s body—either human or nonhuman. This essay proposes thinking similarly about the canal: with some of the processes being organic to the waterway and others acquired artificially. See Peters, “Of Cetaceans and Ships; or, The Moorings of Our Being. The Marvelous Clouds,” in *Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 53–114, <https://www-degruyter-com.oca.ucsc.edu/document/doi/10.7208/9780226253978-003/html>.

⁶¹ Helmreich, “How to Hide an Island,” 84.

⁶² Various books, journals, and touristic brochures were produced to describe the completion of the canal and include this project in the major narrative of Soviet development. To explore some of them, see A. V. Kosarev, ed., *USSR under Construction*, vol. 2 (1938); P. Lopatin, *Volga idet v Moskvu* (*The Volga Comes to Moscow*) (Moscow: Moskovskiy Rabochiy, 1938); and N. Komarovskiy, *Kanal Moskva-Volga* (*The Moskva-Volga Canal*) (Moscow: OGIz Gostranstechizdat, 1937).

⁶³ Dmitry Bulanin, *Goroda Tverskoy oblasti: Istoriko-arhitekturnye ocherki* (*Towns of Tver Oblast: Cities of the Tver Region; Historical Essays*) (Moscow: GII, 2007), 135.

⁶⁴ Berezinskiy, *Kanal Moscow-Volga*, 278.

⁶⁵ K. I. Schetchikov collected and published a few historical accounts of Korcheva written between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. See Schetchikov, “Korcheva v istochnikax XVIII–XX vekov” (“Korcheva in Sources of the Eighteenth–Twentieth Centuries”), in *Korchevskaya starina* (*Ancient Korcheva*), vol. 3 (1997), 40–56.

⁶⁶ Only official publications, such as *Na Shturm Trassy* magazine distributed strictly inside the Dmitlag, and archival documents presenting numbers and dates of the town’s submergence were available during the research. This obstacle complicated the search for the residents’ experience of forced relocation, which was either missing from both sources or depicted as a positive event. That is why the essay does not develop further this question.

⁶⁷ Kathryn Yusoff, “Geologic Realism: On the Beach of Geologic Time,” *Social Text* 37, no. 1 (2019): 12–13, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-7286240>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 105.

⁷⁰ These gatherings are mentioned in the local historians' project *Konakovskiy Uezd*. For more information, see "Ot Korchevy do Konakovo" ("From Korcheva to Konakovo"), *Konakovskiy Uezd*, accessed September 5, 2020, <https://konakovsky-uezd.org/stroies/>.

⁷¹ Yusoff, "Geologic Realism," 13.

⁷² Barkovsky, *Tainy Moskva-Volgostroya*, 22–23.

⁷³ Bulanov, Fedorov, and Gor describe the organization of mass graves at the construction site in a similar way to Barkovsky.

⁷⁴ Barkovsky, *Tainy Moskva-Volgostroya*, 22–23.

⁷⁵ Sergey Zhuk, ed., *Kanal Moskva-Volga, 1932–1937: Zemlyanye Raboty (Moskva-Volga Canal, 1932–1937; Excavation Works)* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatelstvo Stroitelnoy Literatury, 1940), 11.

⁷⁶ Christina Sharpe, "The Weather," in *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 131–44, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822373452>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Léopold Lambert and Christina Sharpe, "Antiblack Weather vs Black Microclimates," *The Funambulist*, no. 14 (2017): 50, podcast transcripts.

⁷⁹ To explore one of these claims, see *Kanal Moskva-Volga*, by Bulanov.

⁸⁰ Lambert and Sharpe, "Antiblack Weather vs Black Microclimates."

Ground Maps of an Unknown Prospect

Elpitha Tsoutsounakis



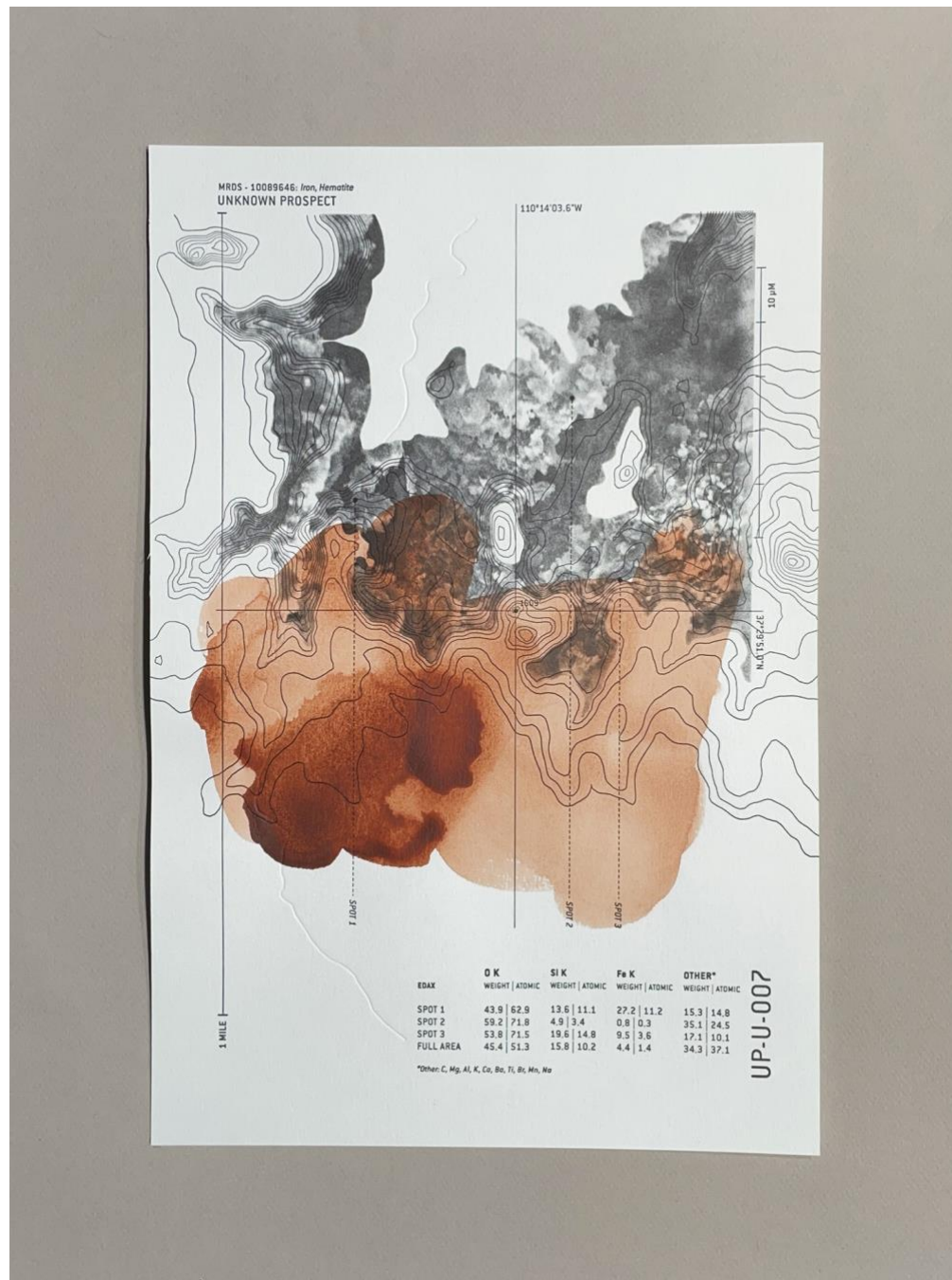
Right to left: UP-U-004, UP-U-007, UP-U-010, UP-U-011

Printed on Coventry Rag (250 GSM) on a Vandercook No. 3 with rubber-based ink. Pigment in gum arabic binder applied in between print runs. Images taken on-site are combined with those generated by the scanning electron microscope in the Utah Nano Lab at the University of Utah. Data for each map were generated in energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy of each sample used for pigment. Topography for the site was generated in ArcGIS.¹

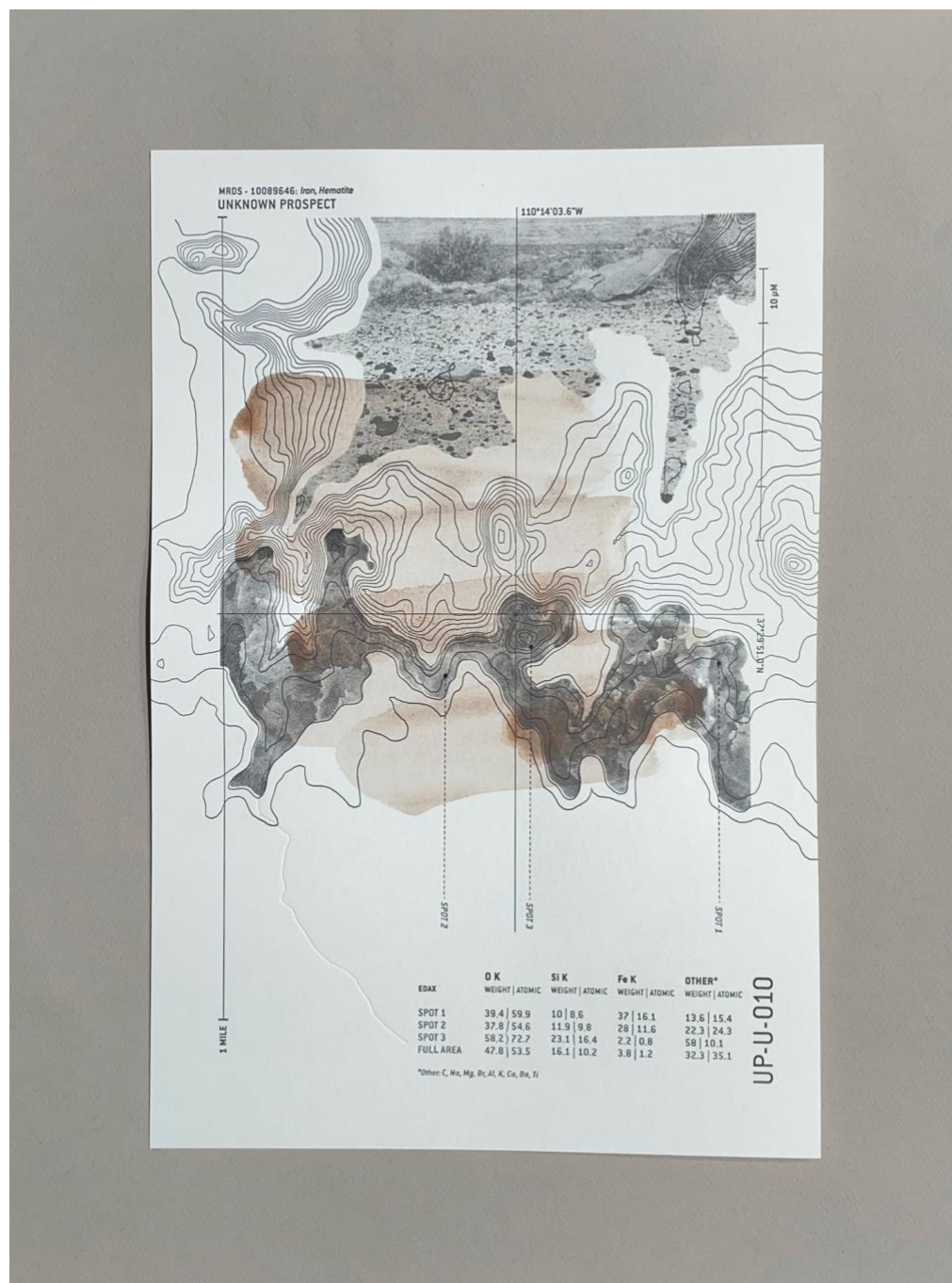
¹ GIFs of Elpitha Tsoutsounakis's *Ground Maps of an Unknown Prospect* (2020) can be viewed at <https://escholarship.org/uc/refract>.



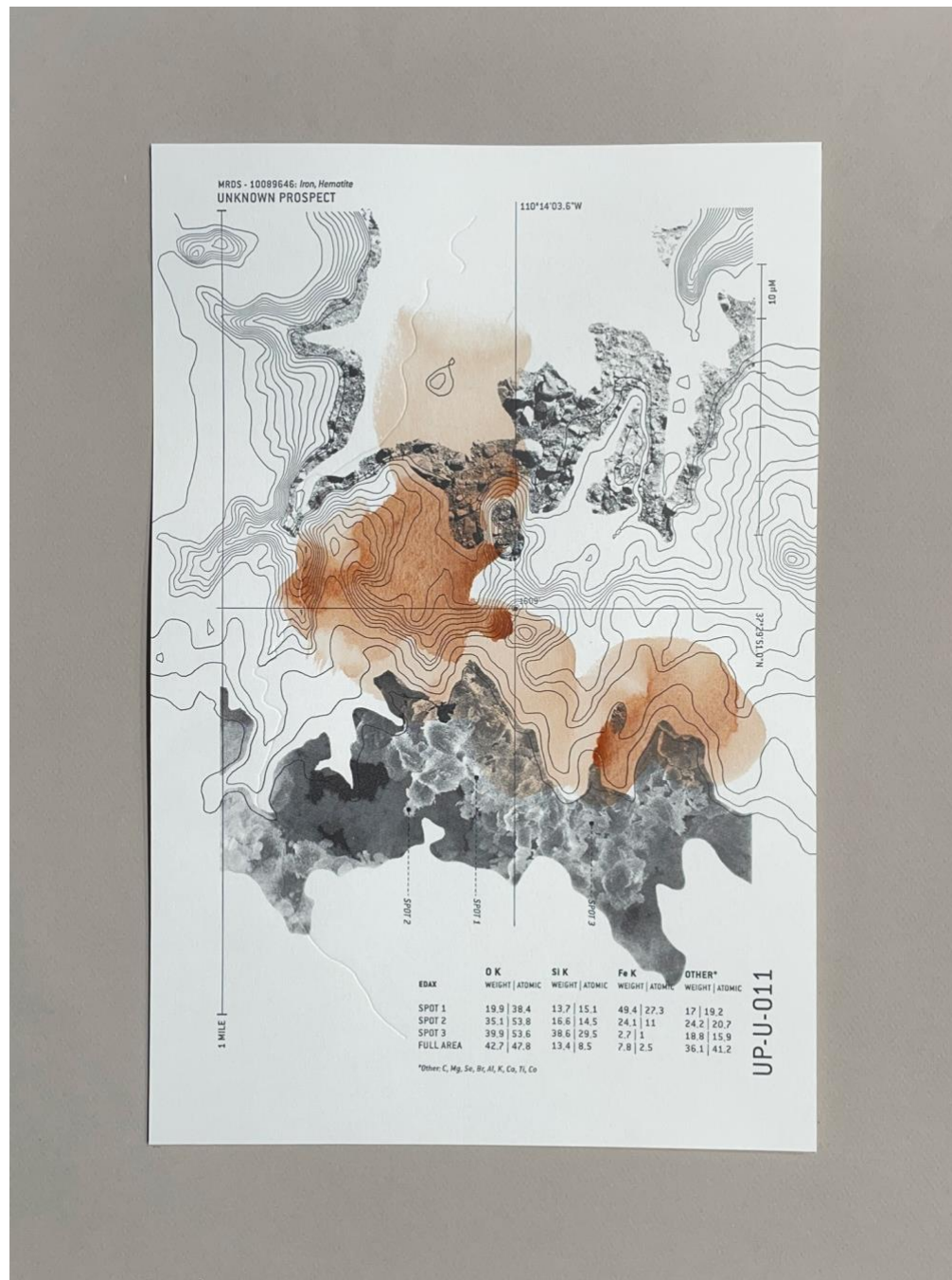
Elpitba Tsoutsounakis, Ground Maps of an Unknown Prospect UP-U-004, 2020. Image courtesy of the author.



Elpitha Tsoutsoumakis, Ground Maps of an Unknown Prospect UP-U-007, 2020. Image courtesy of the author.



Elpitha Tsoutsounakis, Ground Maps of an Unknown Prospect UP-U-010, 2020. Image courtesy of the author.



Elpitha Tsoutsoumakis, Ground Maps of an Unknown Prospect UP-U-011, 2020. Image courtesy of the author.

Unknown Prospect is a particular place on a map, but also a body of work surveying so-called public lands through Ochre pigments, design research, printmaking, and artist's books. *Unknown Prospect* becomes an iterative atlas of mining sites and their geological memory as told through color. I am a printer, formally educated in architecture, teaching in a product design program with an emphasis on studio, design research, and visual strategy. In addition to my studio practice in speculative design, my scholarship addresses community-engaged design. I teach and practice on the ancestral territories of the Ute, Paiute, Dine, Hopi, Zuni, Ute Mountain Ute, and Goshute tribes from the Basin and Range to the Colorado Plateau.

My print work and practice in book binding, combined with architectural training in documents and drawing, have led to an interest in maps and atlases as products of information, communication, narrative, and world-making. I wonder if these products can lead to design ethics and practices that prioritize the relation between human and more-than-human. As an alternative to conventional, colonial mapping practices in the United States, *Ground Maps* are emergent with observations from experience, facts derived and measured by technology, and multiplicities generated by Ochre on the page.

