

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup> 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 1987 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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).<sup>8</sup>

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.”<sup>9</sup> 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 recrafting 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.”<sup>10</sup> 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 tidy 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.”<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.”<sup>13</sup> 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.”<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.”<sup>16</sup> 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.”<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

## 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> As López notes: "The work . . . shows the body as a fragile container, in which the battle between living and dying coexist."<sup>21</sup> 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."<sup>22</sup> 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."<sup>23</sup> 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, Sacos 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.”<sup>24</sup> 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.”<sup>25</sup> 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.”<sup>26</sup> 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.”<sup>27</sup> 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.”<sup>28</sup> 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.”<sup>29</sup> 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 Vacíos*, 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 epidermic 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.<sup>30</sup> 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.”<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup> 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.”<sup>35</sup> 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.”<sup>36</sup> 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.”<sup>37</sup> 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."<sup>38</sup> 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.”<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup>

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.<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup>

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.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup>

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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Lesdi Carolina Goussen Robleto is a PhD candidate in the History of Art Department, at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research looks at contemporary feminist practices in Latin America and the Caribbean, with a focus on experimental, mixed-media practices in Central America. Her dissertation, “(Un)mending Bodies: Patricia Belli and Feminist Artistic Praxis in Central America, 1986–2000s,” centers on the work of the contemporary Nicaraguan artist Patricia Belli (b. 1964) against the backdrop of postwar Nicaragua. Tending to fiber

and craft-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

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Pérez-Ratton, "Mesótica II," 65.

<sup>4</sup> 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>.

<sup>5</sup> 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 Gradás 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.

<sup>6</sup> Quintanilla, “The Making of a New Generation,” 34.

<sup>7</sup> *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.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 128–30.

<sup>9</sup> Patricia Belli, email interview with author, April 19, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

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

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

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

<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> López, “Frágiles.” This excerpt is taken from López’s analysis of another work in the artist’s oeuvre, titled *Pelo (Hair)* from 2001.

<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> López, “Frágiles.”

<sup>20</sup> Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, “Revolutionary Popular Feminism in Nicaragua: Articulating Class, Gender, and National Sovereignty,” *Gender and Society* 4, no. 3 (1990): 371.

<sup>21</sup> López, “Frágiles.”

<sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> Cecilia Vicuña, Artist Statement, *Cecilia Vicuña: Disappeared Quipu*, Brooklyn Museum, May 18–November 25, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Threads of Protest: Cecilia Vicuña Concepts and Quipus,” in *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 109.

<sup>25</sup> Vicuña, “QUIPOem / The Precarious: The Art and Poetry of Cecilia Vicuña,” 213. This quote is taken from the artist statement for this exhibition.

<sup>26</sup> 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).

<sup>27</sup> Cecilia Vicuña, Artist Statement, *Cecilia Vicuña: Quipu Desaparecido (Disappeared Quipu)*, Brooklyn Museum and MFA, Boston, 2018, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/3359>.

<sup>28</sup> Vicuña, Artist Statement, *Cecilia Vicuña: Disappeared Quipu*.

<sup>29</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson, introduction to *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 4.

<sup>30</sup> López, “Frágiles.”

<sup>31</sup> Belli, interview.

<sup>32</sup> Patricia Belli, “Cicatrices,” *ArteFacto*, no. 14 (August–September 1997): 238.



<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>35</sup> Belli, interview.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> 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.

<sup>38</sup> 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.

<sup>39</sup> Pérez-Ratton, “Mesótica II,” 75.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>42</sup> López, “Fragiles,” 59.

<sup>43</sup> Pérez-Ratton, “Mesótica II,” 77–78.

<sup>44</sup> Belli, interview.