

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Immaterial Traces: Objects, Archives, Dust (1980-2020)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/81m0v3hh>

Author

Vergara Calderon, Isabella

Publication Date

2023

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

Immaterial Traces: Objects, Archives, Dust (1980-2020)

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Spanish

by

Isabella Vergara Calderón

Dissertation Committee:  
Associate Professor Adriana M. Johnson, Chair  
Associate Professor Viviane Mahieux  
Associate Professor Ivette Hernández-Torres  
Professor Luis F. Avilés  
Associate Professor Javier Guerrero

2023



## **DEDICATION**

To

José María and Cora,  
my forever chosen family, my love always with you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   | Page |
|---|------|
| List of Figures .....   | iv   |
| Acknowledgements .....  | vii  |
| Vita.....   | ix   |
| Abstract.....   | viii |
| Introduction.....   | 1    |
| Chapter 1: A Life in the Afterlife: Graciela Iturbide and Mario Bellatín’s Dual Exposure..... | 44   |
| 1.1 The Photobook as an Intermedial object: An Overview.....                                  | 52   |
| 1.2 Mario Bellatín’s Bodies in Writing.....   | 65   |
| 1.3 Photography at the Threshold of Reality.....  | 78   |
| 1.4 Still life or Living Nature .....   | 98   |
| 1.5 In the Name of <i>an</i> author .....   | 115  |
| Chapter 2: Images in Flux: Breath, Tears, Rubble.....   | 127  |
| 2.1 The Image as Breath.....  | 131  |
| 2.2. The Image as Tears.....  | 160  |
| 2.3 The Image as Rubble.....  | 185  |
| Chapter 3: Cecilia Vicuña and the Matter of the World .....                                   | 214  |
| 3.1. <i>Preca</i> rious or The Matter of Things .....   | 223  |
| 3.2. <i>Palab</i> rarmás or The Matter of Words.....  | 246  |
| 3.3. <i>Palabra e hilo</i> or The Matter of Acts as Processes.....                            | 266  |
| Chapter 4: Echoes of the Desert: Voices, Archives, Writings.....                              | 289  |
| 4.1. Voices “Out loud” .....  | 299  |
| 4.2. When Air Becomes Whispers.....   | 345  |
| Conclusions.....  | 378  |
| Bibliography.....   | 382  |

## LIST OF FIGURES

|             |   | Page |
|-------------|---|------|
| Figure 1.   | Graciela Iturbide, <i>¿Ojos para volar?</i>   | 50   |
| Figure 2.   | <i>Demerol sin fecha de caducidad/El baño de Frida Kahlo</i> , 2008   | 52   |
| Figure 3.   | Frida Kahlo. "Autorretrato" (1940) / "El abrazo de amor del Universo, la tierra (México), yo, Diego y el Señor Xólotl". | 54   |
| Figure 4.   | <i>Demerol sin fecha de caducidad/El baño de Frida Kahlo</i> , 2008.  | 68   |
| Figure 5.   | Graciela Iturbide, <i>El baño de Frida Kahlo</i> , 2005   | 84   |
| Figure 6.   | Frida Kahlo. <i>Diaries</i> . 2001.   | 89   |
| Figure 7.   | Graciela Iturbide. <i>El baño de Frida Kahlo</i> , 2005   | 93   |
| Figure 8.   | Graciela Iturbide. <i>El baño de Frida Kahlo</i> , México, 2005.  | 99   |
| Figure 9.   | Frida Kahlo. <i>Lo que el agua me dio</i> . Oil on canvas. 1938   | 100  |
| Figure 10.  | Graciela Iturbide. <i>Untitled. El baño de Frida Kahlo</i> , 2006.  | 102  |
| Figure 11.  | Graciela Iturbide. <i>Untitled. El baño de Frida Kahlo</i> , 2006   | 103  |
| Figure 12.  | Graciela Iturbide. <i>Untitled. El baño de Frida Kahlo</i> , 2006   | 104  |
| Figure 13   | Graciela Iturbide. <i>Untitled. El baño de Frida Kahlo</i> , 2006   | 105  |
| Figure. 14. | Graciela Iturbide. <i>Untitled. El baño de Frida Kahlo</i> , 2006   | 106  |
| Figure 15.  | Graciela Iturbide. <i>Untitled. El baño de Frida Kahlo</i> , 2006   | 107  |
| Figure 16.  | Graciela Iturbide <i>¿Ojos para volar?</i> Coyoacán, México, 1991   | 113  |
| Figure 17.  | Oscar Muñoz. <i>Aliento</i> (1995). Photo credits: Luis F. Avilés.  | 123  |
| Figure 18.  | Oscar Muñoz, <i>Aliento</i> (1995). Installation. © Thierry Bal, 2008.  | 140  |
| Figure 19.  | Oscar Muñoz. <i>Cortinas de Baño</i> , Courtesy of the artist, 2021.  | 150  |

|            |  |     |
|------------|--|-----|
| Figure 20. | Oscar Muñoz. <i>Lacrimarios</i> 2000. Installation. Courtesy Sicardi Gallery | 169 |
| Figure 21. | Oscar Muñoz. <i>Lacrimarios</i> 2000. Courtesy Sicardi Gallery, detail.      | 172 |
| Figure 22. | Oscar Muñoz. <i>Simulacros</i> , 1999. Courtesy Museo de Arte de Lima MALI   | 182 |
| Figure 23. | Oscar Muñoz. <i>Narcisos</i> 2002. Installation. Courtesy Sicardi Gallery    | 183 |
| Figure 24. | Oscar Muñoz. <i>Narciso</i> , 2001. Courtesy of the artist                   | 199 |
| Figure 25. | Oscar Muñoz. <i>Biografías</i> 2001. Courtesy of the artist                  | 200 |
| Figure 26. | Cecilia Vicuña, “ <i>Precarios</i> ” 1966. Courtesy of the artist            | 225 |
| Figure 27. | Cecilia Vicuña, <i>Paño e' sangre</i> , (1973-1974). Courtesy of the artist  | 229 |
| Figure 28. | Cecilia Vicuña. <i>Libro Tul</i> , (1973-1974). Courtesy of the artist       | 229 |
| Figure 29. | Cecilia Vicuña. <i>Red Silk</i> , (1973-1974). Courtesy of the artist        | 230 |
| Figure 30. | Cecilia Vicuña, <i>Palabrarmás</i> , 1979. Courtesy of the artist            | 255 |
| Figure 31. | Cecilia Vicuña. <i>Labrar palabras</i> , 1978. Courtesy of the artist        | 261 |
| Figure 32. | Cecilia Vicuña. <i>Pesimismo: el excesivo peso de sí mismo</i> 1978.         | 264 |
| Figure 33. | Cecilia Vicuña. <i>Origen del Tejido</i> (1990). Courtesy of the artist      | 278 |
| Figure 34. | Gego. <i>Reticularia</i> (environment installation), 1969.                   | 282 |
| Figure 35. | Cecilia Vicuña. <i>Quipu menstrual (la sangre de los glaciares)</i> , 2006.  | 283 |
| Figure 36. | Guillermo Galindo. <i>Caravana a Color</i> (Color Caravan), 2015.            | 346 |
| Figure 37. | Guillermo Galindo. <i>Voices Flag / Bandera de voces</i> , 2015.             | 351 |

|            |  |     |
|------------|--|-----|
| Figure 38. | Guillermo Galindo. <i>Sarape Tracking Flag, Variation</i> 2015.    | 352 |
| Figure 39. | Guillermo Galindo. <i>MAIZ: A Cybertotemic Instrument</i> , 2016.  | 357 |
| Figure 40. | Guillermo Galindo & Richard Misrach. <i>Border Cantos</i> , 2016.  | 368 |
| Figure 41. | Guillermo Galindo & Richard Misrach. <i>Border Cantos</i> , 2016.  | 369 |
| Figure 42. | Guillermo Galindo. <i>Play staircase</i> . Courtesy of the artist. | 370 |



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Annie Ernaux noted that the choice to study literature was a choice to remain in a sort of continent in which she was able to set in opposition to her social environment. Six years ago, this same idea to conceive literature as a possibility to transfigure reality took me to pursue a PhD in the US, embracing the passion that defy my fears of the structural demands which often force women into passivity. To choose literature and art today is to choose difference, not only in the name of myself but of all of those I have encountered through it: literary characters, friends, authors, students, artists, professors, mentors, and an intellectual community. Reflecting on the first day of I arrived at this country, I am grateful for the incredible interlocutors, mentors, and friends who have contributed to this journey, fostering a sense of community, and offering invaluable personal, professional, and administrative guidance.

I am particularly grateful to Adriana Johnson, my advisor, for her patient reading, mentorship, and insightful dialogues throughout these years. Her guidance and support allowed me to refine my ideas and challenged me to push through conformism. In her I also found a friend and an example of a great mother, whose support eased the many challenges that came my way. Her encouragement and constructive criticism were crucial in my intellectual growth and expansion of my research boundaries.

I also expand my gratitude to my dissertation committee members: Viviane Mahieux's pragmatism has been inspiring. I thank her for the infinite times she openly received me in her office and her reassurance to think without the restraint of fears or boundaries. To Ivette Hernández-Torres and her exceptional and rigorous readings and discussions. They were inspirational and have served as a reminder to continually redefine my understanding of the world. To Luis F. Avilés, whose teaching and research always were exemplary. I am grateful for his unconditional generosity, attentive readings and feedback always built under a space of friendship. To Javier Guerrero, for being a distanced mentor and friend, whose work has been a guiding light, always pushing me to reach new intellectual heights. His scholarship continues shaping my approach to literature and the arts.

I extend my sincere gratitude to the professors in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine: Horacio Legrás, Santiago Morales-Rivera, Jacobo Sefamí, deserve mention for their support throughout various stages of my PhD and their attendance in all the events I was able to organize at UC, Irvine. To Ackbar Abbas, who initially introduced me to the concept of time in Gilles Deleuze's philosophy and whose own thought has been a model I have always wanted to follow. Catherine Malabou, a mentor and friend, has been a key figure in my journey. She provided a supportive environment conducive to intellectual growth and constant encouragement. Her presence from the beginning made Irvine a place I wanted to stay. To Gaby Schwab, for constantly reminding me that motherhood and scholarship are not mutually exclusive choices. Her perspective on motherhood was not just inspiring but also empowering, reinforcing the belief that one can excel both as a scholar and a parent.

The completion of this dissertation was greatly supported by research grants from the Graduate Division and the Humanities Commons at UC, Irvine. These grants were fundamental in providing travel opportunities for me to meet artists, attend the Critical Theory Summer Workshop in Paris, travel to conferences, conduct focused writing during summers and invite guest speakers. In addition to this, I had the privilege of support from Graciela Iturbide, Oscar Muñoz, Cecilia Vicuña, and Guillermo Galindo, whose studios generously waived the copyrights for the images in this dissertation.

The fellowship opportunities also allowed me to extend my intellectual community beyond UC, Irvine, and engage with admired colleagues and professors such as Gabriela Nouzeilles, Eduardo Cadava, Ignacio Sánchez-Prado, and María del Rosario Acosta. Their valuable feedback, intellectual dialogue, mentorship, critical discussions, and informal dialogue played a pivotal role in both the crafting of this dissertation and my overall scholarly growth.

I also extend my appreciation to the administrative staff in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and Graduate Division at UC, Irvine. The expertise and assistance of Courtney Hemenway, Linda Truong Lee, Amy Fujitani, Arielle Hinojosa, and Geneva López-Sandoval were invaluable, particularly in navigating the intricacies of being an international student.

The last three years of my PhD journey were significantly marked by challenging circumstances, including the covid-19 global pandemic and the largest Academic Student Workers Strike in the University of California system's history. Amidst these events and beyond, I found a supportive community of friends. Their companionship, collaboration, hope, and sincere love made my journey possible. Without them, my experience would have been vastly different, and for their presence, I am eternally grateful.

I extend gratitude to my cohort members, Alejandra Castellanos and Jeanie Toscano, for their solidarity through the years. To my friends Lucía Cash, whose endless tarot readings and spiritual guidance helped me explore my own spiritual expansion and navigate uncertain times. To Ángeles Torres-Méndez for her constant uplifting and overall disposition to foster friendships through shared enjoyment, is admirable. To Martha Torres-Méndez, my dear friend with whom I shared early ideas about Mexican art and motherhood, I am grateful. LASA Barcelona in 2018 was unforgettable. Juan Marcos Villahoz has been a wonderful friend, always ready to be part of our family. To Mell Rivera-Díaz and his commitment to poetry and artistic creation has been motivating and refreshing. To Blanca García for her presence and generous listening, also a friend I will miss.

I am very grateful to Gwen Pare, whose invitation to join the research group *Performance in the Wake of the Political* was a great motivation for my personal and intellectual growth. Her generosity, care, and collaborative spirit have been encouraging. I also appreciated the weekly writing sessions with her and Elena Cardona, as well as the grading meetings with her and Ángeles Torres-Méndez. These regular interactions made my weeks more enjoyable and gave me something to look forward to.

I was fortunate to find friends in various departments at UC, Irvine, who significantly enriched my academic journey. I am particularly grateful to Carlos Colmenares Gil, Pragma

Trivedi, and John-David-Settel. To Anna Setyaeva, for being a sister away from home, for her unconditional support, love, and care. I am forever indebted to her. To Giulia Napolitano, who graciously opened her home to us in Italy, serving as a shining example of a remarkable scholar and an inspiring woman. And to Javiera Letelier and Julieta. Sharing the journey of motherhood with them over the past years has been an extraordinary experience where I understood the importance of communal care.

To my friends in Colombia and around the world, Sara Malagón and José Londoño, I thank you for your freedom and intelligence. Alejandro Martínez deserves a special place here. Alejandro has been an incredible friend and colleague. With him I knew the potentials of collaborative thinking and unconditional friendship while also navigating the difficulties in academia. For all the conference panels and, for all those projects to come, I am deeply grateful.

Before my journey at UC, Irvine, several professors at the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá encouraged and supported my pursuit of a doctoral degree. I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to Camilo Hernández-Castellanos, Claudia Montilla, Carolina Alzate, Mario Barrero, and María Mercedes Andrade. Their inspiration during my formative years were fundamental and has greatly enriched my doctoral experience.

Outside of the academic sphere, I extend my gratefulness to Elaine Clough. Her support and guidance in navigating motherhood and personal growth have been truly transformative. Her wisdom and encouragement were vital during challenging times.

I am immensely thankful with Shayna Brereton and Natalia Alvira, who with great love and dedication helped me take care of Cora while I was writing this dissertation and finishing my degree.

To my family, my dearest sister Sofía, with whom I have weaved an alternative family. I miss her daily. To my mom, and my grandmother for all the right choices they made.

To my in-laws - Pilar, Tin tin, Roberto, Cata, Caro, and Mini, for their limitless presence and support.

My deepest gratitude goes to José María, my partner and best friend. His love, admiration, passion, and endless curiosity have been a constant source of strength and freedom. Without him and his devoted care to Cora this dissertation would have never been possible.

To Cora, the most meaningful piece of this journey and the answer to every puzzle. Her magical existence is simply the best reason to live.

Irvine, 2023

**VITA**  
**ISABELLA VERGARA CALDERÓN**

**EDUCATION** 

---

- 2023      Ph.D. in Spanish and Portuguese, University of California, Irvine  
            \*Emphasis in Critical Theory  
            \*Emphasis in Latin American Studies
- 2018      M.A. in Spanish and Portuguese, University of California, Irvine
- 2015      B.A. in Literature, Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia

**FIELD OF STUDIES** 

---

Latin American Studies    Critical Theory    Contemporary Latin American Literature and Art

**PUBLICATIONS** 

---

- “Eyes and Wings: Graciela Iturbide’s Bird Images,” in *Photographies* 17.1. (Spring 2024)
- “Intervalos Sonoros: hacia una vida íntima de lo común”. in *La rabia: espacio de crítica feminista de cine*, No. 6, mayo 2023.
- “Cecilia Vicuña’s Bodies in Space” in the special issue “*Performance in the Wake*”. In *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3, pp. 1-21, 2022.
- “Performance in the Wake/Cuerpas ante lo político. An Introduction,” co-author and co-editor in the special issue “*Performance in the Wake*”. In *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2022.
- “Flows of breath: Oscar Muñoz’s Unfolding Images”. *Discourse*, 43.2, pp. 286-310, 2021
- Review of “Biopolíticas de la visualidad en la necrópolis contemporánea”, by Javier Guerrero. *Revista Taller de Letras, UC*, no. 67, 2020.
- “Comentarios a Acosta, María del Rosario *Memory and Fragility: Art’s Resistance to Oblivion (Three Colombian Cases)*”. Section “Debate” in the dossier *Filosofía y violencia: Voces femenina*. In *Ideas y Valores Revista colombiana de filosofía*, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2019.

“Towards a Minor Art.” Section “Debate” in the dossier *Filosofía y violencia: Voces femenina*. In *Ideas y Valores Revista colombiana de filosofía*, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2019.

“Sobre el cuerpo y la escritura en las obras *Agua viva* y *Aprendizaje* o *El libro de los placeres* de Clarice Lispector”. Ediciones Uniandes, 2015

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

---

### Instructor of Record

|                    |  |           |
|--------------------|--|-----------|
| <i>Spanish 1A</i>  | Fall 2017                                    | UC Irvine |
| <i>Spanish 1B</i>  | Winter 2018, Fall 2020 (online), Spring 2023 | UC Irvine |
| <i>Spanish 1C</i>  | Spring 2018, Fall 2018                       | UC Irvine |
| <i>Spanish 2A</i>  | Fall 2022                                    | UC Irvine |
| <i>Spanish 2B</i>  | Winter 2019, Spring 2019                     | UC Irvine |
| <i>Spanish 2AB</i> | Summer 2019, Summer 2021 (online)            | UC Irvine |

### Teaching Practicum

|  |             |           |
|--|-------------|-----------|
| <i>Spanish 50 (Online) - Latin American Ecologies</i><br>(Lower-division course with Prof. Viviane Mahieux)    | Spring 2020 | UC Irvine |
| <i>Comparative Literature 60B - Reading with Theory</i><br>(Lower-division course with Prof. Adriana Johnson). | Winter 2020 | UC Irvine |

### Graduate Teaching Assistant

|   |             |           |
|---|-------------|-----------|
| <i>HIS 40C (online) - Modern America, Culture and Power</i> (Prof. Allison Perlman)                       | Spring 2021 | UC Irvine |
| <i>HIS 21B (online) - World History: Empires and Revolutions</i> (Prof. Emily Baum & Prof. Renee Raphael) | Winter 2021 | UC Irvine |

*FMS 85C (online) - History of Broadcast Media and Television* (Prof. Benjamin Kruger-Robbins)

Summer 2020 UC, Irvine

*FMS 85A - Introduction to Film Analysis* (Prof. Glen Mimura)

Winter 2020 UC, Irvine

*FMS 85A - Introduction to Film and Media Studies* (Prof. Kristen Hatch)

Fall 2019 UC, Irvine

### **Undergraduate Teaching Assistant**

*“Ficciones policiales”* (Prof. Camilo Hernández) Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Fall 2014.

*“Un viaje a la literatura moderna”* (Prof. Mario Barrero) Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Fall 2014.

### **Spanish Teacher of Language and Literature**

Colegio Colombo Hebreo (High School), Bogotá, Colombia (AY 2015 - 2016).

### **FUNDING AND AWARDS**

---

2023 Summer Dissertation Fellowship (Graduate Division, UC, Irvine)

2023 Graduate Dean’s Dissertation Fellowship (Graduate Division, UC, Irvine)

2023 Miguel Vélez Fellowship (Graduate Division, UC, Irvine)

2023 Building Intellectual Community, Graduate Student Grant (UC, Irvine)

2023 Building Intellectual Community, Graduate Student Grant (UC, Irvine)

2016-2022 Dean’s Fellowship (School of Humanities, UC, Irvine)

2022 Graduate Student Research and Travel Award (School of Humanities, UC, Irvine)

2022 DTEI Summer Fellowship (UC, Irvine)

2022 The Cortona Friends Association, Summer Fellowship (Federico Faggin Foundation, Italy)

- 2022 Summer School in Critical Theory at EHESS, Paris France (UC, Irvine)
- 2022 DECADE Professional Development Award (UC, Irvine)
- 2022 Pedagogical Fellowship (Division of Teaching Excellence, UC, Irvine)
- 2021 International Student Grant (Graduate Division, UC, Irvine)
- 2020 Summer Grant (Spanish and Portuguese, UC, Irvine)
- 2020 Graduate Student Collaborative Conference Grant (Humanities Commons, UC, Irvine)
- 2020 Miguel Vélez Fellowship (Graduate Division, UC, Irvine)
- 2019 Travel Grant (Spanish and Portuguese, UC, Irvine) for LASA, Boston
- 2018 Graduate Student Collaborative Conference Grant (Humanities Commons, UC, Irvine)
- 2018 Graduate Student Essay Award (Spanish and Portuguese, UC, Irvine)
- 2015 Undergraduate Thesis of Honor at Universidad de los Andes

## CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

---

- 2024 “Cecilia Vicuña’s Ephemeral Writings”  
Paper Presentation at MLA, Philadelphia, PA (January 2024)
- 2023 “Restos epidérmicos: prótesis, visualidad y escritura”  
Paper Presentation at LASA, Vancouver, BC, Canada
- 2023 “Cecilia Vicuña and the Matter of the World”  
Paper Presentation at LASA, Vancouver, BC, Canada
- 2022 “Images in Flux”  
Paper Presentation at *Photographies Conference*, San Antonio, Texas
- 2022 “Ecos del desierto: voz, archivo y escritura”  
Paper Presentation at LASA, virtual
- 2022 “Cuerpos vibrantes, materias sonoras: *Desierto sonoro* (2019) de Valeria Luiselli”

- Paper Presentation at *Mexicanistas*, University of California, Irvine
- 2022 “Vaporous traces: ink, water, dust”  
Paper Presentation at NeMLA, Baltimore, MD.
- 2021 “Ficciones fantasmáticas: escritura, fotografía y enfermedad”  
Paper Presentation at Graduate Student Colloquium, University of California, Irvine
- 2021 “Doble exposición: retratos, autorretratos y fantasmas.”  
Paper Presentation at Simposio *Escrituras y políticas de la mirada en la literatura chilena e hispanoamericana*, Universidad de Chile, virtual.
- 2021 “Tinta, nudos y tejeduras.”  
Paper Presentation at IILLI, virtual.
- 2021 “Metáforas en el espacio: cuerpo, tejido y poesía.”  
Paper Presentation in Roundtable *Performance in the Wake of the Political* at LASA, virtual.
- 2019 “Water Glass: rethinking the river in Graciela Sacco.”  
Paper Presentation at LASA, Boston, MA.
- 2019 “Eyes and Wings: Graciela Iturbide’s Bird Images.”  
  
Paper Presentation at *Mexicanistas*, University of California, Irvine
- 2019 “Towards a Minor Art.”  
Faculty Colloquium *What is Art Doing for You*, at University of California, Irvine
- 2018 “Entre yo y mi aire: una mirada sobre *Aliento* (1997) de Oscar Muñoz.”  
  
Paper Presentation at IILLI, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá Colombia.
- 2018 “Entre la imagen y el cuerpo: *Cortinas de baño* (1985-1986) de Oscar Muñoz.”  
  
Paper Presentation at LASA, Barcelona.
- 2018 “Instantes del cuerpo: Escritura e Imagen en *Farabeuf* (1965) de Salvador Elizondo”  
Paper Presentation at *Mexicanistas*, University of California, Irvine



- 2017 “Entre lo visible y lo invisible: una impresión sobre Ambulatorio (1994) de Oscar Muñoz.”  
Paper Presentation at International Congress: *The Defaced Image: Visual Culture in Contemporary Latin America*. Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia.
- 2017 “Cuerpo y archivo: hacia una política del (con)tacto *En el aire* (2003) de Teresa Margolles”  
Paper Presentation at *Mexicanistas*, University of California, Irvine

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Immaterial Traces: Objects, Archives, Dust (1980-2020)

by

Isabella Vergara Calderón

Doctor of Philosophy in Spanish

University of California, Irvine, 2023

Professor Adriana M. Johnson, Chair

*Immaterial Traces: Objects, Archives, Dust (1980-2020)*, considers the poetics of ephemerality, fragility, and precariousness as forms of disruption and resistance in Latin American contemporary culture. Here I create a corpus of works that use unstable and residual materialities, like anonymous photographs, discarded objects, pieces of words, prosthesis, among others, to create archives that challenge hegemonic forms of understanding. My readings of Graciela Iturbide, Mario Bellatín, Oscar Muñoz, Cecilia Vicuña, Valeria Luiselli and Guillermo Galindo show how their works depart from a context of sociocultural fractures in which memory arises as a privileged cultural site occupied by hegemonic forces. Their work reconceptualizes this memory through an acute attention to materiality. *Immaterial Traces* perceives in these artists a drive to move away from fixed representations of the past and to make memory a site of political struggle. They do so by highlighting the imperfection and impermanence of their works and their open reformulation of aesthetic conventions. In developing the critique proffered by these works—of, for example, the speed of information, the monumentalization of collective memory, and the flattening of experience—this dissertation attends to the remains of what would otherwise be simply imperceptible. Thus, I show how, by recomposing what has been dispossessed, these artists and writers give way to life forces that refigure immediate pasts and potential futures.

## INTRODUCTION

### *The Hidden Archive*

The story I want to sketch out—the question I want to follow—begins with a concern on memory and the past. It begins with a speculative curiosity about the materiality through which memory, its composition, its passage, and its traces comes or not into being, hence, its immateriality. This question follows the tension between the materiality and the immateriality that the forms of memory pose and the possibility to conceive their traces beyond their own constraints on the past. It is grounded on a question of how amidst conflicting times and their aftermaths, Latin American contemporary literary and artistic production can offer alternative sensible surfaces that can tell another story and reframe history, instead of giving a mere account of historical facts. How these alternative surfaces, can problematize binary oppositions between life and death, reference and representation, ethics and politics, history and fiction, realism and modernism. How these surfaces are unstable because they are also a site of encounter in which many looks, gestures, and bodies can be reinscribed as they resist, as they are transformed.

*Immaterial Traces*, focuses on intermedial experiments in contemporary Latin American culture with an emphasis on Chile, Colombia, and Mexico. Highlighting the elusiveness of time's traces, I offer unconventional readings of the production of archival memory in different media and push back on disciplinary boundaries. In conversation with scholars like Ángel Rama, Florencia Garramuño, Jens Andermann, Javier Guerrero, among others, I theorize that by creating narratives that center around quotidian and seemingly insignificant objects, the artists I work with encourage broad audiences to think critically about social forms that seem to be in crisis, i.e., the family; the nation; gender and sexuality. Influenced by the languages of

photography, film and avant-garde principles, artists and writers such as Mario Bellatín, Graciela Iturbide, Oscar Muñoz, Cecilia Vicuña, Valeria Luiselli and Guillermo Galindo produce works that resist fixation, totalization, or closure of the past. In turn, they work from fragile, unstable, and residual materialities such as water, dust, little things, prostheses, sound's whispers and singular stories among others, so as to intervene politically from a place that is indeterminate. Instead of centering on a fixed or pure representation of the past, the corpus I create highlights the materiality of traces as residues of modernity's obsession with progress and economic growth. From discarded objects, they recompose what has been dispossessed, giving way to a life force that creates alternative narratives between the immediate past and potential futures. These "immaterial traces" both veil and reveal the fragmentary and leaky character of material archives that appear to be seemingly permanent objects.

My personal engagement with this topic is deeply rooted in my family history. As the granddaughter of Colombian political victims who were forcibly disappeared 60 years ago due to armed conflict, I have been drawn to themes of the immaterial and ephemeral. Through these themes I have followed the absence and loss that have marked my family's history and, therefore, the im/possible composition of its archival memory. The traces of this story, however, are buried in a family archive that was hidden from me in an attempt to preserve the affective significance of my grandfather's suffering during his years of captivity, as an attempt to preserve a sense of origin and truth.

This archive was composed by the few letters and voice recordings that my grandfather was allowed to send to the family, and family photographs that were sent to him in exchange of this proof. It was a mixture of the correspondence that also documented the process of his failure to survive. In many ways, this archive made me reimagine the ways in which my grandfather's

absent body and its afterlife are part of a composition that could be beyond a work of mourning and its relation to memory.

The letters that composed my family's hidden archive presents an inner tension that is exposed in both the materiality of the letters and their imprint in my own childhood memory. This archive, however, was and remains hidden, to the extent that I have neither touched nor read those letters, nor have I ever heard his voice. It remains hidden as kind of relic, a mystified accumulation of materials that once gave an account of his survival during captivity. As such this archive became a fixed piece in the past, it remains as a ruin of a family history's that could no longer cope with the absence of a body.

The archive, in general, can serve as either a platform for reanimation, breathing new life into stored materialities, or it can function as a tomb, burying the material within. The concept of the archive has been thought by critics like Javier Guerrero who argues that archives are materiality, exteriority<sup>1</sup>, while suggesting that the material condition, the materiality of these archives in their afterlife can challenge hegemony and fixed narratives. The same principle can be applied to my grandfather's hidden archive, although with a twist: this archive, the one I never touched, reinforces a double material absence, that of a body and the absence of a material archive that I could return to.

If life happens each time we return to it, each time we repeat it, as Guerrero argues<sup>2</sup>, with my grandfather's hidden archive I never could repeat his life through the materiality of his letters. In response to this, I reconsidered this lack, and reassembled his archive with the residues that I found from the stories that I was told, from the photographs that I saw in family albums, or

---

<sup>1</sup> Guerrero, *Escribir*, 35. Guerrero primarily focuses on the archives of authors whose works have been considered after their death. However, the same principle can be applied to the hidden archive of my grandfather, even if he didn't imagine his own archive, because he never considered his own death.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

hanging on the walls, from the books he read, from the dust and ashes, from fractured narratives, and the lost lines of communication, that exposed his memorial figure.

The double absence within this archive allowed me to reimagine its mysterious, untouchable, and hidden condition. The archive's absent materiality reemerged through the residues that were also the potential for future composition. This archive, instead of signifying a definitive burial or ending, acted as a site of transformative creation and ongoing discourse, through which I found it possible to paradoxically anchor its "anticipado porvenir."<sup>3</sup> In this other archive, the one I reassembled, lies what Guerrero argues as how the archive could only be conceived after death. My grandfather's hidden archive aligns with this idea, and, simultaneously, proposes a second after death, or the affirmation of a life after death: the proximity to which I decided to approach his absent body, his absent archive, and compose a betrayal to the untouchable and memorial condition of his own death.

The archive that I reimagine is thus transformed into an experience of the body, of the absent body, where metamorphosis, which occurs in the future, after death, as Guerrero argues, becomes the only material possibility for different authorships<sup>4</sup>. Letters and photographs are both materials that work as discursive skins, materials that reproduce as a supplement, so that, if the tomb attempts to let the remains rest in peace, the archive which Guerrero theorizes is one that, on the contrary, requires that these skins never stop mutating, transforming, that their forms never cease to develop, and that they are activated in the contact with critical and lovable hands that destitute subjectivity<sup>5</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Guerrero, *Escribir*, 61.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

While my grandfather's archive initially appears as a stationary relic—a 'tomb' of the past—it is reimagined through the lens of continuous change and dynamism. This perspective suggests that while the physical form of the archive may be preserved and seemingly static, the creative engagement with its immaterial residues can activate a process of transformation and re-authorship. This shifting, ephemeral quality lies at the heart of this dissertation, positioning the hidden archive as more than a static entity, and instead a living model for exploring the tension between material and immaterial traces. The untouched nature of my grandfather's body serves as an immaterial reference point, offering a background upon which it is possible to conceive it in a realm of creative imagination, thereby suggesting alternative ways to engage with the past while considering other life forms from what remains.

From a dual material absence, I reimagined a body's afterlife, its survival, a touch without a touch, or a touch from an outside, from the minor material residues that I encountered and reassembled. Through this hidden archive my grandfather reappears in my life as an inherited ghost. Through my imagination I decide to transgress and betray it. And so I approach this archive from its restless becoming im/material, from its quality of afterlife, through which it can be moved and transformed. To betray this archive is to betray its hidden and untouchable condition, which also means to address it from another place, from alternative sensible surfaces to come.

### *Postmemory, Afterlife and Survival.*

An absent body and its ghostly quality foregrounds the question of memory and inheritance. More specifically, it echoes the concept of "postmemory" as articulated by Marianne Hirsch in the field of Memory Studies. This concept, which has been prominent for many years

following World War II in Hirsch's case, and the post-dictatorship years in Latin American countries, pertains to the subsequent generation that carries the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before. It refers to the experiences this second generation "remembers" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up.

Hirsch's account of postmemory, on a personal level, refers to the experience of writers, visual artists, critics in an autobiographical account that alludes to their memories that have been shaped, however, indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension<sup>6</sup>. On the public level, these indirect recollections are also mediated, as Hirsch notes, by public images and stories that are transmitted to them from overpowering historical events<sup>7</sup>. The traumatic experience that is part of the aftermath of violence that Hirsch notes, however, speaks to an instance of memory that remains in the impossibility to comprehend or attend to these experiences beyond their traumatic and inherited nature.

Contrary to Hirsch's perspective on inherited memory and its incomprehensibility, I perceive the story, the hidden archive, and inherited absence of a body as elements not merely passed down or received as they are. Rather, they require active engagement and reinterpretation. My approach diverges from the peaceful, linear, and legal transfer of an object, the process of which would form an orderly cycle of succession. Instead, I embrace Jacques Derrida's notion of an inheritance that is always the reaffirmation of a debt, but a complex debt: an obligation both to repay and to betray.<sup>8</sup> This perspective calls not only the acceptance of what's been inherited,

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, *Specters*, 114. Even though Derrida's book is focused on the relationship between Marxism and deconstruction, it can be extrapolated to a broader concept of inheritance that deals with tradition if we conceive the structure of the family as a traditional one.



but also its reinterpretation, potentially in ways that diverge from the original intention or understanding; hence, its betrayal. Within the context of this dissertation, I thus choose to inherit this story in a way that actively reimagines, chooses, filters, selects, and translates it.

That said, I engage more with Beatriz Sarlo's account, her discussion of Hirsch's concept of postmemory and her inquiry about the "post" in postmemory as already intrinsic to all memory, her assertion that memory is inherently fragmented. Sarlo posits that memory narratives are not merely stories with missing fragments, but rather embody the complexities and the impossibility of capturing the past in its entirety. Such fragmentariness comes from the emptiness that is in-between memory and what we remember. It is interesting that in Sarlo's formulation, she does not allude specifically to the binary opposition between memory and oblivion that is the site of both collective memory and national history. Sarlo refers to memory and its object, to the emptiness that is at the center of the experience of memory and the possibility to conceive it in spite of all. I thus suggest that we think this possibility further while attending to the unimaginable, despite the inherent difficulties in troubling times.

This dissertation further explores how contemporary Latin American writers and artists produce different types of materialities that rethink a concept of memory as a process of 'doing memory' and life forms no longer conceived in terms of its fixation or attempts to repair past events. I investigate discursive contradictions and paradoxes related to the monumentalization of history, collective memory, death, and violence. The focus of this project understands memory as a site of creative and critical imagination rather than a mere act of recollection. It suggests, perhaps more than ever, the urge for resourceful expressions that can provide other sensible surfaces that can materialize and transform the events that seem to be unspeakable and unnamable.

Under this light, the works of artists and writers that I conceive in this dissertation no longer differentiate between document and fiction, writing and erasure, organic and inorganic matter, but rather question their fixity and situates them in a place of indeterminacy. They present materially fragile and unstable surfaces that challenge incomprehension. This approach allows everyday life events to acquire a life or 'afterlife' of their own. That is, a life that, according to Didi-Huberman emerges in history's discontinuities and overdeterminations<sup>9</sup>. It signifies a form of time where historical events engage with the past's presence within a non-linear temporality.

The afterlife isn't merely a trace outlasting time, but one that emphasizes a form of time that disorients the past, present and future, opening them towards anachronism. Thus, the afterlife can only be adequately grasped if “temporal periods are no longer fashioned according to biomorphic stages, but, instead, are expressed by strata, hybrid blocks, rhizomes, specific complexities, by returns that are often unexpected and goals that are always thwarted.”<sup>10</sup> The afterlife thus subverts historical time and functions more like a Freudian symptom—an 'entangled' temporality addressing a body's plasticity, agitated by conflicts and contradictory movements.<sup>11</sup> This symptom maintains a mobile quality, it forms configurations that remain latent, and, yet, express a capacity to act.

The concept of plasticity is significant in this context as well because it provides sensible surfaces, materialities, and worldly elements the capacity for formation and displacement—allowing for mobility, resistance to fixity, and the production of various forms of critical imagination. Drawing from Catherine Malabou's concept of plasticity—as a medium state

---

<sup>9</sup> Didi-Huberman, *SI*, 12

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

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 198

between elasticity, which denotes an inability to preserve a form, and rigidity, an excessive attachment to a form—allows for both the creation of a figure and the explosion of all form<sup>12</sup>. Consequently, the term challenges any origin that the trace might have about the way past elements resurface in the present.

Within the framework of this dissertation, the concepts of 'afterlife' and 'plasticity' offer a novel lens through which we can conceptualize memory, especially in relation to the tension between the materiality and immateriality of traces. Instead of merely applying these concepts, my analysis focuses on how contemporary Latin American artistic and literary productions provide alternative ways to interpret historical events following critical periods. This perspective transcends neoliberal notions of freedom that often hinge on a vision of redemocratization rooted in collective memory and national history. The aim is not only to provide fresh insights into these historical events but also to critically examine the interplay between memory-making and critical imagination. By acknowledging this movement while exploring other, potentially more elusive and fragile angles, the literary and artistic forms discussed in this dissertation initiate an epistemic shift. Instead of merely documenting past events, they use their residues as minor materialities that emerge as life forms that irrupt in the present.

These forms articulate an understanding of freedom that surpasses neoliberal confines and contemplates a type of plasticity, situating them in a more indeterminate space. This is a realm where cultural forms are simultaneously formless and formed, implying an ongoing cycle of formation and deformation that highlights their liminal state. The transition between fixation

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 25. Malabou articulates this concept of plasticity by also thinking how thought is formed, to what happens when we see a thought in the process of grasping it. Malabou is very critical to Derrida's idea of the trace. She argues that the trace for Derrida falls into the paradigm of the inscription of an idea in the soul as what has determined an order of priority, "according to which the idea is prior to its inscription (*Plasticity*, 292)." The trace in this case is only the result, the "consequence of this precedence. The act of imprinting comes first, and the trace appears as its outcome (292)." Malabou therefore proposes that "plasticity renders the trace illegible because there is no trace".

and distortion, disappearance and emergence, embodies the dynamism where the afterlife can take place.

In memories that operate more like storytelling rather than big national historiographies, the fluidity and plasticity of memory also plays a role. In addition to its residual and spectral characteristics, the ways of doing memory that these literary and artistic productions manifest is one that delves into the intricate complexities of archival memory. It explores how such memory shapes our world and our lived experiences, navigating the nuanced intersections of the personal and historical.

The traces of these memories are not static, indexical, nor exclusively attached to its referent, making them neither purely evidentiary nor memorial. Instead, they operate like an afterlife, or a symptom, that perpetually resists complete interpretation or symbolic translation. The works of artists and writers I explore here provide a space for these traces, where the figurations of bodies, things, and peoples can oscillate between a lack of representation (*sous-exposition*) and an overused, clichéd representation that circulates as a commodity (*sur-exposition*).<sup>13</sup>

As I will develop further, the term "immaterial traces" alludes to these dual movements that disrupt what seems to be absent yet leave an impression of their history in the world. However, these traces do not remain static representations of the past. Instead, they reappear in different places, media, and times as another type of materiality. This understanding of the past resonates with Walter Benjamin's concept of a dialectical image, which suggests that the past can only be seized as a fleeting image, recognized in an instant and then never seen again.<sup>14</sup> This

---

<sup>13</sup> Didi-Huberman in *Peuples Exposés, Peuples Figurants*. L'œil de L'histoires, 4. (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin, "Theses on the philosophy of History" in *Illuminations*, 255. With dialectical here I do not mean it in the phenomenological sense (theses, antithesis, synthesis), but rather as how Benjamin understands it both in the

circulation, rereading, and reappearance of images, texts and sounds is what I identify as immaterial.

This tension between the material and the immaterial, and between absence and presence, is fundamental to our understanding of how literature and art can sift an idea of memory that no longer illustrates exclusively the recent past. It demonstrates how Latin American artists and writers maneuver through their creative processes to encapsulate incomplete memories where the incompleteness is also embedded in their process of creation. By engaging in discontinuous reinterpretation, they shape and reshape memories, permeating them with renewed meaning and form. These creative endeavors thus intervene significantly in the socio-cultural landscapes of Latin America by offering counter-narratives and alternative visions that challenge conventional historical discourses and contribute to a more nuanced, layered understanding of the region's cultural sphere. Throughout their works, these artists and writers create fluid, dynamic, and resonant forms of memories—that echo through time and space, embodying both the material and the immaterial, the past, the present and the future.

The immateriality I allude to also refers to the movement that is in the afterlife of residues, and material objects that move through time and across our cultural horizon, manifesting themselves at different moments and in diverse places. This immateriality follows an

---

“Theses” and the *Arcades Project*. That is an image that is not only seen but recognized. In the *Arcades*, Benjamin says that the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: it is not progression but image, suddenly emergent” (462). This means that Benjamin’s notion of history as image is similar to what he conceives of as storytelling told by the chronicle rather than the historian. For something to be “recognized” it is not enough to see it, but to read it, interpret it without giving an explanation (cause-effect) to it. And in its “recognizability”, that is another name for legibility, “what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation” (*Arcades*, 462). Therefore, to be able to “recognize” is not a question simply of the visual, but a reading between the visual and the linguistic, language and objects. The question of time is then both implicit in the entanglement between past and present, movement and stillness. I do not want to say that to bring the past to the present is to re-write history, which would be the task of historicism that Benjamin criticizes, but rather, to read history against the grain, that is, not just to follow history, but to interrupt its progression, which is like reading history as image, as a scanning rather than in a linear progression.

ephemeral trace; not the precise lines of geometric precision, but something more akin to the blurred, incomplete contours of a vapor trail. Such an ephemeral trace is often elusive, varying in clarity across different contexts, and is most perceptible where it intersects with objects, archives, media, and material forms. It captures the intermittent movements of these things through time and place, leaving a trail that illustrates not only their biographies but also their reemergence in the spaces that both houses and transforms them.

In this regard, the notion of "trace, mark, and inscription" correlates with the temporal dimension of single and multiple archives. These archives activate dualities like absence and presence, memory and impression, writing and erasure. They embody the vital role of literature and art in capturing these intangible yet impactful trajectories of history in the Latin American and Latinx context. By navigating the interstices between these dualities, the works I analyze in this dissertation offer novel ways of thinking about memory, trace, and im/materiality, disrupting linear narratives and reimagining the past and potential futures.

The concept of the afterlife resonates with the trace, as it represents what emerges as a form of survival. Didi-Huberman's reflection on this aspect of survival—exemplified in the metaphor of fireflies—introduces a fresh political dimension to the notion of the afterlife. Drawing from the work and thought of Pier Paolo Pasolini, he juxtaposes the harsh and unbearable light (*luce*) of authority (symbolizing fascism) with the fragile glimmers (*luciole*) of fireflies, which flicker as residues of resistance. Fireflies' existence are uncanny; they seem spectral with their dimly lit, often greenish forms. Yet, paradoxically, they are virtually indestructible. They never wholly disappear but continue to emit a faint, persistent luminescence.

It is in this light that the concept of afterlife also indicates that in our way of imagining lies a fundamental condition of “our way of doing politics.”<sup>15</sup>

Building upon this, the process of seeing the afterlife of things begins from moments of tension. These are instances when memory can be reimagined and reinscribed, only to be allowed to fade once again. It emphasizes those moments when art and literature harbor the potential to render visible that which is unspeakable<sup>16</sup>—the “non-inscribable of memory” in Malabou's terms. This non-inscribable aspect suggests a new structure of responsibility, in which we must stay “in the middle, at the crossing point between the ground and the sky, with the task of producing an understanding of the impossibility of referring to any origin, or even trace of the origin.”<sup>17</sup> This understanding expresses the notion of plastic responsibility—the capacity to respond to the void of any preliminary question, to bear witness in the absence of witnesses.

---

<sup>15</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Survival*, 84.