Ochre is a mineral pigment containing various amounts of iron oxide.¹ In her essay *The Geology of Color*, the artist and independent researcher Heidi Gustafson describes the emergence of human cognition as tied to Ochre use:

According to the archaeological record, human cognition emerged at least 200,000–300,000 years ago, and coincided with the *regular use of earth pigments*, namely iron ochres and their multivalent capabilities as physical and imaginal influencers. Iron-based pigments are primordial collaborators in worldwide human and nonhuman expressions and art forms.²

I primarily collect Ochres from sites associated with the mining history of the western United States, with particular focus on tailings piles as a form of renewing matter otherwise deemed “waste” (Fig. 1). Tailings are the leftover fraction of ore at a mining claim that have no “economic value.” They are separated from the ore on-site and left in massive piles in the landscape. Sometimes they are left sprawling at the base of the audit or mine, like huge rock caretts pronouncing puncture wounds for miles. The mines and prospects I have surveyed are distributed throughout the Colorado Plateau; they all list iron or uranium as the primary ore



Figure 1 Surface view of MRDS 10089646: Unknown Prospect. *Image courtesy of the author.*

body.³ Some, like the site in these *Ground Maps*, are noted as “potential” by the United States Geological Survey (USGS), but left alone. Others were active at some point in our industrial past, but are now abandoned. Only one remains an active mining operation. As I have learned more about the geological history of the Ochre places I visit, I have become particularly enamored by the Chinle Formation. Formed 250 million years ago during the Triassic period of the Mesozoic era, the Chinle is marked by colorful instances of oxidation or reduction based on fluctuating sea levels and changing water conditions. Throughout the western United States, this formation is often associated with the minerals the USGS desires. I might say my personal interest in mines led me to Ochres through this entanglement, but Gustafson would say the Ochres brought me to them.⁴

Ground Maps of an *Unknown Prospect* are inspired by the Mineral Resources Data System (MRDS) compiled over several decades by the USGS. The USGS website defines the MRDS as “a collection of reports describing metallic and non-



Figure 2 Clockwise from top left: UP-U-010, UP-U-011, UP-U-004, UP-U-007. Image courtesy of the author.



Figure 3 Ochre bodies next to their pigment extensions. From top to bottom: UP-U-010, UP-U-004, UP-U-007, UP-U-011. Image courtesy of the author.

metallic mineral resources throughout the world. Included are deposit name, location, commodity, deposit description, geologic characteristics, production, reserves, resources, and references.”⁵ These maps depict MRDS 10089646 according to four Ochres collected at the site: UP-U-004, UP-U-007, UP-U-010, and UP-U-011. In the maps, I preserve the descriptor, MRDS 10089646, not as a name, but as a marker of a particular encounter between the site and the industrial, capitalist system that has described it as a particular ground for a particular purpose—the extraction of “resources.”

MRDS 10089646 (Fig. 1) was identified by the USGS as a potential source of iron ore, but never formally “claimed” or mined. Other than a graded access road for operations farther up the canyon, it remains undisturbed in the desert sun. The site itself barely exists on any conventional maps, but instead switches between the overlaps in separate quadrangles and partially hides under the legend in my road atlas.⁶ I collected various forms of the Ochre bodies including hematite rocks and the soft friable edges of erosion in tributary washes (Fig. 2). Later, I grind these bodies into pigment, extending partial dimensions of the original mineral being. I preserve partial fragments of the bodies as archival reference (Fig. 3). The conventions I use to catalog my research are not intended as names for the Ochres but as markers of a design process. They refer to a particular moment on particular ground, organizing and orienting a growing archive of pigments.⁷ The significance of the archive is twofold: on the one hand, it is produced through a practice of design research to gain an understanding of the materiality of Ochres; on the other, the archive is an assemblage of Ochres as collaborators in their transformation into design objects/products.

These *Ground Maps* juxtapose images of the Ochres at a land scale and at a nanoscale. I was inspired to scan the samples by conversations with pigment researcher Melonie Ancheta, who uses the scanning electron microscope (SEM) in her analysis.⁸ The SEM produces images of the Ochre by scanning the sample surface with a focused beam of electrons in a vacuum chamber. Energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDAX) provides elemental analysis of each Ochre (Fig. 4).⁹ These maps are an initial exploration of the various observational methods available through the body in addition to simple tools like mortar and pestle or complex technology like the SEM and EDAX. Each method reveals a glimpse into the multiple realities materialized by Ochre. I am compiling a pluriversal data system informed by field visits, Ochre practice, imaging and analysis, and publication in

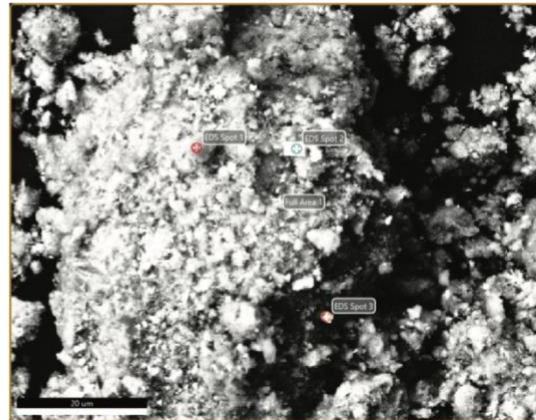
EDAX APEX

TsouTsou

Pa 1

Area 1

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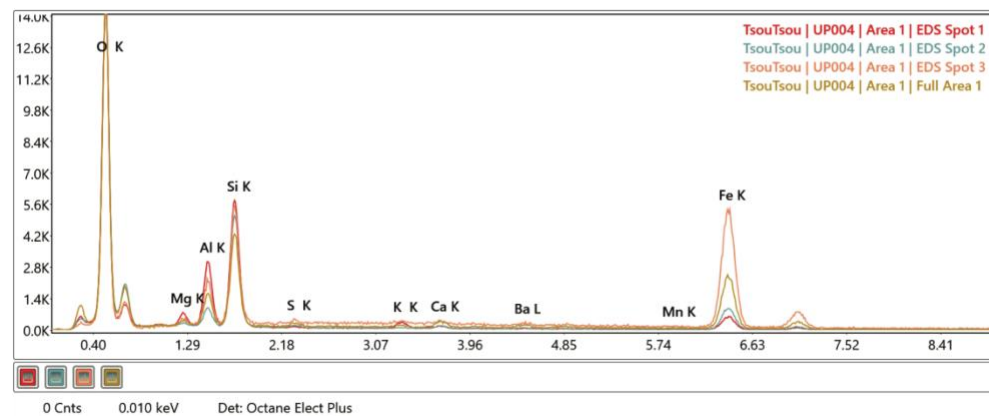


Figure 4 Elemental analysis of UP-U-004 using energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy. Image courtesy of the author.

print and book form.¹⁰ This data system is not only useful for the account of scientific fact or economic potential, as in the case of the MRDS. This data system extends relations between the products of knowledge and the maker/designer. In design disciplines it is commonly understood that craft and material intelligence produce a knowing about the world that influences designer, producer, and user. But we can also find a means to extend our relation to the nonhuman through design practice/process when we acknowledge that “the form or technique of knowing, the means to knowledge, is surely an actor as well.”¹¹

The maps are printed on cotton rag using photopolymer plates on a Vandercook No. 3 printing press. The landscape images of the actual site are

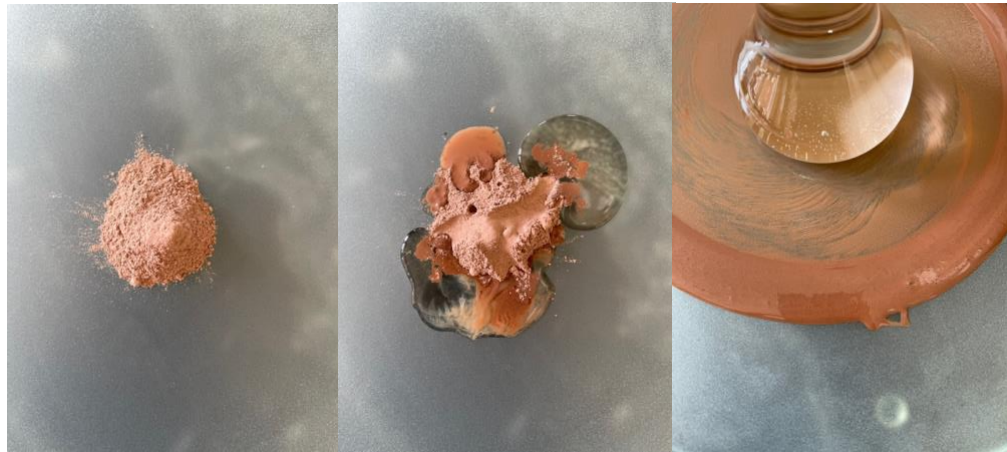


Figure 5 U-UP-011 pigment being mulled with gum arabic. Image courtesy of the author.

phone snapshots from field excursions that I used to create line screens in Photoshop for the printing plates.¹² The vector data were generated from GIS and edited in Illustrator.¹³ After grinding and sifting the Ochre bodies, the resulting pigment is mulled with a gum arabic binder and applied to the maps in between print runs (Fig. 5). Each print, in an edition of ten for each Ochre, results in a new map due to the movement of mineral pigment on the page.¹⁴ Contradicting the traditional desire in printmaking for consistency across the editions, the Ochre emerges as a new territory in every individual map iteration. I am not fully satisfied with my ability to distribute the Ochre on the page using various paintbrushes. I'm not a painter. Instead, my intent is to allow the Ochre to move as it will. Each material has incredibly rich and unique properties that create movement, texture, and tone to map territories through material agency. My next investigation is to explore other means of embedding paper with Ochre, or making paper out of Ochre, for use in printmaking and artist's books. I have also begun experiments in soaking photographs in Ochre solutions as a way of "developing the image further" through the extensions of Ochre bodies (pigment).

These maps ask if we can read alternate futures on the site, if they can lead us to alternative beliefs and actions from the "one-world world" that John Law articulates.¹⁵ Ochre invites us to understand our own relation to the other-than-human beyond "resource" and "claim." In extractive practices, nonhuman beings are framed as separate—less than—the humans who seek to remove and profit from them as resource. My practice with Ochre presents another option, albeit on a very different scale. I don't pretend not to be reliant on extraction; I use a mobile phone and get my water from the tap. In some ways, collecting pigments from the desert is no different from collecting heavy metals for my devices. Where these collections differ is in the politics of who is doing the labor, who profits, and how

we relate to the context and impact of the removal. As a discipline, design has been complicit in concealing this manipulation and ignoring our responsibility to “raw material.” I don’t regard iron, or any terrestrial beings, as neutral objects to be molded by/for human will. I position myself in a dialogue with *Ochre* as a world-making agent. I search the products of *Unknown Prospect* for paths to understand the divergence between humans and geology so that we might “dismantle dualisms through reconstruction of relationship and identity,” as ecofeminist Val Plumwood suggests.¹⁶ What if instead of prioritizing the “human user” and means to profit, we positioned ourselves in dialogue with carbon as world-making agent? With timber or water, as world-making agent? What might become of design and production? This is hardly a novel concept, as indigenous people and the global majority have been practicing this ethic all along.

The conversations describing so-called public lands in the western US oscillate between various forms of extractive industries including mining, grazing, and recreation. The land has been restricted to “one world” in which it becomes either mine or pasture, campsite or “insta-square.” This “dualism of use” prioritizes colonial notions of “wilderness” at the expense and erasure of indigenous knowledge and practices, and compromises alternative futures of reciprocal interaction with the more-than-human. I believe design can offer methods for dismantling this one world and reconstructing a multiplicity of worlds in its place. This potential is not limited to research or speculative practices. All design disciplines, especially those that lead to practical design products—industrial, digital, service, architecture, and so forth—must be affected by this shift in consciousness as well.

* * *

Elpitha Tsoutsounakis (she/her) is a Cretan American designer, printer, and educator based in so-called Salt Lake City, Utah. She is assistant professor and founding faculty in the Multi-disciplinary Design program at the University of Utah, where she teaches design studios, research methods, and visual strategy. As a first-generation college student raised in an immigrant family, she completed her BS in architecture at the University of Utah and her master’s in architecture at the University of Texas at Austin. Her education in architecture informs design research and creative practice in printmaking, book arts, and *Ochre*’s engaging issues of design ethics, materiality, ecofeminism, and the human relationship to the more-than-human. She established the Fieldwork Platform to bring together diverse community partners involved in so-called public lands through interdisciplinary design research, education, and publication.

Notes

¹ While I focus my Ochre work on iron oxides, different cultures and practices around the world define various minerals and earth materials as Ochre as well.

² Heidi Gustafson, “Dust to Dust: The Geology of Color,” *The Side View* 1, no. 2 (2019), <https://thesideview.co/journal/dust-to-dust/>.

³ US Geological Survey, Mineral Resources Data System, 2005, <https://www.USGS.gov>, accessed August 2, 2021.

⁴ earlyfutures.com is the artistic research site of Heidi Gustafson (and collaborators). Current projects focus on ochre, iron oxides, land pigments, and subtle earth activism. Heidi’s Pacific Northwest cabin/studio houses the Ochre Sanctuary, a counsel of ochres and pigments from contributors worldwide.

⁵ US Geological Survey, Mineral Resources Data System.

⁶ See “National Geospatial Program,” Topographic Maps, accessed August 2, 2021, <https://www.usgs.gov/core-science-systems/national-geospatial-program/topographic-maps>. “The USGS was entrusted with the responsibility for mapping the country in 1879 and has been the primary civilian mapping agency of the United States ever since. The best known USGS maps are the 1:24,000-scale topographic maps, also known as 7.5-minute quadrangles. From approximately 1947 to 1992, more than 55,000 7.5-minute maps were made to cover the 48 conterminous states. The 7.5-minute series was declared complete in 1992, and at that time was the only uniform map series that covered the United States in considerable detail. Map revision continued, though in decreasing quantities, through the 1990s. The last printed USGS topographic maps were published in 2006.”

⁷ I would clarify that I don’t formally name the Ochres—or hues/pigments—in the products I’m generating, but I do have personal “ nicknames” for various Ochres and Ochre places. Sometimes these monikers are dreamt up in collaboration with other humans in shared experience in the field. I’ve erred on the side of not naming in order to avoid dominating the Ochres and because the Ochre bodies I collect are not whole subjects but dimensions of larger beings without discrete boundaries in time and space. This issue of naming and the meaning/outcome of naming requires further exploration in future works.

⁸ Melonie Ancheta’s work and research can be found at her website, www.nativepaintrevealed.com.

⁹ I acknowledge the privilege of working at a public research university with access to this technology. Thank you to Dr. Paulo Perez and Alayna Thorstensen for their assistance with the SEM and EDAX at the Utah Nanolab.

¹⁰ My thinking on this has been informed by many scholars, specifically Marisol de la Cadena, Mario Blaser, Arturo Escobar, and Eduardo Kohn, but also more broadly Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Manuel Delanda.

¹¹ See Marilyn Strathern, “Opening Up Relations,” in *A World of Many Worlds*, edited by Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 23–52, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478004318-002>. Strathern elaborates on Haraway “recognizing the agency of the world and objects of knowledge as actors.”

¹² Thank you to research assistants Lucy Allen and Kit Stanworth for their company on-site.

¹³ Thank you to research assistant Megan Pettit for her genius in GIS, and continued support and collaboration in *Unknown Prospect* at large.

¹⁴ GIFs showing the shift in pigment between each edition can be seen at <https://escholarship.org/uc/refract>.

¹⁵ John Law, “What’s Wrong with a One-World World?,” *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 16, no. 1 (2015): 126–39.

¹⁶ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203006757>.

Synthesizing a Dual-Definition of *Façade* in the Western Palaces of Yuanming Yuan: Art, Politics, and Place-making in the Garden of Perfect Brightness

Stella Gatto

Yuanming Yuan, also known as the Garden of Perfect Brightness, was the Imperial Summer Palace residence of five Qing emperors. The garden, built during the time of the Kangxi Emperor (1654–1722), emerged as the center of the political world as it shifted from a place of residence and escape to a place of work.¹ The site was located 22.5 kilometers outside the city of Beijing and comprised of 865 acres of land with more than 200 buildings scattered around artificially-constructed lakes and courtyards.² At its northern end, the Eternal Spring Garden included Western-style buildings designed to exhibit twelve integrated landscapes. In the mid-nineteenth century, tension began percolating between China and Britain in response to British demands to revise treaties and obtain further concessions. This demand was met with Chinese resistance and led to the eventual outbreak of the Second Opium War and the burning and destruction of Yuanming Yuan in 1860.³ The façades and structures of the Western-style buildings, constructed from stone, were the only buildings not completely obliterated by the 1860 fire. The burning of Yuanming Yuan, described in China as a “national humiliation,” led to efforts in the 1980s to preserve any remains of the burnt palace gardens and to document the site and its national significance.⁴ Although the first to suffer from imperial neglect, the Western-style palaces are the only prominent physical remains of the gardens—the European-style buildings, in other words, have become the symbol of Yuanming Yuan.

This essay explores how Yuanming Yuan embodies a dual-definition of façade: both the buildings' decorative exteriors and their void interiors give the palace an appearance of history that never existed in the first place. After providing a brief history of the palace, I turn to a detailed description of its Western-style buildings in the eighteenth-century engravings produced pre-fire (1783–1786) by Chinese court artist Yilantai (1749-1786). Next, I analyze photographs taken post-fire in 1873 by German photographer Ernst Ohlmer (1847-1927) to show how theatricality and the European artistic tradition of the picturesque frame Yuanming Yuan through a lens of imperialist nostalgia. Putting these two representative forms in conversation with one another, I argue they both replicate and perpetuate the illusion and theatricality of the buildings themselves. Additionally, I rely on English-language sources to discuss how Western art historical scholarship functions as a kind of façade as well: an illusionistic screen onto which contemporary politics in China regarding Yuanming Yuan are projected. Finally, I turn to a more recent case in which the palace site was turned into the Yuanming Yuan Ruins Park tourist attraction. The park creates an additional illusion of the past for nationalist purposes. Embodying the dual-definition of façade as both architectural feature and illusion, the various representations of the Western-style buildings create an uncanny mixture of the factual and the fantastic, reality and farce.