<sup>16</sup> Critics such as Nelly Richard have highlighted the transformative role of artistic interventions during the post-dictatorial years of Pinochet's regime in Chile. In her book, *Márgenes e Instituciones*, Richard explores the art movement by “La escena de avanzada” that emerged between 1977 and 1984. The artworks from these years dwelled in a state of tension, being at risk of absorption by the authoritarian regime's repressive narratives while also resisting the ideological demands of party-affiliated culture. These works by “la avanzada” challenged both totalizing forces, emphasizing the ambiguity and multiplicity of aesthetic signifiers and offering a multidimensional understanding of events. Post-coup Chile saw a disruption of clear, transcendent historical narratives. As Richard asserts, the only remnants were histories marred by deceit and failure. Neither the official narrative of the rulers nor the counter-narrative of the ruled could provide a consistent interpretative framework for the cultural subject. This tension gave rise to a cultural milieu marked by the pain and dissatisfaction generated from the collision of these competing histories during a period of societal fragmentation. The ruling regime imposed its repressive narrative while the victims upheld a grand narrative of national-popular resistance. Despite its monumental depiction, this latter narrative hid inconsistencies within its own meaning. *Márgenes*, 15. In the context of this scene, artists like Eugenio Dittborn, whose work is based on found photographs, is an example of a dwelling in a place of indeterminacy, where memory can be conceived beyond death, trauma and oblivion. As Richard explains, by transferring photographs from one referential field to another, Dittborn interconnects the sources of these found images, recombining their links with history: *he disassembles and reassembles the faulty archives until the effect of them becomes legible*. He reinterprets the national memory through photographic omissions in popular portraits and everyday scenes until traumatic repression is lifted. However, Dittborn was particularly concerned with deconstructing the myth of photographic objectivity based on the referential illusion of sense transparency that naturalizes the message, revealing the network of conventions - montage procedures and composition techniques - that mediate the perceptive deciphering of the image

<sup>17</sup> Malabou, 296.

Within the framework of this dissertation, this conceptualization of the afterlife as fireflies—in relation to the immaterial traces—provides an avenue to comprehend the non-linear, fleeting, and transformative nature of memory in its inherent ability to resist, survive, and reinterpret history within the realms of Latin American and Latinx contemporary art and literature. It inspires the possibilities of these cultural forms to create sensible surfaces where memories as storytelling can be inscribed only to be transformed. In that sense, this dissertation conceives of memory as a site of passage where traces are no longer preservations of the past that outlast times, but that can instead be mobilized, displaced, formed, and deformed. It thinks about ways of doing memories that question ideological limitations that fix it within official discourses, which often take shelter in the historical greatness of monuments or in the sacralization of archives that retain historical traumas.

Building on these debates, this dissertation engages with the alteration of coordinates and the reshaping of what is thought of as unimaginable. Here I speculate that what is unspeakable can be explored through the lens of the incomplete, the blurred, or what might be thought of as an out-of-focus. This perspective pays attention to the seemingly trivial materialities that serve as what is ephemeral, fragile and precarious in the world. Instead of presenting a fetishized icon that constricts interpretation, this perspective fosters openness through the unstable characteristic of these forms.

It proposes to think from what seems to be “unspeakable” and “undecipherable” that is beyond static memory, grief, and trauma. It offers an alternative way of thinking from what seems impossible to articulate; it offers, instead, new sensible surfaces in which this impossibility can signify and inform our world and experience. I call this alternative “Immaterial Traces”, to evoke a question on memory that is much more anachronical and impermanent. It is a



concern with the past as something that is no longer is an inert thing to be found and then be told or not. It conceives the past not as something factual and datable but as a movement of what it remembers. It aims for a certain look into things that suppresses hierarchies between relevant and irrelevant facts and access, an acute look into things that are left from the past, an undiscipline. It is related to an idea of memory that is open to many possibilities, to permeable ways in which memories are constructed and created and that allows them to be both contested and liberated from their own permanence.

### ***Immaterial Traces***

*Immaterial traces* considers contemporary literary and artistic practices in Latin America and Latinx contexts that, through their intermedial characteristics, are permeated by a sense of fragility, ephemerality and precariousness in the last four last decades of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The artistic production of these years occurs in a context of multiple fractures in the political and sociocultural spheres. These include post-dictatorships, both military and paramilitary violence, the rise of neoliberalism, drug trafficking, and renewed forms of extractive neocolonialism. It was also the periods of dysfunctional democracies that, in their attempt to recover through transitional discourses, they tried to affirm their pacts of governance that have controlled the production of both memory and oblivion.

In response to the aftermaths of these events, that were particular to each Latin American country, the works of artists and writers that I analyze here produced a versatile register of resistance against neocolonial and neoliberal powers. This dissertation thus focuses on the period of the 1980's towards the first two decades of the 2000's but recognizes elements from the neo-avant garde literary and artistic movements of the 60's and 70's in Latin America. Critics like

Andrea Giunta have argued that the sixties are characterized as a period in which the urge to fuse art and politics that produced a a more direct anti-intellectual and anti-institutional critique and a redefinition of the traditional concept of a “work of art” through happenings, collages and assemblages<sup>18</sup>.

Since the 70s and 80s, in Latin American literature and art tended more to a dissolution of limits and frontiers. During these years, with the emergence of conceptual art<sup>19</sup>, artists and writers produced experimental practices that, instead of being foundational to contemporary art, they proposed alternatives towards the idea of an autonomy of art with a more direct use of materials found in the everydayness. However, the current expansion of discourse calls for a reconsideration. During at least the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, these practices can also be seen in literature, especially self-declared experimental literature.

This experimentation, which is also an experimentation with forms, was less about persistently fitting events into the vessel of history, and more about questioning their forms and the roles they play within it. This critique allows us to analyze the anachronisms and discontinuities of historical discourse - its fragments and residues- and to re-engage their capacity to disturb the logic of the 'verified facts'.

Building upon these observations, this dissertation delves into the nuanced ways in which the varied landscapes of Latin America's cultural production from that era subtly resurface in the practices of writers and artists. These artists and writers challenge the shape and narrative of an official history that blur the lines between original and copy, document and fiction, writing and

---

<sup>18</sup> Giunta, *Vanguardias*, pg. 22. The success of contemporary art practices in placing local Latin American episodes within global narratives, challenging the dominant geographies of art, is exemplified by numerous artists. Figures such as Hélio Oiticica, León Ferrari, Lygia Clark, Alberto Greco, Luis Camnitzer, Cildo Meireles, Oscar Bony, and Artur Barrio, or collective efforts like 'Tucumán Arde' (1968) and 'Arte de los medios' (1966), have become essential references in most recent accounts tracing Conceptualism's transcontinental origins, as argued by Miguel López in López, M. (2010). ¿How do we know what Latinamerican conceptualism looks like? *Afterall Journal*, 23, pp. 5-21

<sup>19</sup> See Luis Camnitzer *Conceptualism in Latin America*. (2008)

erasure. In this exploration, written, visual, and sonic narratives reformulate associations, and disassociations of the mediums themselves, aiming to create diverse forms of storytelling that lay bare their own materialities.

Yet, this practice of interweaving different mediums is not an entirely recent phenomenon. From the avant-garde movements of the 1960s in Latin America, dialogues have been ongoing between photography and literature, photobooks, and ekphrastic practices. Authors such as Julio Cortázar, Salvador Elizondo, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, and others have employed literature as both a space and medium, where images and words recirculate, generating alternate narratives, birthing a different type of archival and documentary practice, or denouncing mechanisms of censorship. Critics like Florencia Garramuño, Josefina Ludmer, Jens Andermann, and Javier Guerrero, among others, have framed these practices around specific conceptualizations.

For example, Andermann has analyzed the non-specificity in the creative act that can be explained as: “una transversalidad a partir del material mismo y en la confluencia de un mismo nivel espacio-temporal de “actos” que se desprenden de su proveniencia plástica, poética, escultural o fotográfica en la medida en que van coincidiendo en un único plano-acción.”<sup>20</sup> Garramuño, on other hand, have also explained this non-specificity of art under what she calls “Estéticas de la no pertenencia”. She positions these practices as extending beyond literature, wherein writing appears in formats and media like cinema, theatre, or artistic installations, often alongside other art languages.<sup>21</sup> Based on the works of Brazilian artist Nuno Ramos, Garramuño calls *Frutos extraños*—the artist’s work title—to contemporary artistic practices that are an ever-

---

<sup>20</sup> Andermann, *Tierras en trance*, 249

<sup>21</sup> Garramuño, *Mundos en común*, 15.

growing amount of texts, installations, films, plays, that are like “unexpected fruits,” difficult to categorize and define, betting on diverse mediums and forms, unexpected mixtures and combinations, leaps and loose fragments, marks and dislocations of spaces of origin, of genres – in all senses of the term – and disciplines – among many other dislocations; these practices seem to share a common discomfort with any specific definition or any category of belonging in which to comfortably settle<sup>22</sup>. Fundamentally agile and dynamic practices, they traverse the landscape of contemporary aesthetics with various figures, often difficult to grasp, of non-belonging. Neither here nor there, neither from one place nor another, neither in one practice nor another, some of these works balance on ephemeral or precarious support; others exhibit an exploration of vulnerability with radical consequences; in others, even the intense nomadism and constant movement of spaces, places, subjectivities, affections or emotions result in operations that are repeated over and over again.

I further analyze the myriad relationships and interactions between textual, verbal, and sonic mediums that altered the literary and artistic output in an era that can be described as post-memorial and increasingly technological, as seen in contemporary practices. This new era poses the idea that mediums are dynamic and mutable, able to transform without completely losing their specificity, that is, without losing entirely their own contours, and yet, being located in an indeterminate space where they can mingle and morph with other forms. The condition of this "post" period has influenced not just the ways of seeing, but also the modalities of writing and listening, integrating visual arts into its system of decoding and deciphering<sup>23</sup>. For example, by

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> An example of this is how in Latin America there are many instances of dialogues between images and writing that have transformed the uses through which both media find their material relations. In the book *Photography and Writing in Latin America*, Marcy E. Schwartz and Mary Beth Tierney-Tello expose some of these examples. From collaborative photobooks like Diamela Eltit's and Paz Errázuriz's *El infarto del alma*, to the writings of poets like Cecilia Vicuña and Raúl Zurita, among others, writing can also present reflections that are related to visual media from a historical, theoretical, or perceptive perspective. In a more general sense, these writers used technological

presenting writing within alternative formats, these artists and writers challenge the structure and narrative of official history, tinkering with the visible and invisible threads of fiction, and the indistinguishable gap between original and copy, document and power. They have also redefined the conventional concept of a "work of art" through techniques such as happenings, collages, and assemblages.

While the '60s and '70s marked an era of formal and conceptual experimentation in the production of literature and art in Latin America, we can extend our lens beyond this period to incorporate the production of words, images, and sounds in a distinctly post-memorial era. As Guillermina de Ferrari and Mariano Siskind discuss, traditional perspectives that were once instrumental in understanding the cultural-political stakes of the Latin American literary tradition - from the nation-building process to various phases of the modernization project between the 1920s and 1970s – are no longer sufficient. Therefore, we must rethink how cultural artifacts contribute to our worldly experience and allow us to explore the fragile boundaries between disciplines and forms shaping the field of Latin American literature and culture.

The advent of new technologies, the influence of market forces, porous national borders, and the pervasive sense of crisis - whether environmental, political, or humanitarian - that characterizes our present have only made these boundaries more fragile<sup>24</sup>. Nevertheless, as I elaborate further in this dissertation, the crises that surfaced in the post-avant-garde era have enabled us to reassess this idea of fragility, instability, and indiscipline of formal boundaries. They have made us consider how these categories are also spaces where artists and writers can resist fixation, totalization, or closure of the past.

---

media sometimes in an ekphrastic mode, but at other times the media were explicitly mentioned, no longer as descriptions of images, but as a real thing that is recorded as part of a narrative style. Other times, media are just suggested as a metaphor or a material thing inserted in texts.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

The body of works I examine underscore the tension between fixity and impermanence through which they show that it's no longer enough to view cultural artifacts solely as testaments to past events or established realities. Instead, I consider how these works can actively construct and shape our world. Therefore, in this dissertation I depict a different sense of fragility—one that contrasts with the instability engendered by market forces and globalization. I analyze how this corpus of works operate from a place of indeterminacy, urging us to constantly reconsider their formations and recognize that we cannot fully possess them.

This sense of indeterminacy relates to the vision of critical figures such as Josefina Ludmer, Jean Franco, Sylvia Molloy, and Nelly Richard, who anticipated the need for new vocabularies and frameworks to produce cultural forms, especially when contemplating the turn of the new century in Latin America. They saw this turn as a myriad of temporal and spatial crossings—an in-between space involving constant displacement and the creation of narratives and histories. In this infinite proliferation of borders, a different vocabulary comes to light, leading to a unique reading machine encompassing concepts like flow, speed, capitalism, intersections, positionalities, crossings, margins, excesses, and chaos.<sup>25</sup> These spaces contribute to the dissolution of "the nation" and nation-states, advocating instead for a reimagined internal redistribution. The contemporary writers and artists I examine reflect this shift—they respond to the prevailing openness and crisis from a shared platform of indeterminacy. It's within this liminal, or in-between, space that they find the latitude for redefinitions through alternative forces of creation.

Working within this framework, Josefina Ludmer examines recent shifts in the global socio-cultural environment that have fundamentally altered traditional modes of literary creation

---

<sup>25</sup> Ludmer, *Culturas de fin de siglo*, pg.10.

and interpretation. Ludmer introduced the term “literaturas postautónomas” to describe contemporary literary works that emerge from a realm where traditional dichotomies such as literature versus non-literature or reality versus fiction are no longer relevant. Instead, these literatures embed themselves in quotidian reality to “fabricar presente.” Such works signify the end of literary autonomy in an era dominated by “transnational book corporations and book offices in large radio, TV, and other media chains.”<sup>26</sup> This transformative period presents new conditions for the production and distribution of books, consequently altering traditional practices of reading and writing.

Other critics, such as Reinaldo Laddaga, locate the distinct characteristics of contemporary Latin American narratives in how authors like César Aira, Reinaldo Arenas, and Mario Bellatín, among others, use form as a means of exploring different aesthetic possibilities rooted in flux, randomness, and fragmentation. Unlike traditional literature that perceives the “work of art” as a polished and static entity, these authors present unfinished stories that embrace their own flaws and transitory nature, focusing on the unstable aspects in the creation of literature that eschew resolution or explanation. Such texts are characterized by a profound sense of disintegration, failure, and dissolution.

In this context, Laddaga asserts that “all literature aspires to the condition of contemporary art,”<sup>27</sup> implying that authors like Bellatín are shifting away from creating representations of specific aspects of the world or proposing abstract designs that result in fixed objects. Instead, they aim to construct mechanisms for the exhibition of world fragments. For these authors, the allure of contemporary art lies in how artists employ their practices to showcase works that reveal its processes or trajectory.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ludmer, “Literaturas postautónomas”,

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Under this light, these authors consider the printed word as merely one medium among many, one which embodies sketches and erratic fragments that the author curates in relation to what she discovers and captures in each moment. These contemporary literary works in Latin American show how authors embody a type of writing that, as Paola Cortés Rocca also exposes, function as the material, process, and theme of writing all at once. In the era of digital reproduction, these writings enact a capture similar to that of a snapshot, making all stages of their composition visible as part of the overarching process.<sup>28</sup> They no longer uphold a linear progression from a neatly packaged beginning to end, but instead embrace a state of continual flux and development, mirroring the fluid and complex nature of contemporary reality.

This fluid, non-linear approach transitions seamlessly into the continually changing landscape of contemporary literary and artistic works. These works seem to be undergoing a transformation that empowers not only the reader-spectator but also prospective writers and artists to emerge as potential authors. A similar process is evident in Graciela Montaldo's exploration of César Aira's narrative in *Juego de los mundos*. This narrative presents a world of virtual reality where "intelligent systems transform literature into wordless images; the written words dissipate once machines have processed them." Despite this transformation, all books retain the potential to be rewritten. Therefore, the opportunity for literature's reinvention remains—a reinvention that signifies both the inception and conclusion of the universe.<sup>29</sup>

This world envisions a utopia of literature accessible to all, where everyone has the means to create novels or produce works of art, thus turning everyone into a writer or an artist. Such a production, in its "pure state," signifies an avant-garde move, making everyone a writer and an artist to challenge the institution, eliminate privileges and obliterate determinations of

---

<sup>28</sup> Cortés Rocca, "Poéticas de lo residual," 3. My translation.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



value. This may solely be a utopian and radical proposition, an aspiration to democratize art with the sole intent of exposing processes.<sup>30</sup> This is particularly relevant in a setting where "new" literature seems to be enthralled by the allure of new technologies.

However, as illuminated by Montaldo, authors like Aira do not merely revert to a simplistic pre-technological understanding of literature. Instead, they innovate and transform literary practices in response to the wave of the technological boom. Montaldo labels these types of aesthetics as "primitivism" in a broader context—an aesthetic strategy specifically formulated to reorient literary works within the new cultural landscape sculpted by technological progress.

Montaldo presents the notion of "primitivism" as an exploration for a platform that allows reflection on the means of production—where past and present exist simultaneously. Within this framework, "new forms enable us to examine both 'how we arrived at this point' and their implications on aesthetic practices." In this context, the term "new" transcends mere innovation or the development of fresh practices. It functions as a conduit for understanding how certain authors use new technologies while simultaneously questioning them. Furthermore, these authors ingeniously embed within their reflections a form of memory that traces various phases of production. They transform their literary works into palimpsests, retaining these layers of memory in a cumulative fashion.

In the context of this dissertation, these layers of memory embedded in literary works can be seen as "Immaterial Traces"—ephemeral, fragile, and precarious imprints left by the process of literary production. This conceptual framework emphasizes not the sturdy permanence of a fixed literary form but the fleeting manifestations of its formation and dissolution in response to cultural and technological shifts. The focus is not solely on the final product but on the traces of

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

its creation that take and assume alternative routes, sensible surfaces and materialities. This perspective aligns with the dissertation's central themes of ephemerality, fragility, and precariousness, enhancing our understanding of the mutable nature of literary and artistic practices in the contemporary, technologically advanced world.

### ***The Works: Collectors, Writers, Mediators***

The literary and artistic works that I analyze in this dissertation are produced in a dialogue between Latin American writers and artists that create tensions within disciplinary and national boundaries, and who incorporate broader theoretical debates about materiality and immateriality, memory and oblivion, writing and erasure. I assemble a corpus of works where these writers and artists use unstable and residual materialities, such as anonymous photographs, discarded objects, prosthesis, pieces of words, murmurs, whispers, dust, to generate archives that challenge hegemonic forms of understanding. Highlighting the elusiveness of time's traces, I offer an analysis of the production of archival memory in different media. In my analysis, I show how artists and writers address memory as a privileged cultural site occupied by normative forces, and how they reconceptualize this memory through an acute attention to materiality. Recomposing what has been dispossessed, as residues, allowS them to undertake subtle, everyday actions to navigate, resist, and subvert normative forms.

This dissertation comprises four chapters, each examining distinct aspects of artistic and literary production in relation to the central themes of fragility, ephemerality, and precariousness. Chapter One delves into the interconnected nature of photography and writing in the dual publication, *El baño de Frida Kahlo/Demerol sin fecha de caducidad* (2008), by Mexican artists Mario Bellatín and Graciela Iturbide. This work juxtaposes Iturbide's photographic series, *El*

*baño de Frida Kahlo*, with Bellatín's fictional text, *Demerol, sin fecha de caducidad*. Iturbide's photographs capture intimate objects found in Kahlo's bathroom, such as prosthetics, orthopedic braces, and medications like the painkiller Demerol. In Bellatín's text, the character of *frida kahlo* (deliberately in lower case) narrates her life posthumously, thereby generating unexpected intersections between Bellatín's and Kahlo's respective oeuvres. This chapter explores the reinterpretation of Frida Kahlo's figure by these artists as a possible framework for perception and exhibition, enabling a dialogue between writing, photography, and prosthetics. I envision this relationship through the lens of prosthetics as a dual movement between replacement and addition, absence and excess, articulating a potential "life" in the "after life" of Kahlo. To contemplate prosthetics in this sense implies deconstructing what we understand as verbal and visual experience, opening ourselves to the tactile and other senses, towards an extension that encompasses a different experience of seeing, writing, and touching the materiality of the book.

Chapter Two focuses on three influential works by Colombian artist Oscar Muñoz: *Aliento* (1994), *Lacrimarios* (2001), and *Biografías* (2002). Known for permeating his work with elements of photography, film, and avant-garde principles, Muñoz's repertoire frequently employs photographic citations from a collection of anonymous subjects. These images, often discarded from newspaper obituaries, flea markets, or personal albums, serve as the foundation of his archival practice. Muñoz situates these images within a context that resists immediate temporal interpretation. In doing so, he defies the rapid speed of information characteristic of a capitalist age of production and challenges the static nature often associated with photography. His work, instead, brings to the forefront the fleeting moments of everyday life that typically go unnoticed. This chapter also highlights the dialectic of materiality and immateriality that these three works by Muñoz express. Each piece exemplifies a different aspect of the image,

materialized through the fragile, and yet persistent mediums of breath, tears, and rubble. These serve to create poetic expressions, illuminating the ephemeral qualities of images. First, the image as breath in *Aliento* (1994) is an image that reconsiders its vitality, as ephemeral as human breath, highlighting its fleeting, transient nature. It reflects a sense of shared intimacy between the viewer and the artwork, bringing forth a personal and yet communal engagement with the image. Secondly, the image as tears in *Lacrimarios* (2001) inhabits a three-dimensional sphere where the image's materiality takes on corporeal properties. This provides it with the transformative yet subtle power inherent to tears, referring to and transcending the confines of grief and mourning. Finally, the image as rubble in *Biografías* (2002) holds the duality of destruction and decay while carrying the promise of regeneration and re-emergence, just as rubble does. This metaphor underscores the complex dialectics of creation and destruction, permanence and transience that are intrinsic to the life of images in Oscar Muñoz's work at large.

Chapter Three delves into the visual poetry of Chilean poet and artist Cecilia Vicuña, specifically examining her works: *Precarious* (1983), *Palabrarmás* (1984), and "Palabra e hilo" (1996). Vicuña employs ritualistic elements and oral traditions in her poetry, utilizing intermediality to challenge traditional writing methodologies and expose official narratives reinforcing social hierarchies. Her use of textiles and found objects ties poetry to other forms of media, proposing an alternative, weaving-based grammar that encapsulates the materiality of the world. This chapter critically analyzes Vicuña's portrayal of the "precarious" and her concept of "arte precario" as modes of creation. I argue that Vicuña's engagement with discarded and elementary materials fosters a unique relationality that underscores the open-ended nature of the process, residing at the intersection of writing, weaving, and orality, thereby suggesting

innovative modes of perception and memory-making. I reevaluate Vicuña's precarious art through three interconnected movements permeating her work: "The matter of things", "The matter of words", and "The matter of acts as processes". "The matter of things" examines Vicuña's initial characterization of her "precarious objects", drawing a link between discarded objects and her notion of "precarious art". This connection invites a reinterpretation of the objects' materiality, beyond mere commodities or industrial byproducts, acknowledging them as part of a creative process wherein poetry adopts unexpected roles. In "The matter of words", the chapter centers on Vicuña's *Palabrarmás* and her dynamic use of language that brings words to life. This movement transforms words into elements that both unify and distinguish the three primary languages in her work: Spanish, English, and Quechua. In the final movement, "The matter of acts as processes", I refocus the notion of "precarious art" through her poem "Palabra e hilo". Here, the poem is recontextualized as a container for words and threads, embodying active materials interwoven through dual processes of weaving and writing. In this context, the focus on processes highlights a creative progression that emphasizes the form and the formlessness of things, driven by intensity and desire rather than a definitive appearance in the world.

Chapter Four dives into an analysis of Valeria Luiselli's novel, *Lost Children Archive* (2019), and the unique artistic practice of Mexican American artist Guillermo Galindo, who reimagines objects found along the US-Mexico border into musical instruments. This chapter unfolds in two interconnected parts, each accentuating the transformative power of echoes in narrating the migrant experience.

In the first part, I examine Luiselli's novel, which tells the story of a family's roadtrip from New York City to Arizona. Throughout this journey, the wife and the husband engage in individual sonic projects: the wife documents the "lost" auditory traces of children who've

crossed the border, while the husband is on a quest to document the "lost" sounds of the Apaches indigenous community. Through the figure of the echo, I analyze how it appears as two different narrative voices that tell the *same* story, embodied by the characters of the woman and the boy. Through the sound of their voices while reading the *Elegies* "out loud," the migrant's stories become present, rescuing them from the vestiges of the past. Rather than a repetitive recapitulation, the echo allows the reshaping of the archive into a trans-historical entity. Like resonant vibrations, these voices can traverse temporal boundaries, suggesting that echoes can redefine the relationship between sound and the archive, and their roles in the production of memory. The second part of the chapter explores Galindo's musical creations. His works, as showcased in pieces like *Voces del desierto* (2012) and the musical scores within the hybrid creation, *Border Cantos* (2016), a collaboration with American photographer Richard Misrach, demonstrate the transformation of migrant voices into an ephemeral and, yet, material form of sound. I interpret Galindo's musical compositions, created from the personal artifacts of migrants, as echoes. Across both parts, this chapter underscores how both Luiselli and Galindo resignify the traces of anonymous migrants by staging relations among their voices, the archives where they figure, and writing, using the echo as their primary tool. I analyze the echo as an afterlife of "lost" sounds and voices, as referred to in Luiselli's novel, and as a potential reverberation in the instruments that Galindo creates from the migrants' personal belongings. These distinct manifestations of the echo allow me to reconsider the possibilities and limitations of documentation and archival compositions.

This dissertation critically examines this corpus of works that strategically repositions artistic and literary practices, not as static objects but as processes of creation engaged in fluid

and open dialogues with other medial forms. The body of work that I select here shares distinct, recurring features, broadly defined under the following categories.

First and foremost, the artists and writers that I analyze are, in one way or another, collectors. Their creative processes center significantly on the act of collecting - a practice that forms a pivotal component in the composition of their works. This collective act consequently transfigures their works into mobile archives, serving as potential sensible surfaces for alternative memories and lives to come. Thus, this dissertation argues that their artistic and literary practices move beyond mere object creation, to establishing dynamic interactions with the world, generating meaning, and the potential for continual reinterpretation.

This distinctive propensity towards collecting aligns with Walter Benjamin's characterization of collectors as people who liberate objects from their conventional utilitarian contexts, often synonymous with commercial exchanges. In his essay, "Unpacking My Library," Benjamin depicts collectors as those who provide objects with fresh connotations and significance, detaching them from the regularity of commodity fetishism.<sup>31</sup> He portrays collecting as a practice that borders the chaos of memories, indicating an intrinsic link between the collector's passion and memory's innate disorder.<sup>32</sup>

The allure in Benjamin's act of unpacking his library is not solely caused by the fact that objects or books are reunited and accumulated. It also comes from the characteristic that in their own singular nature, each object is able to reanimate the experiences associated with it.

---

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin's notion of the collector is in line with Marx's critique of commodity fetishism - the idea that in a capitalist society, the social relationships between people are expressed as relationships between things. The collector, in Benjamin's conception, disrupts this by forming personal, emotional relationships with objects, thus countering their commodification.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin, "Unpacking", 60.

Simultaneously, each object carries a possible life in motion, an afterlife, and carries the potential to influence other lives and experiences.

Given the critical role that the act of collecting plays in shaping the works I examine in this dissertation, the transformative quality Benjamin attributes to it provides an insightful lens through which we can understand these creators' practices. It allows us to perceive their works not just as static pieces of art or literature but as a fluid reverberations and reanimations of elements capable of informing and transforming our understanding and experience of the contemporary Latin American world.

Secondly, these artists and writers grapple with the notion of the archive, developing archival compositions that refute its inherent institutional connotations. Their interaction with the concept of the archive mirrors and simultaneously contests the palimpsestic method they employ. Traditionally, a palimpsest is a manuscript or piece of writing and visual material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing but of which traces of the original remain. The term has been borrowed and applied in various disciplines, such as archaeology, architecture, and literary studies, often to denote an object or place that reflects its own history in partial layers or traces of the past, even as the new replaces the old.

Within the realm of cultural memory and modernity, theorists like Andreas Huyssen use the palimpsest metaphor to explore the intricate layers of historical memory embedded within urban landscapes. In his book *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Huyssen investigates the development and alterations of public memory within urban contexts, employing the idea of a palimpsest to depict how distinct historical periods overlay each other within these settings. His attention is directed towards how memory is inscribed in architectural structures, monuments, urban spaces, among others. Huyssen takes a keen interest in the frictions



between local and national memories, as well as the dichotomy of remembering as preservation versus remembering as mourning. In this scenario, a palimpsest proves a fitting metaphor to comprehend the dynamic, layered nature of collective memory and the remnants left behind by various historical periods.

Yet, the unique literary and artistic works from the artists and writers here, propose an alternate comprehension of the palimpsest. Predominantly, Huyssen's palimpsestic view overlooks the inherent power dynamics embedded in a process that encompasses both erasure and inscription. It implies that past 'inscriptions' are detectable or restorable. Conversely, my analysis explores how these artists and writers diverge from this notion of retrieving what has been forfeited. They recommend considering the transformation of memory into a fictional narrative, a sonic archive, or a creative process as a mechanism that no longer inscribes to recover what has been lost, but rather inscribes to transform.

The primary focus of these artists and writers isn't the completion of memory work, but rather the continuous process of creating innovative artistic and literary compositions that reassess and redefine historical and commodified narratives. Additionally, they contest the rigidity and static notion of memory as preservation conventionally associated with both the concepts of the archive and the palimpsest concepts. They illustrate a temporality that is based more on the concept of time-image that no longer follows a before and after (as with succession), as if things were happening in time, but rather how new forms of coexisting, ordering and transformation are possible.<sup>33</sup> They allude to the inherent fluidity and fragility in memory's

---

<sup>33</sup> Deleuze, "Mediators", 123. Deleuze's concept of time-image is explored further in *Cinema 2: Time-Image*. In *Cinema 2*: Deleuze argues that cinema transforms space into time. Drawing from Henri Bergson's definition of movement, he argues that classical cinema (movement-image) delivers a false version of it. Cinematic movement is the result of a perceptual illusion, in which time is given because of montage, that is, thanks to successive intervals of movement. Modern cinema (time-image), on the other hand, constitutes a direct representation of time, in which there is a reversal of subordination: movement is subordinated to time and as a result, we find ourselves facing purely optical and auditory situations, to which the main character no longer knows how to react. Deleuze refers

construction, viewing it as an unceasing memory-making process intertwined with artistic creation and critical imagination.

Javier Guerrero's concept of the archive, discussed in his book *Escribir después de morir*, aligns with the fluid memory-making process suggested by the works in this dissertation. Guerrero conceives a triadic relationship involving the body, archive, and text/object, a relation in which the authorial body writes after death, and its writing materializes a body resisting disappearance. Guerrero's concept of the archive is consistently material, containing elements that must be touched, visualized, or fantasized, thus forming an archive that transcends collective memory or established canon. The works I consider here mirror this concept of the archive in their ability to generate tensions within the materials they expose, emphasizing the dynamics of form, context, and memory. They articulate a tactile perspective, reaching out to touch, what Guerrero calls "the physical forms of writing,"<sup>34</sup> that expand to the visual and the sonic and contribute to an ongoing dialogue around the archive's role within art and literature.

Thirdly, every artist and writer explored in this dissertation can be broadly described as a writer, although not all of them use paper as their primary medium of inscription. These creators depart from the concept of *The Lettered City* as discussed by Ángel Rama.<sup>35</sup> In Rama's view, the letter was associated with the concept of "el letrado" because it corresponded to those who were at the service of the state, who had control and power over the written letter and, therefore, were in charge of the symbolic and discursive production of reality.

---

here mainly to neo-realism and cinema-verité, and to filmmakers such as A. Resnais and J.L. Godard (Godard's *Breathless* is a clear example). In this type of films, it is difficult for the viewer to distinguish between what is real in the representation and what is imagined. Godard, for example, is quite critical of objectivism and inverts it by making it completely subjective through descriptions. These "des-criptions" according to Deleuze is the indiscernible point between what is real and what is imagined, "destroying and creating at the same time" (12)"

<sup>34</sup> Guerrero, *Escribir*, 29.

<sup>35</sup> In the construction of the colonial city in Latin America writing was linked to power, the law, and the legal documents that construct a "true" dominant history, as scholar Ángel Rama suggests.

Conversely, the artists and writers featured in this dissertation challenge traditional views of reality that treat the written letter as the exclusive mode of expression that allows for different strategies of legitimacy. I refer to these cultural producers as writers in an expanded sense because their writing practices lean more towards the gesture of writing than the control of the written letter. They embrace a style of writing characterized by its quest for uncertainty over certainty and an approach that echoes Vilém Flusser's ideas in his book, "Gestures". Here, the writing gesture is viewed as a creative act, a "de-structuring" process akin to sculpting,<sup>36</sup> a continual cycle of forming and deforming.

These creators' writings can thus be considered writing gestures, where their freedom lies in the transient and unstable nature of the written word. This encourages a dynamic where writing can become visual, tactile, and sensible, challenging the deterministic nature of the world they want to inscribe. By doing so, they strive to make their creations more open, pushing boundaries and expanding their expression beyond the traditional confines of the written word.

In a fourth place, the works in this dissertation are intermedial on various levels, with the authors and artists operating as mediators. These creators are mediators in the sense that they transcend the debate about media replacing literature or having to choose between written literature and audiovisual media. Instead, they embrace the co-existence of these diverse mediums, focusing on generating different modes of expression with distinct creative potential. Their work aligns with Gilles Deleuze's perspective in opposing the introduction of a market-dominated cultural space that demands conformity<sup>37</sup>, that is also the space of producing for the

---

<sup>36</sup> Flusser, *Gestures*, 19.

<sup>37</sup> Deleuze, "Mediators", 131. I am in debt with Viviane Mahieux, with whom I read this text for the first time in her class of Latin American city and chronicle.

market. Furthermore, these writers and artists act as mediators by proposing alternative ways of creating fiction. They craft narratives that are caught in the act' of storytelling<sup>38</sup>, reflecting the ongoing, unfolding nature of their creative process. This approach emphasizes the dynamism and fluidity inherent in their work, breaking away from conventional, static forms of representation. This can be seen in the way that the works in this dissertation combine mediums—writing, poetry, photography, video, sonic installation, drawing—while simultaneously promoting a reconceptualization of the relationship between form and content, medium, and mediation.

These works also tap into what Jesús Martín Barbero elucidates in presenting models to interpret contemporary cultural dynamics. Martín Barbero provides a different perspective on mass media, shifting the focus from the media products themselves to the socio-cultural and political mediations that impart meaning. His concept of "mediations", for instance, encapsulates the processes bridging the media and broader socio-cultural contexts, including the ways audiences receive, interpret, and employ media products. These mediations, shaped by social relations, cultural traditions, and political structures, are crucial to understanding the cultural significance and societal influence of mass media. Thus, acknowledging mediations—not just media—allows for a different kind of knowledge, a re-recognition. It enables us to reconsider the process of communication from the other side—receptions, resistances, and reappropriations based on its uses<sup>39</sup>.

Drawing from Raymond Williams' articulation of cultural formation's three states, Martín Barbero emphasizes these states as the archaic, residual, and emergent. For this dissertation, the

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 126. Deleuze equates the act of "telling tales" to a process that enables the formation of a community. He situates this storytelling discourse as a space where the voice of a minority emerges, countering the established narratives of the "master" or the "colonist." He cites Bergson's term "fabulation" as a concept closely aligned with this transformative act of storytelling.

<sup>39</sup> Martín-Barbero, *De los medios*, 10.

residual aspect of the works I analyze resonates with Martín Barbero's perspective. He views residuality as the persistence of traditional or older cultural forms within a society undergoing modernization and mass media transformation. Residuality, as Martín Barbero argues, is not simply what is left behind or made obsolete by modernity, but instead what continues to play a vital role in shaping people's identities, values, and ways of life<sup>40</sup>. This concept underscores the non-linear progress of culture and communication, recognizing that the old and new, the traditional and modern, often coexist and interact in intricate, dynamic ways. Following this argument, I read the residuality in these works as what coexists somewhat with what "emerges" as the new, driving processes where practices acquire new significations that resist uniformity. Residuality allows for a dialogue between past and present, allowing historicism to be overcome without neglecting history. This notion of what "emerges" allows for a more open, yet precise, methodology for conceptualizing current cultural practices.

This methodology enables us to delve deeper into how the intermedial characteristics of the literary and artistic works that I analyze here encourage an expansion of media that challenges traditional perspectives on violence and historical traumatic experiences. As we traverse various Latin American and Latinx scenarios, these works invite us to study them through a lens that is intentionally "out of focus," inciting explorations into conventional narratives. This intentional ambiguity in vision unlocks a more profound, intricate tapestry of interpretations, interwoven with residues and their potential transformations. By engaging with images, words and sounds we sift through their materiality and immateriality, while critically examining their role in both hiding and bringing to light the stories and experiences of history that seem to be too trivial, too insignificant to be noticed.

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 90.

In this regard, the intermediality exhibited by these works' sheds light on the matter of art and literature, indirectly touching upon another pivotal relationship within media studies: the nexus between the message and the medium through which it is transmitted, a concept predicted by Marshall McLuhan as early as 1964. If, as McLuhan suggests, "the 'message' of a medium or technology is the change in scale or pace pattern that it introduces into human affairs," the question extends beyond the content of a message and its societal interaction that engenders novel ideas; it becomes about a revolution originating from the medium itself. Accordingly, these works introduce a smaller scale that is conceived under the heterogenous minimal tiny fibers entangled in the world, the intimacy implicit in relationships that are familiar but defy the opposition between public and private. They also attend to a temporality that allows for a slower pace and attention to the details, the minor things, in which each work also recompose the details emergence in each specific circumstance.

Considering the matter of art and literature also means that we should not only judge art and literature in terms of what it means (its content) but we should also take into consideration the materiality through which it manifests itself. This perspective challenges the dichotomy between form and content, as suggested by Amanda DuPreez,<sup>41</sup> by introducing materiality as a third element, thus dismantling the binary relation. In this context, the concept of intermediality holds significant relevance as it, on one hand, denotes the interplay between two or more mediums, and on the other, implies a formal consideration that transcends mere typology. Therefore, considering intermediality in the context of the works in this dissertation invites an emphasis on the role and function of sensory, perceptual, and interpretative engagement with

---

<sup>41</sup> Du Preez, "(Im)materiality. On the Matter of art," 30.

media. Such focus aligns with W.J.T Mitchell's multimodal conception of mediality<sup>42</sup>, which recognizes media as operational through these sensorial facets, thereby challenging the regime of visuality traditionally restricted to ocular perception.

Mitchell challenges the conventional binary articulation such as orality and literacy, and old and new media. He urges us to move beyond these hierarchical oppositions and delve into the ways media actively contributes to culture, rather than merely playing a passive role. In line with this, Christian Johansson and Sonja Petersson argue that media wields significant influence in intertwining distinct cultural and historical realms of aesthetics, society, and technology. This interconnectedness encourages a reevaluation of how media can connect seemingly "unbridgeable areas"<sup>43</sup>, serving as a mediator between binaries, and following Marshall McLuhan, influencing experience both through its content and its formal and technological characteristics.

Intermediality also holds political implications. It not only combines forms but also mediates content that fuses together both content and form. Thus, media and more pointedly, media relations can be seen as pathways to various "forms of life" - an encompassing environment for living, thinking, perceiving, sensing, and feeling. Mitchell and Mike B.N. Hansen inquire deeper into this concept, reimagining media as an environment for living that relies not merely on the pervasive notion of media existing "everywhere", from human bodies to

---

<sup>42</sup> Mitchell, in his exploration of the pictorial turn, asserts that "All media are mixed media, incorporating diverse codes, discursive conventions, channels, and sensory and cognitive modes". As per Mitchell, even writing in its tangible, graphic form characterizes the seamless fusion of the visual and the verbal, embodying the "imagetext". However, it's important to note that while all media are mixed, they are not combined in the same manner, and each retains its unique specifics. This association can be extended to consider the incorporation of sound into this multimodal amalgam, thus redefining the way in which texts, images, and - to add to the mix - sound, maintain a hierarchical interplay. *Picture Theory*, 95.

<sup>43</sup> Johansson and Petersson, *The Power of the In-Between*, 10.

the internet and even garbage, but also on how it conditions and enables the possibilities of experiencing and understanding.

The "forms of life" that media brings into the foreground suggest acts of dissensus, echoing Jacques Rancière's views on how art and literature might, and perhaps should, redistribute the sensible. In other words, art and literature come into action when they alter existing coordinates and engender dissensus – a shift of spectacle or tonality, a reframing of places, identities, views, proximities, and distances. Dissensus carves out a space for novel thought and narratives. It unfolds a different story, eliciting other images, subjectivities, and - to add - other materialities. The works examined in this dissertation embody these acts of dissensus. They represent non-linear temporalities, hinting at the constant state of flux in memory, and critique the glorification of a past that may have lost its credibility.

In this dissertation, themes of residuality, the palimpsest, and the archive are relevant. They serve as metaphors and tools for deconstructing and reconstructing memories, narratives, and histories in a manner that challenges dominant, homogenized perceptions. By shifting the focus from recovery of what has been lost to the transformation of what remains, the works analyzed here encourage us to explore memory as a dynamic, fluid process in the making. They reorient our perception of time, from a linear progression to a coexistence of layers, ultimately expanding our understanding of how memories, histories, and narratives are created, archived, erased, and re-inscribed. They prompt us to consider not only the materiality of these processes, but also the tension they create with the immaterial, the residual, the elusive traces that remain and continue to inform our present and future.

Furthermore, the intermedial characteristics of these works illuminate the relationships among various forms of media and challenge conventional methods of conveying and



interpreting violence and historical trauma. Thus, the concepts of residuality, the palimpsest, and the archive—alongside the use of intermediality—provide the analytical tools necessary to deeply understand and appreciate the innovative ways in which the writers and artists in question engage with memory, history, and narrative in their works.

In the context of this dissertation, it is vital to explore how the immaterial traces of these works, often preserved through photographs and archives but not confined to them, serve as repositories of memory - fragmented yet susceptible to change. These repositories, much like 'dust', are ephemeral but also harbor residues that seem to fall outside of history, thereby inviting varied interpretations and reimagination.

As such these artistic practices present an intriguing interplay between form and formlessness, diverging from linear, programmatic agendas rooted in modernist notions of progress, and extending beyond national borders. By using unstable, residual materialities and demonstrating processual movements, these practices resist confinement within a single category. Consequently, this formative fluidity and experimental focus weave diverse landscapes of potential, manifested in their attempts, failures, and revelations, all of which remain open to the unexpected.

### *Immateriality (One more time)*

The materiality in the immaterial presents an inner tension and its possibility to surpass it, to be articulated in other places, at other times and printed on other surfaces. It suggests thinking through different materialities that are residual and, as such, create alternatives to hegemonic forces and static versions of histories. Materialities that are residual are also fragile and precarious because, in their ephemerality, they create openings that present the opportunity of art and literature to matter, and to do so by exposing the processes of their own material becoming.

The materiality in the immaterial is simultaneously a residue and the possibility of its survival as residue, that is, as an afterlife before and after definitive totalities might be achieved.

In a world that is increasingly characterized as being immaterial in nature because of the invention of the internet, cyberspace, the fluidity of the markets and the digitization of most realms of human activity, this notion of immateriality alludes to a quality of late capitalism and modernity. This immateriality often associated with Marshall Berman's famous sentences "all that is solid melts into air" serves to frame an argument about modernity that recognizes Marx's analysis as a profound examination of the transformative nature of modern capitalist society. In this text, Barman discusses the role of art as means through which the constant change in modern life alludes to the "maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish"<sup>44</sup>. This maelstrom of modern life has been fed, according to Barman from many sources: great discoveries in the physical sciences, the industrialization of production that transforms scientific knowledge into technology, among others, that create new human environment and destroy old ones, speeds up time, and generates new forms of corporate power and class struggle, among others. These "world-historical processes" of the twentieth century, have brought this maelstrom into being, and keep it in a state of perpetual becoming called modernization<sup>45</sup>.

In a similar note to Barman, Zygmunt Bauman introduces the concept of 'liquid modernity,' where he argues that we have moved from a solid, hardware-focused modernity to a liquid, software-based modernity. This shift signifies a transition from a society of producers into a society of consumers. In this new phase of modernity, change is so rapid that no social institutions have time to solidify. The constant transformation that Marx referred to, and which

---

<sup>44</sup> Berman, "All that is solid melts into air", 15.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 16.

Berman emphasizes in "All That Is Solid Melts Into Air," has accelerated to the point where it is the normal condition. As Bauman notes in his book, "'Fluids travel easily. They 'flow', (...) unlike 'solid' matter, they do not hold their shape". Fluids, so to say, "neither fix space nor bind time. While solids have clear spatial dimensions but neutralize the impact, and thus downgrade the significance, of time (effectively resist its flow or render it irrelevant), fluids do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it; and so for them it is the flow of time that counts, more than the space they happen to occupy: that space, after all, they fill but 'for a time'."

Bauman's arguments about liquid modernity can be seen as an extension and elaboration of Berman's thoughts on the volatility and transformation inherent in modern life. Both authors highlight the pace of change and the instability of modern society, though Bauman emphasizes the fluid, shapeless nature of this change in comparison to the more solid yet melting structures that Berman discusses. The role of the individual in this changing society is thus reflected in an increased individualization and the subsequent burden of responsibility that falls on the individual in the liquid modern world. This relates to Berman's exploration of the self in a rapidly changing world and the tension between the promise of transformation and the threat of destruction.

This dissertation considers a notion of immateriality that differs from the ephemerality and instability that both Berman and Bauman relate to the core of the modern condition. Immateriality in this case does not only refer to the virtual spaces that are brought up by technology and cyberspace that compose our "software-based modernity" or to the speed of time that is inherent to capitalist consumption. Instead, the concept of immateriality alludes to a matter within what is immaterial that has the potential to be transformed. It rethinks the ways in

which contemporary literary and artistic works contest modernist notions of art, transgress their own boundaries, and defy their own aesthetic conventions.

This dissertation thus engages with the intricate interplay between materiality and immateriality in Latin American literature and art. The works I analyze introduce alternative forms of materiality that lie between visibility and invisibility, hence redefining the relationship between culture, politics, and the memory-making process. This dissertation departs from the desire to repair or reproduce history; instead, it underscores the life forms these works introduce as forces shaping future consciousness, which operates retrospectively. The interweaving of material and immaterial elements in these works extends beyond the mediums and their intrinsic composition, rethinking the significance of art and literature in terms of the physical "stuff" they are made from or created with.

This dissertation thus engages with the intricate interplay between materiality and immateriality in Latin American contemporary literature and art. The works I analyze introduce alternative forms of materiality that lie between visibility and invisibility, hence redefining the relationship between culture, politics, and the memory-making process. This dissertation responds and departs from the field of memory studies and the desire to repair or reproduce history; instead, it underscores the life forms these works introduce as forces shaping future consciousness, which operates retrospectively. The interweaving of material and immaterial elements in these works extends beyond the various media and their intrinsic composition, rethinking the significance of art and literature in terms of the physical "stuff" they are made from or created with. By highlighting the self-reflexive nature of contemporary Latin American literature and art and investigating the interplay between form and content, aesthetics and politics, and the socio-political roles of artists and writers, this dissertation paves the way for

fresh insights and discussions in the dynamic field of contemporary Latin American literature and art.

## Chapter 1:

*A Life in the Afterlife: Graciela Iturbide and Mario Bellatín's Dual Exposures*

*Nadie sabrá jamás cómo quiero a Diego...*

*si yo tuviera salud quisiera dársela toda,*

*si yo tuviera juventud toda la podría tomar.*

*No soy solamente su madre, soy el embrión, el germen,*

*la primera célula que—en potencia—lo engendró.*

*Soy él desde las más primitivas...las más antiguas células,*

*que con el tiempo se volvieron el  
"sentido".*

*(...)*

*Nada resulta tan natural como pintar lo que no hemos conseguido.*

*(...)*

*Una desesperación que ninguna palabra puede conseguir*

*(...)*

*Espero alegre la salida, y espero no volver jamás. Frida*

—Frida Kahlo, *Diarios*



Fig 1. Graciela Iturbide *¿Ojos para volar?* Coyoacán, México, 1991

In 1991, Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide made the decision to portray herself with two birds in her eyes: one dead, the other alive. Through this image, Iturbide posed the question, "Are these to fly with?" (1991). The birds in the image appear to both hollow out and perforate Iturbide's eyes, while simultaneously seeking, in some way, to replace them. Likewise, in her eyes, the birds perch as a kind of circulating nest that expands the eye. The dead bird and the living bird transcend their literal states of being alive and dead, of body and corpse, to emerge as visual prostheses that serve as a means to reconsider, once again, the question: "Are these eyes to fly with?" Fifty years prior, Frida Kahlo writes in her Diaries another famous question: "Feet, what do I need you for when I have wings to fly?" and then adds, "I am writing

to everyone with my eyes." The flying eyes and the writing eyes articulate an approach to the written and the visible as materialities attached to the body, as prostheses that allow both artists to puncture and replace narratives and visualities that indicate a disciplined way of functioning. Like the orthopedic leg and the corsets that support Kahlo's torso, the birds in Iturbide's eyes serve as a visual expansion where something is added and extended to allow an ongoing, perhaps diverted, gaze that lands on another form, in its constant becoming.

After Kahlo's death in 1954, Diego Rivera asked Dolores Olmedo, the lifelong director of the Casa Azul turned museum, to keep certain spaces in the house closed for fifteen years. Among these spaces was Frida Kahlo's bathroom. In 2005, the new technical committee of Casa Azul decided to open these spaces to the public, exhibiting the most intimate objects from Kahlo's life. Before becoming a museum piece, the bathroom was opened to photographer Graciela Iturbide and writer Mario Bellatín, among others. Their encounter is documented in the dual book that includes, on one side, a series of photographs taken by Iturbide titled *El baño de Frida Kahlo*, and on the other inverted side, Bellatín's fictional account titled *Demerol sin fecha de caducidad* (2008). The photographs, serving as a visual testimony of Kahlo's bathroom, focus on the intimate objects that were central to the painter's life, such as prosthetics, corsets, crutches, a hospital gown, taxidermized birds, political posters, and medications like Demerol. On the other hand, Bellatín's text recreates the character of Frida (with her name in lowercase), who appears through a cinematic screen to recount her post-mortem life as a fictitious "author" of Bellatín's works.



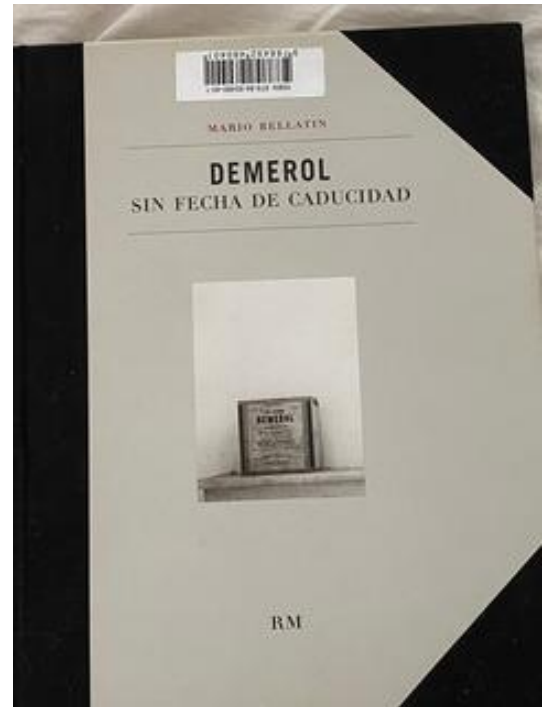


Fig. 2. *Demerol sin fecha de caducidad/El baño de Frida Kahlo*, 2008.

On this chapter, I propose to consider the photographic and writing practices of Graciela Iturbide and Mario Bellatín as “undisciplined” approaches that detach themselves from the literary tradition to suggest unexpected, perhaps unstable, encounters between both mediums, disrupting the hegemonic modes of visual and written production. In that sense, the figure of Frida Kahlo serves as a possible framework for perception and exhibition, enabling a dialogue between writing, photography, and prosthetics in the dual book *El baño de Frida Kahlo/Demerol sin fecha de caducidad*. However, I envision this relationship through the lens of prosthetics as a dual movement between replacement and addition, absence and excess, articulating a potential “life” in the “after life” of Kahlo. To contemplate prosthetics in this sense implies deconstructing what we understand as verbal and visual experience, opening ourselves to the tactile and other senses, towards an extension that encompasses a different experience of seeing, writing, and touching the materiality of the book.

Frida Kahlo has been at the center of debates around capitalism, globalization, primitive art, and contemporary art. As an iconic Mexican figure, she has been the authorized mark of the Frida Kahlo Corporation, the face of the five-hundred-peso Mexican bill. As Margo Glantz explains, Kahlo *is* “moda y concepto,” at the service of what Monsiváis has called the “Fridomanía que, sin embargo, la incluye y la trasciende (29).”<sup>46</sup> Kahlo *was* “el reconocimiento que suele anteceder al olvido (...).”<sup>47</sup> Monsiváis’s words suggest a type of historical figure, embodied by Frida Kahlo, that seems to resist oblivion, to emphasize, instead, a re-cognition in which Kahlo becomes a figure with multiple possibilities: one that is every time “known again,” but whose identity, instead of coinciding with a truer version of self, becomes more unstable and unknown. Monsiváis continues by saying that Kahlo *was* “mucho más que la figura singularísima y la artista exótica, que a falta de otro tema se retrataba obsesivamente a sí misma. Frida era un retrato de época y la obra que trascendía los retratos de época.”<sup>48</sup> As a character that is both anchored to specific times and one that transcends them all, Kahlo’s historical figure seems to work with and against historicity. Monsiváis recalls that during the ’70s, for example, there was a kind of “diluvio admirativo” that emerged around Kahlo and where everything seemed to coincide: “los primeros detalles de su relación con Trostsky y con varias mujeres, las exposiciones dentro y fuera de México, la película de Paul Leduc con Ofelia Medina, el río de visitantes en la Casa Azul de Coyoacán.” This “diluvio” coincides with the Frida that simultaneously *is* or *was*: “(la obra, la figura, la vida, la relación con el amor y el dolor) llegan

---

<sup>46</sup> Monsiváis, Carlos “De todas las Fridas posibles” en Gabriela Olmos (coordinadora), *Frida Kahlo. Un homenaje*, Artes de México-Fideicomiso Museo Dolores Olmedo, México, 2004. All the citations in relation to Monsiváis are from the same text.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

los chicanos, las feministas, los nacionalistas culturales, los críticos del posmodernismo, los radicales, etc.” as she also becomes “portadas de libros y revistas, declaraciones adoratrices de Madonna.” The ambivalence of being someone who was simultaneously everything to everyone and singular to each person and identity, Kahlo has become a central figure in the making of political and aesthetic imaginaries in the history of Mexico. Kahlo, for example, has also been a sanctified symbol to which thousands of Mexicans implore favors and miracles. To a certain point, after her death, Kahlo became the consecrated figure that she herself incorporated while she was alive and that was expressed in her constant references to Mexican ex-votos.



Fig 3. "Autorretrato" (1940) y "El abrazo de amor del Universo, la tierra (México), yo, Diego y el Señor Xólotl", fragmentos, Frida Kahlo.D.R. ©2010 Banco de México, Fiduciario en el Fideicomiso relativo a los Museos Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo. Reproducción autorizada por el Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, 2010.

Frida Kahlo’s secular sanctification is not reduced, however, to a mere copy of what can be called the “mexicanidad.” Her multiple self-portraits and their different reproductions through photographs and painting situate a figure that was in a constant nonconformity with the world. At the same time, it suggests a trope through which, in her multiple reproductions of the self, anyone can identify. With this in mind, is Frida Kahlo, or, more specifically the “Fridomanía” “¿un culto de origen cristiano, la transmutación de la artista en la virgen doliente y nacional y de

género?”<sup>49</sup> It is notable that Kahlo looks at herself through the mercy of altarpieces that she collected and recreated. Monsiváis notes, however, that there is nothing in the “Fridomanía” that proposes a kind of effective translation of the earthly to the celestial, but rather a type of inertia in the methods of consecration in Christian culture that has been going on for decades as well as their staging in a worshipped reproduction. In the most basic consideration, Monsiváis suggests that Kahlo’s myth is a kind of secular reality of aesthetics and from which we can find the movement of the Fridomanía to a secular popular culture aesthetics.

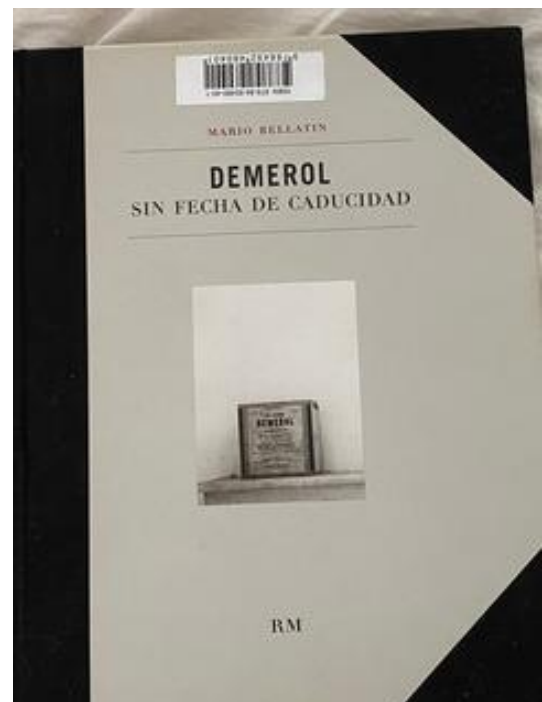
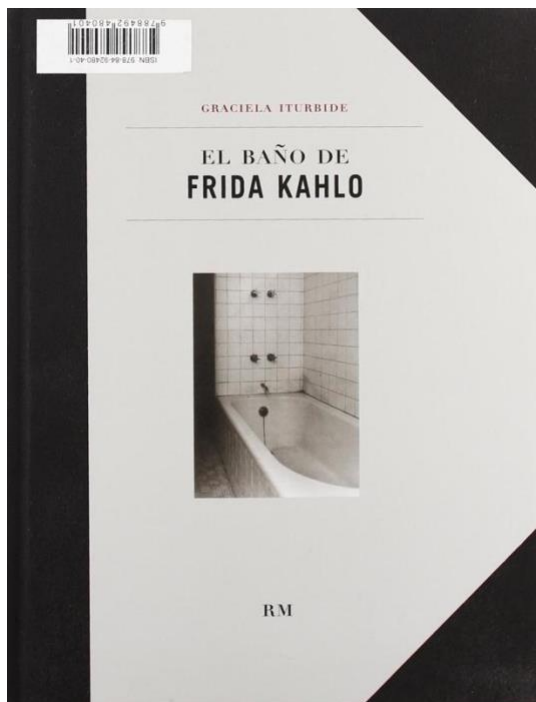
The “diluvio admirativo” of the '70s is followed by the “explosion frídica” of 2007. In this second wave of admiration, Kahlo became part of a cultural demand, an urgent need for information, a contagion of admirations, and the longing for significant references. Kahlo, always subject to excessive explanations or left unexplained, remains, as Salvador Novo describes her, a rocket, a grenade, a shattered glass, a news item, a telegram, and blood. With a multitude of “as,” Kahlo exists as a body, a figure, a life entangled in the tensions of a culture that simultaneously reveres her as a sanctified virgin and commodifies her as a mere icon. Amidst these polarities, Frida Kahlo represents both accumulated fixations and a manifestation of various forms of inadequacy.

The double-book *El baño de Frida Kahlo /Demerol sin fecha de caducidad* has been read in diverse ways. These readings provide various insights into the relationship between the authorial figure and its manifestations in photography, literature, and painting. Paola Cortés Rocca analyzes the book in detail, connecting Iturbide's photographs to the tradition of still-life paintings and examining the absence of Kahlo in Iturbide's work. Delfina Cabrera focuses on the

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

logic of the archive and its role in preserving hidden aspects, questioning the museum's archival operations. Emily Hindy delves into Mario Bellatín's writing and its contemplative approach to destabilizing the concept of modernity. Hindy discusses the significance of opiates and suggests reading Demerol in the context of energopower and the state's control of fossil fuels and electricity. These critical perspectives offer diverse interpretations of the book, shedding light on its themes, connections to historical contexts, and the implications of the artists' creative choices. The presence of Kahlo in this dual book, book-object, *El baño de Frida Kahlo /Demerol sin fecha de caducidad* that brings together Iturbide's images and Bellatín's text, suggests, however, an even more radical gesture, where the intersection of writing and photography presents a dual prosthetic experience of the sign Frida Kahlo.



Despite the extensive scholarship on the works of Graciela Iturbide and Mario Bellatín, the double book *El baño de Frida Kahlo/Demerol sin fecha de caducidad* as a doubled and inverted artifact has often been overlooked. Critics tend to analyze each narrative separately, treating them as disconnected texts within the same book, thus maintaining the methodological traditions of photography and writing as distinct practices. In this chapter, I propose to consider Graciela Iturbide and Mario Bellatín's undisciplined practices intertwined in three movements. The first movement centers on the concept of intermediality, drawing on Chiel Kattenbelt's definition, to analyze how Iturbide and Bellatín stage themselves within the photobook, reinterpreting Frida Kahlo's figure through photography and writing. By coexisting within the same artifact, both mediums demonstrate the plasticity<sup>50</sup> of the photobook as a double artifact, transcending their autonomous boundaries and intertwining life and art in a manner that demands an engaged reader or spectator. The second movement explores how Iturbide and Bellatín propose a "prosthetic" experience in their respective practices, contributing to the articulation of Frida Kahlo's "life in the afterlife." In this alternative existence, Kahlo becomes a dual figure that emanates the irresolvable duality of absence and presence, acquiring an unstable materiality. This instability allows for "a life" to unfold beyond the constraints of dualities, encompassing both an "after death" existence and a dynamic afterlife that facilitates new material encounters and possibilities. The third movement focuses on photography and writing exceeding the dominant notions of authorship and the archive, which are often intertwined with the logic of modernity and capitalism. By conceiving the double book as a corporeal entity embodied by Frida Kahlo, it becomes a material surface that, as a prosthesis can be occupied and emptied,

---

<sup>50</sup> I draw here from Catherine Malabou's concept of plasticity as that which refers to both the formation of the figure and an explosion of all form (25). Plasticity under this perspective is no longer linked to "an eternal post-postmodern ruminating rehearsal, but to the eruption of a reversibility between before and after that modernizes posterity by giving new forms to atomized nuclear sameness" (38).

therefore, transcending fixed referents and opening the potential for communal experiences. This undisciplined practice challenges established notions of authorship, embracing the fluidity of the text and its engagements with the world.

### **The Photobook as an Intermedial Artifact: An Overview**

In Latin America there are many examples of dialogues between photography and writing that have transformed the uses through which both media find their material relations. In the book *Photography and Writing in Latin America*, Marcy E. Schwartz and Mary Beth Tierney-Tello expose some of these examples.<sup>51</sup> From collaborative photobooks like Diamela Eltit's and Paz Errázuriz's *El infarto del alma*, to the writings of poets like Cecilia Vicuña and Raúl Zurita, among others, writing can also present reflections that are related to visual media from a historical, theoretical, or perceptive perspective. In a more general sense, these writers used technological media sometimes in an ekphrastic mode, but at other times the media were explicitly mentioned, no longer as descriptions of images, but as a real thing that is recorded as part of a narrative style. Other times, media are just suggested as a metaphor or a material thing inserted in texts.

However, this intertwined practice between photography and writing is not entirely new. Since the avant-garde movements of the 1960s in Latin America, there have been dialogues between photography and literature, photobooks, and practices of ekphrasis. Authors including Julio Cortázar, Salvador Elizondo, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, and others have used literature as a space and medium, where both images and words recirculate in different narratives, create another type of archival and documentary practice, or denounce mechanisms of censorship.

---

<sup>51</sup> Schwartz and Tierney-Tello, *Photography and Writing in Latin America*, 10-11.

Critics like Florencia Garramuño, Josefina Ludmer, Jens Andermann, and Javier Guerrero, among others, have created concepts around which these practices can be framed. Garramuño, for instance, has localized these practices beyond literature, where “la escritura aparece en formatos y soportes como el cine, el teatro o instalaciones artísticas, muchas veces junto a otros lenguajes del arte.”<sup>52</sup> By making writing appear under other formats, these artists and writers questioned the form and narrative of an official history by playing with visible and invisible threads of fiction, with the indiscernible interval between original and copy, document and power

Even though the '60s and '70s opened the field to formal and conceptual experimentation in the production of literature and art in Latin America, we can go beyond this period to include the production of words and images in a contemporary era that already engages with and surpasses Josefina Ludmer's account on “literaturas postautónomas” and the new conditions of production and circulation of the book that modify the ways of reading and, I will add, of writing and photographing. Other critics, like Reinaldo Laddaga, for example, discuss a set of distinctive traits of recent Latin American narratives. Laddaga explains how writers such as Mario Bellatín, among others, create a resistance to form to explore new aesthetic possibilities of flux, randomness, and fragmentation. These authors tell inconclusive stories suspicious of the notion of the “work of art” as a complete and fixed object that achieves a more stable and monumental quality. Instead, they convey narratives that draw on their own imperfections and impermanence, that refer to unstable qualities in the making of literature that avoid resolution or explanation. These texts are marked by a sense of collapse, failure, and dissolution. It is in that sense, that

---

<sup>52</sup> Garramuño, *Mundos en común*, 15.



Ladagga explains that “toda literatura aspira a la condición del arte contemporáneo,” so that authors like Bellatín are no longer interested in producing “representaciones de tal o cual aspecto del mundo ni en proponer diseños abstractos que resulten en objetos fijos, sino en construir dispositivos de exhibición de fragmentos de mundo.”<sup>53</sup> For these authors, what seems to be attractive about contemporary art is how artists use their practices to exhibit a type of work that shows its processes or its course.

Within the traits with which Laddaga proposes to think of the production of literature in the contemporary era, we can include the photobook *El baño de Frida Kahlo/Demerol, sin fecha de caducidad* as an artifact that both includes and exceeds its format as a “photobook.” By experimenting with form, but also explicitly exhibiting an intermedial relation between photography and writing, this double-book incorporates both media in a way that produces an alternative staging of the emphasis on processes, dissolution, and randomness. By including photography as a kind of inverted mirror to writing, and not merely writing and images as unique and separate things, this double book not only exhibits its quality as an intermedial object-book, but it does so in a way that defies stability and monumentalization. Through the correlation between both media, both artists reinterpret Frida Kahlo’s historical figure as a phantasmatic image that survives a dynamic process of sedimentation and historicity.

This photobook is particularly intermedial because photography and writing assume both a “co-relation” and “a mutual affect”<sup>54</sup> implied in the book format. The photobook as defined by Ralph Prins also highlights its hybrid nature as a material object: “A photobook is an

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 26.

autonomous art form, comparable with a piece of sculpture, a play or a film. The photographs lose their own photographic character as things ‘in themselves’ and become parts translated into printing ink, of a dramatic event called a book.”<sup>55</sup> Intermediality is relevant, then, to thinking about Iturbide and Bellatín’s photobook if we consider Prins’ definition, but also if we go beyond it. For example, in his theory of intermediality, Chiel Kattenbelt argues that when “two or more different art forms come together a process of theatricalization occurs.” This is so because “human individuals stage themselves in words, images, and sounds.”<sup>56</sup> The artists present both registers in the materiality of the book from which or within which the mutual affects take place. This space, in which photography and writing inscribe themselves together, presents a different path toward how perception and experience are conceived. What is considered intermedial is what designates configurations in relation to a crossing or borders between media.

In its most canonical dimension, Silvestra Mariniello defines intermediality in terms of the relation between communication and mass media, as it also designates “el crisol de medios y tecnologías de donde emerge y se institucionaliza poco a poco un medio particular, dando cuenta de la transferencia de materiales y técnicas de una cultura a otra.”<sup>57</sup> Intermediality is then a pathway to thinking about an awareness of techniques and materials that pass from one figure to the next, but also about their own conditions, the openings to multiple figures and eventualities through which the points of one figure refer to another. For instance, when we talk about intermediality, we are also talking about a new type of paradigm, a frame through which we can

---

<sup>55</sup> Parr, Martin and Badger Gerry (eds), *The Photobook. A history*, Vol I, 7.

<sup>56</sup> Kattenbelt, 20.

<sup>57</sup> Mariniello, “Cambiar la tabla de operación. El medium intermedial,” 62.

understand “las condiciones materiales y técnicas de transmisión y de archivo de la experiencia”<sup>58</sup> both in the past and in the present.

It is important to note, that, even though media and materialities cross each other, we must remember their own conditions of production, circulation, and distribution. For example, it is not the same to read a photograph that appears in a photobook as it is to read one that is exhibited in an art gallery, a catalog, or a museum. In the case of Iturbide and Bellatín, the photographs appear to be part of a double narrative that demands a different type of interpretation that is linked to the conditions in which they appear in the double-book as a double-narrative and in correlation to Bellatín’s fictional text. In this particular double-book, writing is not the dominant form of reading, but rather is exposed as a medium that is in dialogue and inverted with a reading of photography. Such distinctions are important, because they also refer to a different focus in the relationship between experience and writing. By being in correlation, both media propose an experience in which writing, and photography cannot be entirely separated. In a certain sense, in the book writing and photography no longer exist as isolated things; it proposes, instead, that one could read photographs as one reads fiction and that one can read fiction as one reads photographs.

Photography and writing seem to be in a process of reorganization that also redefines the ways we conceive contemporary Latin American cultural production. Graciela Montaldo discusses this phenomenon intrinsic to contemporary Latin American narrative, where technology's impact on the production of literature is both engaged with and challenged. In literary realms where intelligent systems have transformed literature into wordless images,

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 64.

Montaldo asserts that there is always room for literature to be reinvented, marking the beginning and end of the universe<sup>59</sup>. This envisioned world, among other things, presents a utopia of literature for all, where access to machines for creating novels or producing photographs allows everyone to become a writer or photographer. This avant-garde production in its "pure state" aims to challenge institutions, abolish privileges, and dismantle value determinations. It is a utopian and radical proposition—an aspiration to create art that is accessible to all and solely focused on revealing procedures. In the context where "new" literature often fixates on new technologies, Montaldo emphasizes that authors do not revert to a naive pre-technological notion of literature. Instead, they explore novel ways to develop literary practices after the technological boom. Montaldo employs the term "primitivism" in a broad sense<sup>60</sup> to designate these aesthetics—a means of relocating literary works within the new cultural field shaped by technological changes. "Primitivism" provides a framework from which to reflect on the means of production, fostering a temporal simultaneity where the past and present coexist. It is within this space that new forms allow for contemplation of both "how we arrived at this point" and their impact on aesthetic practices. However, the reference to the "new" does not imply an obsession with novelty for the sake of developing new practices. Instead, it signifies a thoughtful exploration of how certain authors utilize new technologies and reflect upon them while incorporating the memory of different production phases. This approach transforms literary

---

<sup>59</sup> Montaldo, "How to be Primitive in a Technological Era," 262. Montaldo speaks about Cesar Aira and his novel *Juego de los mundos*. However, her account of how technology appears in the novel can be extrapolated to contemporary literary practices like Mario Bellatín's writing.

<sup>60</sup> Montaldo refers here to Rancière, and she conceives this "broad sense" as one that includes literary formal devices, but also institutions like publishing houses, collective cultural projects, cultural agents, visual artists, readers, and booksellers, 246.

works into palimpsests that retain multiple layers of memory, accumulating depth and complexity.

While the use of new technology is evident in the works of writers like Mario Bellatín, the relationship between writing and photography in *El baño de Frida Kahlo/Demerol sin fecha de caducidad* presents a distinct yet interconnected dynamic. Graciela Iturbide, on the other hand, maintains an artisanal approach to analog photography in her practice. Positioned alongside and challenging the Mexican photographic tradition, Iturbide's photographs, as Marta Dahó elucidates, transcend the boundaries of documentary, anthropological, and ethnographic photography. Instead, they embody a poetic lyricism that unveils Mexico through its rich array of rituals, challenges, and contradictions. Iturbide's exploration within the realm of photography not only pays homage to the Mexican photographic tradition but also interrogates the photographer's role as a creator of individual and collective memory. Iturbide's interest in photography extends beyond the act of capturing an image; it is intrinsically intertwined with her way of life and way of seeing. In that sense, Iturbide develops a complex photographic practice that encompasses a thought process. For her, photography is not confined to the moment of capturing a picture; it embodies the subsequent temporalities of development and the examination of photographs. The images are not seen in isolation but as part of a chain, often reproduced in a contact sheet. In this later stage of photography, the elements of revelation, surprise, and unexpected encounters with what is captured coalesce, articulating Iturbide's practice as "a way of seeing."

Iturbide's photographic practice remains in a place where photography is still primitive because her work maintains both a relation to analogical photography and a conscious practice that thinks about the production of photographs after the technological boom. In the double-book *El baño de Frida Kahlo/Demerol sin fecha de caducidad*, this relationship between photography

and writing becomes apparent. The notion of primitivism, as introduced by Montaldo, does not imply a return to pretechnological concepts of literature and writing. Instead, Iturbide and Bellatín maintain an artisanal approach, emphasizing the materiality of writing and the processes involved in photography.

Both Iturbide and Bellatín's practices can be described as "primitive" in two ways. Firstly, they challenge the traditional book format and authoritarian authorship by presenting a double book that fosters collectivity in the name of the author. Secondly, they engage in critical reflection on their own creative processes. Bellatín recalls his own works through the authorship of Frida Kahlo, while Iturbide establishes a mimetic relationship, revealing her photographic production process and assuming the fictional role of Kahlo's author. It's important to note that these processes are not entirely "pure" or "transparent"; instead, they exist in a dynamic relationship of union and separation, mutually influencing and inspiring each other's projects. Both authors create a symbiotic connection, drawing from their respective traditions while also reshaping them. This transformative aspect characterizes their works as artisanal creations by amateur artists who navigate the post-technological boom, working both with and against technology. Through the figure of Frida Kahlo, they project photography and writing as accessible arts for all. Kahlo, in a sense, becomes a pioneer of this inclusive primitivism.

When considering the photobook as an example, we see how both photography and writing embrace a form of primitivism. Prins's definition of the photobook expands its material possibilities and reconfigures the reader's interaction with the object, opening up a different reading experience. Going beyond Prins's definition, we can view the photobook as a collective object rather than one driven solely by photographs. *El baño de Frida Kahlo/Demerol, sin fecha*

*de caducidad* should be approached as a double-book, where the collective meaning of the entire object and its interaction with the reader are relevant.

This perspective transforms the double-book from a passive entity into an interactive object. The printing of the photobook holds significance in understanding how to engage with it. As Parr and Badger suggest in *The History of the Photobook*, the photobook is a three-dimensional object meant to be handled, evoking a tactile experience that was more pronounced in the rotogravure era. Since the 1960s, as the photobook became intertwined with the art museum, there has been a tendency for commentators to discuss photographs in aesthetic terms, leading to self-referential and solipsistic imagery. However, in the postmodern world, where fine arts and popular media are analyzed and critiqued, photobooks have become more eclectic. Semiotics and structuralism have taught us not to take images and words for granted, allowing photobook creators to play with the medium and prompt a continuous reassessment of photography's nature beyond being a mere conveyer of information. Fiction can be employed as a strategic tool in this medium's turn. It is no longer solely about the faithfulness of documentary photography to its field of representation, but rather about using fiction as a means of expression.

The process of editing and sequencing becomes a vehicle for the utilization of fiction, resulting in what the authors refer to as a "collaged photobook"<sup>61</sup> where the narrative is nuanced, elliptical, and layered within the physical form of the book itself. This innovative approach to the photobook is evident through the mixing of genres, the incorporation of diverse styles, and the combination of formalist and fabricated photographs. The co-relation between different media, as highlighted by Gabriela Nouzeilles, introduces a unique relationship between space and time,

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 9.

fostering an interaction that encompasses the materiality of the artifact, the reader/spectator's bodily engagement, the tactile experience of the page, and the unfolding narrative temporality with each page turn<sup>62</sup>. The reader/spectator actively interacts, touches, manipulates, and engages with the book-object, challenging the notion of the photobook as an autonomous art form. Instead, it demands an active and participatory reading and viewing experience that aligns with the principles of Brechtian theater. This immersive engagement creates "in-between spaces" that the reader/spectator must actively touch and fill, further blurring the boundaries between the physical and conceptual realms.

*El baño de Frida Kahlo/Demerol, sin fecha de caducidad* serves as an eclectic photobook that simultaneously embraces and challenges the conventional definition of the genre. According to Horacio González, a photobook is typically a collection of arranged and reproduced photographs by a single author, presented in a specific sequence with the intention of creating a cohesive visual narrative. Photobooks should function as "text-in-images,"<sup>63</sup> inviting open interpretations akin to texts composed of words. However, this particular photobook diverges from the norm by highlighting the convergence of two genres. It reveals that their purpose extends beyond merely showcasing the work of the photographer and writer; instead, they employ fiction and inventiveness to convey a distinct essence. The arrangement of the photobook is orchestrated by a third party—the editor—serving as an institutional intermediary associated with the Rose Gallery. Both photography and writing, in turn, navigate and resist institutional norms within the book itself. Together, Iturbide's photographic series and Bellatín's fictional text

---

<sup>62</sup> Nouzeilles, "Arquitectura", 130.

<sup>63</sup> *The Latin American Photobook*, 14. A particular characteristic of Latin American photobooks is that they are very difficult to find, mainly because a lot of them were censored.



offer alternative storytelling approaches that align with the inventive nature, the use of fiction, and the selection and rearrangement techniques inherent in the collage form. While photography and writing manifest as separate narratives, there is no hierarchical distinction between the two. Instead, both registers collectively signify within a visually and tactilely immersive experience, establishing the foundation for a dual temporal encounter.

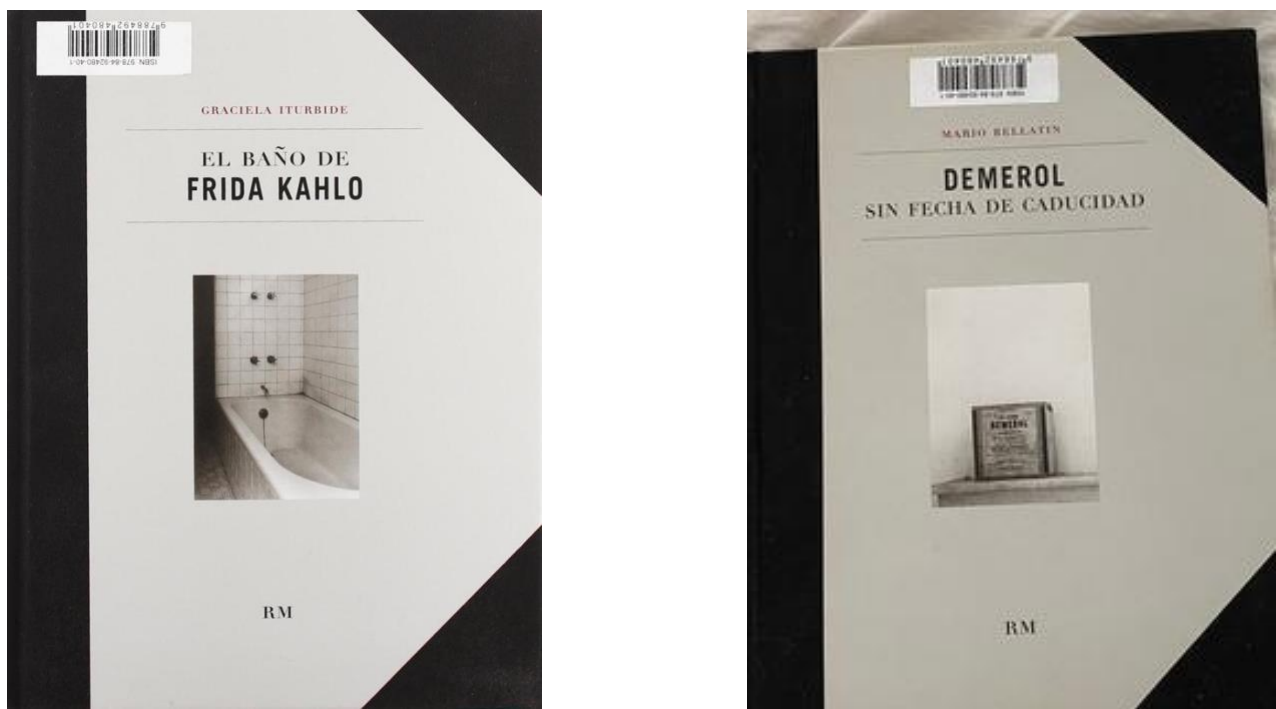


Fig. 4. *Demerol sin fecha de caducidad/El baño de Frida Kahlo*, 2008.

This double-book introduces a unique framework that invites readers to engage and interact with its contents. The notion of duplication, instead of duality as photographic characteristic, is emphasized in the editorial decision to assign different titles to each side of the book, allowing for flexible exploration in various orders. While the book format typically presents a cohesive narrative with a defined beginning and end, in this case, the reading experience becomes more fluid and non-linear, akin to a film projection where the sequence is

not fixed. Moreover, the turning of each page interrupts the flow, resembling a montage in filmmaking. Within a single object, the temporalities of cinema and photography converge. The linear nature of the written text is intermittently interrupted by the physical act of turning the page and the juxtaposition of photographic images and blank spaces. These interruptions create a rhythm that defines the temporal progression of the fictional narrative and the visual series captured in the photographs.

In *El baño de Frida Kahlo/Demerol, sin fecha de caducidad*, the series of photographs by Iturbide and Bellatín's fictional text challenge the categorization and authority associated with the archive, the museum, and the author. Linear writing, preservation, and categorization is challenged by the book's double characteristic. The book's duplicity proposes, instead, a recontextualization of traces. Iturbide's reorganization of objects in the bathroom transforms them into residues and traces, while Bellatín presents Frida Kahlo as a cinematic ghost and author. Through their reinterpretation of objects and the embodiment of Kahlo's figure, the artists create a new stage that alters the significance and representation of Frida Kahlo.

In Bellatín's literary realm, his engagement with fragmentation, rewriting, and self-plagiarism leads to a literature that exists in a state of instability and mutation. On the visual side, the photographs themselves become objects that undergo recirculation and redistribution. Similar to the objects found in Kahlo's bathroom, the photographs serve as vessels through which time passes, being stored, reprinted, and relocated to different spaces. Both the literary and photographic registers challenge the archival nature of documentary evidence, offering instead a visual prosthesis where fiction becomes a critical tool that demands its own stage. The layered quality of the photobook, as elucidated by Prins, Parr, and Badger, imbues both images and text with a new materiality, creating a chain of interrelations. This plastic materiality of the

photobook serves as a paratext, enabling an understanding of the intricate relationship between photography and writing found in *El baño de Frida Kahlo/Demerol, sin fecha de caducidad*.

The artistic reinterpretation of Frida Kahlo's life in "a life in the afterlife" offers a contemplation on how photography and technology shape her figure. The fictional text establishes a connection between writing and technology, portraying Kahlo as a projected image on a screen. This interaction involves a corporeal exchange between the projected image and Kahlo's resurrection within Bellatín's literary body. In contrast, Iturbide's photographs reconfigure Kahlo's "traces" through the objects that shaped her physical existence. These objects encompass not only orthopedic aids that provided functionality and alleviated her pain but also artifacts tied to her political desires, multiple abortions, and the presence of Demerol bottles, an opioid drug. While these objects remained "intact" after her death, Iturbide chooses to touch, manipulate, and rearrange them, imbuing them with new significance. Both Iturbide and Bellatín present Kahlo's life as an encounter between Kahlo, her objects, and the spectator, transcending the limitations of the present moment and inviting exploration beyond the immediacy of the now.

### **Mario Bellatín's Bodies in Writing**

Mario Bellatín's writing encompasses an expanded field that embraces diverse artistic practices such as photography, film, installation art, and performance. His works have been praised for their ability to challenge notions of authorship, authenticity, and originality. In the book *Mario Bellatín y las formas de la escritura*, Héctor Jaimes explores various aspects of Bellatín's writings. With contributions from numerous scholars, the book delves into Bellatín's body of work while aiming to move beyond purely academic analysis.

One of Bellatín's critiques is directed towards academic criticism's tendency to consume and comprise an author's entire body of work. In contrast, Bellatín resists this notion of totality by creating performative constructions and reconstructions of his own body. His body serves as a central materiality in his artistic and literary production. Bellatín's prosthetic arm, for instance, functions not only as a symbol of absence but also as a representation of excess. Positioned between lack and excess, I argue that Bellatín's writing becomes an expanded field that embraces his body, which exists in the interplay of these seemingly opposite poles. The prosthetic arm serves as an extension of his body into the realm of writing, articulating a literary and artistic proposal where the artifice of the prosthesis becomes an opportunity for the convergence of lack and excess.

Critics like Javier Guerrero, for example, have acknowledged that even though little is known about Bellatín's life, much can be said about his own body. Despite assuming various fictional personas as narrators, Bellatín's body remains a constant presence, both in textual and photographic form. Guerrero notes that the author frequently appears within his texts: sometimes inhabiting the fictional space of the narrators, such as in *El Jardín de la señora Murakami*, and in other instances, presenting his animalized and fragmented body in works like *Perros héroes*, *Lecciones para una liebre muerta*, *El Gran Vidrio*, and *Salón de belleza*. In this in-between space, Bellatín's body becomes the locus where the author constructs the interval between the reader and the text. It is within this interval that Bellatín's body embraces its anomaly and exhibits its altered condition<sup>64</sup>. Guerrero identifies the body as the site where Bellatín employs

---

<sup>64</sup> Guerrero, Javier. *Tecnologías del cuerpo*, 244.

strategies that intersect matter and desire, challenging the constraints imposed by the materialization of sex and resisting the technologies of biopower.

The visibility of disease in the social sphere and its material impact in these anatomies turn into an experiment for Guerrero. This experiment lies in these “sick anatomies” that, “obligadas a somatizar, mutiladas, excesivas y anómalas—, se exhiben, gozan al dejarse ver y producen ensayos, tránsitos hipotéticos que intentan cobrar un nuevo cuerpo, una nueva superficie sexuada.”<sup>65</sup> Beyond understanding the body’s materiality as something given and unalterable that fixes the normative conditions that produce its materialization, Guerrero thinks the body as a materiality that defies the imposition of such norms in terms of monstrosity. Even though Guerrero focuses on *Salón de Belleza*,<sup>66</sup> the material relation between the sick and anomalous body as an open surface of inscriptions to come could be extended to *Demerol, sin fecha de caducidad* and, more specifically, to the material confusion between the names Frida Kahlo and Mario Bellatín as authorial and monstrous bodies.

In *Demerol* it’s Frida Kahlo’s body that appears projected on a cinematic screen. From the beginning, the narrator in *Demerol sin fecha de caducidad* emphasizes that what we perceive in the narrative is always “a través de una pantalla.” He presents the lens through which we must enter the narration, as he says:

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> *Salon de Belleza* is a short novel that narrates the story of a homosexual unnamed hairstylist who transforms his beauty salon during a mysterious plague. The beauty salon, referred to as the “Moridero,” which is filled with exotic fish tanks and where only men are welcome, is turned into a hospice or mortuary for victims who are dying of AIDS and whom hospitals are no longer receiving. The very strange beauty salon, which shares some parallelism with the fish’s aquarium, constitutes a space of exhibition where the body is considered, in Guerrero’s words, an experiment: “The body mutates while it makes itself visible as otherness: the extreme thinness, the bodies’ odors, the skin, the sores, reveal another type of corporeality,” 249. The *feminine* salon has become a “Moridero” of hosts where sickness intervenes in the space dedicated to cosmetic care.