A Brief History of Yuanming Yuan

The Imperial Summer Palace was built during the reign of the Kangxi Emperor (1654–1722) and was home to five Qing emperors. Kangxi's son Yongzheng (1678–1735) was the first to relocate from the Forbidden City in Beijing to Yuanming Yuan in the 1720s and officially made it his place of residence for both work and pleasure.⁵ The European, or Western-style, buildings were built under Qianlong (1711–1799), who is credited with expanding the gardens and making them more opulent during his reign. He hired Italian Jesuit missionary and court artist Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766) to design the European palaces, a small part of the garden built from stone rather than wood. Emperor Xianfeng (1831–1861) was the last emperor to reside at the Imperial Summer Palace and was associated with its downfall. In 1860, French and British troops began looting the palace and selling their spoils, including twelve bronze zodiac heads, at auction in Europe.⁶ The gardens continued to be looted by visitors and peasants until 1980 when the Chinese government decided, with the support of academics and architects, to erect the Yuanming Yuan Ruins Park.⁷

Yuanming Yuan's primary identity as a national site became crystallized in public discourse during the reform era of the early 1980s that sought to replace a class-based nationalism with a culturalist one. Historians, city planners, municipal officials, and park managers competed to fix the site.⁸ The question that preoccupied all parties was whether and how Yuanming Yuan should proclaim its symbolic status. The Chinese government applied for UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 1985 in hopes that the twelve zodiac heads would be repatriated to China.⁹ According to Annetta Fotopoulos, the heads metamorphosed into icons of national patrimony during the government-sponsored campaign for the repatriation of China's cultural heritage, as political agents saw the evocative power of the zodiacs as a convenient means of rousing the populace to assert China's right to reparations.¹⁰ With this in mind, the dominant historical narrative in Chinese-media sources appears as an arc that traces a cycle of construction, destruction, and reconstruction. Yuanming Yuan's historical narrative has become part and parcel of a meaning-making mechanism: a sacrosanct national site teaching ruin and renewal.

The narrative of destruction at the hands of foreign invaders is replayed in numerous documentary films today; the most elaborate is the seven-part CCTV documentary series *Yuanmingyuan: 150 Years after the Fire* (2010). This narrative is also a key feature of China's patriotic education program.¹¹ Within the historical narrative, the Western-style buildings have become the iconic figures of the entirety of the palace gardens. Representations of the buildings blur the line between fantasy and reality, their ambiguity contributing to the historical narrative of ravage and revival. The opulent façades of the buildings are most evident in the first set of images examined in this paper: a selection from twenty black-and-white engravings produced circa 1783-1786 by Manchu court artist Yilantai.

The Western-style Buildings at Yuanming Yuan

The Western-style buildings spread across the northern end of the Eternal Spring Garden and were designed to exhibit twelve integrated landscapes; each small tableau was linked by pathways that led from one view to the next for Qianlong's enjoyment.¹² Many buildings in the European section were based on eclectic, somewhat Baroque architectural models with huge stone columns, marble balustrades, extensive use of glass windows, and several European fountains.¹³ Qianlong's apparent fascination with European fountains, of which there were several in the complex, presumably began when he was introduced to images of fountains by Castiglione.¹⁴ The second phase of the building project resulted in the

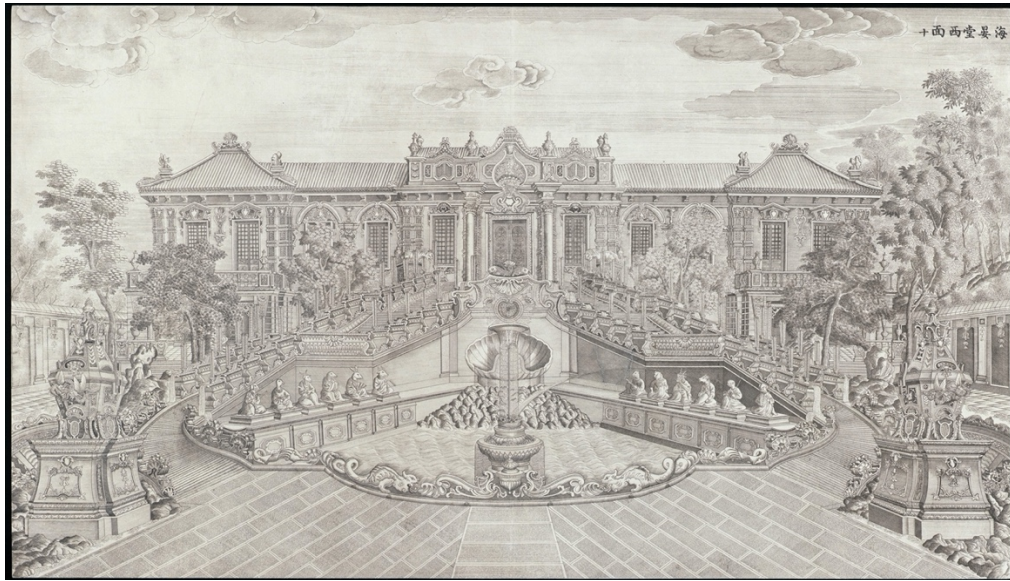


Figure 1 Yilantai, West façade of the Hall of the Calm Ocean, ca. 1783–86, engraving, 54 x 91 cm. Getty Research Institute Special Collections, 86-BB26695. Image courtesy of Getty Digital Collections:
https://rosettaapp.getty.edu/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE2200144.

completion of one of the largest and most famous fountains called the Hall of the Calm Ocean in 1781. The Hall of the Calm Ocean is often compared to the Court of Honor at Versailles.¹⁵ As Yilantai’s engraving of Hall of the Calm Ocean (fig. 1) shows, two broad, symmetrical, and winding staircases on each side of the building rose to a second-floor landing. The large fountain in the center was accompanied by a Chinese-style water clock (*loubu*) surrounded by twelve bronze animal heads mounted on human figures—rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig—representative of the twelve zodiacs. Nearby the Hall of the Calm Ocean stood the Grand Fountain building (fig. 2), composed of several smaller pools, fountain statues, rock and shell ornaments, and a large main pool in the shape of eleven animal figures.¹⁶

The hybridized style of Yilantai’s engravings combines Western linear perspective and chiaroscuro with Chinese-visual patterning and technical brushstrokes to create a blend of visual vocabularies.¹⁷ Greg M. Thomas observes that “the print translates the building’s multiple levels and irregular curves into a theatrical play of variety, patterning and counterpoint equally typical of both *Chinoiserie* and *Européenerie*.”¹⁸ Thomas’s use of the term “theatrical” signals how the façades of the buildings, as shown in the engravings, embody a dual-definition: a decorative aspect, but also an illusion given that several of the Western-style buildings were devoid of interiors.



Figure 2 *Yilantai*, South façade of the Grand Fountain, ca. 1783-1786, engraving, 54 x 91 cm. Getty Research Institute Special Collections, 86-BB26695. Image courtesy of Getty Digital Collections:
https://rosettaapp.getty.edu/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE2200144.

Qianlong was fascinated by theater and play, and several of the buildings in the European section acted as backdrops for theatrical productions.¹⁹ Life in Yuanming Yuan provided entertainment of many sorts, but the annual favorite was, especially during Qianlong’s reign, a “make-believe” southern town set up inside the All-Happy Garden. In the theatrical town, eunuchs ran the market and played the roles of shop and teahouse keepers, while others were vendors and sold antiques, books, silk, porcelain, and varnish works.²⁰ To make the street scene even more realistic, the eunuchs would act out scenes of arrest between security guards and thieves for Qianlong’s amusement.²¹ Hui Zou notes that the entire Baroque garden complex epitomized entertainment and play because, upon entering the complex, visitors had to venture through a labyrinth to find the emperor, whose throne sat at the center of the maze.²² By creating an artificial town, this form of “play” on everyday life highlighted the role of theatrics at court.

The rest of the Yuanming Yuan complex continued the theme of theatricality, artificiality, and façade because it consisted of additional re-creations of villages and vistas from the emperor’s tours of south China. For example, ten scenic spots of the famed West Lake in Hangzhou were recreated in Yuanming Yuan and exemplified the imitative design strategy that reinforced the symbolism of the garden palaces as the center, or microcosm, of the universe.²³ The European garden section in particular was an entirely original arrangement of structures that formed what might now be understood as a quasi-theme park. Painted images of the West



Figure 3 *Yilantai*, Perspective Painting of the Lake to the East, ca. 1783-1786, engraving, 54 x 91 cm. Getty Research Institute Special Collections, 86-BB26695. Image courtesy of Getty Digital Collections:
https://rosettaapp.getty.edu/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE2200144.

were translated into three-dimensional reality, further embodying the dual-definition of façade as decorative interior and illusionistic exterior.

The Western section included gateways, mansions made of stone, and the famous mechanical fountain, and it culminated in an open-air theater at the eastern end of the complex, as seen in the engraving *Perspective paintings of the lake to the East* (fig. 3). Qianlong had two open-air theaters within the garden complex that employed the technique of *trompe l'oeil*. For example, the Hall of the Calm Ocean was a two-story structure that acted as a backdrop for the fountain at the end of the large basin.²⁴ Once reaching the View of Great Waters, a throne nestled at the center awaited the emperor, from where he could enjoy the glistening waters in the Grand Fountain displayed amidst intricately carved decoration (fig. 4).²⁵ Further east was the Hill of Perspective, enclosed in the distance by a stage set painted to represent a small European town (fig. 3). The foreground of the engraving situates the viewer at the position of the square lake, looking out onto a European-style village. We know, however, that what appears as a three-dimensional village is Castiglione's backdrop of various buildings painted using linear perspective. This fools the eye into perceiving the buildings stereoscopically: the painted backdrop suggests the presence of real structures with depth and solidity. The perspective paintings east of the lake are the best example of the illusory theatrical stage settings reminiscent of Italian Renaissance gardens; they resemble the set designs of Serlio and Pozzo where the ground gradually slopes up to make the illusion more

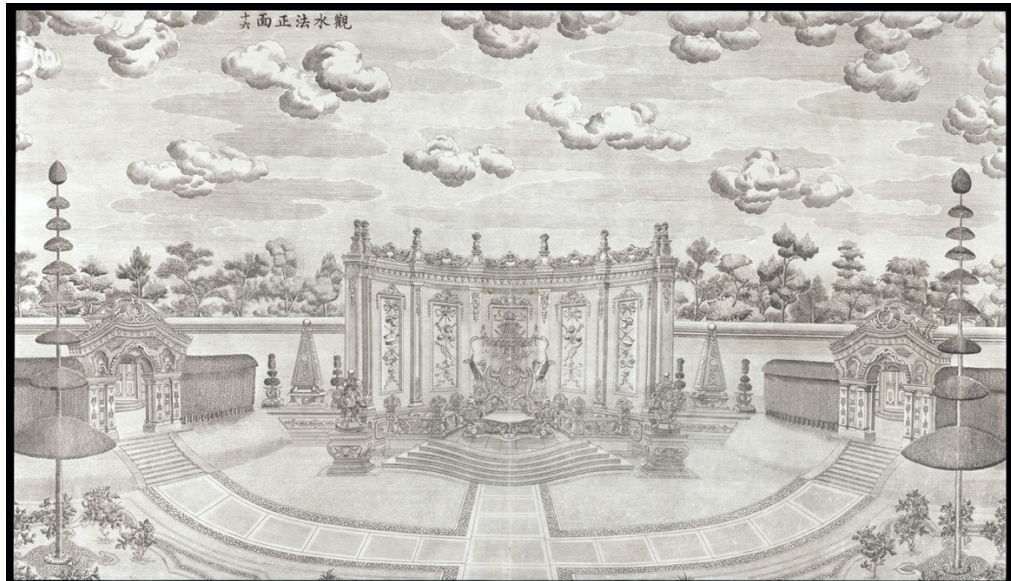


Figure 4 *Yilantai*, Front side of the View of the Fountain, ca. 1783-1786, engraving, 54 x 91 cm. Getty Research Institute Special Collections, 86-BB26695. Image courtesy of Getty Digital Collections:

https://rosettaapp.getty.edu/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE2200144.

real.²⁶ Kristina Kleutghen’s detailed analysis of these “stages” or “theater” fronts notes that at the final “scene” of the European Palace complex, the emperor or the imperial visitor always stood at a distance across a sunken stream. The viewer could never walk through the European village off in the distance because there was no village: it was simply a *trompe l’oeil*, a façade.²⁷ Kleutghen continues,

[T]he Square Lake itself becomes the “stage” where Qianlong performs the dramatic climax of his visit. The organization of this entire section recalls European indoor theaters of the period more than garden-theaters or *trompe-l’oeil* gardens, adding an even sharper edge of theatricality to the already dramatic European Palaces.²⁸

The presence of the European village paintings becomes a backdrop against which “the emperor can perform a more perfected, if stylized, version of his own imperial reality.”²⁹

The Western-style gardens’ decorative Baroque motifs not only provided the emperor with visual access to an evocative, distant, and exotic idea of Europe, but also engaged the larger historical context of the time. European missionary-artists were active in court workshops creating Chinese imperial fantasies of the distant West as the Qing Empire reached its widest limits. The Manchu empire

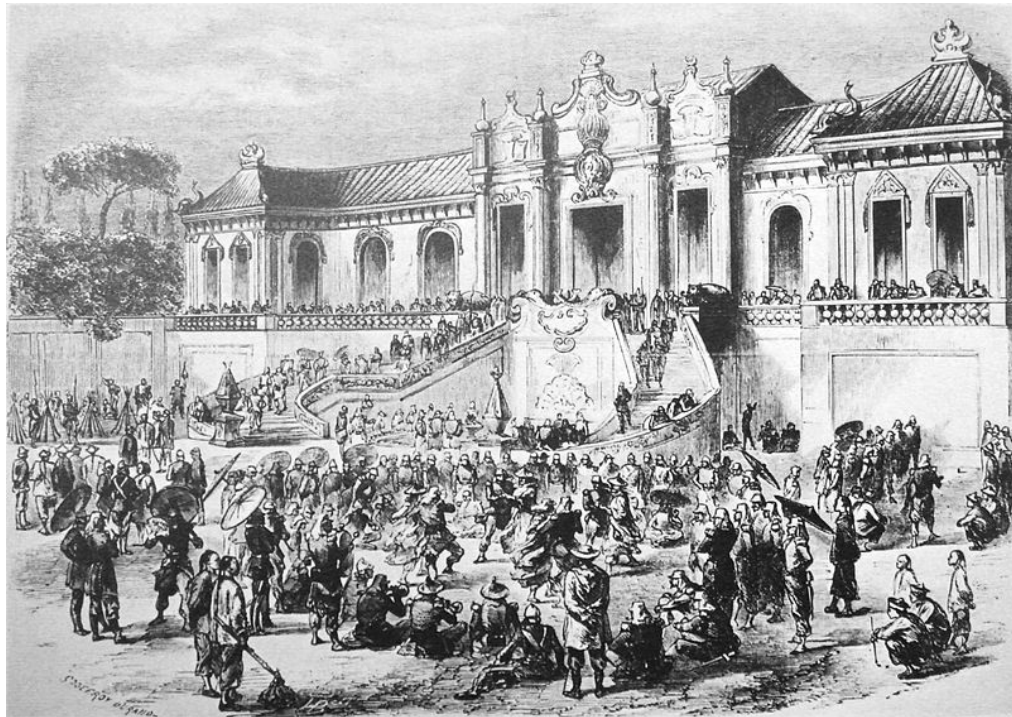


Figure 5 Godefroy Durand, Looting of the Yuan Ming Yuan pavilion by Anglo French forces in 1860, December 22, 1860. *L'Illustration*. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Looting_of_the_Yuan_Ming_Yuan_by_Anglo_French_forces_in_1860.jpg

was at its zenith: the territory of the Chinese state was at its largest and international commerce flourished thanks to export industries such as silk, cotton, porcelain, and tea.³⁰ The gardens reflected Qianlong's desire for a sanitized and idealized image of his reign where he sat at the center of a totally ordered realm, imagining himself as universal ruler.³¹

The Burning and Looting of Yuanming Yuan

The illustration *Pillage of the Yuan Ming Yuan* (fig. 5) published in the popular French magazine *L'Illustration* depicts what the 1860 burning and looting of the gardens by French and British troops may have looked like. Western war photographers captured the European-style buildings that survived the worst of the blaze, framing the structures as ruins in a picturesque manner with the hope of evoking a sentimental appeal.

In Régine Thiriez's *Barbarian Lens: Western Photographers of the Qianlong Emperor's European Palaces* (1998), the author examines a large body of work by several



Figure 6 Ernst Ohlmer, Belvedere, ca. 1873, wet collodion glass negative. In Régine Thiriez, Barbarian Lens: Western Photographers of the Qianlong Emperor's European Palaces (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1998), 43.

European photographers who captured the Western-style buildings after their destruction between the years 1860 and 1925. Thiriez notes the work of hired war photographers such as Felice Beato (1832-1909) and Thomas Child (active 1871-89), and Ernst Ohlmer (1847-1927), who was not a war photographer but worked for a customs agency and took photos for pleasure. Ohlmer's photographs depict the Western-style buildings as ruins in the picturesque tradition of European painting and photography.