Cierta vez se organizó una conferencia donde se presentó un profesor que portaba un aparato **didáctico**. Se trataba de un artefacto premunido de **una pantalla**, por la cual se mostraba una especie de **película de la realidad**. (...) El profesor parecía ser alguien magnífico, que posiblemente proponía, con ese aparato, un nuevo **método de enseñanza**. De pronto la pantalla comenzó a mostrar imágenes, **fragmentos de la vida** de la artista Frida Kahlo, que precisamente era el tema que reunía al público esa noche. Lo curioso fue que se veía a una Kahlo bastante anciana, como si hubiera seguido viviendo después de su muerte. En determinado momento, *siempre a través de la pantalla*, se vio la imagen del jerarca ruso Joseph Stalin, colocada detrás de dos recipientes de peltre para realizar lavativas, y de una caja muy antigua de Demerol. De los recipientes se desprendían, con dirección desconocida, las mangueras de hule necesarias para que esos aparatos cumplan con su función. Pero la sorpresa mayor para los presentes en la conferencia ocurrió cuando a través del aparato se vieron tres obras desconocidas. Las tituladas *Damas chinas*, *Salón de belleza*, y *El jardín de la señora Murakami*.<sup>67</sup>

Kahlo's body is given a material surface by Bellatín within the written text using fiction as a critical tool. This tool also serves as a prosthetic experience between Bellatín and Kahlo's bodies, which meet in their artifice and anomaly. Bellatín, through Kahlo's figure, challenges his own authorial body, copies his works and rewrites them in other formats: theater, painting and, to a certain extent, film and photography. For example, Kahlo appears as the author of Bellatín's works *Damas chinas*, *Salón de belleza*, y *El jardín de la señora Murakami*, which, instead of being novels, are in *Demerol* some of Kahlo's paintings. This doubling of the authors proposes a type of materiality that puts the body at the center of the narration and becomes a plastic surface

---

<sup>67</sup> Bellatín, 8; My emphasis.

in which several processes take shape. This plasticity echoes Bellatín's own tendency to utilize his body as an open extension, ready to be transformed, influenced, and enriched by others—be it his own characters or the external world with which he consistently engages.

Drawing upon Judith Butler's perspective on the creation of the subject, we can extend her ideas to the realm of the body. According to Butler, the subject emerges from a scene of exclusion, an external production that is internalized as a foundational rejection of oneself.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, the body operates within the same sphere of exclusion when it is perceived as a fixed and passive materiality confined within regulatory norms that seek to define and suppress its inherent monstrosity. In *Demerol*, when Kahlo materializes through the cinematic screen, she embodies an alternative conception of life that transcends notions of being "beyond" or "after" this current existence. Instead, she represents a life marked by confusion, where the boundaries between bodies blur and merge. This life "in the afterlife" challenges normative frameworks and disrupts oppositional categorizations. In this disarticulated space, the body becomes a stage, a plastic materiality that defies conventional norms. However, it is important to note that this plasticity can only be achieved through the mediation of the screen and the written word.

The phrase "a través de una pantalla" once again suggests the "unveiling" of aspects of another reality through visual reproduction devices, while also staging the various mediations present in both photography and writing. The figure of Kahlo is reconstructed in a materiality that exists between what is seen, registered, and subsequently revealed, reminiscent of the process of analogical photography. In the dual movement of revelation and duplication, both mediums refer to a life "afterlife" that displaces the biographical and autobiographical referent.

---

<sup>68</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, xiii.

This life is made possible through the replacement of the referent, "bios," and the addition of the prosthetic, which emerges as artifice. Kahlo as Bellatín's double, or Bellatín as Kahlo's double, exemplify the ways in which a narrative emerges and affects both fiction and reality. Frida Kahlo reappears as a ghost, where the "phantasmatic" is articulated not as false, but as a montage of the real<sup>69</sup>. And as a montage, both mediums challenge the notion that photography and writing assume an objective and fixed legibility, they problematize their own material configurations and disrupt the conventions of biographical and autobiographical reference. This "life in the afterlife" necessitates mediation and relies on prosthetic devices to deconstruct the post-medium reality.<sup>70</sup>

Through the artifice, the prosthesis turns into a critical tool that becomes, as Ackbar Abbas has explained, "the prosthetic device that turns the system's logic back on itself by duplicating it, reflecting both meaning and affect without absorbing them."<sup>71</sup> This suggests that the prosthesis is also a tool for duplication that, as a double register defies the falling back into the same and replicating the system's logic. As such Bellatín's reproduction and duplication of Kahlo's "real" life through the cinematic screen present an opportunity to read her life in a counter-discourse, where she becomes a duplicated character who is no longer explained by factual anecdotes but is an account of the processes through which this duplication occurred.

---

<sup>69</sup> It is not by chance that the book features a "Congress of doubles" invented by Bellatín, as a "plastic action" attended by these doubles. Frida, by reproducing herself, opens, giving birth to future authors as part of her artistic proposal. There is also the idea of the absence of bodies at the conference, where the "work" appears in a body representing the artist, but not the "original" body. The emphasis is placed on the work being more important than the name of the author, with its own positions and perspectives.

<sup>70</sup> There is a type of mysticism that Bellatín repeats in many of his writings. One that is not entirely related to a life beyond life, but an alteration of life, as a type of proposing an alternative on how a life can be conceived through fiction and writing.

<sup>71</sup> "On Fascination," 61.



This extends to Bellatín's own text, which is not absorbed but rather shown, making visible the process into the text's creation.

The image that appears "siempre a través de una pantalla," suggests a transaction, a material confusion, between Kahlo and Bellatín's body. Kahlo appears both as author of three other works previously written by Bellatín and as an image that has in herself the possibility to auto-conceive past and future authors. This duplication, emphasized in the phantasmatic quality of the image, demands the tracing of fissures in writings that call for mastery and monumentality and that acquire an immovable finality. This tracing suggests another way as well to think the concept of the index in Bellatín's text under the notion of "showing" the index rather than "fixing" it to past recollections.

This type of index can be observed in Bellatín's writing as a means of constructing the fictional narrative. It is worth considering this indexical nature in Bellatín's text in relation to Rosalind Krauss's concept of the index, which expands beyond photography to encompass various artistic practices of the 1970s that share an affinity for indexical processes, whether photographic or not. The indexicality of photography refers to the residual or footprint left by an object during the moment of impression, serving as a trace of something that has passed. The notion of the index as a trace has been central to discussions in photography and other art forms. Mary Ann Doane, for instance, explains that the index as a trace implies a material connection between the sign and the object, as well as a temporal aspect related to the reproducibility of a past moment. The trace persists beyond its initial production, acting as a witness to a past event.

Building upon this understanding of the index as a trace of anteriority, Roland Barthes articulates the concept of the "has been" in the photographic image in his work "Camera Lucida." Krauss, however, focuses on the index as a shifter, drawing from Jakobson's semiotics, viewing

it as a deictic category that can be filled by various referents precisely because it is empty. Words such as "I," "you," "here," or "there" change their referential meaning depending on the context or the speaker. By emphasizing the dynamic process through which the index keeps shifting rather than fixating it in relation to the past, we can contemplate Kahlo's "life in the afterlife" as a life in constant flux, shaped by the character and media she wishes to incorporate in Bellatín's text. This type of index allows fiction to propose a more radical intervention in the construction of Frida Kahlo as a historical figure. In *Demerol*, Kahlo's inconclusive body suggests a futurity not only for the image, but also for the text. By incorporating the index as a shifter, her body remains indeterminate within a chain of floating signifiers that can be inhabited by anyone. Instead of "fixing," the focus is on "showing," indicating that this inconclusive nature extends not only to Kahlo but also to Bellatín and Iturbide, whose bodies continually reemerge within the scene where both narratives take shape, both in writing and in photography.

Kahlo's presence survives as an image within the text, signifying that she will persist through writing, not as a mere apparition but as a source of fascination. As Didi-Huberman suggests, to be fascinated does not imply being deceived by the deceptive appearance of things; it is rather to genuinely suffer the return of their appearance. It is to behold "the impossibility that becomes visible."<sup>72</sup> Contemplating this impossibility brings forth the paradox of Frida Kahlo's "life in the afterlife" existing in the realm between reality and fiction. By enduring as an image, Kahlo's life takes on a different trajectory, wherein she embodies the inevitability that lies within images—a continuous cycle of becoming and unbecoming that transforms her very disappearance or temporal absence from view into an object of memory, survival, and "eternal

---

<sup>72</sup> "De semejanza a semejanza," 295.

reiteration." <sup>73</sup> Kahlo keeps coming back in Bellatín's text; she keeps moving through different characters, corporeal experiences, and "stages" of the real. She is not only a painter, but also a photographer, a performer, a curator, among others.

Through this fluid process of embodying others, Kahlo's perpetual recurrence exists in the liminal space between "emergence" and "vanishing." It undergoes a dual movement that not only reimagines the concept of traces but also imbues it with a certain plasticity—a capacity to shape and be shaped simultaneously. In *Demerol*, this signifies that Kahlo's indeterminate body encompasses a fictional experience that not only narrates the body but also incorporates it. This presentation of the body aligns with Bellatín's fascination with the materiality of the body, its susceptibility to alteration and deformity, and its ability to perplex both socially and physically, as noted by Guerrero<sup>74</sup>. The key verb to consider here is "to be." In Kahlo's case, this futurity acquired by the body is intricately tied to the realms of representation, through which it resurfaces as something different. Through writing and photography, serving as the mediums—prosthetic devices—that aid and project Kahlo's reappearance. Through these registers, Bellatín and Iturbide depict her body as a mutable entity, capable of deformation and alteration. Within Bellatín's text, Kahlo's ephemeral nature as an image with an inconclusive body finds its foundation in Bellatín's body of work. Through this transaction and incarnation, Kahlo perpetually assumes the role of either an author of Bellatín's book or one of the actors in a performance. As the narrator aptly expresses:

---

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Guerrero, "Tecnologías," 74.

(...) siguiendo quizás el carácter profético, que estaba segura el arte y las propuestas artísticas traían consigo, corrió detrás de bambalinas y se apoderó de su propio personaje. Del peluquero aparecido en escena. Se lo llevó después consigo a su casa. El proceso fue lento y algo penoso. Le llevó algunas semanas al actor despojarse de la figura interpretada para volver a ser él mismo. Antes de partir, el personaje inculcó en el cuerpo de Frida Kahlo el mal físico, la enfermedad, que precisamente aparecía como tema central en la obra de Frida Kahlo representada por ese actor: Kahlo fue contagiada, por su propia obra, de una dolencia incurable. De un mal que, además, parecía no extinguirse, pues allí, a través del aparato ideado por el impecable profesor (...) los asistentes podían seguir viéndola y escuchándola hablar de las cosas que continuó haciendo después de muerta.<sup>75</sup>

The references to illness and contagion are tools that work as part of the “fictional experience” and, therefore, as tools of fiction that propose critical thinking. They not only propose a contagion per se, but also propose an idea of what art and writing could be. The “prophetic” character that the narrator alludes to implies a futurity that is permitted through a certain type of mechanism and that somehow reveals the ways in which a work of art takes place not only in its moment of creation, but also in the possibilities of its transformation. This would take place in a time that is posterior, as it reproduces any “originality” of the artwork in order to conceive it again as something other, external to it.

By embracing the notion of the index as a “showing” rather than a fixed entity, we can draw a connection to the Latin word “mostrare,” which conveys the idea of exhibition, presentation, and exposure. However, “mostrare” also has roots in the Latin word “monstrum,”

---

<sup>75</sup> Bellatín, 11.

which evokes both fear and wonder, as well as "monster" and "monstrosity," suggesting a sense of misfortune. Within the realm of fear, wonder, and monstrosity, illness, with its elements of deformation, contagion, absence, and death, appears to align with the production of fiction, accentuating the cyclical process of its emergence and dissolution. The reproduction of artwork through writing showcases and exposes its inherent monstrosity, enabling it to persist in that form. In other words, monstrosity grants a mode of existence as an altered reproduction, providing an opportunity to challenge and transcend the system, to mimic and deviate from its norms, transforming the original in the process. This alteration, perhaps, embodies the underlying misfortune within the artwork, as it strives not for utility but rather to "show" the very process of its futility—a process that, as the narrator later suggests, attains a certain "perfection:

El mecanismo por el que pasó la obra *Salón de belleza*, desde el proceso creativo inicial hasta su representación en la sangre de Frida Kahlo, fue casi perfecto. Según sus propias frases, la profecía presente en toda obra debía cumplirse. Desde entonces fue descubriendo, con cada vez mayor frecuencia, que la realidad era solo un pálido reflejo de la creación (12).

A Kahlo, lo que más parecía impresionarla de determinado tipo de construcción artística (...) era que tras levantar fronteras estructurales para realizar las obras---creando sistemas que permitan entender el mundo como una maquinaria—se advertía de pronto que no existía límite alguno. Aquel era el punto donde se abrían realmente las posibilidades, y no quedaba otro recurso sino el de cobijarse bajo un orden trascendente (12).

La misma Frida Kahlo afirmaba que esa instancia podía estar cercana a la experiencia mística, en la cual, después de una serie de privaciones y luchas emprendidas contra la libertad individual, se buscaba algo semejante al infinito (12).

Through the mediums of writing and photography, Kahlo is presented as a reproduction of prosthetic experiences, embodying a methodology that Bellatín embraces as part of his artistic practice. The "mechanism" that unfolds in the reenactment of *Salón de belleza* reveals not the plot or explanation of the salon within Kahlo's body, but rather the process by which Kahlo incorporates the narrator. This "process" signifies the opening of possibilities, where Frida Kahlo becomes "infected by her own work," dismantling the boundaries that conceive the world as a rigid, unified entity. By emphasizing the process itself, a new "world" emerges through Kahlo's body and is subsequently unveiled through Bellatín's writing. This dual process of reappearing and revealing demonstrates how the machine of creation turns outward, exposing the very process that defies the structural constraints within each artwork. The mystical experience and the transcendental order mentioned here do not seek to explain or delve into the metaphysical realm beyond life or divine origins. Instead, they open the possibility of "a life in the afterlife," an alternative to conventional existence that persists as unstable traces. Through the combined forces of writing and photography, Kahlo survives as an image that continually reemerges while defying the past and arriving in the future, resisting rational causality.

If we acknowledge *El baño de Frida Kahlo/Demerol*, sin fecha de caducidad as a double book, we recognize it as an artifact that gives rise to "fictional experiences," which are activated through the mediums of photography and writing. These media not only displace and transform Kahlo's body, but also invite us to reconsider the frames through which we perceive her life. Iturbide's photographic camera and Bellatín's writing serve as filters and frames through which we can see and interpret Kahlo's life. However, this is not a life confined to the mummification of the past; rather, it projects and reconfigures a "life in the afterlife" in which Kahlo emerges as a yet-to-be-completed image on different levels. For Bellatín, writing functions as the visual

medium that constructs a screen for Kahlo's appearance. Writing, like photography, shares the Latin root "graphia" and the Greek root "graphein." However, writing also traverses the body; it is an extension of one's hand projected onto an external surface. Similar to a screen, the body "projects" writing and materializes it on a surface. Thus, writing is a bodily gesture. In the words of Flusser, writing is not about constructing, but rather "taking away" and "de-structuring." It is closer to sculpture than to architecture, involving gestures of creating holes, digging, and perforating<sup>76</sup>. To write is to inscribe, to penetrate a surface, and a written text becomes an *inscription*<sup>77</sup>. This notion of inscription can be understood in terms of monstrosity, connecting writing to Bellatín's own body and, by extension, to Kahlo's re-embodiment within his body.

Therefore, Frida Kahlo's survival as image in Bellatín's writing does not stem from an image that presents things "as they really are." As Ackbar Abbas suggests, such an "appearance" is precisely what ideology inevitably constructs. Instead, Kahlo's survival as an image aligns with Benjamin's notion of the image as "an object riddled with error," a heterogeneous blend of the old and the new, observations and fantasies, elements that do not cohere.<sup>78</sup> The image no longer seeks to provide a complete, satisfactory, and impartial representation of events. Rather, as Abbas asserts, it offers a trace, a displacement of experience<sup>79</sup>. This displacement embodies the mystical experience that Kahlo "lives" in her "afterlife," serving as a tool through which fiction can be deployed as a critique of culture and ideology. Kahlo, as this kind of trace, is no longer something fixed but corresponds to the duplication of appearing and disappearing, that is also, the inverted duplication of photography and writing in the book as object. Through writing and

---

<sup>76</sup> Flusser, *Gestures*, pg. 19.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> "On Fascination," 54.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

photography, Kahlo becomes an image whose traces defy nostalgia or lingering. There is, therefore, another shift in which these traces are, in a way, becoming: the potency of fiction to equate creation with life.

### **Photography at the threshold of reality**

Going back to the opening of *Demerol*, we can recall that the “siempre a través de una pantalla” also alludes to the other side of the book, where Kahlo’s “life in the afterlife” appears as photographic fragments through objects taken by Iturbide’s camera. We can see this in Bellatín’s text, when the narrator refers to Stalin’s<sup>80</sup> image since this image also happens to be one of Iturbide’s. Bellatín, however, decides not to include the image in his text, but rather to make it part of his writing. Nonetheless, the image is not absent; if we turn the book it appears on the other side as part of another narrative and in co-relation to Bellatín’s writing. The references to Iturbide’s photographs recur throughout the text, interwoven within the rhetorical narrative. Kahlo’s “life in the afterlife” is portrayed through photographs that, rather than signifying absence, can be interpreted as embodiments of excess. Within the realm of fiction, photography does not claim to be “evidence” of reality; rather, it emerges as a captivating image or a “phantasmatic” presence in *Demerol*.

---

<sup>80</sup> It is interesting to note Stalin’s early use of socialism through photography and the constant retouches that he requested from photographers to erase his enemies according to his political mandates of each period. Stalin’s obsession with image manipulation didn’t stop with photos. As historian Jan Plamper notes, the omnipresent portraits of Stalin that were in every home and business were subject to maniacal oversight. The dictator commissioned an army of painters to create his official portraits, offering some artists massive amounts of money to paint him. Then, the official portrait was reproduced and retouched over and over until it met with Stalin’s liking. A further analysis of Stalin’s poster is worthwhile in both Bellatín’s and Iturbide’s compositions. <https://www.history.com/news/josef-stalin-great-purge-photo-retouching>





Fig 5. Graciela Iturbide, *El baño de Frida Kahlo*, 2005

Although the term "phantasmatic" is conceptually related to its counterpart, the "specter," I interpret the phantasmatic quality of the image differently. According to Agamben, a "specter" is composed of signs or markings, such as signatures, symbols, codes, or monograms, that time

engraves onto things<sup>81</sup>. Wherever it goes, a specter carries a date with it. However, Bellatín's title explicitly rejects an expiration date (*Demerol, sin fecha de caducidad*). Kahlo's return in her afterlife is not as a specter but as a phantasmatic image, suspended between two absences: a bygone past where Frida Kahlo existed as a historical figure and a future that holds the potential for a Frida Kahlo yet to emerge. This emergence of Kahlo as a phantasmatic image endows her with the quality of an indeterminate surface upon which fantasies can be projected. These fantasies include the possibility of blurring the boundaries of the body in Bellatín's text and the opening of an "afterlife" through which Iturbide reinterprets Kahlo's traces as mobile and desacralized traces—that is, traces outside the confines of the historical and commodified version to which her life has been attached.

Within this endless movement of traces, appearances undergo an effect of the medium, the "absolute medium" depicted by Blanchot in his literary discourse on becoming-image. This medium, however, remains neutral, impersonal, and indeterminate, where the space of resemblances takes on an indefinite countenance. Departing from the face while simultaneously separating from it, as Didi-Huberman posits, resemblances traverse a medium that Blanchot envisions as a surface perpetually folding, unfolding, and refolding<sup>82</sup>. It is the face that manifests itself to us, resonating within us—like the face of a loved one—within the realm of an incessant reiteration and fascination, now becoming nobody's face. This neutral and impersonal presence devoid of a face encapsulates a movement of resemblances unto itself: from one face that emerges and another that returns, to the enigmatic allure of a "that" without a face<sup>83</sup>; from the

---

<sup>81</sup> *Nudities*, 38.

<sup>82</sup> Didi-Huberman, "De semejanza a semejanza," 300.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 301.

personal to the neutral. Such an absence of personhood in the face becomes an extraordinary medium in the process of becoming, where one can lose oneself and genuinely encounter ways through which singularity is built upon an intimacy grounded in what is touched, rather than what is seen.

In Iturbide's photographic series, *El baño de Frida Kahlo*, we witness a movement from the personal to the neutral and from the neutral to the singular. Iturbide exposes Kahlo's bathroom by capturing the objects that have remained intact and hidden for many years. These photographs bring the bathroom, as an intimate space, into closer proximity to a certain disorder. Once a privileged and private bourgeois realm, it is now exposed and revealed through the previously obscured objects within it. The bathroom, however, is also a space in which a whole world of things occurs and in which objects serve as indices of a life lived in its most material expression. As Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley assert, the bathroom holds significant psychosexual charges, making it the most psychologically charged room in a building. Entering the bathroom is not simply entering the smallest room, but rather immersing oneself in a space as expansive as a city, replete with its distinct smells, sounds, flows, and chemical processes that evoke a profound sense of threat<sup>84</sup>.

The toilet itself represents a technology designed to quickly eliminate all visual, auditory, and olfactory evidence of both the body's interior and the abject aspects of urban life. It serves to disavow and negate bodily functions, allowing what occurs within its walls to be quickly disregarded, even as it unfolds. This denial extends beyond the elimination of smells and noises and encompasses a broader rejection of bodily fluids such as sweat, saliva, phlegm, pus, vomit,

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

semen, menstrual blood, and vaginal secretions. Ignoring toilets in architectural discussions amounts to a denial of an entire spectrum of sexual, psychological, and moral dynamics. It can be argued that Iturbide's photographs seek to render visible these underlying dynamics by transforming the bathroom into a space of archival recollection. As an archival space, the bathroom preserves not only the effects of time on objects but also the lingering smells, stains, and material remnants that intermingle life with scatological disorder.

The residues within the bathroom, which society perceives as "threatening," challenge the normalizing, gendering, and racializing power embedded within architecture. Instead, these residues embody what Paul B. Preciado refers to as a practice of biopolitical disobedience. Drawing inspiration from Foucault's concept of biopower, which extends beyond legal and punitive domains to penetrate and shape the bodies of modern individuals, Preciado proposes a transfeminist approach that emphasizes expansive connections and fluid boundaries. This approach aims to dismantle disciplinary architecture and unpack the oppressive dynamics of the pharmacopornographic regime<sup>85</sup>. By subverting these structures, it seeks to challenge and resist the normative control imposed upon bodies and identities.

---

<sup>85</sup> Preciado, Paul B. "Architecture as a Practice of Biopolitical Disobedience," 14. Preciado defines the "pharmacopornographic regime" as a Cold War development that led to a postindustrial, mediating regime of production of sexual subjectivity. The term refers to the process of a biomolecular (*pharmaco*) and somatic-semiotic-technical (*pornographic*) government of sexual subjectivity. A first example is "the Pill." During the second half of the twentieth century, as Preciado explains, the mechanisms of the pharmacopornographic regime materialized in the fields of psychology, sexology, and endocrinology. Science's "material authority"—the capacity to produce techno-living artifacts—set discourses to which architecture is closely related. We are facing, as he says, "a new kind of capitalism that is hot, psychotropic, and punk, with new microprosthetic mechanisms of control emergent from advanced biomolecular techniques and media networks (6)". This new world economy does not function without the production and deployment of "synthetic steroids, pornographic images, the manufacturing of new varieties of legal and illegal synthetic psychotropics (Viagra, Prozac, among others)". For that, science's "material authority" has transformed the psyche, the libido, consciousness, femininity, and masculinity, heterosexuality and homosexuality, among others, into tangible realities and manifested into commercial chemical substances managed by multinationals. The success of such realities relies on transforming depression into Prozac, for example.

If we look at Iturbide's photographs like containers of residues that haven't been modified, hygienized, or deodorized by the institution of the museum, Preciado's argument about finding strategies to undo or deform disciplinary spaces resonates with the space of the bathroom in Iturbide's photographs.<sup>86</sup> The photographs expose the bathroom in this biopolitical disobedience, not only to make visible the normalizing regimes through its architecture, but also to unveil "a life in the afterlife" whose pain and disability still occupy such a space. Iturbide makes Kahlo's body appear through her objects and interrogates the confinement of the space as a private and sacred place, as well as Kahlo's objects and belongings.

If the body was also a kind of private architecture in architectural practices and hegemonic discourses on the "normal" body,<sup>87</sup> Iturbide's photographs articulate an intimate portrait of Kahlo's life, her body and her residues, as traces that remain somehow on the threshold of what normally constitutes a body and what does not. As already expressed in Bellatín's fictional text, there is an experience of the body as residue that defies that privacy of the home as well as the privacy of a life that seems to be too commodified. When Kahlo's body somehow reappears in Iturbide's photographs, or appears as if for the first time, it depends on the reader's decision about which side to pick up first. Nonetheless, both narratives allude to the other and to the duplicity that is in every image. By making Kahlo survive "in a life in the afterlife" they are also suggesting a double initial sense that carries with it the capacity to be dual

---

<sup>86</sup> It is important here to note the temporality in which Iturbide enters the bathroom. As one of the first persons to actually be in Kahlo's bathroom, Iturbide presents the bathroom in a kind of pre-institutionalized moment. In a way, she retains the previous indices of the bathroom before it became a museum piece. It will be interesting to ask the museum if anyone can enter the bathroom now and see what are the "rules" that compose such museum experience.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

things at once. Like inverted mirrors, photography and writing reveal the image on the other side, as desidentification, rather than the image as identification.

It is important to note, for example, that the objects, marks, and stains in Kahlo's bathroom also appeared fifty years earlier in Kahlo's *Diaries* as outlines, sketches, and scrawls, and that already reunited visuality and writing in an anxious drive to write her life through pain, creation, and illness. The corset that sustained her body, or the orthopedic leg, are some of the most emblematic examples that Iturbide retakes. The objects also exhibit Kahlo's life through a series that visualizes the weathering, the passage of time in a confined space, and the indexical presence of an absent body. However, rather than dwelling on Kahlo's dead and absent body, the series presents a type of composition that cannot be read without Bellatín's writing. What can be seen as Kahlo's traces in Iturbide's photographs maintains a tension between movement and stillness, absence and presence that does not seek to be resolved, but rather to be exposed. Such an exposition is inherent to the narrative in both registers that reads Kahlo's life in an afterlife. By appearing in an afterlife through different media that are in co-relation, Kahlo is not exactly "absent." Kahlo's posthumous figure is impregnated by two bodies that project her image to make her live materially through photography and writing. The projection is the result of both registers as prosthetic devices that transform her body's immateriality into a material thing that can mold and be molded by them.



Fig 6. Frida Kahlo. *Diaries*. 2001.

This dual projection can be seen in relation to the concept of molding and being molded, as discussed by Blanchot in his text "The Two Versions of the Imaginary." Going beyond the traditional dichotomy between the imaginary as fiction and the real as truth within Freudian psychoanalysis, Blanchot suggests that the image does not liberate us from compromise but instead draws us back to ourselves. The image possesses an intimate quality, transforming our innermost being into an external force that we passively endure. It takes us away from ourselves, leaving us lost yet radiant, immersed in the depths of our passions<sup>88</sup>.

Living an event through images does not simply involve recalling the image of that event or granting it the gratuitousness of the imaginary. It entails an appropriation where something

<sup>88</sup> Blanchot, 352-354.

seizes us, just as an image appropriates and expropriates us from itself and from our own identity. It places us outside, making that external realm a presence in which the "I" does not coincide with itself. This duplicity imbues the image with a dual sense that is constantly moving. Within this ambiguity, nothing possesses a fixed "sense," yet everything appears to hold meaning. Sense becomes a mere semblance, constantly beckoning towards what is to come. At the threshold of this dual sense lies an ability to embrace uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts without seeking definitive facts and rational explanations. It is an acceptance of the liminal space. This is precisely what the duplication of photography and writing proposes—a space where uncertainties can coexist, offering a profound exploration of experience beyond the confines of definitive meanings.

To some extent, we can argue that Kahlo's appearance operates within this realm of *semblance*. It simultaneously captivates and unsettles us. However, rather than passively traversing our innermost being, Kahlo's semblance actively animates her "life in the afterlife" through the mediums of photography and writing. In both registers, Kahlo's semblance becomes the event through which she both appropriates and expropriates us, a spectacle staged by Iturbide and Bellatín through double mediation where Kahlo's survival as an image encompasses both life and death.

This inherent "lack" of definitive sense is what shapes the narratives of both artists. However, this lack is transformed into a generative force that, through the prosthesis—as both replacement and addition—allows us to experience Kahlo's life as a mobile residue, a survival that manifests through a plastic materiality. It is here that the body serves as a canvas for potential inscriptions, a surface awaiting further traces. As a plastic surface, the background merges with the fundamental materiality, blending with a yet undefined absence of form. The



perpetual reiteration of semblance to semblance, as Didi-Huberman contends, shapes us through an unending rhythm of formation and dissolution. This reiterative characteristic is Kahlo's "return," that is, her "life in the afterlife," in which we fuse with her both in form and in the dissolution of form.

As readers-spectators, we accept Kahlo's life in the afterlife when we decide to open both narratives. Through them there is the possibility to reunite the same encounter with the imaginary—that is, with Kahlo's semblance as phantasmatic image that is referring and deferring to something else. There where the "I" does not recognize itself, the "bios" in the biographical keeps coming back as a vacant prefix to be occupied. Like Blanchot's reference to the chant of sirens, encountering Kahlo's life "in the afterlife" is to get closer to both the chant of sirens and the chant's survival as image. There, whatever seems to be deficient, anomalous, or monstrous becomes potency in wonder—a wonder that is seen in Kahlo's ceaseless beginnings of her "life in the afterlife" in Bellatín's text, both by being *frida kahlo* and *mario bellatín*, and by adopting both "forms," both "lives."

Through Iturbide's photographic series, we witness how Kahlo's life is intensified even further, not solely due to a "lack," but rather an abundance found in the recomposition of her body by Iturbide through frames, fragments, and objects. These residues, as traces of traces, possess the power to emerge in a chain of significations, calling forth a force within an indeterminate surface. It tells us, in a way, that Iturbide has worked with time: entering the space of the bathroom, moving her own body within it, composing and recomposing the objects, touching them, placing herself "in their place," becoming a part of Kahlo's life.

For Iturbide, as it was for Bellatín, inhabiting Kahlo's bathroom, body, and objects was necessary to give meaning to their austerities, temperance, humbleness, pain, medicalization, and

the passage through life itself, as expressed through objects, marks, and stains that simultaneously allude to both life and death. Within the series, there is a photograph that stands out—the image of two dead birds resting on a stained white surface. From the context of the series, we can interpret the background as Kahlo's unwashed bathrobe. The stains may be remnants of paint, blood, or other substances. The contrast between black and white in the photograph is striking, with minimal shades of gray. The details of the birds—their wings, contours, and features—are clearly visible. One of the birds, the larger one, is more sharply focused than the other. In the series, we also learn that Iturbide intentionally placed the birds on top of the bathrobe, making them appear as if they are a part of it, yet not dissolved into it. The bathrobe, like the clothes that reveal Kahlo's artistic and painful traces, seemingly encapsulates the presence of the birds within it. However, when we observe the birds, we are not solely witnessing Kahlo's life; we are also glimpsing Iturbide's own fascination with birds.



Fig 7. Graciela Iturbide, *El baño de Frida Kahlo*, 2005

The presence of birds is a recurring theme throughout Iturbide's extensive body of work. They resurface in various forms, series, and periods of time. Symbolically, they evoke notions of both death and the potential for freedom through flight. In an interview, Iturbide reflects on her experience of photographing Kahlo's bathroom. She expresses her fondness for frequently visiting Casa Azul, while presenting her photographic practice:

tocar esos objetos, tocarlos con la mirada y reinterpretarlos en el mismo baño. Porque, además, por ese tiempo, casualmente empezaba a hacer objetos. Ya no tanto, retratos o personas, sino objetos. (...) La fotografía para mí es un pretexto para descubrir la vida (...) es siempre un descubrimiento a través de la cámara.<sup>89</sup>

The presence and recurring motif of birds in Iturbide's photographs highlight an element of chance that is inherent to her artistic practice. This aspect operates on two levels. Firstly, Iturbide refers to the photographic process itself, which involves not only capturing an image in the moment but also a subsequent revelation during the development of the photograph. It is in this later stage that she realizes there is something of herself embedded within the photographs. They seem to embody her own pains, passions, and desires, but they materialize after the fact. In this subsequent life of the photograph, the image is no longer a static and fixed entity; instead, it becomes open to interpretations and revelations. In this alternate temporality, unconscious aspects are unveiled, echoing what Rosalind Krauss alludes to in the practices of photographers in the historical avant-gardes of the 1920s and 1930s, particularly associated with the surrealist movement. As Krauss suggests, the photographic medium is harnessed to create a paradox: the paradox of reality being constituted as a sign, or presence transformed into absence, representation, spacing, and writing<sup>90</sup>. Photography expands the realm of the camera's eye, encompassing not only the act of capturing images but also the act of unveiling them, as part of a

---

<sup>89</sup> Iturbide in Fundación Mapfre: <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/el-ba%C3%B1o-de-frida-fundacion-mapfre/3AWBRhTNXc9ZIw?hl=en>. My translation: to touch those objects, to touch them with my gaze and reinterpret them within the same bathroom. Because, at that time, coincidentally, I had started creating objects. Not so much portraits or people, but objects. (...). Photography, for me, is a pretext to discover, (...) it is always a discovery through the camera.

<sup>90</sup> Krauss, *The Avant-Garde*, 31.

practice of discovering things in wonder, or in the place of “lo insólito”, as Julio Cortázar referred to it.

Cortázar’s suggestion of a dynamic vision that opens an “other” space, is also central in his short account on photography titled “Ventanas a lo insólito.” In this text, the photographic paradox identified by Krauss takes another course. As he says,

Se tiende a pensar la fotografía como un documento o como una composición artística; ambas finalidades se confunden a veces en una sola: el documento es bello, o su valor estético contiene un valor histórico o cultural. Entre esa doble propuesta o intención se desliza algunas veces lo insólito<sup>91</sup>.

Cortázar's notion of "lo insólito" aligns with the unconscious element identified by Krauss within the realm of surrealism. However, what Cortázar adds to Krauss's paradoxical concept of photography is that this "insólito" not only occurs in the act of capturing an image, in its composition and creation, but also in the process of revealing, producing, and circulating a photograph. This additional space of the "insólito" arises perhaps because it was not consciously intended by the photographer but emerges unexpectedly after the image is made. At times, we can glimpse this "insólito" in the development and reproduction of the image, during its moment of revelation. Conversely, when discussing the "insólito" outside the context of a photographic image, Cortázar returns to a photographic analogy and describes those moments when something "displaces us or is displaced,"<sup>92</sup> akin to a traditional *déjà vu* experience. These are the moments when we encounter the instantaneous sliding that occurs either externally or internally, which

---

<sup>91</sup> “Ventanas a lo insólito,” pg. 442.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

somehow immerses us in the ambiance of a blurry photograph—a photograph that is constantly on the brink of becoming or alluding to something else.

Cortázar's perspective on photography and his notion of the "insólito" shed light on the multiple worlds that can coexist within a single photograph. It is as if the photograph itself contains numerous subtle details that allow it to transition from one point to another, all within the confines of the same photographic frame. This internal movement within a photograph challenges the fixed quality typically associated with photography's indexical nature. However, it is important to note that the index, as a deixis or a pointing finger, is also connected to presence.

In this sense, the concept of the index as a trace encompasses not only temporality but also the dual conjunction of presence and absence, touch, and memory—a notion that can be traced back to Benjamin's "optical unconscious" and Freud's concept of the memory trace.<sup>93</sup> This type of index that suggests a dual condition reveals, one more time, the double inverted mirror that is the book-object *El baño de Frida Kahlo/Demerol sin fecha de caducidad* itself. The index functions as a tangible link to the past, evoking a sense of presence through its connection to memory. However, it is through this interplay of presence and absence, touch and memory, that

---

<sup>93</sup> This relationship can take us back to think in Benjamin's quote from his "Little History of Photography," when he compares the emergence of photography with psychoanalysis. Benjamin's point is similar to Cortázar's idea of "lo insólito" as that which can only be disclosed after the image is revealed. We can see a similar approach in his short story "Las babas del diablo," where it includes not only photography but also film, writing, and translation as products of technical apparatuses, like the photographic camera and the writing machine, which work as filters of reality.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud also describes a kind of material inscription without intentionality. Derrida rereads the concept of "memory-trace" in "Freud and the Scene of Writing" by making a more explicit reference to Freud's argument in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where he suggests that, before trying to define what is the psyche, "we should picture the instrument which carries out our mental functions as resembling a compound microscope or a photographic apparatus, or something of the kind." Derrida refers to Freud's "Notes on the Mystic Writing Pad" and points out that in Freud's work, "the metaphor of a photographic negative occurs frequently...the notions of negative and copy are the principal means of the analogy." In 1913, Freud compared the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious to a photographic process, but that later incorporates writing, and he calls it the *Wunderblock* (330).

the photograph becomes a rich and complex artifact, capable of capturing and preserving multiple layers of meaning.

Iturbide's photographs of Kahlo's bathroom offer a distinct form of memory-traces. When she speaks of "touching things with her eyes," she alludes to the body as a photographic apparatus that not only captures and reveals images but also to the eyes themselves as prosthetic tools projecting a version of reality onto the external world. This notion aligns with Freud's argument in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where he compares the structure of the mind to that of a camera: "On that basis, psychical locality will correspond to a point inside the apparatus at which one of the preliminary stages of an image comes into being."<sup>94</sup>

Iturbide's use of the term "touch," as though we were physically touching things with our eyes, serves as an analogy to the process through which objects pass through the camera lens. The camera becomes a visual extension that expands the eye's capacity to perceive. While Freud suggests that mnemonic traces are indestructible paths that can always be accessed<sup>95</sup>, these traces take on new meanings when they materialize in different contexts and become touchable. These traces represent a unique historical construction in which representations solidify into thoughts, fantasies, and affects.

By "touching things with our eyes," Iturbide also implies that the negative and its corresponding copy, as integral parts of the process of perception and representation, do not oppose reality but instead duplicate it as fantasies and affects. These duplicates reveal reality's material residues, inviting future readings and reinterpretations. The process of touching with our

---

<sup>94</sup> 576

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 577.

eyes captures the materiality of these residues, allowing them to reemerge as meaningful fragments to be explored and reimagined.

When Iturbide speaks of approaching Kahlo's objects in the bathroom unconsciously, she may be suggesting that her practice as a photographer stem from a unique construction rather than from objectified perceptions, from the objects that detonate the barthesian *punctum* rather than the *studium*. She operates within a meta-photographic language, where the traces serve as carriers of Kahlo's material and bodily memory. Similar to the photographic camera, the mnemonic trace is associated with the alternating opening and closing of consciousness within perception<sup>96</sup>. According to Freud's "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad,'" the passage of time, within which these processes unfold, is shaped by these openings and closings. Time acts as a screen that separates the inner and outer realms, a veil that shrouds unconscious memory, and a protective shield.<sup>97</sup> Above all, time serves as a receptive surface for impressions that will later transform into mnemonic traces. It is through these processes that memory is formed and preserved.

These traces are both formed and transformed by Iturbide's camera and her physical presence within the bathroom space. It resonates with the camera as a prosthetic extension attached to the eye, but it also goes beyond mere visual reproduction. Iturbide's body narrates a different aspect of Kahlo's life, recounting it through the objects intimately associated with Kahlo's own body. In this exchange of materiality and corporeality, what remains as a trace is a recomposition of residues that Iturbide unveils to the world and that is seen in seriality. She

---

<sup>96</sup> This movement of the conscious mind, switching on and off, exists at the threshold between the preconscious and conscious, as well as the unconscious..

<sup>97</sup> Freud, 225-232..



strips the objects of their sacralization, freeing them from the confines of Kahlo as an fetishized ico figure, and renders them intimate, singular, and yet communal in nature.

Through her tactile engagement, Iturbide articulates an intimate gaze in which the photographs establish a continuous interrelation with one another. The seriality of the photographs is significant precisely because they constantly reference and quote each other. Through this endless yet fragmentary process of citation, they resist being confined to ownership and individual property. Instead, they become part of a collective narrative, inviting multiple interpretations and fostering a sense of shared experience.

This pluralistic nature emerging from the singular reproduction of images is similar to the language of birds depicted in Iturbide's photographs. In his book "The Language of Birds," Dale Pendell suggests that understanding the language of birds requires a form of perception that extends beyond the traditional senses of hearing. It involves a cellular hearing, where the organs of perception expand to encompass "the skin, hair follicles, heartbeat", and the amalgamation of these sensations.<sup>98</sup> In the language of birds, touch is integral to perception.

If we revisit Iturbide's self-portrait from the beginning, where she holds two birds—one dead and one alive—over her eyes, we can observe that the birds replace her eyes. Through this gesture, Iturbide suggests that perception operates in a manner that resembles the birds' vision and that implies transforming codified modes of perception. It entails expanding the realm of perception to encompass the realm of touch. Through this shift, we can approach the interpretation of images with a flight of freedom.

---

<sup>98</sup> Pendell, 68.

The birds, in a way, become a prosthesis for Iturbide's eyes—an extension bridging the gap between what she photographically "was" and what she "will be." Similar to the meandering flight of birds, which rarely follows a straight path, Iturbide composes a mode of perception that is itself a journey—a passage filled with detours, deferrals, and folds. It embraces the nonlinear nature of interpretation, allowing for unfolding narratives.

To “touch with the eyes” is then a type of method that Iturbide uses to “touch” Kahlo’s life. If we bring back Bellatín’s text and consider that Kahlo speaks from the future, we can argue that there is something prophetic in both compositions as well. In Iturbide’s photographs, the language of birds becomes her way to get closer to Kahlo’s life and compose “a life in the afterlife.” For Pendell, there is also something prophetic about this language, and when referring to Plutarch he says:

The prophetic gift is like a writing tablet without writing, both irrational and indeterminate in itself, but capable of images, impressions, and presentiments, and it paradoxically grasps the future when the future seems as remote as possible from the present. This remoteness is brought about by a condition, a disposition, of the body that is affected by a change known as “inspiration.”<sup>99</sup>

Pendell’s allusion to a “prophetic gift” seems to recall a life that is read as traces of traces. Kahlo, as a kind of carrier of this prophecy, becomes a “prophet”: she speaks in and before the future. She speaks from a past, from a memory of her life “in fragments” (Bellatín’s text), but also from the future, as a projected image, inconclusive and in fragments. Kahlo’s life is reconstructed by Iturbide as fragments that are irrational and indeterminate, whose only

---

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

testimony is that of time passing through. Read along with Iturbide's photographs, and her reinterpretation of Kahlo's traces, we can say that she also articulates a kind of prophecy in which the future is "as remote as possible" from the present, because of a "disposition", of a body that is "affected" by a change known as "inspiration"—that is, a method to read life with this type of disposition: to be infused with life, to take in Kahlo's life, even though, or precisely because, she is dead. Through such disposition the body can become this plastic surface with inscriptions to come, where the body can be affected by change. It is a proposal to read Kahlo's life as a photographic image that no longer emerges solely from the past, but as one that, as a writing without writing, is already anticipated in the future.

Still Life or Living Nature



Fig. 8. Graciela Iturbide. *El baño de Frida Kahlo*, Coyoacán, México, 2005



Fig 9. Frida Kahlo. *Lo que el agua me dio*. Oil on canvas. 1938

Iturbide's photographic series, *El baño de Frida Kahlo*, contains allusions to the genre of still life. This genre, as explained by Paola Cortés-Rocca, is part of a history of the gaze that associates exhibition, contemplation, and ownership with a representation of nature as a whole.<sup>100</sup> These images and objects originate from an excessive realism that emerged during the rise of the bourgeoisie as a class. Oil painting, as noted by John Berger, celebrates a new form of wealth and depicts the moment when commodities, property, and consumption occupied the aesthetic realm.<sup>101</sup> Cortés-Rocca argues that oil painting and still life reinforce the notions of exhibition and contemplation as dimensions of property.

---

<sup>100</sup> "La insostenible levedad del yo," 127.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

Although Iturbide's series can be situated within this tradition, which also encompasses the *vanitas* or *memento mori*, there is another dimension that complicates the "arrangement" of objects in her photographic compositions. The avant-garde principle of *objet trouvé* (found object) opens the series to a more accidental interpretation. While the series maintain a composition, there are elements that introduce a sense of randomness, such as the encounter between a corset, a bottle of Demerol, and a poster of Stalin. The arrangement in the series, as predicted by the avant-gardists, is not definitive or linear. By inserting a new object or image, new meanings and alterations are generated, affecting not only the individual piece but also the entire series. These alterations and modifications, observable in Iturbide's images, suggest that what may appear trivial becomes unusual. The act of inserting something into a series produces a sense of absurdity that transforms objects into something other, something more hidden and indeterminate.

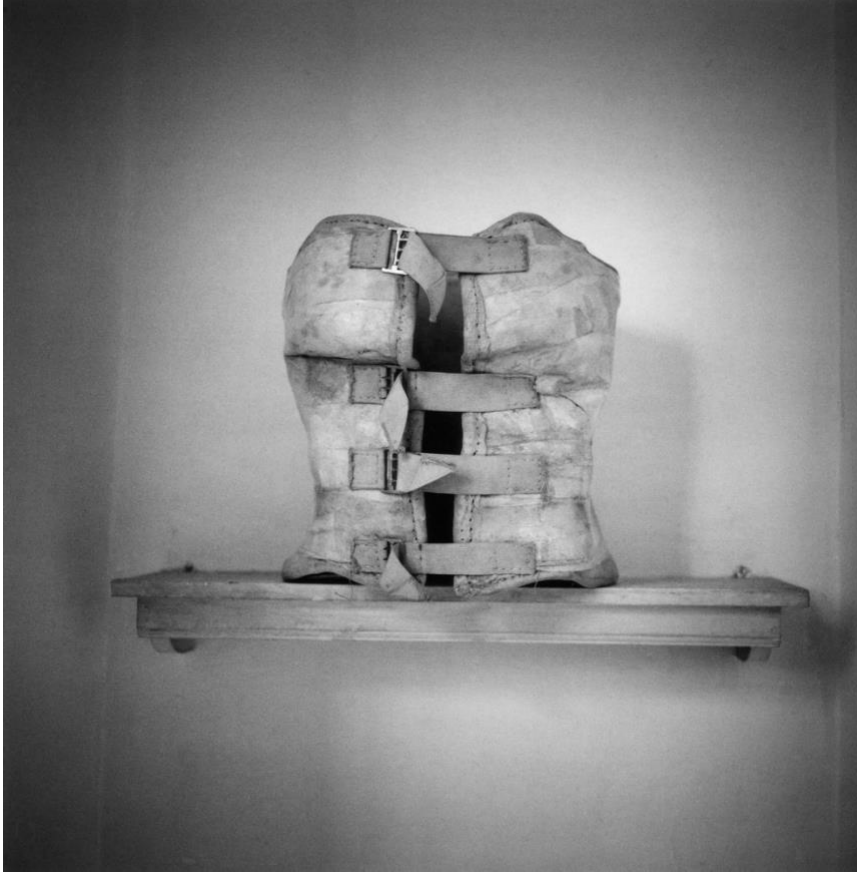


Fig. 10. Graciela Iturbide. *Untitled, El baño de Frida Kahlo*, Coyoacán, México, 2006



Fig. 11. Graciela Iturbide. *Untitled, El baño de Frida Kahlo*, Coyoacán, México, 2006





Fig. 13. Graciela Iturbide. *Untitled, El baño de Frida Kahlo*, Coyoacán, México, 2005



Fig. 14. Graciela Iturbide. *Untitled, El baño de Frida Kahlo*, Coyoacán, México, 2005



Fig. 15. Graciela Iturbide. *Untitled, El baño de Frida Kahlo*, Coyoacán, México, 2006



Fig. 16. Graciela Iturbide. *Untitled, El baño de Frida Kahlo*, Coyoacán, México, 2006

Similar to Duchamp's ready-mades, which suggest that the encounter with a trivial object alters a chain of meanings, Iturbide decides to take photos of Kahlo's objects by constantly reinserting them into a different composition. Sometimes the objects are alone, like the orthopedic leg or the corset, but sometimes they appear together, as in the bathtub with a turtle in it, or the bathtub with another poster and some crutches. We can also see Kahlo's bathrobe with some stains all over it, a pair of dead birds, or the corset repeated under different angles, among others. The series ends with Iturbide's self-portrait that repeats Kahlo's famous painting "*Lo que el agua me dio*," in which she draws her feet in the bathtub.

In Kahlo's painting we see a world of images that float in the water. The feet do not seem to be part of the body, but rather a thing in themselves in which each end mirrors the other through the water. The water works, however, as a bizarre mirror that, instead of being transparent, carries a number of symbols and images. The water does not behave as a clean surface that reproduces the same image, but rather as a kind of medium that gives birth and reproduces Kahlo's feet. The bathtub's siphon also works backwards: instead of draining the blood that comes from the foot's toe, it seems to be irrigating thin threads of blood. The water seems to be the gestating force through which Kahlo reinserts different periods of her life, as well as different paintings. Iturbide's feet mimic Kahlo's, highlighting the deformed toe, the absence of water, the grey zones, as opposed to the colors and symbols, the shadows, and the bathtub's siphon. In both images, the feet, as opposed to the face, articulate a self-portrait that alludes to the threshold of becoming anonymous. The singularity that the photograph retains, however, is the kind of duality that inhabits the photograph: as both a tautological relation with the medium and the possibility of displacing it to a future subject that would be "in the place of" Iturbide. The grey, as a middle zone, proposes that point of uncertainty between the borders of

what is visible, the moment in which the gaze is almost disappearing. But also, the moment in which the traces, marks, stains—and, we could add, writing—are beginning to become out of focus, there they cease to be legible. The grey could be, then, a kind of suture of this uncertainty between the process, the union, and the revelation in each photograph and the photographic process at large. A suture between life and death, or vitality and fixity, between the figure and the background, between materials and their surfaces, or between the photograph and the material space of the bathroom that houses it.

Through these kinds of apparently “unconscious” arrangements, Iturbide creates a poetic gesture that seems to suggest that an image is phantasmatic because it is both suspended and gravitating. Kahlo survives as a phantasmatic image that materially appears through a series of parts that are obtained, listened to, seen, touched, and captured to be reproduced in the world. An image of such a quality behaves as a constellation of parts in between which circulates a system of resonances that lengthen and aggravate it but is determined by the way of its framing.

The gesture of framing is, in this sense, following Rosalind Krauss, inherently photographic. When talking about photography in surrealism, Krauss explains that the framing edge of the image experienced as cut or cropped is the experience of nature as representation, physical matter as writing.<sup>102</sup> The aesthetic of surrealism, which Krauss highlights, is “reducing to an experience of reality transformed into representation. *Surreality* is, we could say, nature convulsed into a kind of writing.”<sup>103</sup> The special nature of photography is that it relates this experience to the real. And the manipulations in photography—what Krauss calls doubling and

---

<sup>102</sup> Krauss, “The photographic Conditions of Surrealism,” 31.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 30.

spacing—appear to document these convulsions where the real appears. The photographs are not then, *interpretations* of reality, decoding it, but rather presentations of that very reality as configured, coded, written. That is, the experience of nature as sign, or nature as representation, comes “naturally” to photography.

The relationship between surrealism, as defined by Krauss, and Iturbide’s photographic practice can be seen in this use of and attention to the framing. In Iturbide’s photographs, however, the framing is relevant because spacing is produced. That is, spacing as the use of found frames to interrupt or displace segments of reality. We can see this in Iturbide’s constant rearrangement of found objects in Kahlo’s bathroom and the activation she gives them through the entire series. The objects also imitate the photographic camera, in which “at the very boundary of the image” it frames, crops, or cuts the represented element of reality-at-large. This photographic cropping is “*always* experienced as a rupture in the continuous fabric of reality.”<sup>104</sup> Framing as spacing is the rupture within this continuous movement of the world. Such a rupture corresponds to Iturbide’s constant reframing of Kahlo’s life “in an afterlife” through objects. To a certain extent, the objects already work as frames in the photographs, as compositions that

---

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 31. Surrealist photography, as Krauss explains, “puts an enormous pressure on that frame to make it itself read as sign—an empty sign it is true, but an integer in the calculus of meaning: a signifier of signification.” The frame announces that between the part of reality that was cut away and this part here there is a difference, and that this segment which the frame frames is an example of nature-as-representation, nature-as-sign. As it signals the experience of reality, the camera frame also controls it, configures it. The point of view or the closeup with focal length are examples of these instances: what the camera frames and thereby makes visible is the automatic writing of the world: the constant, uninterrupted production of signs. The frame announces the camera’s ability to find and isolate what we could call the world’s constant writing, its ceaseless automatism. In that sense, the frame can be both things: glorified, represented, as in some photographs by Man Ray. Or, it can be simply there, silently operating as spacing, as in Brassai’s series on graffiti.

What the surrealist added to that reality, according to Krauss, was the vision of it *as* representation or sign. Reality was both extended and replaced by that master supplement which is writing: the paradoxical writing of the photograph (34).

imitate the fragmentary quality of a life now seen as an indeterminate surface that is folded, refolded, defolded.

The detours that this surface takes also extends to the photobook in general. We can think of the ruptures not only as the framing but also as the blank spaces that accompany each page in the photobook. As blank pages, those spaces also suggest two things. On the one hand, the possibility of images to come, to be inscribed, and the interpretation of the reader as an active participant who will, momentarily, fill them in the series. On the other hand, they suggest an act of reading that challenges historicity, that interrupts history and expands on the gaps. By reading photographs and blank spaces together, the narrative is constructed in such a way that it leaves room for vision to be questioned. As Krauss notes, with the different uses that the camera acquired throughout the history of photography, it also works as a prosthesis to human vision. It works, however, as a paradox, because as it enlarges the human eye, expands vision, and increases the ways in which the world can be presented to vision; it also mediates between that presence, gets between the viewer and the world, and “shapes reality to *its* terms.”<sup>105</sup> This both supplements and corrects the deficiency of human vision, as well as supplants the viewer herself. The camera “is the aide who comes to usurp.”<sup>106</sup> No wonder then that the idea of camera-seeing was essentially a superior power of focus and selection, and which most of culture has used as a gesture of supremacy<sup>107</sup>. The camera as this supplement has served as an internalized representation of the camera frame as an image of mastery.

---

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 34.

<sup>107</sup> Krauss refers to some self-portraits of Man Ray that explicitly show this relationship. The camera frame is revealed in such a way that “it masters and dominates the subject, and the phallic shape she constructs for its symbol is continuous with the form (...) of supremacy,” 34.





Fig. 17. Graciela Iturbide. *Untitled, El baño de Frida Kahlo*, Coyoacán, México, 2005



Fig. 18. Graciela Iturbide *¿Ojos para volar?* Coyoacán, México, 1991

The paradoxical nature of the camera as both enlargement and supplement takes a different step in Iturbide's photographs. In Iturbide's photographs of Kahlo's bathroom we can think that an inversion takes place. Iturbide focuses on and selects objects that act as traces of Kahlo's life. In both self-portraits, *¿Ojos para volar?* and *Lo que el agua me dio* there is an explicit critique of the idea of the camera-seeing eye as an instrument of mastery. Instead, she emphasizes how with the camera there is also an opportunity to pierce the eyes, to not only enlarge, expand, and act on its terms, but rather question such terms. Her reference to the language of birds precisely points to this, as well as to the absence of the face in the self-portrait of her feet in Kahlo's bathtub. The self in both photographs is one that, instead of expressing mastery, deconstructs itself to emphasize, instead, an artisanal gesture that approaches life in

minor ways. That is, this life no longer focuses on greatness, control, and domination, underlined by the phallus, but rather is reproduced through the camera as a visual aid that turns vision to itself. It is a kind of self-reflecting pose that instead of completely mimicking itself through mirrors, quotes and defers the image's duplication to someone and something else.

The camera in Iturbide's practice works as a reproductive organ where focus and selection are driven not by a complete "perceptual automatism" that André Breton related to the calculations of reason (bourgeois reason),<sup>108</sup> but rather to a reproduced vision that is mediated by the camera as a visual aid that articulates vision with a deviant course. Far from considering vision as a "good, pure, uncontaminated" ability, Iturbide defies such purity and, instead, makes visible a process of pollination that stages the experience of what Breton also calls hypnogogic images: a visual experience that is of half-waking, half-dreaming. This experience is one of focus and selection but is suspicious of the aspects of truth associated with the contemplative quality sometimes carried by images. This aspect of truth is even more challenged by the camera as reconsidered prosthesis and opens the space to the artifice that deconstructs not only this type of savage vision, but also the norms and rules that organized what is perceivable through the devices of visual reproduction. With that Iturbide works with and against the camera as a visual prosthesis. Through that gesture Kahlo survives as a phantasmatic image, whose material

---

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 10. Breton also suggests, as Krauss explains, that the privileged place of vision in surrealism is challenged by writing. Breton chooses writing over vision, as he considers vision, rather than writing, "the stabilizing of dream images in the kind of still-life deception known as *trompe l'oeil*." Breton seems to be reversing the classical preference of vision to writing, of immediacy to dissociation. As Krauss says, he continues Western culture's fear of representation as an invitation to deceit. And the truth of the cursive flow of automatist writing or drawing is less a representation of something that it is a manifestation or recording: like the lines traced on paper by the seismograph or the cardiograph. Breton calls this "rhythmic unity," which characterizes as the "absence of contradiction, the relaxation of emotional tensions due to repression, a lack of sense of time, and the replacement of external reality by a psychic reality obeying the pleasure principle alone." This has a similar relation to what Freud called the oceanic feeling—the infantile, libidinal domain of pleasure not yet constrained by civilization and its discontents. Writing makes the unconscious, oceanic feeling, present, because it functions as an automatism that "leads us in a straight line to this region" of the unconscious.

residues activated by Iturbide resist the complete purity and transparency of controlling reason or commodified fetishism.

With Iturbide's framing, focus, and selection, she creates ruptures to that continual development of the world. She makes visible Kahlo's "life in the afterlife" as one composed not through objects that represent *still life*, but rather through those that emphasize a "living nature." Rather than showing her belongings as static things that mimic and represent her life through objects of possession, Iturbide turns her camera to the objects that make her life even more unattainable, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, make her life an empty signifier that could be possibly occupied by someone else through seriality. That someone would be "in the place of" both Kahlo and Iturbide. Kahlo's objects keep living because they remain as traces of traces. That is, as traces that keep living, because living also means leaving traces.

Iturbide's constant reframing refers, then, to a special use of the artifice as a tool that makes vision turn into itself and reproduce, instead, a dual aspect of Kahlo's life in which fiction and documentary work in the same composition.<sup>109</sup> Iturbide's gesture rebels against the freezing of an image of the past, the immobilization of the visible to preserve it. She suggests, instead, a movement within that past that perforates time in order to transform it.

The inverted relationship between image and text in the book-object, articulates a presence understood as an artifice that dismantles the Frida Kahlo sign and, instead, presents a lowercase Frida, recreated among her objects that read not only THE life but a life after life—that is, life as an unfinished image. Understanding life as such an image, therefore, involves recognizing photography, like writing, as living matters that disarticulate their nostalgic

---

<sup>109</sup> A similar composition also happens to be in Manuel Álvarez Bravo's aesthetics, who was her teacher and mentor.

condition towards the past, to inscribe themselves as plastic matters indicating a possible transvestism. Read together, photography and writing propose to think Kahlo's life as this type of surviving image—that is, in this series, a “life in the afterlife” in which Kahlo keeps coming back but always folded on the other side, in Bellatín's authorial body, in the tension between two bodies that fuse as a plastic material of a life and its deferred duplications.

### **In the name of *an* author**

Frida kahlo, in lower case, deauthorizes the mark of the author both as a symbol of property and authority and as a biographical and autobiographical referent. This deauthorization suggests a movement within the fixity of the past and the apparent immobility of Frida Kahlo as historical figure. The lower case is the process through which Frida Kahlo ceases to be a fixed mark of history to become a mobile signifier through fiction. Through a dual presence in photography and writing, Kahlo becomes a referent in constant gestation that could potentially be filled in, without attempting to complete it. It is not a coincidence that in Kahlo's oeuvre she gives birth to herself several times as a central theme in her paintings. This action is something that both Bellatín and Iturbide also repeat in photography and writing.

On the side of writing, the name of Mario Bellatín appears at the end of the narrative with a signature that reproduces his name in lower case. Bellatín, in lower case, also suggests the common action that is repeated throughout his books: the possibility of composing an oeuvre that uses himself as its own archive and its multiple levels of deformation and alteration. In Bellatín's fiction we not only see characters that have the same name, Mario Bellatín, but also have the sense that whatever we are reading we have read before, and that we will read it in the future, that we've seen the same characters doing the same things and the same names associated with small stories.

In a certain sense, Bellatín's writing acquires the process of a performance. In this process writing appears in a type of initial stage in which what is visible is the preparation of forms, materials: the processes through which certain characters acquire different forms, or the ways in which a performance takes place. Writing is, then, the vehicle in which its materials are actualized as the narrative goes on and takes the form of several events. Through this use of performance, where additional layers of fiction are interwoven, the author morphs into a gradually diminishing figure. With every added layer, not just fragments of discourse, but also authorial bodies, are traversed and replaced by others. There is no presumption of conclusion or finality, and its boundaries are constantly in a state of dissolution.

As Reinaldo Laddaga posits, Bellatín's works also display a persistent inclination to incorporate into their fabric "information about the time and place where the collected inventions were realized, and details pertaining to the specific individual who assembled the object with which the reader is now engaging, as if desiring that this object retains the traces of its construction (even if they take the form of irregular markings or incomplete stamps)." <sup>110</sup> Laddaga's perspective underscores the inherent repetition found in Bellatín's works. However, this repetition is never identical but is instead constructed within a domain of difference that is determined by the characters' emergence in the fictional texts and their frames of signification. This "emergence" appears to be novel yet carries the vestiges of preceding texts, revealing "new" characters in transformation. This shifting dynamic points towards the "irregular forms" and "incomplete marks" that form the nucleus of Bellatín's works, articulating a form of literature that is unstable. It also indicates a kind of junkspace, where the continuity of residues is resolved

---

<sup>110</sup> Laddaga, "Espectáculos," 11. My translation.

into a “stream that combines information, fictions, inventions, documents, and disguises.”<sup>111</sup> In this light, Bellatín’s fiction presents a form of becoming that engenders possibilities within the author’s body as an unstable and plastic material.

In the realm of photography, Graciela Iturbide assumes a role more akin to a fictional author of a nameless photographic series centered around Kahlo's bathroom. Through the rearrangement of objects and the exploration of narrative within seriality, Iturbide morphs into an author who replicates and reproduces the bodily traces Kahlo left behind as residues and fragments. As noted earlier, Iturbide transforms into Kahlo's double at the series' conclusion by serendipitously echoing one of Kahlo's renowned paintings, *Lo que el agua me dio*. This seemingly inconsequential gesture becomes a decisive moment in which Iturbide disrupts the formal and institutional nature of a museum, a space destined for mummification and preservation.

By employing seriality, Iturbide "displays" rather than solidifies the tangible traces that Frida Kahlo left behind as a historical figure. Moreover, by rearranging, choosing, and composing objects into a different narrative, she manipulates both the bathroom space and the objects, engaging with the traces and objects now transformed into remnants. In a certain sense, Iturbide assembles a counter-archive of Kahlo's persona and redirects her traces to make them signify anew under a distinct set of domains. Here, the "mark" of the author is a pollination of the "author"—that is, the potential to emerge as another body, to copy and reproduce Kahlo's self-portrait, to literally stand in "her shoes." All these methods of retracing Kahlo's life are possible precisely through the process of fictionalization: that is, through a process in which we

---

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 20. My translation

perceive Kahlo as a phantasmatic image, that materially reappears in "a life in the afterlife."

However, this doesn't suggest that Kahlo's life lacks meaning. Instead, it implies that fiction can reveal something additional about her life. There remains a living matter that the photographic images suggest, employing fiction as a tool that continually actualizes Kahlo's traces. This shows fiction as a force able to resist the display, contemplation, and ownership that Cortés Rocca links with the excessive realism treating nature as a totality.

Photography and writing together suggest that, even though Kahlo's oeuvre revolves around a central principle that turns her life into a work of art, this artificial maneuver opens up fiction to a shared sphere. Within this sphere, "a life in the afterlife" also implies the possibility of a life inhabited by numerous lives—past, present, and future—as lowercase works of art. Iturbide and Bellatín not only enact Kahlo's aesthetic principle, but they also duplicate it within their own lives and authorial bodies. With the post-living kahlo, Bellatín writes his own life as a work of art, and in the confined space of the bathroom Iturbide puts herself "in Kahlo's feet"; she mimics Kahlo, becomes her, and inscribes her own self-portrait in the same series. Through this action, Iturbide disrupts the "official" status of the museum, the archive, and the document.

Both "authors" craft a narrative in which their own bodies serve as sites of fiction and potential contestation against the hegemonic and commodified narratives surrounding Frida Kahlo as a historical figure. If, as I have previously mentioned, orthopedics determines the "normalization" of a body through a prosthesis, such normalization is destabilized when these bodies express their prosthetics as artifice. The photographic camera, on the one hand, and Bellatín's prosthetic hand that reproduces a kind of writing machine<sup>112</sup> invertedly mirror each

---

<sup>112</sup> In the text "Mario Bellatín's Writing Machines," Edmundo Paz Soldán highlights that the relationship between writing and its machinery always has been present. It is not a coincidence that Bellatín's memoir on his book is titled *Underwood portátil: modelo 1915* (2005), an homage to the typewriter on which he began composing his works



other to produce *El baño de Frida Kahlo/Demerol sin fecha de caducidad*. The storytelling nature of both sides of the book works as a visual aid that makes Kahlo's body, her image and her traces, a plastic surface. As both replacement and addition, photography and writing assume their function as aids that work as a *pharmakon*.

In his text "Plato's Pharmacy," Derrida refers to Plato's Phaedrus to examine the truth in writing and the perceived opposition between speech and writing. However, Derrida positions the *pharmakon* as both a "drug and remedy," destabilizing the oppositions that Socrates strives to uphold in Phaedrus. He describes the *pharmakon* as "this medicine, this philter, which embodies both remedy and poison and inserts itself into the body of the discourse with inherent ambivalence. This charm, this enchanting quality, this power of fascination, can alternate or coexist as either beneficent or maleficent."<sup>113</sup> Following Derrida's line of thought, the *pharmakon*—another term for writing—possesses concealed powers and virtues, while

---

(268). As Bellatín says, "Siempre me ha deleitado el sonido que surge de las teclas, el olor de la tinta sobre el papel," referring to a sensory pleasure with the hands and in absence of his hand. Later in the narrative, Bellatín copies his favorite writings by others on the typewriter in order to erase the text of other writing with negative energies, as an exercise of someone who needs to explain the means of constructing his "carga de escritura" (270). Writing, as Paz Soldán argues, can be an artisanal product, the work of an artist who faces a blank page and polishes the artistic object day by day. That product, however, "is part of a capitalist system, based upon which productive machines help the artist be more efficient and productive (271)." This is something that Bellatín clearly notes, but, at the same time, works with and against. Bellatín, as it is known, was born without a right arm and uses many prostheses of different brands and qualities. This has resulted in many reflections throughout his work on the use of prostheses on the body. Such reflection on the writing instrument as another form of prostheses is logical in his case. The typewriter works as a supplement, a prosthesis, a mediation. Yet, the paradox that Paz Soldán highlights relies also in Bellatín's constant search of a prostheses that allows a more or less mediated relationship with writing, something similar to that of a man writing with pencil and that he then incorporates as similar to writing in an Ipod in the digital era. As Paz Soldán comments, "With the Ipod, the writer simplifies the objects, the material structures necessary to the production of writing: in a natural setting like a forest, Bellatín is, with his Ipod touch, a type of cyborg of textual production (272)". The technological changes thus imply stylistic changes where writing acquires different types of expression and processes while it also creates ruptures with conventional elements of what is a novel. This is clearly seen in Bellatín's style of "auto-fiction". What Bellatín's texts show is how the contemporary writer is changing her aesthetics influenced by those machines that materially produce writing and attempts to register the new forms of perception and sensibility. The writer is then both a "symptom of global capitalism and a possibility of resistance and change of that system (273)".

<sup>113</sup> *Dissemination*, pp. 431.

simultaneously functioning as an anti-substance: "it oversteps its limits as nonidentity, nonessence, nonsubstance." <sup>114</sup> The pharmakon, as both remedy and poison, operates through seduction, surpassing the boundaries of its definition. The pharmakon as a form of writing that both seduces and exceeds its own limits invariably connects to elements of life and death. Therefore, the boundary between truth and writing, or life and death, is feasible as long as the artifice functions as a pharmakon—a supplement. This supplement, however, does not signify control, but rather an excess enabled by the artifice, a space where both substitution and addition coexist.

This interplay is apparent at both the writing and photographic levels. In *El baño de Frida Kahlo/Demerol sin fecha de caducidad*, these two mediums function as visual aids, projecting and making apparent the dead person: in this case, Frida Kahlo. They reference an "absent" Frida Kahlo, but as visual aids, they materialize her "absence" into photography and writing. In a certain sense, Bellatín and Iturbide transcribe Kahlo's dead body. Rather than "preserving" or "immobilizing" Kahlo's body, they recreate it in a life in the "afterlife" where she persists as an emergent image. This is not to say that Kahlo's afterlife signifies the opposite of an absence, but rather, she manifests as a repetition—a dual presence. This presence, however, is continuously disrupted by the fluidity within the realm of fiction, acting as a body that is persistently shaped and reshaped.

This duplication introduces an excess in which Kahlo becomes a plastic surface, her plasticity articulated as an artifice or, one could say, as *pharmakon*. This dual movement accentuates the prosthesis of the sick body as an artifice that disrupts the normative principles of

---

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

orthopedics, or the "truth"—an intrinsic normalizing quality in writing as perceived by Socrates. The artifice, acting as a prosthesis, signifies the illegitimate, the replica or image of something "real." However, within the domain of the "plastic," it disrupts the logos—the authorization, legality, and legitimacy of writing. In other words, the artifice contaminates writing and photography, suggesting a game of appearances where the maleficent tricks as "truth." As both poison and cure, the artifice invokes memory from the fabric of fiction.

The relationship between writing as both drug and remedy is also central to Bellatín's works. As I said earlier in the chapter, in his auto-figurative drive, Bellatín constantly refers to his body as a sick body. He transforms this "illness," the absence of his right arm, into an opportunity to highlight his deformity and articulate his creative act as more monstrous and anomalous. Similarly, Iturbide makes visible the objects in *El baño de Frida Kahlo* that, even when they refer to indices of a body that is "absent," by being part of a dual artifact—the photobook—the photographs in seriality open the condition of a sick body to a plastic body, making the index an even more unstable category. By strategically framing and reframing, Iturbide illustrates that an image is a constellation of components that can be reconfigured spatially. Such a reconfiguration of Kahlo's traces implies an assembly that holds temporal roots.

The visual reproduction mechanism depicted in *Demerol*, which finds its reality doubled at the book's conclusion, initiates and concludes the narrative. It acts as a frame of understanding that, by suggesting a form of didactic methodology where fiction can modify the perception of space and time. So, it's not only that the author dies, echoing Barthes, but that the author is infinitely duplicated within the visual mechanism. Both Bellatín and Iturbide disrupt the imprint of the author and intervene in the narrative space via a movement of replacement and addition.

In the realm of writing, this means that Kahlo, by being the author of Bellatín's text, is transformed from an absent body that "is lacking in every image," into a performative subject whose body, portrait, and language undergo transformation and travestism. Within the sphere of photography, a corporeal and temporal experience becomes visible through the intermittent intersection of what is dead and what is alive. The copy, functioning as both replacement and addition, expands the domain of visibility to position it in the gap between life and death.

In here, Kahlo can embody numerous roles: performer, curator, photographer, painter, actress, and others. Echoing Bellatín, she admits detecting in the origins of her craft "a constant unease to paint without painting."<sup>115</sup> As a result, on numerous occasions, she "incessantly copied works from other authors. She devoted some time to the task of transcription."<sup>116</sup> Within this methodology, it could be argued, signatures evolve into erasures, images that through duplication and repetition, replacement and addiction, occupy and pollinate another body.

The visual apparatus copies the artist's life "in fragments"—as photographs—in both registers and reproduces it on the verge of fiction. Frida kahlo, in lowercase, is made visible through photography and writing, as visual prostheses, through which she emerges as an unfinished, incomplete image. Kahlo emerges, then, in the interstice in which Frida Kahlo is constantly becoming other, namely, frida kahlo, mario bellatín, and more. On the other hand, Iturbide's photographs that mimic the objects they capture suggest that the referent is not one, and that they escape signification. The Frida referent is divided into several folds, and alludes to a plastic, formless materiality, where her "missing" body is also her staging. The body, then, also as a photographic and written object reveals the dual aspect of being simultaneously alive and

---

<sup>115</sup> *Demerol*, 8. My translation.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, 9. My translation.

dead<sup>117</sup>. Like the two birds in Iturbide's self-portrait, this dual characteristic of life and death suggests that this duplication opens the condition of the absent body to the plastic body. To articulate, in turn, an undisciplined posture through the artifice where Kahlo's body becomes even more indecipherable. In this prosthetic dual movement between replacement and addition, this life in the afterlife is located not outside of eternal futurity, but, as Catherine Malabou explains, in an explosion of form that can make a before and after reversible, while suggesting the possible life of new forms.<sup>118</sup>

The folds between photography and writing in *El baño de Frida Kahlo/Demerol sin fecha de caducidad* thus expose a undiscipline in front of the rules that organize perception. As a dual gaze—photography and writing—the perceptive act is reorganized to challenge the discipline through which a subject of perception is produced. The Frida Kahlo that survives as image readjusts the past and the future, so that they coexist with one another. Both artists inhabit the body as a plastic surface, as a field of inadequacies that falls into an indefinite consistency of the visible. In this fall, the body proper, like the authorial name, becomes the scene of writing and photography where both authors vacillate and fade away, while inscribing their own material bodies as inscriptions to come.

This undisciplined staging is possible through the artifice that works in both photography and writing. Through Kahlo's body as a plastic surface, both artists participate in a process in which they invent themselves and articulate what Catherine Malabou has proposed as a plasticity beyond presence in each staging. This undisciplined, artful "staging" operates in both mediums

---

<sup>117</sup> Even if Iturbide's photographs allude to Kahlo's experience of pain as what "is no longer there," as Cortés Rocca suggests, it is the staging of this experience as a post-photographic image that reveals the double aspect of simultaneously being dead and alive.

<sup>118</sup> Malabou, *Plasticity*, 38.

as visual prostheses that, in turn, expand the bodies of both artists. The media, as prostheses, displace image and text to accidental encounters that amplify the visual and written field. The prosthesis stands for "the place of" something missing, at the limit of the false, and modifies the modes of reading and writing. It thus displays the final interest of writing which, as Bellatín says, is "el milagroso encuentro instalado en la formulación de las palabras. Ver cómo sobrevive, después de tantos años, la pulsión por su aparición."<sup>119</sup> The drive that exhibits miraculous encounters stages their own artistic process that reproduce randomness and dissolution. There where the body can and will morph, Iturbide and Bellatín use their bodies as the material surface of their works and transform, like Kahlo, the physical ornament in a kind of "autoplastic" surface where the referent is indefinitely emptied and occupied.

Throughout their artistic processes, Bellatín and Iturbide create the plastic component of their works, the prosthetic artifice that suppresses the distance between the materials and their surfaces. In them both artists generate "a life in the afterlife" in which they are both the first cell—in potency—that gave birth to Frida Kahlo after her death. In that passage from death to life, a plastic process takes place: between the dissolution of form and the losing of life, they restructure the emergence and revelation of Kahlo's "life in the afterlife."

In this passage, Bellatín and Iturbide are already inhabited by her, they are the most ancient cells that gave birth to her and that, with time, made sense. Iturbide and Bellatín reconstruct Kahlo's "life in the afterlife" as residues that speak in the order of a living nature more than a still life. Like an embryo, Kahlo keeps coming back in both photography and writing. Text and image duplicate in a "folding in place of," where Frida emerges in a life in the

---

<sup>119</sup> Bellatín, *Obras Reunidas 2*, 18.

afterlife. In this “life” another time opens to flows and reflows that retrace stillness. From there, Bellatín's writing and Iturbide's photographs propose imagination and invite transformation into the form they create, while they create themselves through the materials that comprise both media. This form finds its place through the artifice, that as prosthesis—replacement and addition—defies Kahlo's completely absent body. This form opens, instead, to a life more communal that fascinates because it both exhibits and exceeds the temporal dimension of everyday life.

In that dual movement, of forming and being formed, writing and photography meet in indeterminate spaces and, in those spaces, fiction can be a critical tool that allows us to enter into Frida Kahlo's archive, reposition it, and mobilize it towards something else: a date without expiration that is also the possibility to keep inhabiting a body in which we are all becoming frida.

## Chapter 2:

### *Images in Flux: Breath, Tears, Rubble*



Fig. 17. Muñoz, Oscar. *Aliento* (1995). Nine silkscreens on metal mirrors. Exhibition view, Phoenix Art Museum. Photo credits: Luis F. Avilés.

The image *passes us by*. We have to follow its movement as far as possible, but we must also accept that we can never entirely possess it.

—Georges Didi-Huberman

In the realm of images, something might begin when someone dies. Where the body disappears, when it is dispersed as life, an image emerges, it is solidified. In his text “When images touch the real”<sup>120</sup>, French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman thinks about this type of image, one that burns because of its memory: an image that burns is an image that “*still* burns

---

<sup>120</sup> Didi-Huberman. “Cuando las imágenes tocan lo real,” *Arts Coming/ Contemporary Art Editions*, 8 de septiembre, 2015; My translation.



when it is no more than ash; when it survives, in spite of all. But to know this image, or to feel it, we must put our face closer to the ashes and blow gently so that the underlying fire can emit again its warmth, its responsibility, its danger.”<sup>121</sup> The passage from an image to a form of solidification could be similar to Roland Barthes’ point about the camera shutter as that which turns what is alive into a corpse. The image as solidified could be like a body turned into a corpse. Didi-Huberman’s words, however, seem to claim a different type of image, an image-trace, that exposes the impossibility of silencing or regulating the nomadism of the image. Instead of thinking about the image as a static and fixed unit, the image-trace questions the objectivity and idealism that images sometimes carry in photography’s complicated history. The image-residue forces us to see, to get closer to the image, and to feel its fleeting nature both in time and memory. So that to see an image, following Didi-Huberman, would be to discern the “*place where it burns, (...) a trembling crisis, a symptom. That is, the place where the ashes are not yet cold*”<sup>122</sup>. An image seen under these conditions is an image that passes by while articulating the gestures, the intervals, moments of breath, in which it is constituted, or not, over time.

This unstable condition of images is at the center of Colombian artist Oscar Muñoz artistic practice and what I will later call the fragility of images. When talking about his own journey as an artist, Muñoz says that the connection between his works resides on what “subtly ties them together like a thread, frayed at times”, that which aims to give a better idea of the image in time: “of the strangeness of perceiving ‘inappreciable tremors’ and of the transformations suffered by an image that has been designed to remain, fixed, or printed, over

---

<sup>121</sup> Didi-Huberman. “Cuando las imágenes tocan lo real,” *Arts Coming/ Contemporary Art Editions*, 8 de septiembre, 2015; My translation.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

time”<sup>123</sup>. The different tensions in which images come into being, the instability that allows them to move when their permanence is put into crisis, are situated in what Muñoz calls a “threshold of suspension”. In this threshold images are “neither in full motion, nor completely fixed, flickering before the imminent danger of being burned.”<sup>124</sup> The image in Muñoz’s works is thus an image-trace that carries with it the diverse temporal layers while showing its materialities and future transformations.

The image in Muñoz’s work should be considered in this critical moment of its fixation, be it chemical, physical, or metaphorical. That is, a moment that the image faces when it is not in absolute rest, but rather hesitant, patient and still moving in the “inappreciable tremor” that indicates life itself. Muñoz’s concern about images goes beyond its composition as mere representation of reality and as a mere result of a technical and mechanical apparatus like the photographic camera. He considers them, instead, as part of an assemblage of materials, thoughts and processes that constitutes the image’s flows and lives, the movements that it undergoes through time and history so that it reveals not a beauty of the world, but a world in motion. Because the invention of photography came about as a long experimentation with the visual, the concepts of trace, evidence, and memorial served as tropes to think that the world could have a more exact and instant means of representation and expression. As such studies on photography tend to focus on the index as a state of things of the past, as a trace of its referent and therefore evidentiary and memorial of what is known to be real. Through an analysis of Muñoz’s works, in this chapter I aim to explore the ways his artistic practice both engages with and challenges the

---

<sup>123</sup> Muñoz, *Invisibilia*, 177.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.* The image that burns speaks to the material situation in practice when a film, for example, would freeze during its projection on screen.

photographic medium, defying the presumed fixity inherent in images and its attempt to be sealed in as memorialization.

In this chapter I will analyze three works by Muñoz. I will focus, namely, in *Aliento* (1995), *Lacrimarios* (2000) and *Biografías* (2001). These artworks correspond to the main 70 pieces of the retrospective exhibition of his work called *Protografías* in Bogotá in 2011. Through different temporalities we can see in the two pieces how an image takes shape as it vanishes again, a similar idea that is repeated in some of Muñoz's works. In *Aliento*, it is the viewer's breath that allows an image to appear. A series of circular metallic discs of about 20 cm are put next to each other on an empty wall of one of the museums rooms. They are located at the height of an average viewer's gaze and separated from each other. This separation allows for a singular experience to take place on each disc. An image is printed over a grease film that immerses the metallic disc through a technique called serigraphy. However, to make the image visible the viewers must look at the disc that reflects their image, they see their face, they breathe into the disc, while blurring their own image and allowing another one to appear. On the other hand, *Lacrimarios* (2000) consists of several transparent containers that hold an image made of charcoal powder on the surface of the water. It is mounted on a wall at the waist height of the viewer. Less than a meter away, the artist installs a light projector on the floor that emits a diagonal beam that rises to the container, causing the water to turn into a mirror. In this way, the transparent container allows the repetition of the image suspended on the surface to be seen on all its sides. In *Biografías* we see more explicitly the tension between materiality and immateriality: a video installation records the process of several faces being drawn with charcoal dust on water. The growing image develops, becomes an image, starts to diminish and disappear, and turns back into dust again.

Some questions that guide me are, for example, how an image's afterlife can either quote or defy the permanence of a trace of what no longer exists? How does such an interaction open up a space where photography can be subversive, that is, as Roland Barthes says, "not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is *pensive*, when it thinks"? I thus analyze Muñoz's work with images in these three works to reconsider them also as things that go beyond their composition as mere representation of reality and as mere results of a technical and mechanical apparatus like the photographic camera. This approach allows us to consider the image's life, its movement through time and history, as a material object rather than just a representation. By examining Muñoz's works within their "threshold of suspension"—the critical moment between fixation and dissolution—I aim to elucidate the paths these images take as displaced material objects and to further our understanding of their significance in Muñoz's body of work.

Understanding the "threshold of suspension" in the context of the image's materiality enables us to move beyond interpretations of Muñoz's work that focus solely on themes of collective memory, death, and violence. Such readings often emphasize the opposition between active memory and passive oblivion, as well as the reconciliation with a past that emerges in the present through acts of memorialization. These readings have situated Muñoz's work within the tradition of Colombian artists such as Beatriz González and Doris Salcedo, who use indexical signs such as traces, marks, and residues to reestablish the relationship between the footprints of an event and the missing event itself, as interpreted through the work of Rosalind Krauss<sup>125</sup>.

---

<sup>125</sup> Malagón-Kurka, María Margarita. "Dos lenguajes contrastantes en el arte colombiano" 16-33.

This new generation of Colombian artists that includes González, Salcedo and Muñoz, according to Malagón, is less interested in the figurative style of previous generations and more interested in presenting signs and signals that allude to a particular Colombian reality as indices that the spectator would have to complete. These works are situated in the context of the country's political violence, which has resulted in an overabundance of violent images that have made it difficult to feel anything. Amanda Jane Graham has interpreted this process of disappearance as paralleling the corporeal-political disappearance of the bodies of "desaparecidos" during Colombia's armed conflict<sup>126</sup>. Similarly, María del Rosario Acosta has viewed Muñoz's works as a response to the persistence with which time erases the past, a place where memory and oblivion meet fortuitously, and where the specular reflections in his works refer to the absence of memory through an experience that recreates loss<sup>127</sup>. Other interpretations of Muñoz's work include Paola Cortés Rocca's suggestion of a "canto fúnebre," in which grief is not only about the death of the subject in the picture, but about the destiny of the image itself to disappear<sup>128</sup>. María Iovino, on the other hand, has read Muñoz's use of materials and techniques as a narrative that reveals the cyclical qualities of his own work<sup>129</sup>. Meanwhile, José Roca, Muñoz's friend, and longest curator of his work, has interpreted his work as "protographic" in reference to the history of photography, where the photographic act does not rely on "taking" a picture, but on the temporal space that is before and after the image is fixed<sup>130</sup>.

---

<sup>126</sup> Graham, Amanda Jane. "Assisted Breathing", 63–73.

<sup>127</sup> Acosta, "Memory and Fragility" 71-98.

<sup>128</sup> Cortés Rocca "La imagen dentro de sí. Sobre tres obras de Oscar Muñoz", 149-155.

<sup>129</sup> Iovino, *Oscar Muñoz, Volverse aire*. 2003.

<sup>130</sup> Roca, "Introduction" in *Oscar Muñoz: Protografías* 13-38 (my translation).

In the wake of a new retrospective exhibition entitled *Invisibilia* in Phoenix, Arizona, in 2021<sup>131</sup> critics such as Natalia Brizuela and Alejandra Uslenghi have provided further insight into the work of Oscar Muñoz. Uslenghi's analysis centers on Muñoz's works as an "Image-Thought" that expresses the many possibilities between the photographic process, the construction of memory, and historical experience. For Uslenghi, Muñoz's works pose a notion of historical time that, like Walter Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image and Aby Warburg's *Atlas Mnemosyne*, raises questions about memory and its potential to inform our subjectivity, prompting us to reconsider our own process of memory and forgetting<sup>132</sup>. Brizuela, on the other hand, departs from Muñoz's more common readings, to focus on the historical and representational drama that accompanies Colombia's political history of violence and the technique he uses. Specifically, she follows the carbon trail to its origins, tracing its cosmological and geographical course to suggest a *carbon aesthetic* through which she reads Muñoz's production at large.<sup>133</sup> This approach invites a consideration of the carbon-based materials used in Muñoz's work as material residues of unseen events, suggesting that the aesthetic qualities of his work extend beyond formal concerns to encompass broader social, historical, and environmental issues.

This chapter rethinks some of these ideas about Muñoz's works by suggesting that his artistic practice is one in which immateriality and impermanence lies beyond the binary of life and death. In this chapter I am more concerned in thinking about the tension between materiality

---

<sup>131</sup> I am deeply grateful with Ivette Hernández-Torres, Luis F. Avilés, José María Urdaneta and Cora who adventurously decided to drive with me from California to Arizona to see and walk through the exhibition. It was the biggest retrospective exhibition ever undertaken in the US about Muñoz's work. Walking through the works gave me a new sense of what the works were about and passionately talking about them with my colleagues and friends during a coffee afterwards was a very rewarding experience. The conversations we had and the photographs that Luis took from the exhibition are an integral part of this chapter.

<sup>132</sup> Uslenghi in *Invisibilia*, 163.

<sup>133</sup> Brizuela, *Invisibilia*, 219.

and immateriality. This question, however, does not rely merely on materials themselves, but on the elements that compose material relations and propose new modes of visibility, new surfaces in which the visual can otherwise signify. I conceive these relations in Muñoz's works as a poetic that explores the image's materiality as fragile and in a constant state of flux. Through a repetitive use of water, air, fire, and coal dust in various media and formats, Muñoz's create an intimate encounter between movement and stillness that transforms time-relations by highlighting the dynamic and constantly changing nature of the minor elements he uses. In that sense, Muñoz challenges traditional artistic methods and creates interactive exchanges with the spectator while also citing not only the history of photography but the process in which images are made in its contact with other media and their possibility to move and morph. My analysis thus focuses on the works that emphasize processes in a materially fragile aesthetic. Through this analysis, we can gain a different relation to Muñoz's artistic practice, which offers a unique perspective on the relationship between memory, materiality, and the elemental as forces of creation and poetic expression that proposes alternatives ways to imagine the world.