At the turn of the twentieth century, it was fashionable to depict architectural structures bearing the marks of wear and deterioration or being reclaimed by nature. Architectural photographs taken by Ohlmer also reflect the influence of picturesque aesthetics popular in late-eighteenth-century Europe in which ruins evoked “pleasing melancholy” and a return to the state of nature.³² The tradition of depicting ruins in the picturesque mode—a formulaic composition based upon certain rules of classical proportion—produced images with an identifiable composition meant to guide the viewer's eye to the middle of the painting.³³ By channeling the viewer's eye, framing devices functioned to create a balanced composition that provided a sense of harmony and variety. Thus, picturesque scenes were meant to evoke a harmonic relationship between humans, nature, and the built



Figure 7 Ernst Ohlmer, Haiyantang, west, ca. 1873, wet collodion glass negative. In Régine Thiriez, *Barbarian Lens: Western Photographers of the Qianlong Emperor's European Palaces* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1998), 44.

environment. Ruins in European art also functioned as a reminder of humanity's transience. The concept of the ruin was not simply a description of things that had undergone deterioration, but rather an aesthetic category of its own; the damaged and fragmentary nature of a ruin is what struck the senses and imagination of nineteenth-century Romanticist artists and intellectuals.³⁴ Ruin photography was much like paintings. There was such a mania for ruins in Europe that sham Greek or Roman ruins meant to evoke historical memory and architectural forms were erected in the gardens of the wealthy.³⁵ This phenomena led art historian Alois Riegl to pen his famous 1902 theoretical mediation on "the modern cult of monuments," where he observed that ruins comprised two divergent yet collaborative aspects. Ruins possessed historical value for what they disclosed about the life and culture of the past, and they also manifested "age value" because they bore the marks of wear, damage, and deterioration.³⁶ Maureen Warren notes that the ruin-aesthetic as shown by Ohlmer's photographs should be considered part of the European tradition of picturing ruins.³⁷

Undoubtedly aware of the Romanticist tradition, Ohlmer was a sailor who washed onto China's shores after a shipwreck and began his new life as a professional photographer in Xiamen, eventually working for the Imperial Maritime Customs agency.³⁸ There are fifteen wet plate collodion negatives of Ohlmer's work

on the European-style palaces.³⁹ *Belvedere* (fig. 6) shows a building covered and overgrown with trees, crumbling from neglect and consumed by nature. *Haiyantang, west* (fig. 7) employs a similar framing in which nature, abundant and overgrown, devours the foreground and directs the eye to focus on the large and bright central building in the background that contrasts with the dark foliage. Warren notes that “Ohlmer’s photographs of the ruined European-style palaces not only record a specific stage in the social life of the Yuanming Yuan, but also participate in the ongoing remembrance and conceptual reformulation of the site.”⁴⁰ Upon seeing the ruins, Ohlmer is said to have been struck with sadness. His feelings are akin to Victor Hugo’s, who received news of the fire in France and wrote in an open letter to Captain Butler, “I hope that a day will come when France, delivered and cleansed, will return this booty to despoiled China.”⁴¹

Ohlmer and Hugo’s apparent sympathy for China contrasts with Felice Beato’s photographs, which depict the destructed site not as a place of mourning, memory, or ruin but as a site of conquest (fig. 8). Beato was a war photographer who accompanied Lord Elgin and the British troops during the Second Opium War, and his camera bore witness to the after-effects of the burning of Yuanming Yuan. Beato’s photographs served two purposes: to follow the troops and track their invasion, and to show “landmarks of conquered territory.”⁴² In *View of the Imperial Summer Palace, Yuen Ming Yuen, after the burning*, little remains atop a hill scorched shortly before the photograph was taken.⁴³ Wu Hung suggests Beato’s photos convey “a lesson” or the “doomed attempt to resist the foreign forces.”⁴⁴

Ohlmer and Beato both capture the palace site through a colonial lens by framing the palace as a ruin to be mourned and consumed by the European public. This differs from the original mode in which the palace was viewed and consumed by the emperor and his court, where imperial control was set in a theatrical and Western landscape. By framing the palace within the tradition of the picturesque and ruin-aesthetic, the photographs by Ohlmer and others exemplify what scholar Renato Rosaldo calls “imperialist nostalgia,” where the colonizer “uses a pose of innocent yearning both to capture people’s imagination and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination.”⁴⁵ Rosaldo highlights the colonialist nature of ruin-aesthetics in Western photography regardless of their intent. As Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson note, “the foreign viewer did not want to observe, much less live in, a place that appeared either too raw or too frightening,” therefore “the aesthetic concept of the picturesque had an important impact on the imaginative reconfiguration of colonial space for the benefit of the Western public.”⁴⁶

Jeffrey Auerbach adds that picturesque representations were in large part about “the domestication of the ‘exotic’” by “regarding and reordering the foreign to look very much like England itself.”⁴⁷ That is, the “exotic” was still present in



Figure 8 Felice Beato, View of the Imperial Summer Palace, Yuen-Ming-Yuen, after the Burning, Taken from the Lake, Peking, 1860, albumen silver print, 23.2 × 29.8 cm. The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007.26.198.50. Image courtesy of Getty Digital Collections: <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/241397/felice-beato-henry-hering-view-of-the-imperial-summer-palace-yuen-ming-yuen-after-the-burning-taken-from-the-lake-peking-british-negative-october-18-1860-print-1862/>.

the picturesque but “largely stripped of its difficult otherness, allowing the viewer to remain in his or her visual comfort zone.”⁴⁸ The buildings of Yuanming Yuan thus appear as though they could be anywhere in Europe, further adding to the fallacious nature of their exteriors. Without the captions identifying location, Ohlmer’s photographs might be mistaken for documenting European ruins. For example, *Belvedere* partially obscures the building’s ceramic tiled, double hip-and-gabled roof, and the photograph presents an otherwise Baroque-style structure. The image draws attention to the nuances between documentation and picturesque photography: it privileges framing techniques that mark the building as legibly European and removes contextual cues that highlight the site as Chinese.

When Engravings and Photographs Collide

Yilantai’s engravings and Ohlmer’s photographs bear an interesting and complex connection to each other, as both technologies are major revolutions in image production: the rise of the printed image in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the rise of the photographic image in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The engravings follow the distinct Italian historical genre known as “views” (*vedute*): paintings or engravings meant to evoke civic pride.⁴⁹ This genre is echoed in the title of Yilantai’s works, *Twenty views of the European Palaces of the Yuanming Yuan*. As presumably truthful indexes of the buildings, the engravings use symmetry and incredible detail to portray the reality of the buildings. For instance, all twenty of the engravings depict topiaries symmetrically arranged around a central feature, gently inclined to provide comprehensive, holistic, and therefore accurate representations of the buildings. The architectural centerpieces of these symmetrical layouts are displayed to be examined and appreciated for their intricacy. With their detail, plans, and perspectival views, the engravings act as reliable models of the palace buildings.⁵⁰

Ohlmer’s photographs might also be understood as documentary evidence, an index of what once was. In Ohlmer’s photograph *Southern Side of the Palace of the Distant Horizon* (fig. 9), for instance, the tightly cropped image directs the gaze to the intricate detailed carvings of the stone. The emphasis on capturing precision—whether through linear perspective or the documentary potential of photography—is evident in both mediums.

However, it is crucial to recall that most of the structures were not buildings at all, but massive masonry walls covered in perspectival paintings. The dual-definition of façade is useful in understanding the way Yilantai’s engravings depict the reality of the palace’s design on one hand and the illusion of European village life centered around China’s empire on the other. The engravings are therefore critical to our understanding of theatricality at court, for the images not only provide visual evidence of the uncanny presence of a European village in eighteenth-century China, but also recreate the playful, entertaining experience a visitor would have as they recognized the deception. For instance, the title *Perspective Painting of the Lake to the East* (fig. 3) unmask the building’s true nature as a painted backdrop. Kleutghen notes that appreciating both the view and the paintings together “required a sophisticated viewer capable of holding reality and illusion in balance, a key feature of seventeenth-century Chinese conceptions of theatricality and spectatorship.”⁵¹ The painted backdrops were arranged in a pattern derived directly from European stage technology to enhance their perspectival effects, thereby also incorporating European ideas of theatricality.⁵²

Moreover, at the heart of the engravings lies the design concept of *jing*, or “scene:” a discrete and pleasing space that includes a combination of water features, architectural structures, decorative rocks, floras, faunas, and artificial landscaping composed to appear natural within the larger landscape of a designed garden of linked yet independent scenes.⁵³ According to the earliest extant Chinese



Figure 9 Ernst Ohlmer, Southern Side of the Palace of the Distant Horizon, 1873, wet collodion glass negative. In Maureen Warren, "Romanticizing the Uncanny: Ernst Ohlmer's 1873 Photographs of the European-style Palaces in the Yuanmingyuan" in Nineteenth-Century Photographs and Architecture: Documenting History, Charting Progress, and Exploring the World, edited by Micheline Nilsen (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013), 241.

manual on garden design, clever sequencing of these distinct scenes produced a successful and aesthetically-pleasing garden.⁵⁴ Thus in the Qing dynasty, the "scene" created a multidimensional experience that encouraged a sensory, intellectual, and emotional response to viewing the garden whether in person or through an image.⁵⁵

If we take each engraving as a particular "scene" of the garden and apply the same logic of "scene" to Ohlmer's photographs, illusion becomes doubly evident. That is, Ohlmer framed the buildings he captured by creating various views: staging "scenes" with a European picturesque aesthetic that add another layer to the multiplicity of illusions already framing Yuanming Yuan's Western-style façades. Much like Chinese garden "scenes" were meant to elicit emotion in their viewers through theatrical entertainment, so too did the Romanticist tradition of depicting ruins elicit an emotional response, this time one of mourning and imperialist nostalgia.

Considering the Western-palace images as a cohesive whole that react and respond to the site, both the engravings and photographs produce an uncanny mixture of the factual and the fantastic. Documentary modes of representation are, in this case, acting in service of illusion. In their formal methods, both present the buildings in a theatrical sense, capturing the “fairyland” quality Qianlong had in mind when commissioning their construction. Qianlong had engravings made of the void structures in a Western aesthetic, visually mimicking architectural and decorative traditions of Versailles. By the time the photographs were taken, the new ruin-aesthetic gave the buildings an appearance of a history that never happened, since the buildings were never used as such and were no more than façades.

Yuanming Yuan Ruins Park

In 1976, many political leaders, scholars, and architects expressed concern over how to preserve the remaining buildings in Yuanming Yuan. Reconstruction became a national priority: a preparatory committee was formed and led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the Yuanming Yuan Institute was established. The institute’s focus on research, cultural activities, and reconstruction transformed the space into a memorial park by renovating several of the Western-palace structures.⁵⁶ Prior to the Ruins Park, the relatively barren site was made up of farms, factories, and schools.⁵⁷ Photographs of the site during this time are difficult to track down, but scholars such as Young-Tsu Wong note that Yuanming Yuan had become “a place for peasants who were destroying the landscape.”⁵⁸ The land was composed of 182 acres of rice fields, 55 acres of huts, and 150 acres of roads, alongside twenty villages.⁵⁹ After the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the new administration resumed, with increased vigor, the initiative to restore and preserve remaining artifacts. The government evicted people from their homes and claimed the land as historically sacrosanct. Nearly all who contributed to the restoration debate at the time agreed Yuanming Yuan should primarily be a symbolic site that fostered a range of moral and sentimental experiences in its visitors, from awe, pride, humiliation, rage, and resentment to patriotism.⁶⁰ The Western-style buildings became architectural icons representative of Yuanming Yuan and continued to serve as theatrical façades for political, nationalist, and economic purposes.

John Friedmann notes how a building or structure can symbolize a city as a whole. Friedmann refers to historic buildings such as the Coliseum in Rome or the Eiffel Tower in Paris as iconic forms of architecture that, in today’s competitive and capitalist world, “brand” cities, just as the classic Coca Cola bottle is universally recognized by its shape.⁶¹ In this case, the reconstructed Western-style

buildings on display at the Ruins Park have become a highly recognizable icon, the “brand” of Yuanming Yuan.

Similar to Ohlmer’s photographs, the Western-style buildings function today as sites of nostalgia, mourning, and patriotism promoted by the state’s investment in the palace and garden complex as a heritage site.⁶² If Yuanming Yuan achieves UNESCO World Heritage Site status, it would solidify Yuanming Yuan as a “branding site” in Friedmann’s sense.⁶³ This gesture would confirm that the buildings have become a protected pleasure park once again—a “Disneyscape,” or “a product of [a] two-decade-long process of resurrecting the ‘fallen’ site and transforming it into a national monument and a revenue generator.”⁶⁴ In a way, the site as a “Disneyscape” would reproduce Qianlong’s original objective behind the construction of the European section: he described it as “fairyland on earth.”⁶⁵ Inherent to both the intention and presentation of Yuanming Yuan’s Western-style palaces are the twofold nature of their façades: the exterior surfaces have become a visual paradigm for artificiality.

Conclusion

From their inception, the Western-style buildings have in a sense always been façades. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when China’s emperors resided there, they were places of play and make-believe. The decorative exteriors and void interiors of Yuanming Yuan’s Western-style buildings operated as theatrical illusionistic spaces during Qianlong’s reign. Their representation in ensuing centuries built on and intersected with this notion in various ways. Yilantai’s eighteenth-century engravings reify the theatrical farce of the buildings through their attention to detail, stage-like presentation, and titling of various buildings that exposed them as painted sets rather than structural walls. Ohlmer’s nineteenth-century photographs falsely historicized the buildings to fit them into a Romantic picturesque tradition common in Europe at the time. Finally, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the Yuanming Yuan Ruins Park operates as a façade wherein the buildings’ ornate and empty structures provide the backdrop onto which a complex synthesis of art, politics, and the Chinese tourist market are projected. In some ways, the Yuanming Yuan’s European style-palaces never stopped functioning as a façade, in both senses of the term: ranging from the faithful application of European styles to the imaginative staging of European life, or in other words ranging from the factual to the fantastic. The continued reproduction of the site—in Yilantai’s engravings, Ohlmer’s photographs, and today’s tourist market—demonstrates

the role of visual representation in mobilizing the dual-definition of façade for political, national, and economic purposes.

* * *

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Notes

¹ Young-tsu Wong, *A Paradise Lost: The Imperial Garden Yuanming Yuan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 76, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824863876>.

² Régine Thiriez, "Old Photography and the Yuanmingyuan," in *Art History through the Camera's Lens*, edited by Helene E. Roberts (Cambridge, M.A.: Gordon and Breach, 1995), 263, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315075433>.

³ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴ Annetta Fotopoulos, "Understanding the Zodiac Saga in China: World Cultural Heritage, National Humiliation, and Evolving Narratives," *Modern China* no. 41 (2015): 608, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700415571259>.

⁵ Wong, *A Paradise Lost*, 74.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Haiyan Lee, "The Ruins of Yuanmingyuan: Or, How to Enjoy a National Wound," *Modern China* 35, no. 2 (March 2009): 162, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700408326911>.

⁹ At this point Chinese site managers began to actively market sites as "world cultural heritage" in hopes of including them on UNESCO's official World Heritage List. This helped stake a claim to the zodiacs based on international law laid down by the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the

Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property of 1970 and the subsequent UNIDROIT Convention of 1995. China joined the ranks of other nations demanding the return of illegally obtained cultural heritage. Fotopoulos, "Understanding the Zodiac Saga in China," 655.

¹⁰ Ibid., 622.

¹¹ Lee, 163.

¹² Régine Thiriez. *Barbarian Lens: Western Photographers of the Qianlong Emperor's European Palaces* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1998), 37, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203827277>.

¹³ Wong, *A Paradise Lost*, 59.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 63.

¹⁶ Ibid., 64.

¹⁷ Greg M. Thomas, "Yuanming Yuan/Versailles: Intercultural Interactions Between Chinese and European Palace Cultures," *Art History* no. 32 (2009): 135, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.2008.00652.x>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Hui Zou, "The Jing of Line-Method: A Perspective Garden in the Garden of Round Brightness" (PhD diss., McGill University, 2005): 222-223.

²⁰ Wong, *A Paradise Lost*, 127.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Hui Zou, "The Jesuit Theater of Memory in China," *Montreal Architectural Review* no. 2 (2015): 38.

²³ Cary Y. Liu, "Architects and Builders of the Qing Dynasty Yuanming Yuan Imperial Garden-Palace," *The University of Hong Kong Museum Journal* no. 1 (2002): 43.

²⁴ Thiriez, *Barbarian Lens*, 42.

²⁵ Ibid., 45.

²⁶ Sebastiano Serlio and Andrea Pozzo were architects and stage set designers considered masters of illusory perspective in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Italy. Their stage designs influenced the first Chinese book on linear perspective, *Shixue*, which was published by Nian Xiyao in 1729 and adapted from Pozzo's *Perspectiva pictorum et architectorum* (1693). Zou, "The Jing of Line-Method," 304.

²⁷ Kristina Kleutghen, "Staging Europe: Theatricality and Painting at the Chinese Imperial Court," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* no. 42 (2013): 92, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sec.2013.0000>.

²⁸ Kleutghen, "Staging Europe," 92.

²⁹ Ibid., 99.

³⁰ Wen Fong, "The Time of Qianlong (1736-1795)," *Phoebus* 6, no. 1 (1988): 9.

³¹ Maxwell K. Hearn, "Document and Portrait: The Southern Tour Paintings of Kangxi and Qianlong," *Phoebus* 6, no. 1 (1988): 131.

³² Wu Hung, *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012): 99.