As a brief contextual note, it is important to note that for seven decades Colombia has lived the anguish and sequels of a very long civil war, which ended to some degree in 2016 with the Peace Agreement as an uneasy truce. Beginning with what was called *La Violencia* (1948-1958), the armed conflict between military and guerrilla groups continued throughout decades and intensifying in the so-called "Cartel Wars" which began in the 1980s. Colombia's National Center for Historical Memory reported approximately 200,000 people that were killed between 1948 and 1958. An additional 260,000 Colombians died in this violence between 1958 and 2013; most of them were civilians caught in the crossfire. As the exhibition *Invisibilia* suggests, Oscar Muñoz associate the fragility of images with the precariousness of life. Many of his works

revolve around this relationship, while others feature images of the dead. Nonetheless, in this artistic practice, his approach to violence as a dire reality is more subtle, elusive and processual that articulate other modes to conceive the political.

As I will argue in the chapter, although Muñoz's poetic exploration of materials and surfaces speaks to the experience of living in a country under violent circumstances with numerous conflicts, it also contributes to what he calls "a drive, maybe, a need to explore this to some extent in one's work (...) taking those experiences into a poetic level, to a universal level and to a level that has to do with artistic language"<sup>134</sup>. This is not to say that Muñoz's work does not address the political experience behind the country's historical violence, but rather that his approach to this experience defies national boundaries and goes beyond the so-called *arte comprometido* characteristic of the 1970s.

José Rocca has also argued that, in contrast with much of the *arte comprometido* that flourished in the 70's, the artistic practices that emerged at the end of the 80's tackled the past and contemporary armed struggle in Colombia obliquely and on many occasions openly disavowed *arte comprometido* or reproduced the ideological marginalization of which this art was the object<sup>135</sup>. By avoiding a direct representation and denunciation of what was political, the artistic practices of this moment emphasized a "metaphorical approach where the point of reference was often absent, even though it was implicit."<sup>136</sup> Rocca's suggestion indicates the

---

<sup>134</sup> Quoted in the retrospective exhibition *Invisibilia* at Phoenix Art Museum, 2021.

<sup>135</sup> Rocca, *Transpolítico*, 26.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. At the end of the 80's, however, one of the most important political transformations occurred in Colombia after negotiating with the M-19 guerrilla group that summoned for a National Constituent Assembly. In this assembly, indigenous and Afro-descendants participated along with members of the M-19, increasing the level of participation of marginal groups and declaring Colombia as a multiethnic and multicultural country, with all the political troubles of both terms. In this framework, as José Rocca explains, many artists produced works that we can considered today as key to the Colombian contemporary artistic scene. In them, the experimentation with political-poetic means that were censored the years before by the Estatuto de Seguridad emerged. However, the forms of this experimentation and its development of a political praxis through art had changed (26).



challenges of representing the impossibility of language to express traumatic experiences, while revealing the historical and cultural paradoxes at the heart of the political struggles in Colombia<sup>137</sup>.

In this chapter I aim to emphasize the tension between the image's materiality and immateriality in *Aliento* (1994), *Lacrimarios* (2001) and *Biografías* (2002). Through the materiality of breath, tears, and rubble the images in these works propose poetic relations in their more ephemeral qualities. As such, these images achieve another sense in which their political dimension is conceived. First, the image as breath in *Aliento* (1994) is an image that reconsiders its vitality, as ephemeral as human breath, highlighting its fleeting, transient nature. It reflects a sense of shared intimacy between the viewer and the artwork, bringing forth a personal and yet communal engagement with the image. Secondly, the image as tears in *Lacrimarios* (2001) inhabits a three-dimensional sphere where the image's materiality takes on corporeal properties. This provides it with the transformative yet subtle power inherent to tears, referring to and transcending the confines of grief and mourning. Finally, the image as rubble in *Biografías* (2002) holds the duality of destruction and decay while carrying the promise of regeneration and

---

<sup>137</sup> Rocca remarks, though, that at the turn of the century the constant scenes of violence in Colombia led many artists to the controversy of what is called the *aesthetics of violence* that established a hegemony where the Colombian conflict was seen as an opportunistic and strategic tool to settle a political position under the sight of foreign institutions. However, Rocca explains that this aesthetics did not correspond exclusively to the demands of the international art circuit, but to the shaping of a public reflection on the armed struggle. The way that this topic was approached through the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was full of irony and self-criticism that avoided following normalized guidelines and articulate instead a politics of memory. In this politics, artists like Doris Salcedo and Mario Opazo have created lines of work that explore the production of objects and experiments in multimediuum to create a poetry of memory where the symbolic production is established as a resistance to forget. Others like José Alejandro Restrepo has taken us to the realm of eschatology, the ultimate human reality in which the human is disarticulated. <sup>137</sup>. As Roca also explains, the decade of the 1990's, however, marked a historical point due to the commemoration of the Discovery of America in 1992 that had an effect in the institutional agenda of art and culture. Situations like the right of self-representation, the question of identity, historical, social, gender and political differences, marginality and the reclaim of what was considered as "lo periférico" marked the production of these years.

re-emergence, just as rubble does. This metaphor underscores the complex dialectics of creation and destruction, permanence and transience that are intrinsic to the life of images in Oscar Muñoz's work at large.

In these three iterations of the image's materiality, fragility functions as part of a process of attempts that are inherent to the movements of everyday life, to a constant trial and error that speaks through Muñoz's artistic language where these complicated experiences are reframed through other media and materialities that makes them signify otherwise. The allusion to photography in Muñoz's works, for example, resembles a demand to expand the notion of what a photograph is as well as to reflect on the different uses of photographs that outlive the strict definitions of document, testimony, and a fixed mirroring of reality.

The use of photographs in his works also exposes a long practice of archival collection of photographs of anonymous subjects, some of them found in newspaper's obituaries, flea-markets, or personal photo-albums taken by anonymous photographers. This is a tendency that has marked the production of visual arts in Latin America during the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that works against the overabundance in which images circulate today. By making these images recirculate in another space and time, and under different media and formats, Muñoz gives these images a second life where they reappear in a delayed time that counteracts the speed of information, the immediacy of the press, and the idea that photography is just an image.

In his works we can see how the use of montage and the manipulation of materials transgress the photographic medium to generate combinations and ruptures that forge spaces of creation related to the space, the photograph as process and as an object, and the passage of time. This multi-dimensional use of the photographic medium amplifies the margins to a more experimental approach. As such, Muñoz has composed works that extend the photographic space

to let us into technical procedures related to temporality and the fixation, or not, of images on different media and surfaces. The emphasis on the materials and their residues contributes to the “threshold of suspension” that keeps images trembling. In this sense, Muñoz recenters the more natural and, somewhat, discussed characteristics of photography by challenging its relation to the register of the real in a precise instant, the fixation of the image through light, the photographic negative and the paper as the primordial medium for the image’s printing and inscription.

These apparent oppositions can be seen in Muñoz’s works at large as two main focal points in his artistic trajectory. On the one hand, there is the image as a track, trace and sediment. As part of this thread in his work we can see how a photographic portrait has the power to bring back a person, to claim it nearby. This resembles a common use of photographs as a remembrance of something past, or as the trace that a person was there but is no longer present. Nonetheless, his interest in photography is also grounded on a reflection on the photographic process. It alludes to Muñoz’s interest in the relationship between truth, illusion and reality, or, as he says “that which is seemingly true or not—which is also related to a reflection upon photography itself, in the truth-value that is granted *a priori* to photography”<sup>138</sup>. Some of his works thus have the characteristic of making unclear to the viewer whether there is something or someone behind a picture, a collection of photographs. The idea of the image’s dissolution speaks to this concern that brings both illusion and reality into the material in which both modes are expressed and the surfaces in which they are inscribed.

On the other hand, Muñoz’s concern also centers on what I referred to earlier as the “life of images” that is also expressed in the different materialities used in his works like air, water,

---

<sup>138</sup> Oscar Muñoz interviewed by Hanz Michael Herzog in *Cantos, cuentos colombianos*, 237. An example of this is *Cortinas de baño* (1992) which will be discussed later in the chapter.

charcoal and dust. As Muñoz also says, working with charcoal for so many years he realized that charcoal is “a living, vegetable material that has been burned, charred and reduced to dust, which is what soot is”<sup>139</sup>. Here Muñoz focuses on process as a creation of trials, attempts, and processes. In this other aspect of his practice, the image is affixed, or separated from, different media as a metaphor of how fixed images are constructed, how they are materialized in our memory. In relation to these ideas, I analyze how Muñoz artistic language suggests that images are fragile, and survive with difficulty in a world that is cluttered with constant stimuli. This fragility establishes the relationship between materiality and immateriality, permanence and impermanence as movements that allude to how images travel through time, how they expose their material condition as residue, as a site of encounter that preserves the traces of its corporeal life while also reframing a narrative that constantly shows its capacity to transform. This (im)material tension that images share in Muñoz’s works help us think beyond collective memory or acts of memorialization. Instead, these fragile materialities propose that images are there, sometimes dormant and latent, sometimes overexposed, other times underexposed, but whose qualities as image-residues uncovers them like ashes that need a vital force, a puff of air, to regain their power.

---

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. An example of this works are *Tiznados*, *Narcisos*, *Biografías* and some others.

## *The Image as Breath*



Fig 18. Oscar Muñoz, *Aliento* (1995). Installation. Image courtesy of the artist. © Thierry Bal, 2008.

The etymology of “breath” takes us back to the Greek word *psyche* (soul), mind or spirit, that occupies the body. The word was later translated into Latin as *pneuma* (a blowing, a wind, a blast; breathed air, breath, spirit, a ghost) and as *pneumatic* (as “of” the wind, belonging and nonbelonging to the air, “of” spirit). In the Stoic tradition, “pneuma” was believed to permeate the cosmos, acting as a connecting principle and an organizing force. Along the same line, the Latin *spiritus* also means “breath” and was commonly used to name the soul. In many languages and cultures, the “last breath” was the expression used when a person died. While the person lived, the soul was manifested in the form of breath, or a vaporous state. In Hindu and Buddhist traditions,

"prana"<sup>140</sup> signifies the universal life force that permeates existence, closely associated with the breath as a means of connecting to and nurturing this energy.

The Chinese concept of "qi" or "chi" embodies a vital energy flowing through all living things, with breath playing a central role in cultivating and balancing this force. Theorists like Jacques Derrida has also referred to breath as similar to the “anguish of the Hebraic *ruah*” that he identifies as a writing that is “experienced in solitude by human responsibility.”<sup>141</sup> In a footnote, translator Alan Bass observes that the Hebrew *ruah*, like the Greek *pneuma*, “means also both wind or breath and soul or spirit. Only in God are breath and spirit, speech and thought, absolutely identical; man can always be duplicitous, his speech can be other than his thought.”<sup>142</sup> An example of this experience is when Jeremiah is subjected to God’s dictation, in which he has to take a scroll and write all the words that God has spoken. An experience that is extended within what Derrida calls “the properly human moment of *pneumatology*, the science of *pneuma*, *spiritus*, or *logos* which was divided into three parts: the divine, the angelical and the human.”<sup>143</sup> It is the moment, according to Derrida, when we must *decide* whether we will engrave what we hear and whether engraving preserves or betrays speech.

These diverse cultural interpretations of breath can be related to Oscar Muñoz's work *Aliento* (1994) at many levels. *Aliento* is part of Muñoz’s experimentation with surfaces and supports, where the materiality of elements like breath interacts with a printed photographic image

---

140. In both Hinduism and Buddhism, "prana" is a Sanskrit word (प्राण) derived from the root "pra" (प्र), meaning "to fill," and "an" (अन्), meaning "to breathe" or "to live." "Prana" is the universal life force or vital energy that permeates all living beings and the cosmos. The concept of "prana" is central to the practice of yoga and pranayama (breath control), where regulating and controlling the breath is believed to harness and balance this vital energy, promoting physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. For more information see Saraswati, S. S. *Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha*. Munger, Bihar, India: Yoga Publications Trust, 1999.

141. Derrida, “Force and Signification,” 9.

142. *Ibid.*, 304n24.

143. *Ibid.*, 9.

on silkscreen. *Aliento* is composed of a series of twelve steel disks that appeared to be a mirrored surface. Each disk has about 20 cm of diameter and is attached to the wall at the height of a viewer's gaze. As the title suggests, the viewer is supposed to approach the disk and see her image reflected. As soon as this happens the viewer is asked to throw her breath onto the mirror while another image appears with the viewer's warm air. The image, however, appears only momentarily and disappears again as soon as the viewer's warm breath evaporates in the mirror. The revealed images in *Aliento* are printed with silkscreen over the disc's surface, which is the technique that allows for both the image's printing, revelation, and disappearance. These images are portraits taken from the local newspaper's obituaries that the artist has been collecting throughout the years. They are from people that could either be missing, as part of Colombia's paramilitary violence that has disappeared civilian's bodies for many years, or from people who have just died. Some of them resemble the ID document, while others resided first in family archives or photo albums. Either way, these images carry a history of their own that speak not only about the absence of someone who was there, but also about what gives back the presence of another image, and an image to come.

Breath in *Aliento* is the main source of action and image revelation. It is what gives life to an image. The water that used to be a surface for the image's impression in *Cortinas de baño* makes explicit the image's development and revelation in *Aliento*. The image's latency and its possible revelation, sustains a concern for presenting a time-based technique that defies what immediately comes to us, to our own reflection on the mirror's surface. In turn, breath displaces the gaze that constitutes the modern subject to, instead, touch the image with our breath. It suggests a tactility of our sight: to see within what unexpectedly touches us. In that reciprocity the image is animated, it is alive, one more time.

In his book *The Survival of Fireflies*, Didi-Huberman asks about the disappearance of fireflies in the rise of fascism during World War II. He gives the example of Pier Paolo Pasolini's response in the devastating political moment that will end up with his life. Pasolini thought, in those years, that the fireflies had disappeared but what happened was that he had lost the capacity to see them. The question of fireflies is both political and historical. It shows what Didi-Huberman calls the "death notice for the fireflies". That is a funeral lament on the moment in Italy of the disappearance of fireflies, "those human signals of innocence annihilated by the night—or by the 'fierce' brilliance of spotlights—of triumphant fascism"<sup>144</sup>. This overexposed brilliance is also the overexposed power of the void that Pasolini recognized as the transformation of everything into commodities, on the power of a consumption-based society through fascism. The disappearance of fireflies thus refers to two things. First, the disappearance of human beings under the fierce fascist light and, second, again, our own capacity to see them. The brilliance of the spotlights is not only the disappearance of human bodies, but also the disappearance of the living under a consumerist dictatorship when each one ends up exhibiting themselves "like a product in a window—a way precisely, of *not appearing*" that makes it impossible to escape from the "fierce mechanical eyes"<sup>145</sup>.

Didi-Huberman's account, however, also suggests an inspiring note that I propose to think along with Muñoz's images in *Aliento* and his work at large. If, in fact, the totalitarian machine works and keeps working today, one thing is to give it a total victory, to give credence to what the

---

<sup>144</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Survival*, 9. This analysis of the fascist rule in the "brilliance of the spotlights" is also related to Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* and Walter Benjamin's famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproduction", in which, among many ideas, Benjamin claims that fascism would have been impossible without the invention of the gramophone. Both critics allude to a unification of the world, that negates and separates human beings and, as Didi-Huberman says, "their own capacity to appear otherwise than under the domination—the raw, cruel, fierce light—of the commodity" (*Survival*, 14).

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, 16.



machine makes us believe and to act defeated, to only see the whole. Another thing is to postulate the question itself of the “that it is?”. In this question, Didi-Huberman sees the opportunity to see the space instead of the whole, a space that may be “interstitial, intermittent, nomadic, improbably located—of openings, of possibilities, of flashes, *in spite of all*”<sup>146</sup>. I see this space as one in which Muñoz’s locates his artistic language. The interstitial and fragmentary space that is between the disk mirrors in *Aliento*, for example, and the capacity to repeat our breath for an image to appear, alludes precisely to the possibility of seeing fireflies again. To see them through the ephemerality of our breath, and to simultaneously hold their smaller light, versus the fierce mechanical one, as a perturbing ash, or residue, that reminds us of the vital force through which they can live again. After all, as opposed to the moths who would be consumed “in the ecstatic instant of their contact with flame”, the fireflies are flies of fire, “who bear within their very bodies an eternal, tormenting burn”<sup>147</sup>. This is why the fireflies, like the dormant image in *Aliento*, does not disappear completely, it stays there in the disk like ashes, waiting to light again, but also holding in tension their own fragile status.

In another passage from the book, Didi-Huberman also recalls a letter that Denis Roche, a French poet, and photographer, writes to Roland Barthes in which he reproaches him for omitting, in *Camera Lucida*, all that photography could set in motion in the areas of “style”, of “freedom”, and of “intermittence”. Intermittence is surprising, Didi-Huberman argues, when one thinks of photography as an object rather than an act. How can we not think about Walter Benjamin’s dialectical image, a concept that precisely aims to understand the way in which “*epochs become visible*, how history itself can appear to us as a brief flash that must be named an ‘image’?”<sup>148</sup> (cite)

---

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, 22.

The image's intermittence leads us back to the fireflies, as they are "a passing, fragile pulse of light."<sup>149</sup> The fireflies' pulse of light does not really "disappear", they are, instead, out of the viewer's sight who chooses a different path and moves away from them. Or they disappear from the viewer's sight because she remains in place, while they keep traveling. The fireflies' intermittent lightning is what, in fact, sets this light in motion.

In his reading of Denis Roche, Didi-Huberman also argues that this pulse of the fireflies' light helps us to understand the relationship between the viewer's position in front of this light, and the necessity of photographers to make images, as photographers are first and foremost travelers moving around "like insects with their large, light-sensitive eyes (23)". This relationship differs in some degree from Roland Barthes's grief of the "this-has-been" related to his mother's death in *Camera Lucida* and the immobilization of images that fall into paralyzing acts of grieving. Even though Oscar Muñoz has never considered himself a photographer, but rather as a collector of photographs, an archivist more than a photographer, his need to make images uses the material and chemical elements involved in the photographic and cinematographic processes, as well as the theories and histories behind them. The image's flashing nature leads us back to the fireflies as this fragile passing pulse of light. Muñoz's photographic images in *Aliento* are similar to the fireflies: they do not really disappear, unless they die, their light keeps being there, manifesting itself in the dark and invisible in light. These images, like the fireflies, do not disappear, but rather keep re-disappearing, that is, keep appearing again even if we are able, or not, to see them.

Muñoz' work *Aliento* is an example of this interplay between light and darkness, animation and inanimation, where the image-flash lays dormant, partially alive, waiting for someone to come

---

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

and to throw her breath to it, to infuse it, again, with life. *Aliento* is also an example of image-making as much as it is one of the viewer's agencies in front of images and the fact that images cannot exist alone, but rather need to be part of this interconnected flowing energy embodied by the viewer's breath. Because this breath is both in the body and outside of it, it is an active connecting principle, rather than a death sentence, it becomes the life force that both nurtures and permeates existence, it is what acts as an interconnection in-between things and people in the world. As such, *Aliento* is much more concerned with breathing life, rather than an articulation of loss, of losing light. The artwork shows a concern that performs with the idea of intermitting lightning, that includes the residues of dead particles that are re-cycled in the movement of inhaling and exhaling.

The photographic image, on the other hand, that appears with the viewer's breath in *Aliento* is related to Benjamin's dialectical image that sees the image in its moment of recognizability instead of attempting to recompose a nostalgic past. The relation to a past follows Benjamin's notion of a dialectical movement where an image is "suddenly emergent"<sup>150</sup>. The image is "recognized" where "what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation"<sup>151</sup>. This recognizability is another name for the image's possible interpretation between the visual and the linguistic, language and objects. This reading also indicates the movement of photographs through time whose trace delineates, "not only the biography of the photograph but also the histories of the persons and places that house it"<sup>152</sup>. These histories correspond to the survival of the traces of what is past and our ability to read them as traces. This means that traces, as Eduardo Cadava says, are in the "verge of disappearing, without

---

<sup>150</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades*, 462.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> Willumson, 'Making Meaning: Displaced materiality in the library and art museum', 65.

disappearing”<sup>153</sup>, where time is implicit in the entanglement between the image’s movement and stillness.

“Breath” in *Aliento* exposes the possibility of considering this type of trace as an image-residue, that is, as a relation between the materiality of breathing and the “immaterial” quality of a specter. The dead person’s image fleetingly appears in relation to all the processes that take place during its moment of emergence and its possible reactivation by the viewer in the future. The chemical processes in *Aliento*, which are already part of the photograph as something that is both invisibly fixed and yet waiting to be seen, establishes the interest that Muñoz has in the uses of photography. The image is part of a chain of chemical and physical exchanges and relations. If the photograph is the record of an encounter—between photographer and subject, subject and context, a camera and an object, a viewer, and an image, in *Aliento* this record is located in the fleetingness of this encounter as what situates the photographic image in a space that is uncertifiable<sup>154</sup>. It is precisely this point of the image’s transformation that Didi-Huberman notes, asserting that there is a temptation for history experts to immobilize images when they are reduced to a merely functional status as “visual documents”<sup>155</sup>. Images move and should be unstable, because in the dialectic of appearing and disappearing, not only in the same place, but always in another, images can reveal something about culture, history, and politics.

Muñoz’s more experimental techniques and explorations with these materials came after the 1980’s shifting his practice while also responding to the political events of those times. The 1980s’ marked a violent wave in Colombia’s history that affected not only the rural environment,

---

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> This contradiction between recording and encounter and, at the same time, making it “disappear” is more explicitly shown in Muñoz’s video-installations like *Narciso*, *Re-trato* and, *Biografias*. I will analyze this relation deeper in the third part of the chapter.

<sup>155</sup> Didi-Huberman, *The Eye of History*; xvi

which was the locus of the armed conflict, but also the urban sphere. Sugarcane production, as the central axis of Cali's economic development, became the terrain of dispute between the bourgeoisie and the guerrilla groups, increasing the displacement of the population from the countryside to the city and leading to military confrontations, assassins hired by important landowners, and state military repression. In those same years, Conceptual art dominated the scene, fostering experimentations and new uses of photography that commented on different social domains in which violence intervened, like the urban environment and popular culture in the city of Cali. At the same time, Muñoz and other artists like Fernell Franco and Miguel Ángel Rojas began to work with photographic experiments that attempted to make visible the effects of violence and the social and political fractures the country was experiencing. However, the rise of violence also created a crisis for Cali's art scene, where artists were more isolated from one another and the public. Muñoz's drawings of these periods<sup>156</sup>, similar to Franco's photographs, showed an atmosphere of decline and collapse, where Cali was ruined by several scenarios of violence during the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In recent years, Muñoz's practice has developed to include three main aspects: the use of color, supports and surfaces, and "accidented" drawings, as noted by Miguel López<sup>157</sup>. *Cortinas de baño*, presented in 1985, marks the threshold of this change/shift. As González also notes,

---

<sup>156</sup> In this context Muñoz began his first series of *Interiores* (1976-1981) and *Inquilinatos* (1976-81) that followed the collaboration with Franco and referred to more domestic and enclosed spaces in everyday life that challenged the human figure. In them the figure was situated between materialization and dematerialization, giving light to the interplay between light and texture on various surfaces, lighter tonal values and more radiant ones that made the figure more abstract. In fact, the gray tones and marked chiaroscuro using charcoal and graphite made the drawings more ambiguous, as if referring to uncertainty and hazy forms where a level of invisibility was attempted towards a particular kind of failure that will be present along Muñoz's works in which they fail to offer certainty. By diffusing visibility these drawings "blur and fog the terror of visibility (Brizuela 231)," or I will add, complete visibility.

<sup>157</sup> *Oscar Muñoz*. Catalogue published by Cámara de Comercio de Cali, 1987.

although Muñoz's earlier works relied on architecture to reconsider light<sup>158</sup> in enclosed and domestic spaces, such as in his carbon-based drawing series *Interiores* (1976-1981) and *Inquilinatos* (1976-1981), the plastic surface of the curtains in *Cortinas de baño* alludes to an ephemeral and unstable openness of form. The figures in the work, taking a shower or drying themselves with a towel, create a sense of suspense that becomes an illusion. The water drops, stains, and traces of soap manifest a possible emptiness through which the figures have abandoned or will abandon the scene.

---

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.



Fig. 19. Muñoz, Oscar. *Cortinas de Baño*, Installation. Image courtesy of the artist, Phoenix Art Museum, 2021.

This liminal state of evaporation in which the figures are either in a before and after, emphasizes Muñoz's concern with surfaces as materialities that contain their ability to fail and to morph. The humidity of the bathroom tiles in *Interiores* becomes the plastic shower curtains in *Cortinas de baño* (1985-1986) that later become the warm breath through which images appear in *Aliento* (1994). *Cortinas de baño*, is significant in Muñoz's work because with them he radicalized his practice by moving away from drawing in charcoal on paper as in his series of *Interiores*, to experimenting with new media where he first fused his methods with their meanings. By creating shadows of figures in the shower with water and airbrushing ink in serigraph on plastic surfaces,

the figure becomes a ghostly trace of bodies at their most intimate and vulnerable state of exposure and nudity while performing their daily ritual. The viewer becomes not only a kind of voyeur, that witnesses the figure's ghostly presence, but also a material contact between bodies that perform different actions: one that is showering and one that walks through the shower curtains' scene.

Muñoz's works will repeat some of these ideas in the following years, while constantly revisiting his own artistic processes and manifesting alternative ways in which the materials both interact and are exposed through image-making, installation art and/or video-loops with or without sound. These thematic repetitions in which water, and other elements, take on different forms as medium, surface and developer suggest that the visual is no longer tied to eyes that see and that enclose them in the regimes of visibility, but rather that the visual implicates the eyes as much as bodies, faces, and mouths that touch and feel. As such, the image's materiality in *Aliento* is part of a surface that is configured in both an unstable and ephemeral condition to be shared and explored. This type of surface aligns with Giuliana Bruno's proposal to think about surfaces as a form of habitation for the material world, where the material configurations could be understood as the "relation between subjects with objects" where the surface is also seen "as a site of mediation and projection (3)." In Bruno's approach, we are invited to think beyond the image even if the image, in Muñoz's case, is very much a site of concern.

In *Aliento*, for example, because the image is entangled in a process of impression, re-impression and revelation that involves the viewer's body as well it is no longer an image exclusively tied to the visual. It is, instead, an image that is concerned with the visual as it is with the tangible and material, spatial and environmental. With Bruno's proposal the image extends its condition of being purely visual to be part of a haptic materiality, where the "reciprocal *contact* between us and objects or environments indeed occurs on the surface (3)." It is through these



reciprocities that the contact between the viewer and the space of art becomes a “communicative interface of a public intimacy (3).” This approach results in a dynamic way of looking at images by being both ephemeral and part of an untotalizable flow that makes them itinerant in nature, intermittent sometimes, and dissolving in others. Muñoz's images in *Aliento* disrupt the immediate, enduring through slowed intervals that emphasize the passage of time, that is also the instances of exhaling and inhaling our breath. Muñoz's images in *Aliento* persistently move, they disarticulate their own instantaneity and in their restlessness they keep trying to appear and captivate the viewer's attention, no longer through her eyes, but through her breath. Or, better through eyes that are entangled with her breath.

The images in *Aliento* are thus unstable ones, where breath works as a notation in which the image appears for a second time. It is in this condition in which the image appears *again* that we can follow Derrida's idea of *pneuma* in a second degree. *Pneuma* as outside of *pneumatology* inscribes an image while it erases. Something of the image, however, remains as an image-trace that oscillates between visibility and invisibility, as a movement that tests the distinctions of what Derrida calls the pneumatic and the grammatic, concept and sound, signified and signifier. *Pneuma*, in other words, is this shout of the *ruah* that the articulations of language and logic have not yet entirely frozen, that is, the aspect of an oppressed gesture that remains in all speech.<sup>159</sup> In *Aliento*, *pneuma*, activates what remains: the image that, although (in)visible, remains in spite of and in *need* of our breath. As we draw closer and breathe into the several mirrors, we provide the material that reveals the image that is also the result of the warmth and water vapor emitted by our

---

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

bodies. This chemical composition that makes the contact between our breath and the image allows the image to be displayed physically and chemically, only to gradually fade away.

The images in *Aliento* are unstable because they open a liminal space between the image of the past and the breath of the present that reveals the image while it also waits for it in the future. An image that waits is one that is (in)visible, in latency rather than completely absent. The image is dormant, but not dead. It is suspended in between life and death; it carries an impossible conclusion. This image emphasizes repetition as a space of continual awakening where two images never entirely coincide with themselves, where they are part of this communicative interface as a shared intimacy instead of being an image endlessly reproduced. The image of an other requests our “breath” in the place of our “face” while it de-faces its contours. Breath becomes the faceless face, the authorless anonymity, the space of non-coincidence through which we can speak “with” and see an other.

The non-coincidence and instability within the photographs in *Aliento* sets the stage for a perceptual and bodily exchange. These characteristics create new visual configurations by redoubling our experience of time, where seeing should “take time”. Because seeing within time, as Didi-Huberman also says, “changes the nature of what is seen as well as the constitution of the one who sees it”<sup>160</sup>. By using breath as a medium for an image to appear, Muñoz opens this dynamic vision. To *see* within time is to see these photographs as fragments of reality that make visible the details of the real that until now were, as Benjamin also says, “covert enough to find shelter in daydreams”<sup>161</sup>. Such details are locked in the future of the image where its revelation

---

<sup>160</sup> Didi-Huberman, *The Eye of History*, xvi. where the viewer’s body is not only looking but also inclined and being looked at.

<sup>161</sup> Benjamin, “A Short History of Photography” 512.

through breath determines its mode of appearance. The duality in the act of breathing—inhaling/exhaling emphasizes this redoubling and repetition as the continuum of a becoming residue that, as a moving trace, allows for the image to be born again. It composes an image that remains suspended as a parenthesis.

The duality of breathing is related to the idea that what comes from the earth returns to it: the ashes, the coal dust, the calcinated thing, and the surface of water refer to movements in minor acts that take place in everydayness. Breathing is part of these trivial acts, like those described by Joan Fontcuberta as part of the Duchampian “infrathin”. They are acts that refer to the simultaneity of what remains and what disappears: an absence-presence at the limit of the invisible, what remains in the mirror when you stop looking at it. The “infrathin” implies the relationship between affects and fleeting images, between fragility and life, like an ephemeral shape that irrupts during everyday life and takes the form of tears, a drop of water that splashes the surface, a blurry drawing, a span of pleasure, or the breath of life. What seems to be fragile, subtle, or too ephemeral, highlights the tiny and trivial part of phenomena, differential repetitions that find expression in seriality as an expanded instant where phenomena appear.

The usual focus on photography as a trace of its referent remains tied to a monumental form of representation, to a past that does not move, that is final. If a photograph, to follow Kaja Silverman, can prove “what was,” then it is the royal road to certainty, a belief that the photographic image is unalterable and through this certainty we judge the world. In *Aliento*, we can see that Muñoz puts into motion this certainty of “what was,” letting us associate the photographic image with a future perfect yet without attributing a finality to the image. That future perfect is an open futurity, an action that will have been completed in the future, to what is already

there but needs to be animated, with no certainty as to when this will happen in contrast to a past that has a date and is already expired.

Muñoz's work with images in *Aliento* resonates with, yet challenges, the conception of photography as mourning. I argue that there is a larger story than just considering the power of photographs from the subject's absence and its remembrances of the past or traces of presence of what is no longer there. A crucial aspect of *Aliento*, for example, is the recentering of the viewer's action of breathing over the disc, which is essential for understanding the event of the photograph, its birth. I point to Ariella Azoulay's concept of the photographic event, which is crafted and driven "by a relation of an external eye" in which "photography is a form of relation that exists and becomes valid only within and between the plurality of individuals who take part in it."<sup>162</sup> Consequently, the viewer's responsibility is to transform photography from a simple tool for creating pictures into a social, cultural, and political instrument of immense power.

Azoulay's perspective defies the notion that a photograph inherently contains meaning. Instead, she suggests that photography is an encounter amongst the photographer, camera, context, and subjects or objects it captures. From this perspective, photography transforms into a political intervention, as it is no longer viewed as the final product of an act, but as an ongoing practice. A photo, in this sense, represents a new beginning with an unpredictable end. Azoulay suggests that a photo acts by making others act as well, so that we can take advantage of resisting a way of looking that defies being subordinated to a dominant quality of vision and visibility.

---

<sup>162</sup> Even though Azoulay's conceptual analysis and redefinition of photography considers photographs that are mainly catastrophic, her concept of the photographic event is useful to think about the use that Muñoz's gives to photographs and its potential meaning as material objects that are also part of bigger chains of relationality in the world, and not just images of representation.

This resistance to the dominance of the eye that sees shows the difference between  
visuality and counter-visuality proposed by Nicholas Mirzoeff on what he calls “the right to  
look”. Visuality is, following Mirzoeff a term to describe the ways in which society is organized  
and understood visually. It is, as he says, an “old word for an old project” that does not mean the  
“totality of all visual images and devices, but it is in fact a nineteenth-century term, meaning the  
visualization of history”<sup>163</sup>. More than what we see, it is about the power dynamics that dictate  
what is seen, how it is seen and who gets to determine these rules. It draws from what Foucault  
calls the “the nomination of the visible”<sup>i</sup> that uses words like “naming,” “categorizing,” and  
“defining,”. The “right to look” would be a counter-visuality that contests visuality as a practice  
that is imaginary, rather than perceptual, “because what is being visualized is too substantial for  
any one person to see and is created from information, images, and ideas.”<sup>164</sup> The ability to  
assemble a visualization like this manifests the authority of the visualizer.<sup>165</sup>

In Muñoz’s *Aliento* visuality and counter-visuality operates in two main domains. First,  
the anonymity of the subject behind the picture and, second, the use of breath as a non-identity,  
as the power to blur when things want to be too definitive, too explicatory. If what is being  
visualized is too “substantial”, for Muñoz it is precisely this instance of unrecognizability, of  
avoiding defining, naming and categorizing that makes the fragility of his images powerful,  
political and counter-visual. Both the authorless anonymity that is carried through our breath as  
something both intimate, common, and shareable and the anonymity of the person behind the  
picture tells us that the image should be undecipherable. In that sense, the image, in its partial

---

<sup>163</sup> Mirzoeff, “The Right to Look”, 474.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Mirzoeff also relates this power of visuality to Foucault’s panopticon and what he defines as the “nomination of the visible (132)” in *The Order of Things* and that Mirzoeff relates to contributing to the mapping of plantation space in the plantation practice to the identification of “cash-crop cultivation techniques and the precise division of labor required to sustain them” (476).

disappearance, avoids being part of Foucault's "nomination of the visible". The image, however, as I said, needs another body that animates it one more time. Both breath and the anonymity of the subject, work as two instances of signification that establishes the relationship between two images that move, that appear while our breath vanishes. They also make visible, for a few seconds, the smallest part of phenomena that manifests itself through breath and situates the image in an indeterminate and unrecognizable space.

The anonymity, repetition, reimpression, and seriality of the photographs in *Aliento* counteract the desire for originality and uniqueness, for accumulation and classification, that accompanied the first appearances of industrial photography and film. It is in this other aspect that Muñoz's practice as a collector of images contributes to an idea of the archive that critics like Okwuai Enwezor's have explained as a place that situates photography in between history and the monument. In the exhibition titled *Archive Fever*, which he curated, Enwezor explores the various conditions of the archive, particularly, in its relationship to photography. He argues that certain artists use the techniques of selection and arrangement as in an archival practice. Muñoz's emphasis on the temporal and material process of the image also refers to the ways in which he has interpreted, reconfigured, and interrogated the structure of the archive and its materials. In *Aliento* we can clearly see how Muñoz uses the images he collected in newspapers to make them operate in another set of significations not only to create his own archive but also to make this archive public, that is, to liberate the archive as an institution and—contrary to the task of the archivist—arrange the images subjectively as the artist's primary sources.

The anonymity of the photographs in *Aliento* defies the principle of identity and classification. Muñoz use of images that appear in newspapers obituaries as anonymous photographs is related to the seriality, repetition, and cyclical temporality that is intrinsic to the

abundance of information that circulates today: the photographs themselves are inherent to networks of information, like newspapers, that circulate every day and every day are left behind<sup>166</sup>. Nonetheless, by giving these images a new surface to signify Muñoz contests the principles of identity, classification, and the degeneration of the photograph that Enwezor locates as part of the “rapacious machines of mass media, its banalization in popular culture, and its cult of sentimentality”<sup>167</sup>. For instance, artists like Muñoz have made the effort to situate themselves in these complexities that involve the overabundance of images through mass media technologies, the speed of information and the weight of nostalgia that images carry as part of historical and political accounts that control the production of information as well as the commemoration of collective memory. By using breath as the main image developer, but also as what opens a relationality between the image and the viewer, Muñoz develops a strategy that transforms the use of evidentiary and documentary modes of archival materials that are also part of the use of photography as evidentiary truth.

We can see this transformation in two aspects. The first is that, if the images that Muñoz uses in *Aliento* also contest the continuous reproduction of images of violence that, as Alejandra Usleghi suggests, “anesthetized and desensitized the media-consuming audience”<sup>168</sup>, it does so by emphasizing the anonymity of the person behind the picture and its resistance to be classified again as part of the media-consuming audience. In that sense, Muñoz does “preserves and

---

<sup>166</sup> The presence of newspapers also appears in another of Muñoz’s work *Paístiempo* (2007). In this work the front pages of the *El Tiempo de Bogotá* and *El País de Cali* newspapers, are rendered in a booklet made of newsprint with the aid of the pyrogravure tool, point by point. This process allows Muñoz to reflect on the rapidity with which printed news are immediately forgotten. The pyrograve technique, also known as wood burning, is a millenary one. It is an example of how Muñoz uses traditional techniques in the history art but always transforms them under a personal mark that leads to reinvent them. For more information see *Oscar Muñoz: Des/materializaciones* (Fundació Sorigué, Lleida, 2018).

<sup>167</sup> Enwezor, 46.

<sup>168</sup> Usleghi, 170.

redefines the faces of the murdered people, creating a memorial archive”<sup>169</sup>, as Uslenghi suggests, but also manifests an artistic process that is much more indeterminate. Muñoz’s work in *Aliento* not only resituates the artist as a “historic agent of memory” as Enwezor also suggests; neither do the uses and reuses, impressions and reimpressions of photographs in *Aliento* conjure up an archive that is focused on the past and touched by the astringent vapors of death, destruction and degeneration, or is a site of lost origins that invokes acts of remembering and regeneration, where a “suture between a past and present is performed”<sup>170</sup>. Rather, the photographs and the photographic process that the images undergo in relation to the viewer suggests that there is not a suture between past and present, but a temporality that should be kept in tension as a zone in-between event and image, document, and monument.

This zone is what determines the image’s movement and refusal to be part of a static notion of the memorial, document and monument. The image is an impression that keeps being reanimated by the viewer and future viewers. The image is both fully dormant and yet, an open surface that receives the next breath, another life in relation to the materiality that touches it. What the photographic images show in *Aliento* is an image that also appears as part of a relation, a request, perhaps, that makes the viewer participate in their formation and deformation. It is an image that, in this participatory movement, defies its own isolation.

An image like this is, as Benjamins would have said, “suddenly emergent”. It is also an image that in its appearance as light is not glaring, as Didi Huberman says, but strange, striped with dark shadows, too close or too far to render its object clearly visible. Insofar as they appear and disappear, Muñoz’s images in *Aliento* don’t emergence as testimonies or documents of

---

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, 170.

<sup>170</sup> Enwezor, 47.



history that rely on a past but instead as images that in their condition of being there, but invisible, like the fireflies, could work as “previsions”.

As “previsions”, the images in *Aliento* are those that could tell a story that is before and after the image’s own emergence and speaks to what Didi-Huberman also suggests as “the political history in the process of becoming.”<sup>171</sup> This “process”, as I suggest, is seen in *Aliento* as one that is tied to an everydayness that opens a layer of commonality in which we are requested to communicate at the minor level, to a shareable grain that is our breath. This graininess is also the smallest degree in which a photographic image is produced in its early stages. That is, images that on the edge of disappearance, keep resisting a complete visibility by showing us only glimpses. Despite the images’ relationship to the dead body that was once there, the photographic images in *Aliento* show the smallest “particles of humanity” that are in contact and that the act of breathing makes appear, however fragile and brief the image apparition may be.

*Aliento* makes visible the fragile movement between appearance and disappearance and the work of art as site of encounter. By asking the viewer to throw her breath repetitively throughout the seriality of the metallic disks, the work of art becomes an intermediary to which both the artist and the viewer can relate. As Claire Bishop discusses, the task of the viewer as a participatory agent in the work of art constructs an intersubjective relation that is not an end, but rather serves to explore and disentangle more complex social concerns where art is located in an ambiguous territory between art becoming mere life or art becoming mere art (39). In *Aliento*, the viewer’s breath makes the viewer’s body become an active participant in the encounter between the image’s reanimation and movement, between her own image and the appearance of

---

<sup>171</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Survival*, 75.

another. By doing so, participation becomes here a way to reimagine relations where breath becomes both the most mundane and most attentive medium to capture the viewer's attention and to challenge a type of society numbed by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production.

It is in this sense that contemporary artistic practices like *Aliento* calls for an “art of action, interfacing with reality, as Bishop argues, rather than an art that revolves around the construction of “objects to be consumed by a passive bystander”<sup>172</sup>. Nonetheless, Muñoz's work in *Aliento* is not entirely about contributing to a repair of the social fabric that has been fragmented by capitalism and a long history of political violence in Colombia, but to attend to the ways in which the minor everydayness of acts like breathing can contribute to a different way of relation between passivity and activity.

An “art of action” in *Aliento* is one that is both singular and relational. By singular I do not mean individuality, but rather the singularity implied in each act of breathing, the chemical reaction and variety of temperature that is in each breath as part of a logic that emphasizes the materiality of elements where our lived experience is entangled to the organic life cycles. It is in this contact at the surface of the work of art that *Aliento* becomes a site of encounter that is both anonymous, singular and open to the shareable act of breathing.

This encounter at the surface emphasizes the visual as a material surface that calls for a haptic relation beyond the eyes. In *Aliento*, breath activates this other way to relate to the image, and to what we see in general. The act of breathing is, in fact, what gives the image a materiality in which the surface comes into play as a partition that mediates “by acting as a material

---

<sup>172</sup> Bishop, *Artificial*, 11.

configuration of how the visible meets the thinkable and as a form of dwelling in the material world.”<sup>173</sup>The surface as a sensible receiver of both the image’s impression and its reanimation with the chemical reaction of our breath makes this surface a realm of texture and inhabitation. The encounter between the viewer, her breath and the image resituate the metallic surface as a place to be, momentarily, livable. The viewer’s breath, then sets the image’s temporality, it lasts as long as a breath is on the surface and inverts the ways in which the image’s fixation in the analogical photographic process is conceived.

We can see in *Aliento*, then, another way to look at images in which their revelation does not pass through an apparatus but instead passes through the viewer’s body, making the medium and its materiality determine how the images are looked at. We can see this in a first moment when the image, though invisible, is already printed on the reflective surface. There is an inversion of the photographic process insofar as the sensible surface where the image is to be printed is not empty but full. The photographs are then reprinted in silkscreen, thereby adding another process of impression and revelation. Finally, the viewer has to come to the image and reveal it a second or third time. The water that traditionally reveals the photograph is also replaced by the chemical contact between water and temperature in the viewer’s breath, a process revealed only when the viewer places her body in front of the image. The difference between the photographic image and the material support in which it is revealed on each copy alludes to the image’s process of transformation through time and space, a transformation that constitutes the image’s history as a virtual trace and a material artifact<sup>174</sup>. In that sense what

---

<sup>173</sup> Muñoz, *Invisibilia*, 13.

<sup>174</sup> This idea follows Gabriela Nouzeilles’s reading of images in photobooks as material artifacts. She points to photographic images as references in circulation that become the object of multiple reinscriptions through different types of montage and assemblages. See Gabriela Nouzeilles, “Arquitectura del fotolibro: Escritura e imagen,” *Outra Travessia* 1, no. 21 (2017): 131. For further reading on this topic, see Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, eds., *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (London: Routledge, 2004).

Muñoz shows in *Aliento* is also this history of the image whereby it is resignified in each material impression and an attention to this other look, one that seems invisible to the regime of visibility.

The image's history and transformation go, however, beyond its functional status, as texts to be deciphered or, as Didi-Huberman also suggests, puzzles to be solved. The photographic images in *Aliento* avoid being immobilized when they are part of Muñoz's technical process where breath is not only the reproduction of a life, a reenactment of loss, or an intent to make a forgotten other live, although all of these aspects are there on a metaphorical level. Indeed, breath also works as the immanent movement that binds the viewer to the ordinary, to the everydayness, to the found and anonymous image that appeared in a newspaper, to the common thread invisibly tied to the world. This movement looks for a nonsovereign relationality as something carved from within the dynamics of relation rather than a state prior to it or distinct from it. The image's vanishing makes of movement something from within in order to make perceptible the missing hole within history's dominant discourses.

The photographs in *Aliento* also contain many lives that unfold through the different frameworks under which the photographs appear. For example, the portraits that get materialized with the viewer's breath earlier possibly existed in the private framework of family photography to later appear reframed in the public space of the newspaper obituary. In this transition from the private to the public, as Kate Palmer Albers suggests, "a visual document has been revised, its referent has irrevocably shifted"<sup>175</sup>, which makes the newspaper pages themselves "fleeting documents, existing in a particular time and place for a limited duration with a function that will

---

<sup>175</sup> Palemer Albers, *The Night*, 62.

itself soon expire: telling the news.”<sup>176</sup> After the viewer’s breath has vanished, the portraits return to their latent mode, which are supposed to be viewed again with the active effort from the viewer. For Palmer Albers, Muñoz’s focus on the metaphor of “breathing life into an image” is insistent in the viewer’s performative action where Muñoz seems to say that there is no image without effort, “you can see it, but you have to work for it, you have to want it enough to *do* something: you can’t take it for granted or sit back, passively.”<sup>177</sup> You must want the image, however, as Didi-Huberman says, you cannot entirely possess it. The viewer, Muñoz seems to suggest, needs to confront the void in which a mutual exchange takes place without necessarily receiving something back, but rather letting the image go and return to its latent state and repeat the same action all over again.

This ambivalence between wanting an image and its ultimate possession, between an image that is latent and its materialization with the viewer’s breath, shifts the relationship to the sensorial in a way that holds the perceptual open so that something else can be revealed. This intertwined movement where the image is invisible, but on hold, defies Amanda Jane Graham’s reading of *Aliento* as a work that foregrounds the recognition of an “Other” in the viewer’s reflection of herself or himself. She argues that in this work we are taking photographs with our breath and that by giving up our breath we give to this image “the greatest gift it has ever been given” that is, “what it never had in life: closure.”<sup>178</sup> She also correlates the aesthetic disappearance with the “real,” corporeal disappearance of the civilians’ bodies. I argue, however, that the images in *Aliento* go beyond this apparent closure. Even though Jane Graham refers to the ability to grieve a body, the focus in *Aliento* is on the interrelated exchange in which the

---

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>178</sup> Jane Graham, “Assisted Breathing” 71.

viewer's breath reveals the image instead of "taking" the image's absent referent. With this revelatory process, the viewer performs beyond the image as closure, or an act of mourning that would seal the image's appearance forever. The viewer expands the photographic event in which we are all implicated.

This "event" is what, in fact, holds the image in that "threshold of suspension", where it appears momentarily, while avoiding its complete disappearance. Other critics, like María del Rosario Acosta, characterize *Aliento* as a work in which the artist responds to the persistence of time's erasure of the past insofar as the work operates as a place where memory and oblivion meet fortuitously. As viewers, we have the responsibility to assume a task of memory to which the work's darkness responds: "only the tireless repetition of breath . . . gives a fleeting life to the image that patiently abides in the mirror's other side."<sup>179</sup> As she argues, Muñoz's mirrors claim the absence of memory itself through an experience that re-creates loss. Both Jane Graham and Acosta's reading points to an experience with images that emphasizes death, violence and the possibility to mourn those who are gone while reclaiming back their absent bodies. However, as I have emphasized, less attention has been given to the materiality of "breath" and the work of art as a site of encounter where the ephemeral nature of this relation also speaks to the physical transformation that the photographic image experiences. This fragile quality is related to another of Muñoz's concerns, that is, "the conflict between image and medium", that is also, the "impossibility of grasping, retaining and containing"<sup>180</sup>.

The image's revelation in *Aliento*, subtly points to how photography has been conceived. That is, to a definition of photography that highlights the decisive moment of taking a picture

---

<sup>179</sup> Acosta, "Memory and Fragility", 88.

<sup>180</sup> *Crónicas de ausencia*, 57.

and the idea that every photograph is a memory tied to a past. In *Aliento*, however, by posing breath as the main image developer, and by emphasizing the referent's anonymity in the image, Muñoz's gives the image another instance of signification, a second life. That is, the image's power no longer resides in its ability to bring a body back to the viewer and therefore re-create the idea of loss, but rather in the possibility of an active way of looking that is tied to our breathing as a bodily way of being in the world that we all share in commonality. In this sense, photographs are active detonators of relationality that defy the instant of certainty. In fact, this photographic "instant" is decomposed by Muñoz when he opens the processes in which the image appears in apparently opposing forces like permanence and fixity, destruction, and erasure.

In line with Azoulay's thought John Tagg also argues that photography is not "unique in its alleged phenomenological basis"<sup>181</sup>, because it is also part of different domains, that of law, the police, and science, as proofs of some reality. In *Aliento*, however, the act of breathing displaces the photograph from this type of legality that documents have. By emphasizing the anonymity of the subject behind the picture, the photographs maintain a difference in tension: as images they do not disappear completely, they cannot be possessed either. They rather wait to be revealed through breath while shifting the idea of photography as pure objectivity. The singularity of breath and the image's anonymity is thus part of Muñoz idea of the impossibility to retain a moment in time, to evade permanence and suggest the danger to immobilized images by assigning them an explanatory meaning or a utilitarian value.

---

<sup>181</sup> Tagg. *The burden of Representation*, 2.

Muñoz shows in *Aliento* this tiny part of a phenomena, the uncertifiable encounter through which we approach the world by inhaling and exhaling our breath, to the elemental and vital materiality, to what is locked in the future of an image, in its grain, *even if* we know that in the next second it will *move* away. This, apparently trivial act, is the material impression that opens another look, one that seems to escape the regime of visuality. It shows the secrets of the real that, in Muñoz's case avoids being codified, certified and classified, where the image also avoids its own decipherment.

To breathe in front of the image is also the vital flux that gives an afterlife to the image, thus repeating the process of the image's revelation rather than its fixation. Such a process presents an idea of photographic development that detaches itself from official representations that institutional archives and photographs, as documents that seek to prove an identity, sometimes have. With *Aliento* we see these images as examples of dispersed archives. These archives also show what Gabriela Nouzeilles calls "the foundational paradox" that defines the photographic archive, "suspended between the domiciliation of the law and the indeterminacy of the image, always protean and resistant to fixation"<sup>182</sup>. Muñoz puts into practice this paradox in the movement with and against photography. In *Aliento* he presents this paradox also as an opportunity to come into time and reconfigure it.

Muñoz's practice in *Aliento* defies fixity by telling us instead that "photographs are moving signs that, (...) carry a number of open secrets (...) simultaneously exposed and veiled, post-marked and yet fully dormant"<sup>183</sup>, where unexpected meanings are waiting to be viewed and read in the future. This defiance keeps the perceptual open, it dares us to risk our sight and get closer to

---

<sup>182</sup> Nouzeilles, "The Archival Paradox", 43.

<sup>183</sup> Nouzeilles; Cadava. *The Itinerant Languages of Photography*, p.17.



the mirror, to put our face in proximity to the ash, and “blow gently” so that the live coal can emit again its warmth, its splendor, its danger”<sup>184</sup>. As viewers, we are asked to abandon ourselves to what is waiting to be seen. To embrace a void while waiting, to give our “breath” for what could appear in front of us and embrace uncertainty. Such is, perhaps, the “danger and heat” that Muñoz’s images carry in their afterlives. The possibility to make us *see* through the fog of our “breath” what we cannot otherwise foreclose. That is, seeing through a blurry void where we can experience not an absolute abandonment, not only death as a form of absence, but the breath of life. There where a “real” is revealed in relation to what is alive, to what keeps *living* strangely and mutely, indeterminate, but waiting, delayed and always to come.

---

<sup>184</sup> The water that traditionally reveals the photograph in analogical processes is replaced by the chemical contact between water and temperature in the viewer’s breath, a process revealed only when the viewer has to put her face in front of *Aliento*.

## *The Image as Tears*

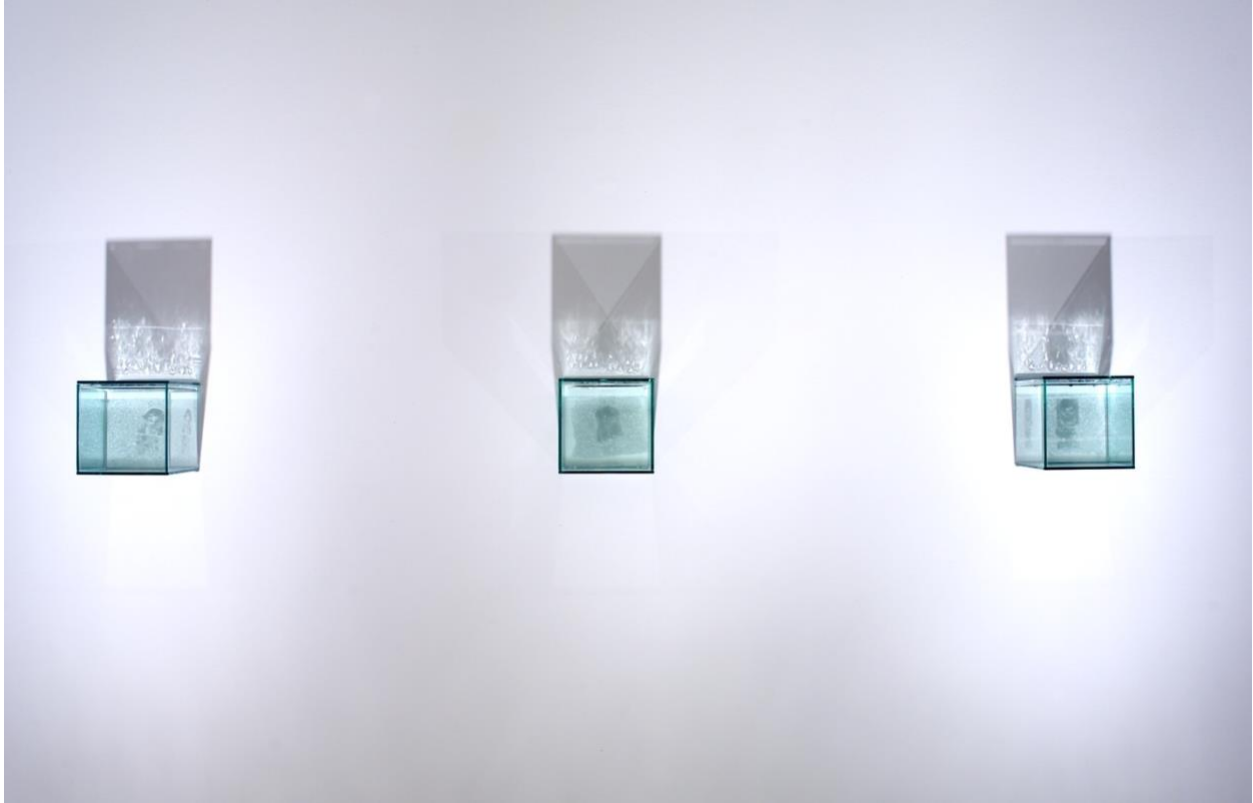


Fig 20. Oscar Muñoz. *Lacrimarios* 2000-2001. Installation. Courtesy Sicardi Gallery

In a recent interview, Oscar Muñoz quotes a text by Richard Sennet entitled *The Craftsman* to recall the presence of his hands in the production of his work. Muñoz says that “the hands think”<sup>185</sup>, which means that the hands are not only producers of sense, but also of knowledge. The hands that think, as I have been suggested, displaces the absolute dominance of the eye as the primary organ of knowledge to locate this knowledge, instead, as a process of creation and a subject of experience. The hands that think moves the eyes to uncertain places,

---

<sup>185</sup> Oscar Muñoz “Charla magistral en Chile”, 2022.

where if the visual experience is condensed in the eyes, it is so in a way that expresses a desire to see when everything seems to be slipping away. This desire, despite all, is what Didi Huberman has also thought about with the figure of the fireflies that work as an *intermittent spectacle* that goes without saying “as our own eyelids open and close”<sup>186</sup>. This relationship between an organ that sees and an organ that touches recompose the ways in which we are requested to attend to and interact with Muñoz’s works.

The breath that reveals an image in *Aliento* (1994), already supposed that the production of images as sites of knowledge is no longer tied to our eyes, but rather works with and against our capacity to see and tempts us to get closer to an image to see it, or to see it better, through the fogginess of our breath. Breath returns in the form of tears in Muñoz’s works *Lacrimarios* (2000-2001). Muñoz produces his installation, *Lacrimarios*, employing the same carbon silk-screening on water technique as in his earlier works *Narcisos* (2000) but this time, he uses three cube-shaped transparent containers, that are filled with water and sealed. They are installed waist-high on the wall and illuminated from below. As the water evaporates, drops fall, distorting the image on the surface. These images are portraits of individuals featured in the media<sup>187</sup>, among them, a murdered student. Muñoz explains that he began *Lacrimarios* following a violent event involving Saja Kaim, a Fine Arts student who went to Chocó, the main city of Colombia’s Pacific region, and was never seen again. As he explains:

One day, I saw her father on the news, recounting the tragedy allegedly caused by paramilitaries. Among other details, he mentioned that they had mutilated the body to

---

<sup>186</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Survival*, 78.

<sup>187</sup> Here Muñoz alludes, once again, to the presence of newspapers in his works. In the book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson describes the newspaper as one of the forms that provided the technical means for re-presenting “the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation (25)”. The origins of the newspaper was in the Dutch gazettes of the late seventeenth century, but it became a general category of printed matter after 1700 (pg. 25).

prevent it from floating in the water. I spoke to people who knew her and began to reconstruct her memory, her past, thinking about creating an image of her that would always float, that would never sink. Also, I had in mind the very special climatic system in Chocó, where there is high evaporation, condensation, and a very high humidity index<sup>188</sup>.

The word “lacrimarios” initially refers to an ancient practice of mourning that were also called “tear catchers”. The Encyclopedia Britannica identifies this word as related to the glass bottles found in Roman and late Greek tombs and supposed to have been bottles into which mourners dropped their tears to preserve them<sup>189</sup>. There are many references that indicate that people dropped their tears in these recipients as symbols of love or respect for the death. Tear catchers reappeared during the Victorian era in the 19th century, when those mourning the loss of a loved one would store their tears in bottles with special lids that allowed them to evaporate. When all the tears had evaporated, the mourning period would end<sup>190</sup>.

The relationship between tears and mourning resonates with Muñoz’s *Lacrimarios*. Nonetheless, I am more interested in analyzing *Lacrimarios* from its materiality and the tension that the work suggests between water, evaporation, and residue. As much as it is a work of

---

<sup>188</sup> Muñoz, quoted by Diego Garzón, *Otras voces, otro arte: Diez conversaciones con artistas colombianos* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2005), 65. My translation.

<sup>189</sup> [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911\\_Encyclop%C3%A6dia\\_Britannica/Lacrymatory](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911_Encyclop%C3%A6dia_Britannica/Lacrymatory)

<sup>190</sup> <https://diccionario.sensagent.com/Lacrimatorio/es-es/> There are more references that allude to stories from the American Civil War of women weeping into tear catchers for when their husbands returned from combat. The collected tears showed how much they had loved and missed their husbands. The Roman ritual also appears in Shakespeare’s *Antonio y Cleopatra* (I.iii.62). The Renaissance physician and writer Thomas Browne wrote in the second chapter of “Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial” (1658), that in some Roman urns excavated near London, tear catchers, lamps, liquor bottles, and other objects “of superstitious affection” were found. As it is shown the use of tear bottles traverses many cultures and traditions making it difficult to trace its exact origin and it is beyond what can be contained in this chapter.

mourning, *Lacrimarios* seems to suggest an affective component that is implied in the image's composition and dissolution. Those are the ways in which the materials and media used in *Lacrimarios* proposes a way to rethink fragility and ephemerality, as concepts that recompose the idea of mourning in order to think about Muñoz's proposal as a project that is beyond loss and absence<sup>191</sup>. In fact, I aim to think from *Lacrimarios* as a work of art that reframes reality in a three-dimensional sphere that defies the flatness of the paper and of experience.

---

<sup>191</sup> Even though it would be excessive to consider a history of tears in relation to Muñoz's work, the historian Tom Lutz has written a wide historical account on the history of tears that explains not only tears in relation to mourning, death and rituals, but also to joyful, psychological, and even professional uses of tears that also define the ways in which crying is also a response to social expectations throughout history. He explains, for example, that there are traditions like the Aymara in Peru who believed that the souls of children were pure and, therefore, their funerals were more joyous, and their parents did not "weep for it, for this prevents the soul from going to heaven" (209). For more information see *The Natural and Cultural History of Tears* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1999).



Fig 21. Oscar Muñoz. *Lacrimarios* 2000. Courtesy Sicardi Gallery, detail.

In his attempt to give a historical account of tears, Tom Lutz notes that there is a great variety of kinds and reasons for crying where tears signify many different things. In all cultures, for example, “tears are a breach not just of etiquette but of ethics”<sup>192</sup>. This vast array of tears, however, shared common threads “just as the infant’s tears signal its desire for nourishment or comfort, tears usually signal a desire, a wish, or a plea, where for, example, tears of mourning “signal our desire to turn back time and magically redeem our loss, as well as the bitter knowledge of the impossibility of that desire”<sup>193</sup>. Our tears of pleasure and joy, on the other hand, can express our desire “to remain in the state of bliss we know full well will vanish all too quickly, leaving us to our more mundane lives, the lives we are, in effect, crying to escape”<sup>194</sup>. The language of crying that Lutz suggests, can accomplish many different ends, expressing not just our distress but our demands, not just our desire to be understood but our desire to evade exposure. Even in our deepest moments of grief, Lutz suggests “we can be aware of the effect our tears are having on those around us”<sup>195</sup>. This communicative function of tears, as Lutz notes rarely remains where they begin, at the level of wordless gestures and sounds. They often demand an explanation, and to offer one, we necessarily revert to verbal language<sup>196</sup>.

In Muñoz’s *Lacrimarios*, the materiality of tears intertwines with the tangibility of rain by presenting an elusive and ambiguous duality. The deliberate choice to incorporate elements that resist both full capture and comprehensive explanation positions the enigmatic nature of

---

<sup>192</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>196</sup> Lutz gives the example of many sayings across cultures such as “there is no use in crying over spilled milk, “cry me a river”. etc..24.

weeping within a nuanced cultural framework that oscillates between opacity and over-articulation. *Lacrimarios* shows a yearning to replicate and recontextualize the narrative, providing the Saja Kaim's lost body an alternative story to be remembered for the future, rather than merely making an effort to rewind time or more specifically, resurrect her body in a way that urges us to both relate to and absolve her loss. The subtle interplay between image creation, evaporation, reflection, and refraction within the transparent cube is less an attempt to reconcile loss than it is a movement towards parallelism. This approach seeks to align the lost body with a more fundamental connection where tears reconfigure speech rather than being supplanted by them, thus enhancing our capacity to reinterpret the scene in unforeseen ways where tears also come to us unexpectedly.

The drops of water that fall from the top of the cube are a factor that implies the image's dissolution and merges with the narrative of the piece and to an extent, activating an aspect of grief as rain entangles with tears. In ancient Roman burial customs, tears were offerings that served as emblematic expressions of the presence of loved ones on an eternal journey, and simultaneously, as testaments of the painful love born out of the anguish of loss. In *Lacrimarios*, however, the tears are transient – they vanish, underlining their fleeting nature and the impossibility of capturing their entirety as a lasting tribute. Analogous to the breath in *Aliento*, the tears in *Lacrimarios*, even though present, are destined to evaporate, they leave no trace. This evaporation transcends the mere representation of mourning for the departed. It insinuates that grief can manifest in the materiality of tears, which, despite their evanescence, bear the weight of significance. It is this very transience and dissolution that liberate the artwork from being anchored within the confines of memorialization. Through evaporation, *Lacrimarios* evades crystallization as a static monument and instead, breathes life into what leaves no trace through the subtle medium of tears.



Instead of reading the image as part of the linearity and dated progression of time that the newspaper and the media suggests, even in its own ephemerality, the images in *Lacrimarios* are constantly reframed in the transparent cubes. Unlike the tears, the media news can be stored and preserved. They can compose an archive that could later be contested. Muñoz's work proposes instead a counter-narrative to the media in which the images live outside of the newspaper and their condition as a fixed inscriptions on paper to become spatialized and textural things that are opened to their own fragility. The images are constantly redrawn with charcoal dust and exposed to the principles of condensation, precipitation, and evaporation inside the cube. The drops of water, that simulate both tears and rain, keep redefining, once again, the form that is drawn.

The use of water as both the material that makes and dissolves the image suggests that beyond being a work of mourning, *Lacrimarios* is the re-creation of a scene, a counter-narrative that aims to reframe not only the media news, but the violent act itself. The viewer is integrated into the scene as an active participant contributing to this reframing, rather than being a mere witness. Once more, the artwork emerges as a locus of encounter, embodying the passage of time and the physical reactions that the body, akin to the image, undergoes, in its reframing of mourning for the dead. The allusion to tears or tear droplets and their impossible preservation mirrors the composition and dissolution of the image through the concept of precipitation. The reference to tear catchers transcends their association with mourning or the impossibility of fully grieving for another's body. The artwork instead suggests a re-enactment of the violent scene, reimagined through the humidity deposited as if it were rain.

The reference to the impossibility to mourn contrasts the idea of mourning brought up by Derrida in his book *The Work of Mourning*. In this book Derrida locates mourning as an impossible task and as a genre that admits how difficult it is to speak at the work of mourning. When he is

called upon to speak of the death of his friends, Derrida finds that even though in mourning we find ourselves at a loss, as no longer ourselves, or as a self that is destabilized, yet we are still called upon to speak where speaking seems impossible and to participate in the rites and codes of mourning<sup>197</sup>. Mourning as such is a work because it implies a type of labor that is both emotional and intellectual and that involves accepting to some degree the absence of the dead body while reconfiguring the world without them and integrating this loss. The ethical encounter between the dead and the living, must be then beyond, as Derrida notes, political calculation, personal retaliation, narcissism. Even though Derrida is specifically speaking about the death of his friends, some ideas can be extrapolated

Derrida offers a productive warning by saying that there is always a danger of narcissism in mourning, specifically in commemorative gatherings and tributes, where we use the dead for some end or purpose. Even when we speak to the dead to ask for their forgiveness, it is because we do not completely accept that the dead can no longer respond to us. It is so, Derrida explains, because to ask for forgiveness is also an act of expiation, at giving oneself good conscience. He proposes, instead, a writing of the dead that will come on its one, “that would no longer have to choose, inscribe or calculate, that would be without any labor or responsibility, without any risk of bad taste or violence”<sup>198</sup>. To mourn, then, should be, following Derrida, to bear witness to a unique friendship without giving a narcissistic “we” or “me”, being willing to return to the troublesome aspects of the past, “without wanting to claim the last word on it”<sup>199</sup>. However, when speaking about his friends like Roland Barthes, Derrida suggests that “it is only in us that the dead may speak”, that in speaking *of* or *as* the dead we enact a type of ethical fidelity that would make

---

<sup>197</sup> Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 5.

<sup>198</sup> Derrida, “Circumfession”, 12.

<sup>199</sup> Derrida, *The Work*, 98.

the friend living *in us* also living *in himself*<sup>200</sup>. This reciprocity between the dead and the living that consists much more in an interiorization of the other and recognition that the only thing we can give to the dead can only be in us, the living, supposes an interiority of the dead and the living that could only be carried in the form of speech or writing in the present and its impossible articulation.<sup>201</sup>

In Muñoz's *Lacrimarios*, the ethical dialogue between the dead and the living transcends this paradox, positioning the materiality of tears as a relational form that aims for externalization rather than "interiorization". It invites us to form a connection with the dead, or the stranger that is outside of us, and from this premise, constructs an alternative realm demanding a shared and intimate encounter of experiences. *Lacrimarios* veils and unveils a process of mourning that runs parallel to the continual redrawing and decomposition of the image. However, it seems to hint at a deeper sense of disorder. In essence, the image is exposed to the span of time in which the tears, mirroring rain, evaporate, and the cube's space is left empty again. This notion of duration holds significance as it counters the overwhelming consumption of information and news that Muñoz appears to rescue from the media-saturated sphere of information, resisting the tendency to reduce bodies to mere data. By recasting the images in *Lacrimarios* and reframing them in a different cycle and temporal duration, Muñoz grants the image another surface to float upon, contrasting with the body, which as data, would sink. He imbues the image with a subjective quality, a narrative, a story in which the individual behind the photograph is beyond our ability to remember her and, instead, can spark a level of intimacy similar to tears, bringing the viewer closer to the re-creation of the scene.

---

<sup>200</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>201</sup> This idea returns in "By Force of Mourning", where Derrida uses the image of interiorization as an introjection, consumption of the other, 159.

Tears, like breath, are forms that we emit from our bodies and that we all share. The link between tears and rain expands what is common in us to the environment in which we live, to what surrounds us, to the experience of being part of a world and a living world in us. This dual relationship is what is, in fact, at the center of *Lacrimarios*, that is, to re-establish what is common in us that makes us relate to the work of art in an elemental and yet fragile and ever-changing level. The parallelism between the image that floats and the body that did not float, the image that is created with charcoal dust and its dissolution by the drops of water, refocus the attention that we should put into images. It is no longer about an image that ends, that is completed; the very process in which the image is made and unmade makes us dwell in the process of form and formlessness. This process is also the space in between creation and dissolution, the interstitial duration in which the image appears and slowly disappears that is also both the work of mourning, the space of love and the possibility of commonality. In a way, the other story, that is, the violent news re-framed, contests the violent narrative of making the body sink into water with a narrative that makes the body float and begin a process of dissolution. This paradoxical relationship extends to the formal level where the attempt to make an image while floating in water, yet also incorporating its eventual destruction through water evaporation, disrupts conventional norms. It avoids traditional surfaces like paper or canvas, usually reserved for inscribing an image.

These formal decisions are not minor or banal in Muñoz case<sup>202</sup>. Similar to the technique employed in his work *Narcisos*, we can see in *Lacrimarios* an artistic proposal that uses temporality and the constant re-creation of the present, or of what is present, as part of the image's

---

<sup>202</sup> As María Iovino suggests, in works like *Lacrimarios*, the formation of a system of inherent values is evident, along with the definitive abandonment of traditional mediums. They transcend formal boundaries and radically adopt space-time as a decisive factor in the work's significance. An indissoluble amalgamation of creative or interpretative resources emerges, coupled with an untiring and strengthening questioning of what is assumed as reality. Iovino, *Volverse aire*, 14.

movement between composition, decomposition and evaporation. The use of photo silkscreen technique, present in many of his works including *Aliento*, uncovers a transformative critique of one of the defining techniques of pop art. As Iovino also suggests, the use of charcoal dust in *Narcisos* and *Lacrimarios* presents a reinterpretation of the technique of drawing that makes Muñoz's artistic practice unique in its experimentation and working methods. This approach, in turn, exposes an exploration of media intimately tied to the observation of the inherently fragile and unpredictable nature that defines our perception of reality<sup>203</sup>.

Muñoz's work in *Lacrimarios* defies thus the prominence of the trace, of what is left behind, when thinking about similar works that attempt to account for events that are part of historical and political violence. *Lacrimarios* is first and foremost a work that situates the tension between the materiality of the photographic process and the rendering of immaterial presences, people, things, events, that is, like Peter Osborne suggests, the image, is at its most intense. It is under this logic that "all art is concern with surfaces" because it engages centrally, Osborne argues, "with the site or substrate on which it inscribes its marks, symbols, gestures and sounds"<sup>204</sup>. This is more explicit in the visual arts, where the surface is always "actual and material even when electronic; and it is also always virtual and conceptual"<sup>205</sup>. All these approaches can be found in a variety of photographic practices and, in the case of *Lacrimarios* in the way it changes what is meant both by image, reality and surface.

---

<sup>203</sup> As Iovino suggests, such a unique perspective situates Muñoz as a singular and paradigmatic figure within Colombia's art history. In contrast to some other contemporary artists like Feliza Bursztyn, Álvaro Herrán, and Bernardo Salcedo, who are marked by the legibility of time and reality in the trace left on the materials used and using the objectual and the assembly of movements in static bodies, Muñoz's paradigmatic proposal is more centered on vital dynamics that are, in fact, the opportunity of art (14).

<sup>204</sup> Osborne, "The Damage: Photography and the Aesthetics of Fragility", 158.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

The image is also illuminated from below. The entire installation includes a light projector that multiplies the image's visible possibilities that is inscribed in water. *Lacrimarios*, in contrast to other works like *Simulacros* or *Narciso*, is installed on the wall at the viewer's waist-high. Just over a meter from each box, the artist places a light projector on the floor. The beam it casts ascends diagonally to each container. The light gives the water a mirror-like quality, allowing the transparent container to reflect the repeating image suspended on the surface. At the same time, the light's influence enlarges the silk-screened image, casting a shadow onto the wall where the artwork is displayed.





Fig. 22. Oscar Muñoz. *Simulacros*, 1999. Courtesy Museo de Arte de Lima MALI



Fig 23. Oscar Muñoz. *Narcisos* 2002. Installation. Courtesy Sicardi Gallery

At each instance in which the image is reproduced in *Lacrimarios*, we see how images of events, cities, or places in the Colombian Pacific are gradually replaced in a constant precipitation of water. This rain effect occurs because, in this series, Muñoz seals the container with a lid made from the same transparent material as its walls. The lid captures the condensed water, initiating a persistent drip that transforms the image from various points. As Iovino also suggests, there's an escalation of resources from *Simulacros* to *Lacrimarios*, as the latter's process occurs self-



sufficiently, without the mediation of external mechanisms, in a perpetual cycle that prevents water level loss due to evaporation<sup>206</sup>. In *Lacrimarios*, the image is counterweighted from all sides by a gentle rainfall within the container that outlines its territory. As Iovino describes, this lends a whispered expressiveness of sound and pushes the destructive action to its utmost tension<sup>207</sup>. The image's distress in *Lacrimarios* is more fleeting than in *Simulacros*, and the dispersion of its components (the charcoal dust) appears endless within the eternal cycle driven by precipitation.

The image inside the transparent cube experiences a physical process that is thus related to the temperature and weather conditions in the Pacific region. The idea that the water composes but also decomposes an image underscores a fragile quality that does not achieve, however, a complete disappearance, but rather illustrates the leftover material that it is made of. The charcoal dust as residue and the evaporation-like effect ties the image to Cali's atmosphere. Muñoz recalls that this atmosphere is very determinate in relation to light:

esa carga borrosa del aire denso de humedad, de esos cielos blancos y opalescentes. La calina o calima—muy de aquí este nombre—es una bruma de humedad con una densidad menor a la niebla, pero afecta la visibilidad. En alguna parte dije hace mucho que hay una hora del día en Cali en que las personas parecerían desmoronarse<sup>208</sup>.

When the image's outline seems to dilute and crumble, Muñoz destabilizes the medium of drawing. The image's projection from below and its multiplication caused by the light reflector in *Lacrimarios* is both shadow and mirror that works in a real-time reproduction of the movement

---

<sup>206</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>208</sup> Oscar Muñoz interviewed by Miguel González in *Protografías*, 128. A blurriness of the air dense with moisture, of those white and opalescent skies. The haze or mist—very typical here this name—is a moist haze with a density less than fog, but that affects visibility. Somewhere I said a long time ago that there is an hour of the day in Cali when people seem to crumble. My translation.

that dissolves the printed dust. In each repetition of the event, a different facet can be observed. Yet, it never fully clarifies the whole. This projection suggests a surface encounter that in the re-creation of scenes, events, cities, becomes a mobilization of space that splits between the many reflections that the image projects.

The transparent cube in *Lacrimarios* can be thought along what Giuliana Bruno calls an “architectural imaginary” because it turns contact between materialities into a communicative surface. The cube becomes a mysterious three-dimensional surface that asks the viewer to decipher what is inside, but whose only visibility must be blurred. As an apparently transparent surface, the materialities inside the cube expose their ability to communicate outside, to make the image outlive its own destruction by being projected and refracted. In the cube’s three-dimensional surface architectural imaginaries can be constructed “for these are, indeed, about the movement of habitable sites and how, in turn, these movements shape our inner selves”<sup>209</sup>. In *Lacrimarios* the contact between the viewer and the image is guided more by this affective movement rather than by the direct contact between the viewer’s breath and the image’s possibility of appearance as in *Aliento*.

The reference to an architectural mode in which materials are mobilized in *Lacrimarios* happens inside the cube but is projected to the outside. This reflection and refraction of the image to an outside asks the viewer to get closer and move around the cube in an attempt to decipher the image’s movement and inner tension. In this work of art, the environment that Muñoz attempts to re-create alludes to this imaginary of a space that, far from being an architectural abstracted space, becomes “the envelope, the skin of our inhabitation”<sup>210</sup>. What this

---

<sup>209</sup> Bruno, *Surface*, 195.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

“architectural imaginary” shows then is “a fully habitable concept: a visual space of intimate fabrication, the very delicate fabric we live in”<sup>211</sup>. In *Lacrimarios*, however, the re-created space of the Colombian Pacific region makes the attempt to become habitable without capturing the attempt in its fullness. The transparent cube is part of this visual space of “intimate fabrication” precisely because of its continual re-framing of events, scenes in an environment that we are called to live in even if we pass by, to look in from all sides rather than to look at. We are asked to become part of this never-ending cycle of precipitation to, in a sense, live with the image in both its formation and dissolution. Much more than in *Aliento*, *Lacrimarios* is a work that in its real-life temporality asks the viewer to come back the moment she leaves the museum room. To return and live with the changes that the image also experiences both inside the cube and in its projection. In a double sense, it also means that we are asked to live with the image and, simultaneously, to let it go, only to return.

By making public the violent event that gave *Lacrimarios* its first appearance, Muñoz also emphasizes the multiple ways in which we are all agents of history. Nonetheless, because *Lacrimarios* is not limited to this only event, but rather recomposes different ones, violent or not, it also speaks beyond the national boundaries and violent events in Colombia’s history. The work of art at large, exposes an assembly of viewpoints that are impelled by the mirror/shadow effect that is created by the light on the water-filled face of the container against the wall that replicates the image. This reflection emphasizes once more the lack of precision that comes from the “original” image installed on the surface and avoids transcribing the origin of the information that materially affects it. Nonetheless, María Iovino has also suggested that in this mirror, the image's transformation appears to be the result of its own perspiration, not the rain. So that, the

---

<sup>211</sup> *ibid*

mirrors formed on the different faces of the container, stemming from the repeated image on the face against the wall, provide a less defined record of it. As she argues, “These mirrors are like a fading echo of the first reflection. The shadow amplifies the record on the water's surface, presenting it as a unified entity without interstices”.<sup>212</sup> Even though the image appears to be in a unified whole that is contained by the cube’s four walls, I suggest that the fragility inherent in the images in *Lacrimarios* decomposes the image’s origin while emphasizing the image’s interstices and the refusal to consider it to be interpreted as whole. The image’s interstices highlight the physical changes that the image undergoes and reconsiders the parallelism between rain and tears as part of the image’s cyclical formation.

This parallelism between the image’s internal form and its outside as part of an “imaginary architecture” underscores Muñoz's concern with a reality. This concern, as Mari Carmen Ramírez observes, relates to Muñoz’s “photographically inspired interpretations of people and interiors.”<sup>213</sup> This perspective consistently provokes Muñoz's exploration and contestation of the boundaries of the media he employs in his practice. For example, the expansion of drawing, translated into the medium of photography, can also be seen in *Lacrimarios*. Here, the image's composition is grounded in the visual complexities of photography, breaking down its mechanisms to accentuate the interplay of light and reflection.

In this interplay, Muñoz's approach transcends a simplistic "realist" notion of art. He is less concerned with faithfully replicating or representing reality, and more with reconstructing and shifting the various elements through which we perceive the “real”. This interest, as Ramírez also suggests, lies in "Muñoz's nuanced and evocative use of light and shadow to question the

---

<sup>212</sup> Iovino, *Volverse aire*, 61.

<sup>213</sup> Ramírez, *Aligning Vision*, 178.

very act of representation"<sup>214</sup> rather than focusing on the veracity behind the work. Therefore, I contend that Muñoz's work in *Lacrimarios* proposes a subtle use of materials that challenges the authenticity of objects, events, and people. It suggests a way to engage with what is seen, mediated, and consumed, that extends beyond the simplistic binary of truth and falsehood.

In *Lacrimarios*, Muñoz displays a particular preoccupation with the mediatized image. This concern, however, is less about revealing an unvarnished "truth" pertaining to the violent origins underpinning this artwork. Instead, Muñoz seeks to present a counter-narrative, one that reconstitutes the notion of visual consolidation, as I've previously suggested. This counter-narrative underscores Mirzoeff's conception of authority within the realm of visibility. Mirzoeff contends that authority—despite its enduring nature amid the onslaught of modernity, derived from its interpretative ability—undergoes transformation due to the resistance it engenders. Mirzoeff offers a reconsideration of Foucault's term "intensity", interpreting it as the force that has heightened the economic efficacy of both visibility and counter-visibility. He asserts that under the force of intensification, each facet of visibility becomes more specific and technical.<sup>215</sup> Therefore, within each intricate visual complex exists a standard and an intensified form.

This interplay between standardization and intensification precipitates a paradox in which history and visualization, as Mirzoeff elucidates, merge to build the reality of modernity, yet fall short of providing a comprehensive account of one another. Counter-visibility thus operates in this nebulous space "between intention and accomplishment."<sup>216</sup> This space serves as a conduit

---

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Mirzoeff, "The Right to Look", 482.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

for counter-visibility, allowing it to transform into more than a mere opposition to visibility, and morph into its necessary becoming.

Muñoz's artistic practice, as I aim to argue, is situated in this paradox where his works are in-between intention and accomplishments, in creating a drawing's first line and its possible dissolution, without achieving any kind of complete finality. In this crumbling of media and forms Muñoz destabilizes the form of the real and, with it, he insists on the assemblage of contents that range between what is visibly inapprehensible, as well as the temporality that is implied in the process of the image's self-creation as in *Narciso*, *Lacrimarios* and others. In *Lacrimarios* the tear-dropping effect pairs the states of bodily secretion to environmental cyclical conditions that are beyond human control: sweat, tears and rain, enact what first appears to be simple visibility. The water-like materiality that these motifs all share, defies what is visible or what is delivered as part of media coverage in newspapers and tv news. If, as Mirzoeff suggests, where once consumer and subcultural practices seemed to offer new modes of resistance, "now themselves thoroughly commodified, the task is now more paradoxical"<sup>217</sup>. *Lacrimarios* reframes the narrative carried by the commodified version of subcultural practices that once were subversive on their own.

---

<sup>217</sup> Mirzoeff, 496. Mirzoeff, in his discourse, explicitly addresses the necropolitical regimes of separation which, with the rise of new right-wing regimes, have become increasingly commonplace. These intertwining threads of conventional population management discourse signify an intensification of visibility within the society of control. This amplification, evident since the so-called 'visual turn' in humanities post-1989, is symptomatic of, initially, the neo-visibility of the Revolution in Military Affairs following the Cold War's ending, and now, the further intensification of this visibility. As a case in point, Mirzoeff cites the example of insurgents and suicide bombers in Iraq and Afghanistan who dressed in military and police uniforms to execute their attacks. In this context, he poses the question, "if counterinsurgency uses neo-visibility as a strategy, can we construct a counter-visibility to oppose counterinsurgency? (495)." This question particularly resonates if counterinsurgency is seen as an intensified version of the military-industrial complex. If this is the case, it becomes essential for this new mobility to reclaim, rediscover, and retheorize the practices and spaces of everyday life, particularly within the context of a perpetual counterinsurgency.

The decomposition of images in *Lacrimarios*, all coming from mass-media, suggests instead that Muñoz's concern with these political situations is, once, again, beyond the commodified version of *arte comprometido* and an *aesthetics of violence* that were central to Colombia's artistic production as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter. The practices that emerged towards the 80's in Colombia, where Muñoz was part of, seemed to respond to ways in which artistic practice reproduce the ideological marginalization to which it was subject. In contrast, as noted earlier, the artistic practices that emerged at the end of the 80's confronted the past and contemporary armed struggle in Colombia by avoiding a direct representation and denunciation of what was political<sup>218</sup>. Muñoz's work in *Lacrimarios*, and even in *Aliento*, responds to these types of discourses that were more concerned with a subordinated task that, following Claire Bishop, alluded to "statistical affirmation of use-values, direct effects and a preoccupation with moral exemplarity"<sup>219</sup>. It does so by locating fragility and ephemerality as modes in which the "direct" political effects take place. In the case of *Lacrimarios* the re-enactment of a scene, as I suggested, in which the image's fragile origin is printed with charcoal dust and slowly dissolved in water, emphasizes an important architectural imaginary to conceive what is fragile and ephemeral as a response to a direct and commodified version of history.

In fact, I argue that Muñoz work in *Lacrimarios* proposes a different story, another materiality where the body no longer sinks but floats. In this alternative sensible surface where the body resists being part of a historical accumulation of collective memory. The body floats again at the level of the image's inner tension between composition and dissolution. What Muñoz offers is to change the frame and the conditions in which this image, as the body,

---

<sup>218</sup> See José Rocca in *Transpolítico*.

<sup>219</sup> Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 38.

reappears in-between its composition and its impossible conclusion. It is in here, perhaps, where what is impossible and inapprehensible is not fixed in its condition of impossibility, but rather it is mobilized in this constant re-framing, in the cycle of rain through which the image is both reframed and otherwise deferred. This point of the image's fragility and dissolution is what also speaks to Muñoz's practice as one that is driven towards processes of relations that are parallel to image-making, temporality, form and formlessness that are not end in themselves, but rather that find their expression in the persistence in what their compositions have to do, however disruptive, uncomfortable or difficult their task may be.

Muñoz's artistic practice emerges from the necessity to rethink the connection between historical facts, media information and artistic practice, making images recenter the realms of both enjoyment and disruption. This fidelity to a singularized desire rather than to a social consensus enables Muñoz's work to recenter ephemerality and fragility as poetic forms of art-making that are already political gestures. In *Lacrimarios* the reference to tears as both a materiality and metaphor reunites sweat and rain as textures that contribute to the image's creation and atmosphere. This counterbalances, as I stated before, the image's flatness in the newspaper in favor of a three-dimensionality, reproduction and multiplication that avoids its own fixity. In a way, the parallelism between the image that floats as it is projected and the body that was supposed to float, presents a work of mourning that speaks to not only an affect shared in communality as the experience of grief, but also the re-creation of an environment in which the image also comes to life as it is, once more, redefined through its new framing.

The image's reproduction in *Lacrimarios* emerges from the same source in which the image is both projected and multiplied. The light projector that is below the transparent cube works similarly to the mechanism of the photographic camera as it is exposed to light.



Nonetheless, I argue that the reference to photography in this artwork points to the photographic camera in its procedure and operation, rather than the visual object it produces.

The mirror-like effect impulse of the light projector illustrates the re-creation of the image in the news, while the drops of water refer both to the high precipitation in the Colombian Pacific and the process of photographic amplification and revelation where the image also floats. In a third instance, the water also refers, like I said before to the tears as offerings to the dead and as a proof of love for others. This third instance establishes a relationship between the image and its weathering condition. That is, the image's composition and dissolution as part of a work of mourning that emphasizes both the grief's possible articulation and its passing through.

In *Lacrimarios* the image weeps while it suffers its cyclical movement of temporal transformation. The image weeps where tears are both indisputably readable and an excess that expands any reasoning. In a way tears appear at a breakout point, in the place of overwhelming emotions and what seems to be inapprehensible. As Tom Lutz suggests, "we recognize in crying a surplus of feeling over thinking, and an overwhelming of our powers of articulation by the gestural language of tears (21)". This is why tears are difficult to articulate or to define and precisely this unreadability makes them appear in a variety of situations and scenarios. In *Lacrimarios*, as I argue, Muñoz returns to the materiality of water to think about the materiality of tears in its evaporation and their impossible complete preservation.

This ephemeral quality is what makes the image part of a process in which they are and should be considered under a constant reframing and affection that makes them be considered outside of their circulation as commodities. Unlike *Simulacros* and *Narcisos*, the image in *Lacrimarios* was not specifically taken for the project, but rather discovered in documents or print media based on an affective resonance. Thus, Muñoz once again transitions from a

carefully studied and conceived record for the work, as in *Inquilinatos*, to the found object in media, as it is also present in *Aliento*.