- ³³ Jeffrey Auerbach, “The picturesque and the homogenisation of Empire,” *The British Art Journal* no. 5 (2004): 48.
- ³⁴ Carolyn Korsmeyer, “The Triumph of Time: Romanticism Redux,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* no. 4 (2014): 431, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12104>.
- ³⁵ Hung, *A Story of Ruins*, 15.
- ³⁶ Alois Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin,” in *The Oppositions Reader: Selected Readings from A Journal for Ideas and Criticism in Architecture 1973–1984* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 621–51.
- ³⁷ Maureen Warren, “Romanticizing the Uncanny: Ernst Ohlmer’s 1873 Photographs of the European-style Palaces in the Yuanmingyuan,” in *Nineteenth-Century Photographs and Architecture: Documenting History, Charting Progress, and Exploring the World*, edited by Micheline Nilsen (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013): 237, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315090498-15>.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 234.
- ³⁹ It is unclear whether only fifteen negatives were taken or if others were lost. After Ohlmer’s death in 1927, his widow gave twelve glass negatives to Ernst Boerschmann, an architect and art historian in Berlin. The glass negatives disappeared until 1988, when Régine Thiriez found them with Boerschmann’s grandson in Berlin and gave them to The Science Museum in London, which made prints from them. In 2010 Qin Feng, a Taiwanese journalist and collector, purchased Ohlmer’s negatives. Warren, “Romanticizing the Uncanny,” 234.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 235.
- ⁴¹ Victor Hugo, *The Chinese expedition: Victor Hugo on the sack of the Summer Palace*. Napoleon.org. November 25, 1861, <https://www.napoleon.org/en/history-of-the-two-empires/articles/the-chinese-expedition-victor-hugo-on-the-sack-of-the-summer-palace/>.
- ⁴² Hung, 131.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 125.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.
- ⁴⁶ Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson, “Introduction: Photography, ‘race,’ and post-colonial theory,” in *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing race and place*, edited by Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson (London and New York: Routledge, 2002): 5, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315015262>.
- ⁴⁷ Auerbach, “The picturesque,” 53.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁹ Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001): 84.
- ⁵⁰ Thomas, 130.
- ⁵¹ Kleutghen, “Staging Europe,” 83.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 84.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 85.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Wong, *A Paradise Lost*, 190.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 188.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Lee, “The Ruins of Yuanmingyuan,” 168.

⁶¹ John Friedmann, “Reflections on Place and Place-making in the Cities of China,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* no. 31 (2007): 260, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2007.00726.x>.

⁶² Lee, “The Ruins of Yuanmingyuan,” 181.

⁶³ Fotopoulos, “Understanding the Zodiac Saga in China,” 655.

⁶⁴ Lee, “The Ruins of Yuanmingyuan,” 156.

⁶⁵ Wong, *A Paradise Lost*, 47.

Jozi Rhapsody: Tracing a City's Legacy through Time

Ncomi Nzimande



Figure 1 Aerial shot overlooking Johannesburg's Bree taxi rank, the Metrorail, and skyscrapers located in the central business district (Jozi Rhapsody, 2020). Courtesy of the artist.¹

¹ Ncomi Nzimande's *Jozi Rhapsody* (2020) can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/379095821>.



Figure 2 Jozi Rhapsody, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3 Camera swerving in the dark streets of Newtown at night (Jozi Rhapsody, 2020). Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4 Zandi in Jozi Rhapsody, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5 Zandi and Lwandle taking in a panoramic view of Johannesburg city from what was until recently the tallest building in Africa, holding this title from 1973 until 2019. The fiftieth floor of the Carlton Centre in the inner city (Jozi Rhapsody, 2020). Courtesy of the artist.

Artist Statement

In 1960 Lionel Rogosin released his film *Come Back, Africa*, which showcases the sights and sounds of Johannesburg through the eyes of Zacharia, a native migrant who comes to the city looking for work.¹ This film was one of the first to give a visceral expression of Joburg, in its light and its shadow, combining fictional film and documentary techniques to create the hybrid genre known as docufiction. Sixty years later I endeavored upon my own exploration of Johannesburg through my short experimental film *Jozi Rhapsody*. The impetus for this work was to use film to reflect on the heritage that has been bestowed on this city and how it is expressed in both past and present time.

Johannesburg rose from a small mining town to a burgeoning African metropolis, the largest in South Africa. With the discovery of gold in 1886, Joburg became the hub of capitalist activity. Loren Kruger notes that,

on the one hand, the rising gold price enabled a building boom, the transformation of the skyline, and the employment of black as well as white workers in the renovation of the city. On the other hand, the implementation of the Urban Areas Acts (1923, 1930) and the Slums Act (1934) made it more difficult for Africans, dubbed ‘temporary sojourners,’ to find housing within city limits, even as they contributed in increasingly large

numbers to building that city.²

Through oppressive laws enacted by the apartheid regime, black aspirants like Zacharia were relegated to the outskirts both spatially and economically. The mass segregation that forced black people into cities to work for capital and then out into townships on the periphery reflected greed and dispossession shrouded in white assertions of morality.

As many new buildings and other signifiers of cityness arose, so did the disparities between the black and white populations. In *The Elusive Metropolis*, Sarah Nuttal and Achille Mbembe suggest the vertical organization of this city. They note the underground and the surface as two distinct spaces in Johannesburg; with the gold that is extracted below through toil, and the superfluous agendas lived above on the surface. They write,

the vertical and racial segmentation of the Johannesburg urban world was given structure and order by what it relegated beneath. As far as Johannesburg is concerned, more than the surfaces of the vertical city with its skyscrapers, the underground seems to hold the keys to unlocking the secrets of its modernity.³

The image of Johannesburg presents a duality that has been built into its bones, calcified and unyielding. Black and white, crowd and isolation, privilege and struggle, labor and leisure, access and restriction: these and many more hard boundaries the city allows. This has been the case since its birth and is arguably still the case in today's postapartheid city. Documenting these experiential extremes from a position of straddling both makes for a fragile and easily eruptive endeavor that this process explores (fig. 1).

Charles Dickens, writing of two great European cities, offers a harrowing insight that the nature of a city and its soul is a pendulum that constantly swings from one extreme to the other:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief; it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness.⁴

Adaptation and ever-continuing metamorphosis become necessary when moving in a world of extremes. A city takes no sides, suspending assertions of good and bad or righteous and evil, its movement the rhythm within which a city's inhabitants sway. A great part of city identity is to "modernize" its residents and keep them in flux, always ready for new imaginings of self. In

this sense, Johannesburg is truly a modern city. It is an alluring place born from a history of racial oppression and segregation that spawns many fragments of reality that may seem opposed yet seep into each other in the oddest of ways to create colorful juxtapositions, a kaleidoscope of multiplicities continually erupting, filtering through Joburg's stern mask and bringing with them unknown new forces that the city absorbs.

Acknowledging this aspect and relaying it in film means that both the world presented and the characters are constantly shape-shifting. There are no justifications or explanations for Johannesburg's untethered nature. Nuance and shade of change take precedence over inciting incidents and narrative motivations in *Jozi Rhapsody*.

My short film follows four characters who inhabit different parts of city identity. Lwandle is the first person we meet; she is a figure who defies conventions of what a woman should be, smoking a cigarette and indulging in quarts of beer in a tavern. Having no traditional demands of her body and being, she is so immersed in the pleasures of city life that they seem to have her trapped. The city appears for her all-consuming; she has been engulfed.

Zandi is the lead and the receptacle through which all other city lives find themselves to us on-screen (fig. 4). There is nothing indicating toil or physical struggle about Zandi except the robustness of her curiosity. Her primary tasks seem to be musing about, writing, thinking, listening, imagining, being. She cannot be described as passive; rather, she is in a haze, working to make sense of her reality without much luck but persistent nonetheless, absorbing all that is given her, ingesting and imprinting it into her being.

We meet Phumlani in a restaurant where he has after-work drinks with Zandi. His flawless black suit, eyeglasses, and white-collared-worker appearance indicate he is a man on the rise. He tells of a dream he had of his neighbor from home who is up to some dubious activities in the darkness of night. This has him so concerned that he calls home to check on his family. His character suggests the tenuous relationship between the city and one's place of growth, where family resides. Home is still the township or countryside where Phumlani feels a sense of belonging, and the city becomes a parallel universe divorced from an essential self where he can create a new reality. He is unable to reconcile his current world from his former, yet strongly desires to do so. Understanding that such an endeavor would be futile because of the irredeemable changes that have happened to him through time in this city, his only solace lies in the nightmares he shares with Zandi.

The final character is Genesis, an enigmatic man with beads who, in an interaction with Zandi on a rooftop, is suddenly revealed to inhabit a different and intersecting reality (fig. 2). Genesis has existed in this city from its inception; he bears its scars and memories, has incredible access to Johannesburg's past and present, and appears branded by his knowledge to

know no levity. Genesis has the ability to physically move from above to below, but his home lies in the ghostly in-between. He understands and in many ways embodies the desires of the city and also its dangers.

Each character provides a unique and at times extreme perspective to thread the tale of this metropolis. When these characters' lives intersect, the film leaps into a different realm of city life where new strange situations await. This method attempts to document the many faces and experiences that the city holds, as well as navigate them successfully with a deep curiosity and malleability, allowing the city to take shape, morph, mutate, alter, and transform.

In *Come Back, Africa*, the opening visuals reveal a bustling landscape with skyscrapers and a hive of activity in the streets. Zacharia arrives in Johannesburg to build a prosperous new life for himself like the many we see on the city streets among him. His journey begins in the gold mines, where work is hard labor and doesn't pay well. Zacharia decides to try his luck in Joburg city, altering his life absolutely with a series of sensational and tumultuous occurrences that soon overwhelm him. He encounters many hardships shuffling from one job to the next, never stable. There are also dangerous gangs looming in the crevices and dark corners of his Johannesburg experience, ready to capitalize on any weakness displayed. Even so, there is dynamism and wonder created by the many interesting people he meets, and he finds himself enamored with the daring and excitement that new friends introduce. His character lives a dual life of freedom and pleasure from the city's temptations, and of uncertainty and fear about continually changing fates. *Jozi Rhapsody* finds a deep resonance with this perspective/duality/experience, reflecting on this city's contradictions and documenting them in a modern context.

To capture the city's energy and aura, *Jozi Rhapsody* showcases sharp contrasts between the dark insidious heart of Johannesburg city and its beauty and promise of endless delight. To introduce this sinister pulse, the first scene is a shaky handheld shot taken at night, designed to be emotive rather than offer logic and narrative (fig. 3). This crazy movement gives no characters, faces, or clarity of space. There is only sheer darkness with a haze of lights. As we watch the handheld shot, we hear the sounds of feet running, seemingly in distress, with no real sense of direction. Alongside the darkness and hazy lights, the footsteps allude to a restlessness, an unsettled stance that the film will conjure through a range of mechanisms. Jarring movement through this dark den sets the tone for a film filled with oddities of experience and fluctuations of state and stability, a continuous bewilderment to both the characters and the viewer.

The film also does not shy away from the beauty that Johannesburg inhabits. It represents the glittering gold metropolis and the experience of

living in its splendour coveted by people from all parts of the country and outside it. Overlaid above the opening scene's rough, dark, grainy texture is an expression of the city as a bright and vibrant world. Here people move about, singing in celebration, communing with statues of late great jazz musicians, or at work in their various occupations. Attractive people are on display alongside a flurry of exciting activity, joy and young opulence, a people with many disparate hopes and intentions that are encouraged and nurtured by Johannesburg city. In effect, the film demonstrates the tension of living in the ghostly in-between of these two perspectives of threat and pleasure, darkness and light. In the process, Joburg's soul is revealed.

Nine years after the birth of Johannesburg, the era of cinema began in the city streets of Paris. Beginning with Louis le Prince's two-second film clip from 1888, the *Roundhay Garden Scene*, an outpouring of a great many new, lengthier films emerged in the mid-1890s. *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1895) by the Lumière brothers recorded forty-five seconds of employees leaving after a day's work in the Lumière factory. These early films, characterized by their black-and-white aesthetic, showed everyday Parisian life through a new prism that offered a refreshed mediation on reality. There have been many iconic monochrome movies since that reflect on city life, and *Jozi Rhapsody* keeps in this tradition. My short film uses the medium of black and white to relay the many interwoven narratives of Johannesburg. This is the original motion picture format, and its use echoes a history of its beginnings. The medium is stylistically transformative, taking everyday sights and conceiving a new visual interpretation. Black-and-white imagery immediately transports us to an alternate world, one that feels familiar but is just out of reach. It also preserves the history of cinema, in communion with the pioneers, who developed the medium and explored their environments with this game-changing method of documentation.

In addition to its black-and-white aesthetic, *Jozi Rhapsody* creates a strong slice of life feel through the use of nonprofessional actors just as *Come Back, Africa* and *Workers Leaving the Factory* do. Three out of the four actors in the film are novices, but all four contributors share the common experience of urbanites who daily engage the city from different vantage points. This cast offers raw and unvarnished performances and a strong familiarity with the world they already inhabit. Other figures in the film, like kids dancing on the street or construction workers, are real situations encountered and captured in the documentary mode of shooting.

A great portion of the film was shot in actual settings significant to the city's identity such as the Top of Africa in Carlton Centre (fig. 5). This building was the tallest skyscraper in Africa for a little over forty-five years (until 2019) and offers wondrous views of Johannesburg. Other settings for the film, such as Niki's Oasis jazz restaurant and Nelson Mandela Bridge, showcase iconic

sites that have been part of Johannesburg city identity for decades. Outside of Genesis's green screen shoot, all scenes and visuals were captured in the inner city and Newton district of Johannesburg.

In Rogosin's film, Zacharia is at once enchanted and confounded by his experiences. Realizing how ill-equipped he may be to tackle the sensitivities and shifting tides that Joburg brings, his resilient and enduring spirit continues to meet challenges and surprises with the intention to succeed. Similarly, *Jozi Rhapsody* documents this city's legacy and presents it as a shifting landscape, the embodiment of old, worn tensions that seek release through a constant flurry of bizarre and spontaneous events. The city's character is made incarnate in residents who contort and change in alignment with its own nature and who leave fragments of themselves behind, to be devoured and rebirthed by enduring Jozi.

* * *

Ncomi Nzimande has a master's degree in film from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, where she is based. Nzimande has worked in broadcast television and film for the past decade, initially as a video editor and now as managing director of Kriptych Films. Her interest is in merging classic cinema conventions with African griot culture, the poetry, movements, rhythms, mysticisms, folklore, and spiritual traditions of the continent.

Notes

¹ Lionel Rogosin, dir., *Come Back, Africa* (1960).

² Loren Kruger, *Imagining the Edgy City: Writing, Performing, and Building Johannesburg* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 27, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199321902.001.0001>.

³ Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe, *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 22, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822381211>.

⁴ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 1859), 3.

Documenting Gender's Signs: Site, Performance, and the US-Mexico Border in Contemporary Art

Margaret Allen Crocker

On the beach between San Diego and Tijuana, vertical steel slats stand close enough together that the spaces between them are impenetrable to human bodies, creating a physical demarcation of the border between the United States and Mexico. The weathered brown metal apparatus cuts sharply against the shades of blue from sea and sky that peek through the slats. In 2011, Ana Teresa Fernández (b. Tamaulipas, 1980) skillfully matched these natural shades of powder blue in Martha Stewart brand exterior paint, applied with a spray gun, for her installation and documented performance, *Borrando la Frontera* (Erasing the Border). In this performance, Fernández climbed a ladder in a black cocktail dress, painting a portion of the fence so that it appeared to disappear against the expansive sky (fig. 1). Her performance is part of a longer history of artists whose work depends on both site and documentation, yet *Borrando la Frontera* intervenes in a way that makes gender an integral part of conversations about the border. Fernández draws on the overtly masculine narratives of border art that are underpinned by women's labor. The artist documented *Borrando la Frontera* in both photography and video, media commonly used to document performance art, and through her own oil paintings of the event. Documentation plays a key role in this piece, which deals with ephemerality and erasure. Therefore, some trace of action and presence must remain for the work to be shared beyond its initial site in order to reach a larger and more diverse audience.



Figure 1 Ana Teresa Fernández, *Borrando La Frontera*, 2011. Image: Ana Teresa Fernández, <https://anateresafernandez.com/borrando-la-barda-tijuana-mexico/borrando10/>. Image courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

A year before Fernández's performance and farther east along the border in the city of Agua Prieta, the artist M. Jenea Sanchez (b. Arizona, 1985) produced the film *Historias en la Camioneta* (fig. 2). Employing her family's *camioneta*, or small van service in Agua Prieta, Sanchez joins passengers as they cross the border into the United States. During the journey she interviews and films them. By using two cameras, she simultaneously captures the interviewees and the desert landscape they travel through. Sanchez's subject position as a bilingual woman who works as an artist, or what she refers to as a "nomadic sensibility [achieved] by inserting [herself] between, among, and outside of the status quo of American and Mexican culture," gives her the ability to make *Historias en la Camioneta*.¹ This refusal to identify as one or the other, even as her physical position changes when she crosses the border, allows her to work in the space of the *camioneta*. The artist's role in the family unit allows her access to an intimate knowledge of the *camioneta* and the families who use it to cross the border. Through engaging emotionally with border crossers and forging connections with them, a position that itself depends on women being categorized as approachable and nonthreatening in this scenario, she is able to accurately document and share their stories. Documentation, labor, and gender connect these two works, which can be compared with each other only because they have been documented.



Figure 2 M. Jenea Sanchez, *Historias en la Camioneta*, still, 2011. Image: M. Jenea Sanchez, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGOSBLbqwOM2010>. Image courtesy of the artist.

This essay centers the difficult and sometimes inconclusive work of documentation to highlight the labor of asking questions about the relationship between location and identity. I put Fernández's work in conversation with Sanchez's to address issues of gender and documentation, by which I mean recording or otherwise preserving traces of artistic performances and personal identity. Documenting its presence allows for artwork be transported beyond its initial site. While scholars in performance studies debate the value of documentation, the theorist Rebecca Schneider sees documenting performance as part of the artwork itself, writing that performance "becomes itself through messy and eruptive reappear-ance."² Schneider suggests that live performance is part, but not the entirety, of a work of performance art. The work is completed through the uneasy process of documentation and being revisited beyond the artist's initial scope, inherently opening the work up to misinterpretation while expanding its reach.

I also draw on Ila N. Sheren's concept of "portable borders" to further complicate the ways in which performances deployed in border zones can reappear elsewhere.³ Sheren suggests that the circumstances of the borderlands, and with them border semiotics—an approach to signs and interpretations specific to the US-Mexico border—are not just created or deployed in one border region but draw on transporting larger sociocultural references made both visible and invisible.⁴ I augment Sheren's understanding of portability by investigating the ways documentation packages artworks. Documenting these artworks-in-production allows for them to be exported to other physical spaces, implying that they may also

ground themselves in alternate theoretical landscapes in order to reach a broader audience. Furthermore, they suggest border theories are not only for national borders but also for other intersections of identity.

Both physical position, the literal site where an artist or viewer is located, and subject position, their racial, cultural, gender, and sexuality-informed identity brought to viewership, dictate the transporting and reading of signs. These two interwoven positions are both mutable. In terms of physical position, I engage Miwon Kwon's argument about site-specificity, in which she states that even while identity is socially constructed, "the ability to deploy multiple, fluid identities in and of itself is a privilege of mobilization that has a specific relationship to power."⁵ While the privilege of mobilization has an element of power, that is not the only way to read it. Code-switching, the early twenty-first century practice of deploying multiple identities as a way of life, originated in linguistics and is increasingly present in popular culture. Code-switching is not a choice of the privileged, but a survival mode of the marginalized.⁶ It is about fitting in, but doing so successfully can mean life-or-death, especially in circumstances like crossing the US-Mexico border. These two artworks underscore how code-switching, especially that which involves language or dress, often involves the reinterpretation of signs as a mode of survival. Code-switching operates alongside the difficult but crucial work of intersectionality through gender's omnipresence in conversation with multiple different identifiers.⁷

The US-Mexico borderlands are fertile grounds for code-switching as a form of cross-cultural exchange that goes beyond differences in language to define symbols and images. It is not enough to simply name an image that serves as a symbol in both English and Spanish, since each side carries different inferences, histories, and connotations. Furthermore, what happens at the border has implications for other zones of cultural contact both literal and figurative. I propose revisiting the idea of "border semiotics," a term used by the border artist and writer D. Emily Hicks to synthesize the semiotic methods present across the borderlands and employed by Mexican and Chicana artists, poets, and theorists to form and perform identity.⁸ In her assessment of border semiotics, Hicks acknowledges semiotics' origins as a mode of thinking that began in Europe and traces its roots to the Enlightenment, adding that in the context of the border, codes are deterritorialized, meaning they have no official grounding.⁹ Some of these signs and interpretations that make up border semiotics include language and bilingualism, cultural codes, and a sense of *el otro lado*, or "the other side."

As legal and state impositions heighten the importance of identity, Hicks writes that, regarding the border, any given signifier "hovers between two signifieds, seeking refuge in a battle between desire and nostalgia."¹⁰ Here she notes the

ways that semiotics is not a one-to-one relationship between sign and interpretation. This same complexity can be read onto other examples of border semiotics, like language and cultural norms. Hicks gives the example of cultural codes of bribery such as the *mordida*, a bribe to a police officer, which though accepted in Mexico could result in a violent arrest in the United States.¹¹ Individuals must understand this cultural code to maintain safety. In terms of symbols charged with meaning, the figure of the mother, a trope I revisit below, is a good example of border semiotics at work.

Scholars including Hicks and the poet Gloria Anzaldúa have engaged border semiotics and gender with US-Mexico border issues both on location and exhibited elsewhere. I argue that gender is inalienably at the core of border thinking, as a methodology for contemporary art at the US-Mexico border in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Deploying the border as an oversimplified metaphor can lose sight of these realities. Fernández and Sanchez abandon this oversimplification by grounding their interpretations in site, lived experience, and the prevalence of gender dynamics. They document gender dynamics and transport these documentations beyond the particularity of their initial sites.

Fernández's and Sanchez's artworks are products of these women's own labor. Through performance, documentation, and circulation, viewers read and reread the artists' actions. This repetition builds a collective, multifaceted, cross-border consciousness while highlighting the numerous types of work women do in this region. Reading these artworks is labor of a different kind; looking at these works draws attention not only to the artists' labor that went into them but to the women's work that goes on around them and in the audience. Furthermore, although these forms of gendered work (including housework, personal reflection, and navigating social and emotional interactions) often remain undervalued and therefore undercompensated or even uncompensated, articulating them in performance grants them value both culturally and historically. When documented, as Fernández and Sanchez do, women's work becomes a category for scholarly debate and cross-border conversation, suggesting a system wherein this labor, and the women who perform it, cannot be forgotten or ignored.

The (Un)Documentation of Gender

Much of interpreting border art relies on an established and known iconographic set and its varying meanings across space and time. This set relies on overly masculine narratives of border art and the border region that were supported by women's labor. Fernández and Sanchez disrupt these histories through their gen-

dered work of documentation. The Border Art Workshop / Taller de Arte Fronterizo's (BAW/TAF) *End of the Line* (1986) best exemplifies the necessity of drawing on border iconography to interpret meaning. In the performance, the performers dress as various signs that take the form of symbols or characters, including *la migrá, el nopal* (the Border Patrol, the Prickly Pear), and the sexualized, hyperfeminized forms of *la criada* and *la fácil* (the Housekeeper and the Easy).¹² In boxy, homemade costumes depicting these various characters, the performers share a meal of *elotes* (grilled Mexican street corn) as they rotate a table over the border itself, a line that was easier to cross in the 1980s than in the 2010s. The same images from the BAW/TAF's performance are also depicted on Victor Ochoa's *Lotería Cards: Border Bingo / Lotería Frontera* (1986), both a mural and a project that recreates the mural as cards for easy distribution. The BAW/TAF's performance and Ochoa's cards and mural are legible to multiple audiences—Mexican, Chicano/a, US. They inherently require a semiotic reading, relying on an audience, specifically one with the foreknowledge of that region. But even within a single region, the readings shift across cultures.

The mode of relying on established knowledge walks the “fine line between archetype and stereotype,” according to the scholar and artist Amy Sara Carroll, who defines this semiotic practice as “allegorical figuration” that is both a positive and negative aspect of the BAW/TAF's work.¹³ While the work creates an insider language, it also creates boundaries that rely on gendered tropes. This is because knowledge becomes held only by certain actors, and more likely than not, those actors are male given the history of art at the border. Carroll writes that in the performance *The End of the Line*, “at the end of every line they relinedated, BAW/TAF's aesthetic depended on undocumentation. The collective deployed a logic that reMexed mediums and metaphors, genres and goods.”¹⁴ In this process of relineation, meaning a redefinition of the border line as well as various binaries at work within that space, the BAW/TAF helped cement an already existing insider language of border metaphors that appears repeatedly in border art and life.

Carroll defines “remex,” both the book's title and key theme, as an “allegorical performative,” a combination of remix culture and *Mexicanidad* (Mexicanness).¹⁵ The section of her book titled “Woman” disrupts the text's binary juxtaposition of “City” and “Border” and “enjoins us to read literally and thus ontologically allegory's etymology, to empathize with global spectacles of the ef/feminized nation as commodity.”¹⁶ She questions the new meaning that comes from the remixing of Mexicanidad and the language of tropes that marks the woman's body as an allegorical landscape. This very image makes its way into historical iterations of Mexicanidad through evocations of the woman as colonized, including the story of *La Malinche*, the indigenous woman who guided Hernán Cortés during

his time in Mexico, and the proverbial mother of Spanish-and-Indigenous Mexico.¹⁷ This language is present at the border, but Carroll is careful to note that it does little to destroy the borderization of that zone and instead “de-allegorizes to re-allegorize” this gendered divide.¹⁸ Gender is a critical element of border semiotics, but it cannot be accepted as it has previously been depicted without questioning how it has been formed in relation to signs and their interpretations. Deployed as both attack and survival strategy, gender-inflected border semiotics create both a common understanding grounded in patriarchal and at times misogynistic understandings for women making art at the border and a common—albeit complicated—enemy.

Fernández highlights the complexities of critique and survival first put forth by Anzaldúa in *Borderlands / La Frontera* as well as many of Anzaldúa's poems.¹⁹ Fernández sees these themes in her own work, writing, “For contemporary women, it is often difficult to reconcile the ubiquitous images of virgin and whore in our culture: clean vs. dirty. It is a fine line that becomes the point of demarcation for women to dance around,” adding that her work explores “territories that encompass these different types of boundaries and stereotypes: the physical, the emotional, and the psychological.”²⁰ She sees these various types and stereotypes (the distinction lies in recognizing realities and oversimplifications) into which women, especially women navigating various literal and metaphorical borders, are categorized. Her position as an artist allows her to engage these types on the emotional and theoretical levels required to understand and dissect them. Fernández calls out the troubling stereotypes within semiotic systems by encompassing them rather than using them as dividing lines.

Similarly, Jo-Anne Berelowitz, writing about Las Comadres, a collective of women engaged with border art in the late 1980s into 1990, recognizes in their work “cultural root paradigms” for Mexican womanhood.²¹ These cultural root paradigms include the Virgin of Guadalupe, the historical figure La Malinche, the ghostly La Llorona, the historical nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648–1695), and the artist Frida Kahlo (1907–1954). Berelowitz describes the ways Mexican and border cultures situate each figure as a paradigm, sometimes stereotypically, sometimes productively. Las Comadres was a group of women with multiple, intersecting identities. Their artistic and activist work was sometimes productive; at other times their intersections caused tensions often found within collective approaches that strive to be intersectional. Regardless, through their references to the five cultural root paradigms, Las Comadres serves as a key antecedent for the ways that Fernández and Sanchez each conceive of femininity and women's work at the border.

Berelowitz offers the possibility of hybrid characters as one solution to the intersectionality trouble, including Hicks's "wrestler bride," who embodies both the ferocity and humor of a Lucha Libre fighter as well as the purity and Americanness of a traditional American bride. The figure also breaks the cultural root paradigms, depicting the new mestiza otherwise. Berelowitz argues that art has "the capacity to create new myths and new paradigms and thereby transcend demeaning subalternity," seeing Kahlo especially as "a type of the new mestiza, for she also traversed many borders."²² But these two examples still rely on the combination rather than the erasure of earlier tropes, such as the combined figure of virgin and whore. Berelowitz, while critical of individual attributes each cultural paradigm details, does not challenge the very notion of women relying on the historical figures for cultural connection and self-definition. The need to suffer like Sor Juana or Kahlo to be a "great woman" is toxic to identity formation, much like having to reconcile with the images of virgin and whore that Fernández describes. This bind is particularly relevant for artists, since they are making images that rely on a border semiotics in which these paradigms and tropes factor heavily.

However, these paradigms are not wholly negative. In fact, artists deploy them to both comment on their own circumstances and redefine imagined futures. Often through their work, artists who engage with their own gendered viewpoint utilize components of these figures while casting off others. This process of selective sampling shows such artists engaging in the process that the queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz refers to as "disidentification," which he defines as a response to dominant modes of thought that "neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against the dominant ideology."²³ He adds that the process of disidentification also includes holding on to what the subject lost to redefine it. By recognizing a trope and then deconstructing it, feminist artists disidentify with the types that outside forces categorize them into, as Fernández illustrates by wearing the cocktail dress and heels. She rejects this trope as a way to identify herself but nonetheless employs it to criticize patriarchal systems of oppression. But this process is work. It is difficult mental labor, often invisible, almost always unpaid, and tacked onto the everyday labor of survival.

In their projects, Fernández and Sanchez make visible the work of navigating metaphorically gendered landscapes through depicting, documenting, and doing physical work. By climbing a ladder while wearing a cocktail dress and taking on the physical labor of painting, Fernández uses the imagery of gender roles to point out the labor of living between two cultures. Sanchez literalizes this in-between position through her documentation of her crossing, a task she is able to do only because of her role as a woman. Furthermore, the family unit plays a key role

in Sanchez's actions; her work as an artist is hers alone, while the *camioneta*, and circumstances that allow her to make this artwork, is her family's business. Both artists turn the limitations afforded to them by their gender into a means of making artwork and sharing stories of the borderlands.

Presence, Paint, and Documentation

Fernández's engagement with the border in *Borrando la Frontera* is a site-specific installation, performance, and video artwork.²⁴ This breakdown of genre and medium sets off an amalgamation of tropes, signs, and components, as Fernández employs a range of styles and references within the piece. While *Borrando la Frontera* engages the border wall, land art, and their respective histories, in this section I shift focus to Fernández's sexualized, hyperfeminized costume on her laboring body. While the black cocktail dress and heels may seem like an impractical choice for the artist to wear while scaling a ladder to paint the fence, they speak to a larger theme when put in conversation with Fernández's other works that explore these topics. The costume highlights gender roles and the sexualized labor of women in the border region.

In her series of performance-based paintings, *Pressing Matters* (2013), the artist depicts herself both at the border and in the domestic space with an iron and ironing board, conflating this action of feminized labor with the artist's site-specific performance at the border. *Pressing Matters: Untitled* (fig. 3) depicts the artist bent over an ironing board folded out of the wall within the domestic space. The image comes directly from a performance where Fernández danced a tango with an ironing board. She irons a white sheet that covers her head while she wears a short, strapless, black cocktail dress made from a tight, synthetic material that accentuates the contours of her body, along with black, pointy-toed pumps. The brushwork highlights her curves and sensualizes the domestic space. Overt references to Mexico or the United States do not exist; this home, this labor, and this sexualization could occur anywhere that emphasizes heteronormativity, gender roles, and their concurrent division of labor. Furthermore, it could also be an art historical reference to flirtatious laundresses painted by the impressionists of the nineteenth century. The painting suggests that the trope of *la criada* (the housekeeper) from Ochoa's *Lotería Cards* has come to life as a human woman, or perhaps this painting is the more realistic version of the crafted costume in the BAW/TAF's *End of the Line*. Both *Pressing Matters* and Ochoa's combination cards-and-performance employ elements of performance and documentation, as well as the sexualized female figure of *la criada*. Ochoa's *criada* irons while wearing a large bleach-bottle costume (perhaps suggesting cleanliness but also whiteness), dirty



Figure 3 M. Jenea Sanchez, *Pressing Matters*, 2007. Oil on canvas, 6 × 8 in. Image: M. Jenea Sanchez, <https://anateresafernandez.com/pressing-matters/>. Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

sneakers, and exaggerated makeup. Even when she is rendered undesirable through her labor, the figure is still hyperfeminized through makeup and the bulky but nonetheless curvy form of the bleach bottle. By comparing the BAW/TAF's performance and Ochoa's cards as a form of documentation with Fernández's work involving the literal body at the literal border (images in this painted series show her sweeping around the border wall, not painting it), she progresses through types of labor while maintaining the hypersexualization of her own body. Thus Fernández carries out her performance to an unbalanced end, where costume and labor in their idiosyncrasy work together to illustrate the multifaceted qualities of women's work.

Through the absurdity of the balancing act of wearing high heels on a ladder, Fernández's performance exemplifies *relajo*, a mode of performance that highlights while rejecting various stereotypes or tropes to a playfully subversive, and often failing, end. The performance theorist Diana Taylor identifies *relajo* as "an act of disidentification insofar as it rejects any given categorization without producing or owning another," adding that *relajo* disrupts conventionality, manifesting

“both the challenge to and the tacit acknowledgement of a system’s limits,” creating a “different, joyously rebellious solidarity.”²⁵ This differs from other performance models, including satire, in its ability to produce something else through the process of rejection; the disruption itself is *relajo*. However, *relajo*’s joyful elements are also a contested space in Fernández’s work. Of her signature “little black dress,” she writes:

I also subvert the typical overtly folkloric representations of Mexican women in paintings by changing my protagonist’s uniform to the quintessential little black dress. Wearing this symbol of American prosperity and femininity, the protagonist tangoes through this intangible dilemma with her performances at the San Diego/Tijuana Border—a place I myself had to cross to study and live in the US. In these performances, I portrayed this multiplication of self and the Sisyphean task of cleaning the environment to accentuate the idea of disposable labor resources. Moreover, the black dress is transformed into a funerary symbol of *luto*, the Mexican tradition of wearing black for a year after a death.²⁶

As Fernández explains through her multiple references, the black dress does not act as one neatly decoded sign, index, or symbol, suggesting *relajo*’s acceptance of failure. The dress is both sexual and somber, about her oppression and her freedom based on nationality and gender. The white sheet in the painting suggests purity in its color and its similarity to religious head coverings such as nuns’ habits or the Virgin Mary’s veil. Yet it also suggests the more violent image of a specter or shrouded corpse. As with the feminine dress and masculine labor in *Borrando la Frontera*, the tension between two divergent meanings can exist where neither interpretation is wholly correct or wholly wrong.

While the painting-and-performance itself is dark in color and subject matter, a *relajo* rebellion comes through in the action of dancing a tango, a dance usually associated with romance and desire, with an inanimate household object. The painting depicts a performance that does not actually re-create the intimate dance. The same is true for *Borrando la Frontera*; despite the turmoil often associated with the borderlands, through the light blue paint erasing the border, Fernández’s performance suggests a joyfully rebellious imagined future, one that uses the state’s own mechanism of the border fence to obscure itself. But once she leaves the site, any allusions to her gender identity leave with her body.

Fernández’s work as performance artist and documenter of her performances is comparable to the late-1970s Chicano collective Asco’s early work.

Much of Asco's early photography depicted the group not in the garish homemade costumes that made them famous but instead emulating the *pachuco*, a 1930s Mexican American or Chicano gangster, usually clad in a zoot suit. The group's single woman member, Patssi Valdez, dressed instead as the feminized version, the *pachuca*, for Asco's *Spray Paint LACMA* (1972). Harry Gamboa Jr. photographs Valdez with the group's graffiti tags at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). The image shows where the three male members of Asco have signed the bridge at LACMA in response to a museum curator's declaration that "Chicanos make graffiti not art."²⁷ Instead of signing the bridge herself, Valdez signs the space with her presence. She wears a pink shirt and tight jeans and has styled her hair and makeup. Like Fernández, she wears hyperfeminized clothing in a contested and perhaps dangerous space, made treacherous by unsanctioned painting (in the case of Asco, the tagging, and Fernández, the border erasure) and the clothing's restrictive nature preventing a quick escape. While tight jeans, body-conscious dresses, and high-heeled shoes are impractical attire for covert or even illegal activity in that they draw attention to the wearer while also being physically restraining, these artists wear them to underscore the importance of performed gender to their artworks. Through directly performing hypersexuality, these women become hypervisual. Both bring a highly feminized body to the historically masculine spaces of the art museum and the border zone. Although both artists are women, it is important to note the heightened elements of femininity they use in both of these encounters. Costume plays a key role here: while the male Asco members sign LACMA with their names, the BAW/TAF performs and documents their presence at the "end of the line" through their larger-than-life costumes.

Valdez and Fernández mark these sites with their bodies, creating documented traces of their presence. By employing presence, they mark the site with their bodies-as-themselves, not only their names or performances as border tropes. Their performance-as-feminine is documented through photography. As these women identify themselves in relation to site, they disidentify with gendered expectations put on them. While the expectation might be that they lean into the roles, both national and gendered, put forth by this contested space, the artists instead lean into femininity through dress while rejecting gender roles in their actions. This illustrates the complexity of feminist work, suggesting it is always intersectional. Here, the performance of femininity is weaponized; the artists use feminine signs in spaces where they are historically unwelcome to engage each site and to advocate for change. By weaponizing feminine signs, these women take up space, not only with their work but also with the very presences that contest an already contested space.

As part of a lineage of art that contests borders—in Asco's case, the border of what is inside and outside the museum in the 1970s—Fernández is signing the US-Mexico border space both with her presence and her art materials. The gesture of painting suggests an artist's hand or signature, an action that inherently requires presence. Not just Valdez but all four members of Asco marked the space with their presence. Yet the only body in the image is Valdez's, further complicating the gender binary. Photos not of just the painted walls but of the action of painting, including the artist's body, thus circulate for both artworks. Fernández's costume responds to the multiple ways transgressive work excludes the feminized figure. Both Fernández and Valdez are aware of the ephemerality of their presence at the site. The trace of their presence through the signature is equally fleeting, hence the documentation of the work. Fernández comments on this history and then moves beyond it, signing the border wall herself in three media: her presence, the trace of her presence in paint, and the video documentation of the event. In doing so, she illustrates that because of, not despite, her hypersexualization, the figure of the feminized woman is uniquely able to mark, contest, and erase the border, so long as she documents her work.

Through the bold act of painting and her consideration of the implications of her work beyond site, Fernández challenges any single notion of femininity's role at the border. Instead, she uses a *relajo* sensibility to perform an imagined future where national borders are rendered invisible, thus centering other identities. Fernández uses her costume to draw attention to women's invisible labor, highlighting the critical, but often unnoticed, role it plays in these contested sites. Her signature in blue paint remains at the border, and in the documentation of her performance long after the slatted wall reappears against the sky.

From Agua Prieta to Phoenix and Back Again

Sanchez's documentary film project *Historias en la Camioneta* (2010) focuses on the transitory aspects of the border, contrasting the apparent immobility of the international boundary with its conceptual portability.²⁸ Mobile borders, portable borders, and the common assertion that “the border crossed us” permeate responses to the US-Mexico border.²⁹ Sanchez's work illuminates how tension between subject positions and physical positions at a given point in time define the border's crossers. Sanchez's project engages the border beyond the San Diego–Tijuana region, yet gender's inflection remains a key aspect of her approach, as she would be unable to make the work were it not for her identity as a woman and her familial access to the space of the *camioneta*. Her gender, her knowledge of both English and Spanish, and her lived experience allow her to step outside theoretical space

of the in-between and into a documentary mode of art making. In the film, which chronicles the journey of her family's *camioneta* from Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico, to Phoenix, Arizona, United States, Sanchez sees the van as a public space and therefore a repository of knowledge that she can access because of specifics of her identity as a brown woman who speaks Spanish living in the borderlands. Furthermore, travelers often use the *camioneta* to stay connected to their families and friends across the US-Mexico border. Many of the interviewees mention traveling in both directions to visit family members. This also evokes the domestic space, which is often under the care and control of women. By documenting this portable, ephemeral, and domestic space, Sanchez presents the familial and the feminine as a key component of the borderlands.

Sanchez highlights labor's performative component and, more specifically, the mobile qualities of women's work, which is often unpaid and in the home. Even when Sanchez's physical position changes, she maintains an inherently gendered viewpoint, informed by how she sees herself and how those around her interpret her. As a woman, Sanchez moves subtly and comfortably within the space. Furthermore, her gender affords her the trust of the other women in the van, if only based on gender. Put another way, the passengers would give a different response to a male artist bringing a video camera into the *camioneta* and asking questions. The work of her project is to cross the border while documenting her crossing. In doing so, Sanchez engages the other travelers she meets within the *camioneta* space as well as the film's viewers once the project is complete.

The *camioneta*, like gender or the borderlands, is a malleable space, defined by and in relation to its occupants.³⁰ In the first clip, Sanchez fixes the camera on a young girl as a United States Border Patrol agent, *la migra*, asks other passengers in Spanish where they are coming from, where they are going, if they live or have family in these locations, and what they are carrying with them. His rigidity is in sharp contrast to the fluidity of language, identity, and subject position within the *camioneta*. His demeanor is a contrast to the list of items a woman in the van tells him she is carrying: prepared food for her family across the border. The film's viewers, much like the child, are aware of some, but not all, of what is going on (fig. 4). By placing *la migra* in the periphery (viewers never fully see his face), Sanchez decenters those in power to focus on human connections and human stories.

The little girl at the center of the frame early in the video appears doubtful, caught between a multitude of binaries including languages, national identities, governments, and cultures. Sanchez, through her documentary mode, gives her viewers just as many cues as she does ambiguities. For example, like Sanchez's interviews, the video alternates between Spanish and English, always subtitled in



Figure 4 M. Jenea Sanchez, *Historias en la Camioneta*, still, 2010. Image: M. Jenea Sanchez, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGOSBLhqwOM2010>. Image courtesy of the artist.

the other language. This implies audiences that speak only Spanish or only English, but it still privileges a knowledge of both languages. This is especially true when some riders speak in a hybrid of Spanish and English particular to the borderlands, illustrating another linguistic, if not always visible, semiotic mixing in this space. Sanchez also makes the confusion and mixing of languages visible, as opposed to solely auditory, through her capturing the fares written in both English and Spanish on the van's windows. The inclusion of this information and its centrality in the frame mirrors how, while the information is printed and legible to passengers in some places, it is not always visible or perfectly clear to them. At one angle, the van's destinations and fares are clearest from inside the van. From the outside, it is as if viewers were seeing it in a mirror, therefore obscuring the certainty of where the van is going until the passenger is inside. Sanchez's fixation on this mundane detail intentionally suggests to her viewer that border semiotics are only truly legible to those within that space.³¹ Outsider perspectives always have the potential to read a sign or language in reverse.

Sanchez's editing obscures other central elements from the viewer's direct line of sight. She allows her viewers to glimpse more context through the simultaneous depiction of what the camera sees (the passenger being interviewed) and what the passenger sees (the landscape outside the *camioneta*), but never granting the viewer a straightforward understanding of a physical position. Often Sanchez splits the screen between the face of the person speaking and the exterior of the van. In his essay on landscape and representation at the border, John-Michael H.

Warner observes of Sanchez's work that "viewers always know where we are inside the bus, but the precise location in Arizona and Sonora remains uncertain," mirroring the ability for viewers to know some, but not all, of the visual language of the border at any given point, and heightening the sense of knowledge as tied to insider status.³² What is more certain than location is the increased nervousness of the young girl as she looks around the *camioneta*, watching both what goes on outside it and how the adults inside with her react. Her gender situates us in the feminine as well, presenting a generational lineage from her to the artist to the artist's mother who runs the business. The child's reaction reflects the changeable nature and guaranteed uncertainty of the journey and of the borderlands itself.

As with languages, viewers might be familiar with the semiotic system but are never quite sure how it will be deployed and how, in doing so, their physical position will change, incorporating, even altering, their subject positions within that shift. As Warner writes, "Within the space of *La Camioneta*, the notions of foreigner, tourist, immigrant, and refugee reconstitute as passengers and historians," as the work "strategically negotiates boundaries and creatively emphasizes the specificity of borders in thoughtful and abstract ways."³³ The spatial changes outside the *camioneta* redefine the positions of the people inside of it to one another and to their surroundings. This affects the viewer's interpretations and ability to understand the artwork. Flexibility complicates the relationships of the people inside the *camioneta*—including Sanchez. Through her documentary mode, she transports that uncertain flexibility outside the space of the *camioneta*, further troubling the subject-viewer relationship.

Much of the conversation in *Historias en la Camioneta* involves cross-border familial relationships. Families, individuals, and groups travel north or south to visit relatives who are separated from them by the border. In her study of abjection in performance art, Leticia Alvarado discusses the various ways that different systems of border semiotics interpret motherhood and the abject, when applied outside performance art and in real-world situations, might help dismantle tropes and gendered expectations.³⁴ The figure of the mother has multiple interpretations in border semiotics, including the Virgin, *La Llorona*, the state-valued bearer of children, and the crossing migrant, pregnant with her "anchor baby." Alvarado wonders what it might mean to adjust cultural understandings of motherhood, making space for abjection.³⁵ Alvarado's reading in the introduction of *Abject Performances* removes the moralized nature of maternity in relation to the nation and instead presents "an abject figure grappling with and deciding on separation within a mixed-status family of loved ones across the expanse of the border."³⁶ Here Alvarado invites the abjection and discomfort of these situations. The abject mother is represented as a sexually available foil, "impure yet desirable," against which to

create white womanhood.³⁷ She invites the Latina mother to perform and exist against respectability politics and asks that her audience pay close attention to moments of nonassimilation that the mother might use in abject performances of her gendered position. Alvarado inserts abjection into motherhood, allowing for the messiness of emotion to make its way into each iteration of interpreting signs. Sanchez's work might hint at these less-than-idealized understandings of motherhood and femininity, but she is grounded in the reality not even of extreme circumstances but of everyday life and movement across the border. In her artwork, Sanchez makes room for the abject insofar as it is part of the reality of life as a woman, a mother, and a human being.

Like all semiotic approaches, the interpretation relies on the interpreter. Sanchez intends her film for an outside audience yet shows her biases in her closeness to the situation. Her connection to the *camioneta* is that it is her family's business, so she is documenting both their labor as well as her own work as an artist. Her family's business and role in the community gives her access to do her artistic labor in this project. At one point she discusses her own mother with the driver (fig. 4).³⁸ He explains to Sanchez that he met her mother when he was working at a gas station. They became acquainted, and she hired him to work for the family's *camioneta* service. As the driver raises a sunshade to block the setting sun coming in from his left, a clear indication that the van is heading north, he says (as translated into English in the subtitles), "when I encounter someone I know, it feels . . . you start to remember, make memory, remember things from the past, beautiful memories."³⁹ Their conversation, born of Sanchez's prompting, later edited out of the video, invites viewers not only into the space of the van but also into the intimate interpersonal and familial relationships that occur in these spaces. These relationships are quintessential to dismantling tropes in favor of realism, tearing down stereotypical female figures and replacing them with real women living intersectional lives. Sanchez's work implies that this method is portable: relationships are central to engage border semiotics, and border stories, in the spaces beyond the US-Mexico border.

Envisioning the Border beyond the Borderlands

Historias en la Camioneta does not fully erase the border but documents, engages, and redefines it. Fernández does the same; even with the title *Borrando la Frontera*, the erasure of the border is only one element of her work. Documentation, through video and her painting, is critical to the work's continued reception. The border's literal absence or presence is ultimately inconsequential to an artist's ability to engage with that space. Through the labor of engaging with the border's

presence, these works illustrate how national and social boundaries as well as rhetorical tactics construct the border.

While the history of feminist perspectives often leans toward the exclusionary as in the case of *Las Comadres*, the roots of that movement and of feminist and collective desires are initially inclusionary, far-reaching, and intersectional. There is neither a singular feminism/femininity nor a singular border or border semiotics. Instead, there is a mutable series of signs whose interpretations are always underscored by physical and subject positions, specifically as they relate to gender. The US-Mexico border is made up of multiple points, cities, and social and ecological climates, reaching beyond a single line. It is precisely these multitudes that allow for a more comprehensive and portable understanding of the border. Fernández and Sanchez engage the physical border space as well as a more fluid comprehension of gender and borderlands that makes space for not only multiple interpretations but their respective interpreters. The documentation process also opens up even further meanings and interpretations among different audiences as the work circulates outside its original sphere. This gives it special as well as temporal reach, as it documents not only a place but also a time.

These works illustrate that site and gender are inextricable, intersecting in a myriad of ways that lead to identity formation. For Fernández, it is to highlight gendered stereotypes while imagining a borderless future. For Sanchez, it is a means of traveling and comprehension that matches the fluidity of gendered constructs and the borderlands to make space for human experiences. Identity plays a key role in these works in that the artists contend with not only geographic and cultural borders but also the intersections of gendered boundaries as well. This means that through their work, they are constantly performing the labor of intersectionality and further documenting that labor to export it. While this could become an exclusionary exercise, both artists invite participation and reception through the act and work of performance and documentation, allowing outsider access rather than drawing yet another boundary.

* * *

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The author would like to thank Professor Ila Sheren, Professor Kristina Kleutghen, and the wonderful editorial team at Refract, especially Madison Treece, for their attention to and care for this project.

Notes

¹ M. Jenea Sanchez, "About," M. Jenea Sanchez website, accessed July 3, 2021, <http://mjeneasanchez.com/en/about-1>.

² Rebecca Schneider, "Performance Remains," *Performance Research* 6, no. 2 (2001): 100–108, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2001.10871792>.

³ Ila N. Sheren, *Portable Borders: Performance Art and Politics on the U.S. Frontera since 1984* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015).

⁴ Much of my understanding of these issues comes from the seminar Contemporary Art of the US/Mexico Border and Beyond, Ila N. Sheren, Washington University in St. Louis, Spring 2020.

⁵ Miwon Kwon, "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 87.

⁶ For code-switching's origins as a linguistic element of Black culture in the United States, see Taryn Kiana Myers, "Can You Hear Me Now? An Autoethnographic Analysis of Code-Switching," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 20, no. 2 (2020): 113–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708619879208>.

⁷ I define *intersectionality* by drawing on the work of Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007).

⁹ D. Emily Hicks, *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹² Translations from Sheren, *Portable Borders*, 146n61.

¹³ Amy Sara Carroll, *REMEX: Toward an Art History of the NAFTA Era* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 230.

¹⁴ Ibid., 230.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1.

¹⁶ Ibid., 36.

¹⁷ Famously Octavio Paz discusses the figure of the *Chingada* in “The Sons of *La Malinche*,” in *The Mexico Reader*, edited by Gilbert Joseph and Timothy Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 20–27.

¹⁸ Carroll, *REMEX*, 200.

¹⁹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera*.

²⁰ Ana Teresa Fernández, “Borrando La Frontera” (2011), accessed April 27, 2020, <https://anateresafernandez.com/borrando-la-barda-tijuana-mexico/>.

²¹ Berelowitz borrows this term from Victor Turner. See Jo-Anne Berelowitz, “Las Comadres: A Feminist Collective Negotiates a New Paradigm for Women at the U.S./Mexico Border,” *Genders* 28 (September 1, 1998). <https://www.colorado.edu/gendersarchive1998-2013/1998/09/01/las-comadres-feminist-collective-negotiates-new-paradigm-women-usmexico-border>.

²² Ibid., 21.

²³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1999), 11. Muñoz is also drawing on the linguist Michel Pêcheux’s reading of Louis Althusser.

²⁴ Fernández also erases the border in a 2016 project in Baja California, Sonora, and Ciudad Juárez titled *The Borrando la Frontera Project*. This work’s continued resonance, community engagement, and expansion beyond the San Diego–Tijuana region suggests its importance not just with a specific site but with the border region more broadly. In this essay I focus on the 2011 performance and video in which the artist painted the wall alone in San Diego–Tijuana

²⁵ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 129.

²⁶ Ana Teresa Fernández, “Pressing Matters,” <https://anateresafernandez.com/pressing-matters/>, accessed April 27, 2020.

²⁷ Chon Noriega, “Your Art Disgusts Me: Early Asco (1971–75),” *Afterall* 19 (Autumn–Winter 2008) 1–8.

²⁸ In *Portable Borders*, Sheren asserts that during the time these artists were working, “borders came to represent a space of performance rather than a geographical boundary” (3).

²⁹ See Sheren, *Portable Borders*.

³⁰ John-Michael Warner, Zoom call with author, April 24, 2020.

³¹ While the text goes both ways depending on the location within the van, an example of the text as legible to the passenger but not someone outside the van

appears at 4:53 in M. Jenea Sanchez, *Historias en la Camioneta*, October 12, 2011, YouTube video, 20:37,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGOSBLhqwOM&ab_channel=mjeneaSanchez.

³² John-Michael H. Warner, "A Border Art History of the Vanishing Present: Land Use and Representation," in *Border Spaces: Visualizing the U.S.-Mexico Frontera*, edited by Katherine G. Morrissey and John-Michael H. Warner (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018), 209.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Leticia Alvarado, *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

³⁵ Ibid., 7.

³⁶ Ibid., 4.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ This conversation begins around 15:50 in Sanchez, *Historias en la Camioneta*.

³⁹ Sanchez, *Historias en la Camioneta*, 16:42.

**Visualizing Precarity and Security: Mona Hatoum's
Drowning Sorrows and Guadalupe Maravilla's *Walk on
Water***

Catherine S. Ramírez

Precarity is an overwhelming and persistent condition of unpredictability, instability, and insecurity, especially as related to employment, housing, health care, and migration status. While spread unevenly, it is a hallmark of our contemporary world. At UC Santa Cruz, a federally designated [Hispanic-Serving Institution](#) where [more than one-third](#) of the undergraduates are first-generation college students and [more than half](#) receive need-based financial aid, many of my students are of the [precarariat](#), the people for whom precarity is a driving force. For example, many of my students struggle to find stable housing in Santa Cruz County, one of [the least affordable metropolitan areas in the world](#). Some are the US-citizen children of undocumented migrants, and some are undocumented themselves. And many more confront or will confront upon their graduation economic uncertainty in the form of involuntary part-time or short-term work, falling wages, mounting, chronic debt, and [“declining prospects of upward mobility.”](#)

Like [intersectionality](#) and [heteronormativity](#), *precarity* allows us to name, to better understand, and then to change the conditions that shape our world. And like intersectionality and heteronormativity, it is an abstruse concept. To help my students identify and comprehend precarity, I have found that it is useful to visualize it. To do so, I turn to art, specifically to [Mona Hatoum's *Drowning Sorrows*](#) (2001–2) and [Guadalupe Maravilla's *Walk on Water*](#) (2018).

I teach courses on migration, and both Hatoum and Maravilla are migrants, a point I return to below. Before I discuss their works and biographies, I want to

acknowledge how the coronavirus pandemic has laid bare the precarity with which so many migrants are forced to live. International migrants quarantined in cramped dormitories in [Singapore](#) and the [Gulf countries](#), for example, have seen higher infection rates, while the Indian government's abrupt lockdown in March 2020 drove [more than ten million internal migrants](#) from their jobs and homes in big cities back to their villages of origin. In [Italy](#), undocumented agricultural and domestic workers were deemed essential and granted a temporary amnesty in the spring of 2020, only to find that [they lacked the proper paperwork to qualify for the COVID-19 vaccine](#) a year later.

The pandemic has also magnified a paradox of migrant existence: migrants—in particular, migrant workers—often play a fundamental role in many countries; at the same time, migrants, international and internal alike, tend to be marginalized, if not excluded altogether, within and by the host or dominant society. I call this the paradox of assimilation in my 2020 book, [Assimilation: An Alternative History](#).

To illustrate that paradox, we need not look far. In March 2020, the Migration Policy Institute reported that migrants in the United States were [“over-represented in coronavirus-response frontline occupations,”](#) such as health care. Migrants, including undocumented ones, were also disproportionately represented in other [“industries vital to pandemic response,”](#) such as retail, manufacturing, and [food production](#). In April 2020, the [US Department of Homeland Security](#) (DHS) classified farmworkers as essential, even though [roughly half of farmworkers in this country lack legal status](#). While these migrants were deemed essential by the very agency charged with hunting down, rounding up, incarcerating, and deporting them, they were [denied federal coronavirus aid](#). They were simultaneously essential and excluded.

Migration has long been cast as a [national security](#) issue, hence its inclusion in DHS's purview. Yet the convergence of crises we have faced since the World Health Organization announced the pandemic on March 11, 2020, has prompted a rethinking of security not as sovereignty or defense but as social or public goods, such as health care, housing, food, water, and education. The science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson calls these social and public goods “the necessities for a good life” in his 2020 novel, [The Ministry for the Future](#). “Security is the feeling that results from being confident that you will have [the necessities for a good life] and your children will have them too,” he writes. “So it is a derivative effect. There can be enough security for all; but only if all have security.”¹

Security is the antithesis of and antidote to precarity. Yet what does security look like and how do we envision it in a world increasingly forged by precarity? How do we recognize the acute precarity many migrants endure and

include those migrants in our visions for a world in which all have security? These are some of the questions with which I approach *Drowning Sorrows* and *Walk on Water*.

Drowning Sorrows

There are multiple instantiations of *Drowning Sorrows*. The one I describe here has been part of the [San José Museum of Art's](#) (SJMA) permanent collection since 2017. It consists of roughly a hundred clear, glass bottle fragments. The fragments sit in a corner of the gallery on the wood floor in the form of an oval measuring about eight feet by eight feet. Some of the fragments are the top part of the bottle; others are the bottom half. They are illuminated from above and appear to be bobbing in water.

As its title alone makes evident, the painting's subjects include drunkenness and grief. In various iterations of this artwork, Hatoum has used wine and beer bottles. In the SJMA's, she has used flasks, a bottle associated not only with spirits but with portability and secrecy. After all, a flask is not meant to sit atop the dinner table. Instead, it tends to be tucked into a pocket and carried away. Cut in different places and at different angles, the bottle fragments appear to be drifting on an unstable surface. This variety lends a sense of movement to the artwork. The fact that only a portion of each flask is visible also enhances its air of stealth.

Drowning Sorrows captures the tension between transparency and opacity and fragility and danger. The glass Hatoum has used in the SJMA installation is clear, but the flasks appear to be partially submerged, as if they contain or bury secrets. And glass is a fragile material. Yet when broken, it can be sharp, lethal even.

In [many of Hatoum's works](#), including *Drowning Sorrows*, seemingly harmless household objects, like bottles and kitchen utensils, morph into unfamiliar and menacing forces. For some of us—for example, the person facing domestic abuse or deportation—home is a hostile, indeed dangerous place. Recent wildfires, polar vortexes, heat waves, and floods have underscored that for *all* of us, even for inhabitants of the insular [“wealthy world,”](#) home is ephemeral and fragile. When seen in this light, Hatoum's bottle fragments evoke rising sea levels, and *Drowning Sorrows* becomes a commentary on the Anthropocene. Beautiful and sinister, her artwork leaves us with a sense of precariousness, with the impression that all is not as it seems and that the ground on which we tread may not be as solid as we think or hope.

The [circumstances of Hatoum's life](#)—her family's exile from Palestine, an embattled nation, her exclusion within and by the country where she was born and raised, and her second exile due to war—testify to the instability, hostility, and mutability of home. Hatoum is a Palestinian who is not from Palestine. Rather, she was born in Beirut in 1952 to Palestinian parents. However, she is not Lebanese. Like the majority of Palestinians who found themselves living in exile in Lebanon after 1948, she and her family were denied Lebanese identity cards. Then, in 1975, while Hatoum was visiting London, Lebanon erupted in civil war. She remained in the United Kingdom. Today, she is a London-based Palestinian artist.

While Hatoum created *Drowning Sorrows* over 2001–2, it evokes more recent images of migration—specifically, the treacherous trek over bodies of water that millions of migrants make. Think, for example, of the Rio Grande, the Mediterranean Sea, or the Suchiate River between Guatemala and Mexico. The partially submerged bottle fragments call up the tragic and shameful images of people who have drowned as they have tried to realize the freedom to move.

When we connect *Drowning Sorrows* to grief and alcohol, as its title implies, *and* to movement and migration, then it becomes a work about migrant mental health, a subject that received relatively little attention outside activist and mental health worker circles until images of [migrant children separated from their parents at the US-Mexico border](#) began circulating during the years of the Trump administration. For far too many migrants, especially those who are undocumented—which is yet another way of being denied an identity card—migration is a traumatic experience. People flee poverty, violence, and fear in one land only to confront poverty, violence, and fear in another land. Families are separated not just for weeks or months but for entire lifetimes. So it should come as no surprise that some migrants have mental health needs stemming from their experiences of dispossession and displacement.

For example, how are the people who survived the capsizing of the dinghy that resulted in the drowning death of three-year-old Alan Kurdi off the coast of Bodrum, Turkey, in 2015? How do they cope with their trauma and profound loss? One of those survivors was Alan's father, Abdullah Kurdi. He and his family were fleeing a war-torn Syria and trying to reach the Greek island of Kos when he lost not only Alan but his wife, Rehana, and their five-year-old son, Galip, to the Mediterranean Sea. Does Abdullah suffer from anxiety, depression, or worse? How is Nilüfer Demir, the Turkish photographer who described the beach that Alan and the other drowned passengers washed up on as a [“children's graveyard”](#)? What impact has her infamous photo had on her mental health? On the viewer's mental health? On our moral compass? On the way we see and treat migrants?

Sadly, the deaths of Alan, Rehana, and Galip Kurdi have not changed how migrants are seen and treated. Indeed, things seem to have gotten worse, as the images of caged migrant children and the drowned bodies of [Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his twenty-three-month-old daughter, Angie Valeria](#), attest. After fleeing their gang-controlled neighborhood in San Martín, El Salvador, and traveling over thirteen hundred miles to Matamoros, Mexico, Óscar Alberto, Tania Vanessa Ávalos, and their daughter were caught in the Rio Grande's mighty current as they tried to enter the United States on June 23, 2019. Along with Mexican photojournalist [Julia Le Duc](#), Tania Vanessa bore witness as the water swept her husband and daughter away.

To honor Óscar Alberto, Angie Valeria, and all other drowned migrants, Nuyorican poet and [2021 National Book Award recipient](#) Martín Espada penned "[Floaters](#)" in 2019. In US Border Patrol parlance, Espada tells us, a "floater" is a drowned migrant. He opens his poem with the image of a bottle bobbing in a river:

Like a beer bottle thrown into the river by a boy too drunk to cry,
like the shard of a Styrofoam cup drained of coffee brown as the river,
like the plank of a fishing boat broken in half by the river, the dead float.

Just as the glass, Styrofoam, or wood that end up in a river remain there, so do the dead—as "floaters," as [ghosts](#), or as the trauma of the bereaved. When put in dialogue with Espada's poem, "Drowning Sorrows" becomes both a memorial to the displaced, the dispossessed, and the drowned and a provocation to take better care of one another.

Walk on Water

Caring for each other is at the center of Maravilla's oeuvre. Many of his elaborate mixed-media sculptures, immersive installations, and collaborative, ritualistic performances grapple with his ["traumatic experiences"](#) as a former unaccompanied child and undocumented migrant, a refugee, and a cancer survivor. In addition to being part of his self-healing process, his Salvifuturist works are his offerings ["for self-healing to the immigrant community and beyond."](#)

Formerly known as Irvin Morazán, Maravilla was born in 1976 in San Salvador. At the age of eight, he fled the civil war in El Salvador and migrated to the United States as part of what is now referred to as ["the first wave"](#) of unaccompanied children to travel from Central America to the US-Mexico border. With the assistance of a coyote, he hid beneath a dog in a truck, crossed the Rio

Grande, and made his way to New York City, where he grew up undocumented. At twenty-six, he naturalized as a US citizen. Ten years later, he was diagnosed with colon cancer. He sought remedies from Western medicine, “[shamans, Brujox, \[and\] curanderos](#)” and was drawn to sound therapy in particular. “Our bodies are over 60% water,” he explained in a [January 2021 interview](#). “And in the water, we carry anxieties . . . stress . . . trauma. In some cases, we carry . . . illnesses. Or sometimes, these untreated traumas can manifest in an illness. . . . The sound vibration shakes up the water in your body.”

Water plays a prominent role in many of Maravilla’s works. For example, in *Illegal Alien Crossing* (2011), he returned to the Rio Grande. Yet rather than hiding beneath a dog in a truck, he donned a large, silver, metallic headdress with solar panels, submerged himself in the river, and walked across it. The headdress’s “hyper-visibility,” the art historian Kency Cornejo has observed, contrasted sharply with the secrecy and invisibility to which so many undocumented migrants are subject as they make their way to and in the United States. “By exalting his presence,” she notes, Maravilla transformed the “trauma of negation into a healing ritual of light and preservation.” As he emerged from the Rio Grande, he was reborn not as an “illegal alien” but as a luminous, “hybrid half-man, half-machine extraterrestrial creature”—“a futuristic border crosser,” in Cornejo’s words. In this act of self-baptism, he transformed not only the undocumented migrant but the river from a site of violence and death into one of “healing powers and the sacredness of water.”²

Akin to the healing powers and sacredness of water, Maravilla’s sound baths are performances/rituals with gongs that seek to restore participants’ well-being. From April 2020 until December 2020, he offered them on a weekly basis. His [sound bath on July 7, 2020](#), for instance, was for undocumented migrants who had been released from detention. Then, from May 15 until September 4, 2021, he offered sound baths for undocumented migrants, people affected by cancer, and the general public at [Planeta Abuelx](#). Spanning sixty feet in Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, this exhibition consisted of two towering, cast aluminum and steel sculptures, two massive gongs, a ring of medicinal plants, including corn, squash, and beans, a ground drawing made of water-based paint, an aluminum fire pit, and a *retablo* (devotional painting) the size of a billboard. Images of his sound baths show participants relaxing on [yoga mats](#), beach towels, and [picnic blankets](#). These images stand in stark contrast to those of migrant children wrapped in mylar blankets in [bieleras](#).

Maravilla’s sound baths stem from his autobiographical trilogy, a combination of musical performance, dance, and sculptures. Using science fiction tropes and reenacting moments from his own life, the trilogy invents what he calls

[“new mythologies”](#) and [“a new visual language for border crossing stories.”](#) The first installment, *The OG of Undocumented Children*, performed at the Whitney Museum in 2018, recounted the story of his journey to and arrival in the United States as a child. The second installment, *Walk on Water*, which I discuss below, took place on July 21, 2019, at the Queens Museum as part of the exhibition *Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas*. Fantastic, mixed-media, gong-bearing sculptures make up the third installment, *Disease Thrower*. These totemic sculptures, two of which were part of *Planeta Abuelx*, link the trauma of his border crossing to his cancer and highlight [“the ways he overcame the disease.”](#)

Walk on Water was set in the *Panorama of the City of New York*, a 9,335-square-foot architectural model of New York City that was created for the 1964 World’s Fair. Accompanied by the [“songstress”](#) La Momia (Sam Xu), a [“team of \[gong-playing\] healers,”](#) and two [“futuristic border crossing coyotes”](#) with exposed torso organs (Nima Jeizan and Maxwell Runko), Maravilla invoked his colon cancer and his traversing of the Rio Grande at age eight as he trod across the *Panorama*’s waterways. The green, inflatable suit he wore transformed him into the [Alien Abductor](#), an enormous, otherworldly creature, and, at the same time, the Alien Abductor’s abductee. [In the Alien Abductor’s arms](#), Maravilla’s own arms were extended. In addition to appearing small, vulnerable, and childlike, he resembled Christ on the cross. Connecting illness and illegality, “ilLEGAL” was written across the Alien Abductor’s back.

Like many of Maravilla’s other works, *Walk on Water* had a strong spiritual and therapeutic component. Its title alone evokes the story of Jesus’s miracle, and the gongs’ swirling, overlapping sounds were [“intended to cleanse political phobias and blockages of New Yorkers”](#) during the third year of the Trump administration.

What’s more, *Walk on Water* was an homage to migrant labor. With their hand-held vacuum cleaners and fluorescent mop slippers, the coyotes cleansed the space of the *Panorama*. As the coyotes and Maravilla walked along the miniature replica of the East River, Jamaica Bay, and the Upper Bay, they enacted that which Alan Kurdi, Angie Valeria Martínez Ávalos, Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez, and all other “floaters” have been unable to achieve: they walked on water. In addition to transforming the migrant housecleaner and domestic worker into a powerful shaman, *Walk on Water* likened the unaccompanied and undocumented child migrant to a miracle worker.

Resembling a liquid hole in the middle of the floor, *Drowning Sorrows* is an apt image for precarity. In contrast, *Walk on Water* envisions security for all as it turns water into solid ground. Where Hatoum’s installation evokes illness, in the form of alcoholism, and death, Maravilla’s performance used the tropes of science fiction to achieve a very real goal: healing. Differences notwithstanding, *Drowning*

Sorrows and *Walk on Water* offer new stories and images (and, in the latter work, sounds) for migration. Against the backdrop of the Mediterranean and the Rio Grande, both works testify to the ongoing, unexpected resonance of art in and beyond the classroom.

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Notes

¹ Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future* (New York: Orbit, 2020), 58.

² Kency Cornejo, “Decolonial Futurisms: Ancestral Border Crossers, Time Machines, and Space Travel in Salvadoran Art,” *Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas*, edited by Robb Hernández, Tyler Stallings, and Joanna Szupinska-Myers (Riverside: UCR ARTSblock, University of California, Riverside, 2017), 26.