In their state as found objects, the images that Muñoz retrieves transcend their inherent status as ruins. Instead, they suggest an alternate means to contemplate a communal experience of memory and mourning, as opposed to a collective one. As traces, these images reveal their identities as found objects, diverting from any reference to a static past that evokes monumental, collective memory. They challenge their classification as ruins, a category that, as Andreas Huyssen defines, can be apprehended "only in its decay and which only reveals the ruinous state of the present."<sup>220</sup>

The weathered condition of Muñoz's images in *Lacrimarios* and *Aliento* refrains from treating them as ruins; instead, they are viewed as residues capable of future reanimation. This image's second life can be achieved either by the viewer, as exemplified in *Aliento*, or by Muñoz himself. Thus, if ruins, as per Peter Osborne's assertion, "attract meaning as they represent loss" and confirm a past that is irrevocably laid to rest, the images in both *Aliento* and *Lacrimarios* reorient their status as things being lost. They become surfaces of encounters and portals that stimulate thought and evoke emotional responses. These images no longer address a collective memory preoccupied solely with its angst-ridden attempts at preservation. Instead, they serve to simultaneously create and dissolve what we seem to both remember and forget.

The transient nature of both breath and tears foregrounds the image's materiality, aligning it with an alternative narrative of events, objects, and individuals. The image they encapsulate and unveil surpasses the status of a damaged or weathered photograph, which Osborne identifies

---

<sup>220</sup> Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 52, 53.

as ruins. As Osborne elucidates, an image that operates as a type of ruin is an artifact of a past it predates. Osborne gives the example of self-portraits as embodying the logic of the ruin because they capture a face that once existed but is now absent, whereby "the face becomes the signifier of its own future ruin."<sup>221</sup> This perspective would apply to Muñoz's works if they were to remain purely on a representational level. However, as I have argued throughout this chapter, the materiality that Muñoz employs in his art transcends the concept of fixity over time, or the preservation of a static index in which memory, or a person, resides.

Muñoz's use of fragile materialities—such as breath, tears, and charcoal dust—points to the inherent fragility and transience of a photographic object, rather than an exclusive fixity of time. These materials are exposed to sunlight, they decompose due to chemical reactions, and they can be stored and subsequently lost. This fragility take us back to the early history of the photographic medium when, as I've previously noted, the emphasis was more on the photograph's fading than on its preservation.

Osborne, too, emphasizes the value placed on the fragility of early photographic techniques, suggesting that the invention of the Daguerreotype was celebrated for its "tragic impermanence." When a photograph corrodes or shows signs of wear, its meaning reverts to its material base, descending "into silent granularity."<sup>222</sup> Muñoz's images often transcend the photographic fixity, thereby transforming rather than extinguishing the category of the photographic. The image's granularity speaks to this transformation as part of the image's composition. This transformation probes unexpected temporalities, challenging any notion in which these images are confined to a state of melancholy or mourning.

---

<sup>221</sup> Osborne, "The Damaged", 161.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

The conception of the image as ruin differs significantly from the image as residue in Muñoz's work. While ruins are fragmentary remnants tethered to a static present, hinting at the nostalgia for what is lost, the image-residue in Muñoz's oeuvre resonates with the ceaseless logic ingrained in the temporal frame of 24/7, as defined by Jonathan Crary - a time corresponding with late capitalism, where both human subjectivity and the global infrastructure of labor and consumption are uninterrupted<sup>223</sup>. Contrary to this relentless march of time, Muñoz's work strives for a deceleration of time, crafting an anachronism within images and within the life of images, which becomes part of a poetics that is at once integrated and resistant. When time is transformed from a process to a commodity that can be bought and sold, Muñoz gives images another, distinct time in which to unfold, revealing them outside the confines of their effectiveness and productivity, and imbuing them with an autonomous force.

These images attend to a materiality that moves while reminding us of Deleuze's quote from Hamlet in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* in which time is "out of joint". This account about time actively decomposes the photographic instant as being the only way to think about photography in times of late capitalism or conflicting times of crisis within the context of Colombian political violence. In fact, Muñoz's works tell us that what we see in his work is a repeated experience in which, as Deleuze also says "movement is subordinated to time", so that we live as we see a reversal in the more fast-moving circumstances (xi). Even though Deleuze's focus is film analysis, his theory of time echoes with Muñoz's image's as well if we consider them as moving images. When we are in front of Muñoz's images we are confronted not with the present as what "the image 'represents'", but with a process of relationships between its material elements, that are entangled in "a set of relationships of time from which the variable present

---

<sup>223</sup> Crary, 24/7, 3.

only flows (xi)”. As such, not even the body is exactly what moves, but “the instrument of action, it becomes rather the developer of time, it shows time through its tiredness and waiting’s (xi).” This last centrality of the body as an active developer of time is what gives the images in *Aliento* (1994) the force to go beyond its own survival, that is, to return as an image-trace that keeps coming back in *Lacrimarios* (2000).

### ***The Image as Rubble***

I began this chapter by discussing the concept of the image-trace, which can be viewed as an image that constructs a language intrinsic to photography. Drawing a parallel, Victor Burgin, in *The End of Art*, posits that photography is yet another of desire’s captivating “red herrings”: “Fundamentally it is the unconscious subject that desire...but the conscious object of desire is always a red herring. The object is only the representative, in the real, of a psychological representative in the unconscious. In fact, desire *is* the instinct, as the Lacanians put it ‘alienated in a signifier’—the *trace* of a primal, *loss*, satisfaction. The real object is *irretrievably* absent”<sup>224</sup>. The image-trace, in shedding light on the interplay between loss and absence, resonates with the notion of photography as an image tied to its vanished referent, to that which manifests as an image of what or who no longer exists. Contrarily, the image-residue, as I seek to articulate, is at the liminal encounter of what fades without entirely vanishing. It is an image that alludes to the formless matter of each material composition, to the paradox that not everything disappears completely, and yet we cannot entirely possess it, or recuperate it. This complex dynamic invites an exploration of the interstices between presence and absence, materiality and ephemerality, which is particularly

---

<sup>224</sup> Burgin, *The end of Art*, 98.

relevant in the context of Latin American expressions that often grapple with themes of memory, loss, and the ephemeral nature of existence.

In his study of the Gran Chaco, Gastón Gordillo questions the language associated with ruins, to propose one more related to rubble. He argues that rubble, instead of ruins, let us think about the remainders of colonial missions beyond a mystified object and patrimonial contemplation. The notion of the image as rubble carries the weight of what Gordillo refers to as the “material sedimentation of destruction.”<sup>225</sup> I expand this notion of rubble to imply that the image is not just a product of destruction but is also indicative of its inherent capacity for self-destruction. This interpretation lends depth to the image, making it an embodiment of both creation and dissolution.

The residual nature of the image in *Biografías* avoids its definition as trace, or ruin. If the image as ruin is more related to this *irretrievable* absence, the image as residue is an image that moves, that is born and dies from its remains. It is an image, nonetheless, whose remains are in-between the opposing forces of impermanence and fixity. In this third section I propose to think about a third instance of the image: the image as rubble, that is, also, a return and a final note to speak about the life of images in Oscar Muñoz’s work. I have said already that Muñoz’s artistic proposal undoes photography’s primary objective: to permanently fix an image born of light to a stable surface. In his video-installation *Biografías* (2002), Muñoz simulates the photographic fixed impression on the surface of water in a sink using charcoal dust. As the sink drains, the photographic image distorts and eventually vanishes. The video projection, however, registers the image’s transformation, follows, and repeats its movement of dissolution. This same technique

---

<sup>225</sup> Gordillo, *Rubble*, 20. I am grateful with Adriana Johnson, who first introduced this reading to me in her graduate seminar “Infrastructure”. It has been fundamental to think beyond the concept of ruin.

appeared in his first video work *Narciso* (2001)<sup>226</sup>, that is an earlier version of *Biografías* in which Muñoz draws a self-portrait that, on the one hand, follows the same movement of form and formlessness and, on the other hand, explicitly brings forward the myth of Narcissus.

---

<sup>226</sup> This video installation stages the process that was already anticipated in the installation *Narcisos* (1986), where evaporation was imperceptible to our eyes. We would not see it unless we stayed in the museum room for days. Similar to the installation, in the video we see a self-portrait floating on water, but the background circle and the sound of the water in the sink indicates what will be the image's ending. This work also shows a duplicated image, the drawing and the shadow, making explicit the reference of the myth. The myth is embodied through an idea of representation and to the photographic myth par excellence: image's duplication and impossible grasp.





Fig. 24. Oscar Muñoz, *Narciso* (12 works). Video installation with sound, 2001. Courtesy of the artist



Fig 25. Oscar Muñoz, *Biografías* (9 works). Video installation with sound, 2002. Courtesy of the artist

In these pieces, Muñoz's use of video strikingly brings to life the paradox of an image seemingly stripped of its physical form, but reborn through the very materiality that gives its form. Video, as a medium, introduces an intriguing complexity, as it questions the possibility of an image existing as mere light, apparently devoid of a material anchor.<sup>227</sup> With the use of video, Muñoz pushes this concept further, forgoing the notion of a solid state and embracing a continuous cycle. This cyclical nature reflects the heart of Muñoz's artistic vision, where an image undergoes three fundamental stages: creation, life and death<sup>228</sup>. Through video, these stages develop in an ever-ending loop, emphasizing the lifecycle as a visible process that makes the image impossible to be absolutely contained.

Created in 2002, *Biografías* shares commonalities with other works such as *Narciso* (2001) and *Línea de Destino* (2006), especially in the way they display the instability of images. However, José Roca points out two distinct elements in *Biografías*. First, rather than employing self-portraits, Muñoz showcases portraits of various anonymous individuals who have passed away, similar to *Aliento*, with the images also sourced from newspaper obituaries. Second, the assembly of

---

<sup>227</sup> Muñoz had previously explored the concept of an image in flux, as seen in *Cortinas de Baño*, where images emerge as ephemeral traces, and in *Narcisos*, a 1986 installation featuring water as a physical component to the image's impression and dissolution. These artworks highlight the significance of recognizing the fragility of the medium while engaging with its physical aspects.

<sup>228</sup> Muñoz first drawing with water was his work *Atlántida* that he began in 1992. Even though the work was a failure, it establishes the first moment in which Muñoz began to conceive the image distant from drawing and began to create tensions within the image in-between an image completely defined "a priori" and the contingency and accidentality of an image floating in water. Muñoz explains his technique while doing the *Narcisos* as one that defies the complete materialization of a drawing on paper. If we think that a conventional drawing is materialized when the hand adheres charcoal definitive to the paper, in the first *Narcisos*, Muñoz says, this is only accomplished when the water, which is the distance between the charcoal and the support, evaporates definitively. It is also paradoxically reverting the idea of the portrait as a means of eternalizing an unrepeatable instant, exposed here to a transformation in time, he argues, in the manner of the portrait of Dorian Gray (46).

*Biografías* differs; akin to *Narciso*, the image in *Biografías* distorts and ultimately fades into an ambiguous stain, but in an unexpected turn, it resurfaces by replaying the sequence in reverse.

*Biografías* was created in a context where the term “disappear” is fraught with severe political implications and acts of violence are rapidly eclipsed by more recent news. In this setting, individual deaths risk being reduced to mere statistics. Roca asserts that the anonymous portraits in *Biografías* resist such erasure; they oppose being consigned to oblivion, which is equivalent to a second death. This work by Muñoz, as Roca argues, stands as a powerful reminder of the individuals behind the statistics, conferring on them presence and dignity through a compelling visual narrative.

However, I propose a different perspective: in *Biografías*, images are not mere resemblances or reflections of political acts of collective memory and reparation. Viewing them as such could lead to an oversimplification of memory, experience, and their complex processes, reducing them to inert elements within the socio-political landscape. It risks endorsing a deterministic interpretation of images, neglecting their potential to actively construct and redefine historical narratives rather than merely mirroring them. Instead, Muñoz's work avoids fixing the image's fluidity, to instead articulate an instance of images where they are capable of resisting, disrupting, and reshaping historical narratives. Muñoz's practice compels us to rethink the fluidity and dynamism of images, their potential for resistance, their mutability, and their role in suggesting alternatives to an experience that is part of a broader context. This context enables both the dead and the living to meet even at the level of the screen, rather than limiting the focus to acts of memorialization that could diminish artistic potential to denunciation, or to social redemption, and to do politics in its name.

The image as rubble in *Biografías* reveals charcoal dust to be a materiality through which we navigate the edges of a world on the verge of liberation from the threat of clarity and transparency. The paradox between the material and the immaterial manifests through the video, which serves as the medium holding the image, and thereby rendering the photographic language more fluid and immaterial. However, the video does not deprive the image of its temporal dimension; it captures the cyclical nature of the image's dissolution. The paradox between ephemerality and permanence remains present on the screen. It is within this tension that the image exposes its identity as rubble.

Rather than representing an image in preservation or nostalgically reverting to an idealized past, *Biografías* underscores a conceptual transformation. The moving image surfaces as rubble, disentangled from the grasp of the past, released from the commodification of the present, and detached from the homogeneity of mass media. Here, the moving image transforms into an audacious and affected surface that unsettles the established world, instead of merely representing it. The image, with its movement and dust, embodies the space given to it, building another one that nurtures a multiplicity of perceptions and hopes. These hopes lie beyond a cry for salvation, and rather compose an anticipated and imaginative desire.

In *Biografías*, Muñoz recollects photographs from newspapers obituaries, as he did in *Aliento*. He rescues them in a series of images that reveal themselves as residues no longer of places, as ruins, but instead of the social and political accounts that make them fall into historical time and that buy them into networks of information. In this artwork the image takes a more radical stance in challenging the conventional correlation between a photograph and its testament of “being there.” These images are rubble because they are robbed from this temporality. They are, instead, restaged in a different logic, they are even detached from its “original” source and,

therefore, they avoid been part of a heritage industry and mummification. As Gordillo also notes, ruins are objects without afterlife: “dead things from the past, whose value originates far in time” where they have been “fetishized”<sup>229</sup>. The image as a fetishized ruin resembles this aspect of photography that seems to mummify the past. While the image as rubble composes an afterlife to the image, detaching it from its “original” source, that is the original photograph, and, simultaneously, creating an ongoing form of disruption.

Laura Mulvey, in her book *Death 24x a Second*, also discusses this aspect of photography that can be related to ruins. She notes photography’s temporal aspect as a snapshot in time, which had once existed. This, she attributes to a once-upon-a-time moment that existed in the world as “the human perplexity in the face of death, which tends to be drawn towards irrationality and the need to believe”<sup>230</sup>. The transformation of the image in *Biografías*, where it is incessantly evolving into a distorted stain, illustrates the materiality in which the image begins to emphasize its elusive nature. As the image morphs into this stain, it leaves behind remnants that allow the image to be reformed through the video loop. This residue continues to be an active element in the life of the image, bridging the printed image and its shadow. Consequently, the residue as rubble illuminates the inherent anachronism of the image as well as it suggests a critical vision of things in-between their form and formlessness that disintegrates recognizable forms.

Mulvey draws a parallel between this stillness and the individual frames in film, which can be related to the stillness observed in ruins as relics of the past. The image in *Biografías*, characterized as rubble, reinterprets this “stillness” as an element that revives the motion in the image, drawing attention to the weighty presence of mortality and the passage of time, as

---

<sup>229</sup> Gordillo, *Rubble*, 9.

<sup>230</sup> Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 65.

Mulvey points out. The moving image in *Biografías* calls into question this conventional perception of images as mere reflections of the past and challenges the static nature that considers them as ruins. *Biografías* displays, instead, the ephemeral traces of its own composition, revealing the time sealed within the photograph and challenging its traditional role as a memorial past. Rather than reconciling with the origins or dwelling on the decay, the focus shifts to the image's transformative capabilities.

The artwork uncovers the image's potential to document its own unraveling and turmoil in a different material form, that is also another way to document its own history, its own passage of time. This other form contests its ineffability, its supposed impossibility to speak, as an idea that alludes to the silent trauma and concealed aspect of time, which is proficiently captured by photography. Instead, the work presents an image in flux, embodying a subtle interplay between form and formlessness. This interchange crafts a particular shape, one that illuminates not just the material remnants of destruction, as Gordillo suggests, but also the cyclical nature of its creation and disintegration.

Roland Barthes and André Bazin have also considered the heavy presence of mortality, the stillness of time and its hidden nature as aspects that photography exposes very well. In his discourse on the ontology of photography, André Bazin contends that photography does not conjure eternity, but rather “embalms time, rescuing it simply for its proper corruption”.<sup>231</sup> Bazin's insight into photography's essence associates photography's ontology to time's immutability that functions as a conservation of the past, or the fixed moment when the photographic subject was immortalized, thus thwarting the “decay” intrinsic to its progression.

---

<sup>231</sup> Bazin, “The Ontology”, 13.

However, Muñoz's oeuvre appears to embody the scenarios wherein photographs are susceptible to metamorphosis and erosion.

In *Biografías*, the image constitutes an evolved repetition of the “original” photograph upon which it was based. Through the incorporation of video, Muñoz situates the photographic image at the edge of Bazin's essentialism where time is preserved. As such *Biografías* insinuates—perhaps more subversively than *Aliento* and *Lacrimarios*—an image that relinquishes the preservation of the subject it entangles, concealed within the ephemeral moment of its capture. This alludes to a cinematic quality that Bazin identifies as the dynamic potential of moving images to “liberate baroque art from its paralyzing catalepsy.”<sup>232</sup> In Bazin's perspective, photography and cinema emerge as technological discoveries that satiate our obsession with realism, the replication of reality, and the objectivity of time.

In *Biografías*, Muñoz critically engages with the notion of objectivity propounded by Bazin, whose analysis of both media is anchored in the technical reproduction process, which ostensibly removes the artist's touch from the creative process. As he contends, both media mirrors reality “without direct reference to an artist or photographer”<sup>233</sup>. However, in *Biografías*, despite having little control over the image, Muñoz carves a space for a more intimate experience to take place. It transcends merely giving the object a quality of credibility, as Bazin puts it, which compels belief; instead, *Biografías* rewrites an interplay of realism intertwined with a temporal duration. This duration weaves a dialogue between the viewer and the artist at the point where they meet on the screen's surface. Both subjects engage in this dialogue to challenge the supposed objectivity of both mediums, bringing to the fore the image's residue as rubble that holds the potential to both inform experience and interrogate the image's intrinsic “likeness”.

---

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid, 14.

Consequently, the image in its fragmented state lays bare the dynamic quality in *Biografías*, which not only fashions an image-process manifested upon water but also scrutinizes the image's internal mechanics of resemblance that its own shadow aspires to unveil.

This movement between the image and its shadow offers a poignant reflection on the impermanence and transformation in both personal and collective memories. The image's creation and dissolution through video, however, offers another instance in which it transcends to communicate its own existence as part of those memories, to offer instead an opportunity for the image to be outside of its ontological condition. That is, the image in *Biografías*, is an image that is, in fact, redrawn with the artist's hand, it adds a stage of subjectivity to the supposedly "objective" photograph that first appeared in newspapers. This second layer of the image, that passes through the artist's hand, although not controlled by it, proposes to think critically about an archival memory that no longer aims to preserve things as they are. It rather aims to construct, to create upon the image's rubble, as part of an addition where creation is also a form of political imagination.

The image in *Biografías* is thus singularized by its re-impression on water. This second impression makes the image even more fragile in nature, as it does not stay totalized for too long, but rather works as part of a cycle in which it challenges its own resemblance to how it was. The image as what "was" is also tied to a nostalgic representation of the past that looks back at things as ruins. The moving image constructs instead its own addition as rubble through which it can be born again, repetitively, by both its fluids and residues. It almost seems that Muñoz suggests in *Biografías* another instance to the image's gestation, where the reference to



the image's fluidity lies beyond its categorization as part of the capitalist liquidity<sup>234</sup> and ephemerality<sup>235</sup>.

If the ontological condition of photography is what Bazin calls the inanimate and the stillness in which photographs appear as specific moments in time, as the capture and preservation of what appears before its lens, in *Biografías* the inanimate and buried images that resided in the newspaper obituary come to life. The residual trace of stillness, that is the stain in which the image completely dissolves, survives, sometimes enhancing, sometimes threatening. But it is precisely its survival as stillness that makes it defy its own condition of remaining in a static past. The *bios* in *Biografías* alludes, as I suggest, to the image's life and survival as rubble in which an anonymous life becomes simultaneously livable and shareable. This *bios* in an image shows its process of composition. It indicates the image's residue as rubble, rather than ruin. It composes a residue beyond a dated past that has expired and that can only be contemplated in the veil of what is unchangeable.

The image as rubble in *Biografías* recenters a process that continues in the present. It builds a field of affects whose resonances touches the object that both persists and accepts its own life. This object, that is the subject behind the picture resists then, as Gordillo says, the eye of the machine that poses over it, the now of the gaze that also composes the narcissus myth. The rubbish-like nature of the image that becomes stain criticizes a temporal progression that Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* reminds us as what is looking back into the past to remember that there is nothing else there than an accumulation of ruins. In *Biografías* Muñoz reorders this accumulation as rubble, as residues that add a transformation, a moving image that subtly speaks about the image as an added value to the world. In this addition, each object of the world is

---

<sup>234</sup> Vs Baunman.

<sup>235</sup> Vs, "All that is solid melts into air".

converted into an image that Muñoz's urges us to confront under [the sign of (?)] an anachronism. That is, nonetheless, a transfigured temporality, an image in its reversal, that comes back from the stain that is drained in the sink.

Beyond their ontological state, images as rubble should be considered for their residual components, serving as nodes that can form constellations. In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin introduces the concept of constellation—an image that mirrors thought, thereby evoking a non-linear connection characterized by multiplicity, rupture, and fragmentation. Benjamin's concept highlights the need to consider a unique perspective of the present and how history manifests within this present. His interpretation of history is thus constructed through interruptions, remnants, and constellations, contrasting it with the "homogeneous, empty time" embodied by ideology or progress. Muñoz's images in *Biografías* align with this conception of history as rubble—that is, residual sedimentations appearing as constellations that challenge the fetishization of images in mass media and objects.

The concept of the image as rubble in *Biografías* thus alludes to how Muñoz conceives his artistic practice: at the threshold of oppositions. That is to say, it presents appearance and deception not as a traditional "trompe l'oeil," but as a perception, a vision that transcends into reflections—not only through the image itself but also through the materials and processes he employs. Muñoz's consistent concern with image destruction, not just creation, encapsulates ideas of dematerialization,<sup>236</sup> decay, pulverization, and evaporation. These elements are evident

---

<sup>236</sup> The term "dematerialization" carries significant weight in the history of art. On October 30, 1966, Argentine artists Eduardo Costa, Raúl Escari, and Roberto Jacoby—known collectively as the "Media Art Group"—published their manifesto "An Art of Communication Media" in the *El Mundo* newspaper. Within it, they argued that the audience of the mass media in the 1960s no longer interacted directly with cultural issues, but instead received information about them through newspapers, magazines, radio, and TV. The term was first coined by their mentor Oscar Massotta, who defined it as: "The 'matter' ('immaterial,' 'invisible') with which informational works of such type are constructed is none other than the processes, results, facts, and/or phenomena of the information triggered by mass information media (e.g., 'media': radio, television, news, newspapers, magazines, posters, 'panels', comics, etc)." Oscar Massotta, "After Pop, we dematerialize," in Oscar Massotta "Después del Pop nosotros

in the charcoal dust through which the image in *Biografías* both materializes and disintegrates. This cycle, amplified by the video loop, illustrates how the image sheds its materiality. However, an inherent contradiction persists within the image. The charcoal dust defies the image's complete obliteration. In its dust form, the image displays a resistance from minor elemental materials that challenges the prevailing clarity and precision of visual images in today's mass media and the documentary power of photography.

The charcoal dust in *Biografías* embodies this perspective of perceiving the image as rubble, hinting at the processes where the image's dust is simultaneously preserved and set adrift. This external facet allows the charcoal dust to potentially become the sources of other images while also signaling their inevitable dissolution. Furthermore, it suggests an exterior realm that emerges as a multi-centered, malleable, and elusive constellation. Thus, the image as rubble in *Biografías* implies a materiality that extends beyond itself, resonating with the residual aspects of reason and perception. With this residual material, these images that encompass their own dissolution and decay, Muñoz examines the traces of the world's appearances. In-between that world and our eyes lies a field of mist, indicative of the mist Muñoz references when discussing the particular environment surrounding Cali at certain moments of the day. This mist, the blurriness and fog we also perceive in *Aliento* and *Lacrimarios*, forms part of an alternate dimension wherein the moving image in *Biografías* immerse us, extending the temporal fog layered on the surfaces of objects, as opposed to the object's absolute transparency.

---

desmaterializamos” en *Revolución en el arte: pop art, happenings y arte de los medios en la década del sesenta*. Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2004), pg.350. In the case of Muñoz, and in this chapter, I use the term in a more indirect and extrapolated way, more closely related to the idea that images, works, or processes are made and unmade, deconstructing and putting tension on their own materialities. Although several of the examples I use point directly to the circulation and cultural consumption of both images and violence, as well as the subjects who fall prey to it.

The image's movement and its impression upon water, transforms the photographic language, which captures an instant and "embalms time". The water, initially acting as a medium that imparts movement to the image, contributes to a composition that emanates from the image's spacing and spatialization. It overlaps the simultaneous anticipation and delay, within the realm of the image, materializing alternative temporalities of the subjects, processes, and things. While an image's fleeting and ephemeral nature may underscore its fragility, this characteristic does not diminish its status as an image. Rather, in works such as *Biografías*, this fragility is integral to the image's progression, mediated by water and video recording. These media showcase the image's fragility, reflecting a paradox in perception: it hinges on a receptivity to forms that can make a lasting impression, separating from their material basis, yet also holds the potential for transformation. It can yield to new modes of perception, thus stimulating a continuous flux within the perceptual experience.

Contrary to the image as ruin, the image as breath, tears and rubble is materiality recontained, reconsidered. It is an image that in its own formation and dissolution, in fact, questions what it leaves behind. It asks the viewer to see it through the transparency of the cube in *Lacrimarios*, or through the mirror that ultimately hides the image in latency one more time in *Aliento*, or through the mixture of water and dust as surface and source of the image in *Biografías*. This transparency that both the cube in *Lacrimarios*, the mirror in *Aliento* and the apparently transparency of water in *Biografías* shares, is questioned by the fogginess and evaporation-like effect of breath, water and tears. As materialities that involve a chemical reaction within the image and its composition, the purity of vision is no longer integral, it is out of focus. The fogginess of breath in *Aliento*, the refraction between light and tears in *Lacrimarios* and water as a sensible surface that receives an image alludes to a veil to sight. This veil could be

read alongside Nicholas Mirzoeff's "veiled visuality". This type of visuality is any moment of visual experience in which the subjectivity of the viewer is called into question "by the density or opacity of what he or she sees"<sup>237</sup>. It is the flickering, excessive, disjunctive moments that, like Didi-Huberman's fireflies, are "spectral dust in the eyes of visuality" and that causes it "to blink and become momentarily unsighted"<sup>238</sup>. Veiled visuality performs then a similar function of the fireflies' light appearance and disappearance, a function that divides visuality into two by the veil that is both visible and invisible at once.

Regarding this relation between the veil's opacity and the mirror's transparency, Joan Fontcuberta says that there are images that "escape through a slit of time, that run away without looking back"<sup>239</sup>. Images like thus suggested by Fontcuberta, are part of a "mirror-like effect"<sup>240</sup> that resembles the mirror as the antecedent of the daguerreotype—"which is precisely a mirror-with-memory"<sup>241</sup>. Oscar Muñoz's images are those that pass-through time while composing intervals in which, perhaps contrary to what Fontcuberta says, the image keeps appearing and coming back to us.

Muñoz's images have a materiality and durability that are part of a process-based technique in which the account of photography is mobile, ephemeral and part of an untotalizable flow in which images keep being itinerant in nature. They speak to both a creation and dissolution of a visual object that, while leaving its sight, is constituted by the intersection "between the agent of

---

<sup>237</sup> Mirzoeff, "On Visuality", 70.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid. Mirzoeff refers to this veiled or inverse visuality that is created by those who seek to respond to the masculine imperial hero, and who seek emancipation. He gives the example of Oscar Wilde and W.E.B Du Bois who both make use of Carlyle's vocabulary and disjuncture temporality to talk about a theory of veiled visuality as a place of greater insight than the clear visuality offered to the hegemonic groups in society and in so doing sketched "a radical transcultural pedagogy" (76).

<sup>239</sup> Fontcuberta, 236.

<sup>240</sup> Fontcuberta explains that our face is reflected in the daguerrotype when we look at it. "Only when we move obliquely and change the incidence of light, does the image captured by the camera appear (236)".

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

sight and discourses of visibility”<sup>242</sup>. These images materialized through breath, tears and rubble are also a site of encounter, a material surface that receives and gives back, that while avoiding being fixed in the past as a geometric figure, manifest a zone of contact that is as, Achille Mbembe suggests “*time as lived*, not synchronically or diachronically, but in its multiplicities and simultaneities, its presences and absences”<sup>243</sup>. In dealing with these complexities, Oscar Muñoz’s images puts at the center the notion that, in fact, visibility considered in this sense as both veiled and inverted, is, as Mirzoeff suggests “a time-based medium”<sup>244</sup>.

These images that manifest and unfold in their materialities propose an instance of love, desire and imagination. We must want these images so much, Muñoz seems to suggest, to keep them close to our breath, to our tears. If imagination is the work that produces images for thought, it shows through its own process the way that in Muñoz’s “time-based mediums” the “Past meets our Now” as Didi-Huberman argues, so that it can free the rich constellations of the Future”<sup>245</sup>. This also means that if the image needs us as much as we need them under a reconstructed frame of creation, it is a process that refers no less than to rethinking our principle of hope, to the way the past meets with the present thorough a glimmer, an ephemeral, firefly effect and our own capacity to follow it. It is in this openness and closeness of visibility, where the veil is in-between both the creation and dissolution of an image. This liminal space of perception asserts our way of imagining that is, precisely, what Didi-Huberman also calls “the fundamental condition of *our way of doing politics*”<sup>246</sup>. What is political in Muñoz’s images is this process-based creation and

---

<sup>242</sup> Mirzoeff, 76.

<sup>243</sup> Mbembe, 8.

<sup>244</sup> Mirzoeff, 76.

<sup>245</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Fireflies*, 30.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

dissolution where the materiality of the image is constantly recontained and exposed. This showcases that there is no politics without the ability to imagine and to desire.

Muñoz's poetic and visual account of the image manifests as breath, tears, and rubble. He appreciates it as the indestructible character, transmitted here, invisible but latent there, resurging elsewhere in perpetual metamorphoses.<sup>247</sup> It is the image simultaneously hidden and revealed, inscribed and erased, defined and redefined by the surface material upon which it exists. This veiled visibility emerges as Muñoz's most politically and poetically charged gesture in his artistic practice, employing ephemerality to defy pure identities, preserve anonymity, and deform its features.

Images thus should be fragile, because it is as fragile that they are always in-between the paradox of appearing and disappearing, without doing so completely. It is within this liminal space that Muñoz's practice exerts its influence over forms, materials, and the surfaces he employs. Here, the image is perpetually transforming, eluding finality, and propelling a continual movement of visibility and invisibility. His artwork thus navigates the tightrope of persistence and transience, embodying a continual interplay of creation and dissolution.

In these types of images, Muñoz articulates not just death, memory, and oblivion within the context of Colombia's lengthy history of political conflict and violence. His work, such as in *Aliento*, *Lacrimarios*, and *Biografías* transcends the concept of violence to propose a focus on intimate materialities. With their fragile and evanescent nature, they suggest an alternative discourse on contemporary politics: the capacity to perceive through the veil, on surfaces that host intimate encounters.

---

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, 31.

Muñoz artistic language proposes to see through the fog and blurriness which had not completely disappeared despite its inherent tendency to vanish. He draws our attention to what persists in appearing, against all odds, to the resonant newness in the present of this long national history and beyond. In this veiled visuality, Muñoz positions us as both viewers and participants of a subjective experience that detonates an outside, that reaches us on the other side, in the moment that this veil finds the right narration and transmission to interpellate us.

Muñoz's images in this chapter manifest as firefly-like images with a shift: it is not just light that appears and disappears, but a light that is also mirrored and refracted, where time is opened, multiple and evocative of a temporal condition that, in its fragility we don't only die incessantly so that we leave traces behind. We also keep living intermittently during conflictive times, there where breath, tears and rubble, perhaps, emits the signals, the flashes, of a poetic power of critical imagination.



### Chapter 3:

#### *Cecilia Vicuña and the Matter of the World*

Primero vi una palabra en el aire  
sólida y suspendida  
mostrándome su cuerpo de semilla  
se abría y deshacía  
y de sus partes brotaban  
asociaciones dormidas  
(...)  
Esperan silentes  
y cantarinas  
cien veces tocadas  
y trastocadas  
agotadas por un instante  
y vueltas a despertar  
*Cecilia Vicuña—*

Already in the early eighties, Chilean artist and poet Cecilia Vicuña referred to her poetic practice as a way of *doing* that relates to what “lives in certain places, where the cliffs need nothing but a sign to come alive: two or three lines, a marking, and silence begins to speak.”<sup>248</sup> Poetry for Vicuña is an encounter between the materiality of written words and the ephemerality of spoken ones, between what is already there in the world and what needs to be animated. Signs are the thread that connects the living thing with its potential futurity. Signs acting *like* a mark make visible a material connection between things, while weaving a relationship between what appears

---

<sup>248</sup> Vicuña, *Unravelling*, 17.

to be dissimilar. The sign's aliveness also appears in one of Vicuña's childhood memories in which she writes that one day her mother found her "writing". Her mother asked, "What are you doing, *mijita*?", "I am painting", I told her, and went on speaking to the signs"<sup>249</sup>. Vicuña's reference to signs on both occasions allude to a relationality between writing and painting where both mediums emerge and exceed their own definitions. By naively confusing writing and painting Vicuña speaks of them as signs that are born from a poetic action. This action seems to be a "confusion" that simultaneously proposes a way of doing that is a first attempt to approach mediums with certain disorder. Through this disorder Vicuña's use of poetic language sets the stage to think about intermediality, where the poetic becomes a space of fluencies, acts, and gestures.

Since her exile in London, Bogotá and New York in the 1970s from Pinochet's Chile, Vicuña has been a poet, painter, sculptor, singer, performer, filmmaker and activist whose "arte precario" has been at the center of her practice. This "art", where words, languages, objects and sounds are seen in dissolution and transformation, rather than as stable or rightful, emphasizes the nature of processes in an elliptical movement of time and space that defies the linear course that time "should" take. In turn, Vicuña's art and poetry take off from itinerant, fragmentary, "things" that morph into "visual poems" as Lucy Lippard suggests, that become, I will argue, poetic acts. Books that become objects, a long poem that becomes an image, an image that morphs into a film, a song, a sculpture or a collective and/or oral performance, all of these make up the multi-dimensional and intermedial practices that are at the core of Vicuña's work. Moving from one medium to another, but also mixing them all, Vicuña's work combines practices of ritual as well as assemblages and collages. In doing so, she proposes a grammar of weaving and

---

<sup>249</sup> "Performing Memory: An Autobiography" in Spit Temple, pg. 41.

knotting that disarticulates the common distinction between words, images, and sounds through a feminist critique that opens the space for a particular poesis. Because Vicuña's work is tied to visual and material residues, they find expression in the use of minor objects that are left behind either by the culture of consumption, or by nature itself, like feathers, shells, pebbles, leaves. These objects, little things, or "basuritas" as she calls them, are then turned into fragmented stories that do not convey a "message", or an affirmation of an identity, but that rather weave threads of communication in the interstices, the moments of passage where a word is written to become something else.

In the context of many fractures within the political, representational, and sociocultural sphere during the seventies and eighties, some critics, like Claudia Panozo, categorized Vicuña's works as a dense, programmatic, and versatile register of resistance against neocolonial and neoliberal powers in her use of materiality as the support of a memory in recovery.<sup>250</sup> She is well known as a feminist, a defender of indigenous culture, and avid critic of US imperialism, one whose artistic practice is linked to the way she decides to build her critique, that is, through a combination of ritual and oral traditions that challenge the masculine, heteronormative, and hegemonic models that have dominated the Latin American cultural tradition. She has also been recognized beyond Chile's national sphere, where her experience of exile has taken her to present her art to a broader public, defying the constricted notion of a body that belongs to just one place. This nomadic characteristic has been part of a work that has been read as resisting fascist agendas, social hierarchies, patriarchal and sexist structures.

---

<sup>250</sup> Panozo, 152

Vicuña's artistic intervention that resists these agendas has been taken further by critics like Magda Sepúlveda who considers Vicuña's work as a counter-canonical operation first presented in her work *Sabor a mí* (1973). In this eclectic book, that takes the form of a diary, writing first appears as the memory of a *happening*, the configuration of a trivial "I", the handcrafted composition of a book-object, the construction of objects under the concept of "precarious art", the approach of a *naïf* art and the deconstruction of woman as a product of the other (Sepúlveda)<sup>251</sup>. Vicuña's work in *Sabor a mí* thus presents a first attempt to expand her work into different mediums that try to give an account of the fall of Allende's government, the state of censorship during Pinochet's dictatorship and her own exile. In front of these hegemonic agendas, Vicuña first articulates in *Sabor a mí* a way to integrate a type of work where these ideas could be exposed into the use of new supports, installations and the manufacture of books that links the poetic with the plastic arts.

This relation between poetry and the arts, has been also characterized by other critics like Lucy Lippard as a visual poetics that pays acute attention to the displaced, the marginalized and the forgotten as vehicles of engagement with economic and environmental disparities and the reclamation of ancestral traditions<sup>252</sup>. On the other hand, Daniel Borzutzky has called Vicuña's work as that of a "radical archivist" in which she never ceases to refer to a life in between art and politics through a relentless questioning of history and tradition.<sup>253</sup> By such questionings, Vicuña has made the effort to highlight the blind spots of historical narratives that has been erased by state censorship, political persecution, and capitalism.

---

<sup>251</sup> Sepúlveda, Magda. "Una neovanguardia hippie: Cecilia Vicuña", 67.

<sup>252</sup> Andersson, Lippard, Gómez-Barris, in *Cecilia Vicuña: About to Happen* (2019).

<sup>253</sup> Borzutzky, *New and Selected poems of Cecilia Vicuña*, xix

Even though Vicuña's work has been read under similar lenses, in this chapter I read Vicuña's use of the word "precarious" and her proposal of an "arte precario" as poetic acts that emphasize a way of *doing* that has been somewhat overlooked. In these acts, I argue that Vicuña's work with the discarded and the elemental creates a relationality that underscores the nature of processes as an open-ended space between writing, weaving and orality where new modes of perception and memory-making are possible. I analyze, Vicuña's acts as a transformative force guided by a desire that expands the poetic voice and its forms of inscriptions by using writing as a textuality of interrelated signs that gets entangled into another media and acquires spatiality.

Under this lens, I consider Vicuña's precarious art as a way of *doing* in what I call three movements throughout her work: "The matter of things", "The matter of words" and "The matter of acts as processes". In "the matter of things" I analyze Vicuña's first articulations of her "precarious objects". I read the link between discarded objects, as residues that acquire diverse shapes, agencies and corporealities, and the proposal of a "precarious art". In that relation I allude to the object's materiality outside of raw commodities and the automatism of the industrial process, to consider them as part of a creative process where poetry assumes unexpected forces as a *matter* of work. In "The matter of words", I focus on Vicuña's *Palabrarmás* and a malleable use of words that sets them in motion. Through this movement, words work through their residues in a way that both unites and separates the three main languages in her work, Spanish, English and Quechua. Third, in "The matter of acts as processes" I bring back the notion of "precarious art" through the poem *Palabra e hilo*. In this part I re-center the poem as a container of words and thread as active materialities through the double processes of weaving and writing. Things, words, and acts as processes *matter* in a double sense: as a course of thought, speech and

expression and as a deferred origin from *mater* as a birthing subject. All these movements *matter* as insignificant forces in a continual coming into the world. Here, the matter of processes is important, or it matters, because it gives visibility to a creative process that emphasizes both the form and formlessness of things driven by intensity and desire rather than an absolute appearance in the world.

Through an entangled analysis of these three works by Vicuña, I analyze how they present different relations between materialities that are part of a fluid process that goes beyond programmatic agendas and avoids essentializing definitive identities, disciplines and places. Because Vicuña's visual poetry is tied to residues that stem from discarded objects, roots of words, vocal vibrations, and threads, among others, I consider these residues to be active materialities that *matter* because they participate in a movement of selection and assemblage that alter their own configurations and their impact in the world. In these three works by Vicuña minor objects, oral and written words, performed voices and textiles not only refer to the subversion of a world mediated by commodities, but also appear themselves as assemblages of process that suggest alternative relations and narratives. An emphasis on process provides an open-ended space where Vicuña's poetic acts emerge to redefine the linguistic, visual and sonic orders that make the case for definitive things to be easily classifiable. By reappearing through material residues these orders are disarticulated and rearticulated in alternative ways in which they can signify while resisting their own classification. In this unclassifiable place, things, words, acts and processes *matter* as they defy their absolute origin and an extreme futurity that would pose them in the timeline of progress.

Vicuña's work resonates with Walter Benjamin's critique of things reduced to means or signs and his proposal for "a relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional,

utilitarian value-that is, their usefulness- but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate”<sup>254</sup>. Even though Benjamin relates this fate to human existence, Vicuña’s practice emphasizes the stage and fate of things through a *poiesis* that recenters poetry as the vehicle that sets the stage for a rebirthing of relations among things and people that brings back what is scattered as things and in language. In that sense, this *matter* grounds both an elemental relation in the idea of *mater* (mother) and its possibility to morph outside of it. Things, words, and acts as processes thus refer to various assemblages of the organic and inorganic, human and nonhuman that tells us what they are made of while inhabiting the world. These movements *care* and *carry* their relation to the living while nurturing their material residues. Things, words, acts/processes manifest through a *matter* that remains anonymous, that defies idealism and recenters its quality of being *low*<sup>255</sup>, that is, scattered matter that brings us closer not to an origin, but to the base of the world.

Under this logic, I also analyze how Vicuña’s works are intermedial as they make visible and reorganize the relationship between “form” and “medium”. Similarly to what Julio Prieto suggests, intermediality “allows us to see what the mediation is in-between all forms of art, so that “to see this in-between moment is a way to access a previous state of each practice, an archi-

---

<sup>254</sup> *Illuminations*, 62.

<sup>255</sup> Here I adopt Georges Bataille’s notion of “low material” or base matter as what exist outside of me and from the idea. The low material is “external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations (“Base materialism and Gnosticism”, 163).” Bataille’s base materialism claims that whatever is ideal depends on base matter which makes the purity of this ideal contaminated. The dependence of the ideal or “the high” on base matter which would be “the low” and its contamination is denied by the ideal that splits off base matter as whatever is disgusting, vile, or sub-human. So that, base matter is both a residue and a reminder of what ruins the ideal. Matter could be a force that can be thought more as a differential and unstable movement that avoids complete stability or definition that will result in revolutionary effects because of this destabilization between high and low. For Bataille, base materialism is a way to liberate us from this idealism that “leaves us under the spell of a few comical prison bosses” and returns us to “a feeling of freedom” by returning to “scatter of matter”. Bataille retains this materialism to radicalize how it appears in front of idealism and detaches it from the metaphysical opposition while disrupting both materialism and idealism.

intermedialidad.”<sup>256</sup> I read Vicuña’s works as those that underlines a conventional cut in established mediums and disciplines. By considering intermediality as this in-between state of art forms, as an origin without an origin, I suggest that Vicuña’s art can be considered as a precarious way of *doing* that emerges in-between the previous moment in which, for example, writing is defined as writing and painting as painting. This way of *doing* irrupts in the moment when writing can appear “as if” it was painting, and painting could be considered “as if” it was writing.

The place of the “as if” between mediums proposes a mediatic expansion that exceeds the classification of Vicuña’s work as *arte povera*, conceptual art or institutional criticism, all of which seem to be insufficient. The prominence of relationality and ephemerality is thus part of Vicuña’s *poiesis* at work, one that creates an entanglement of mediums expressed through the practices of weaving, writing and singing in between “word and seed, sound and thread, quipu and blood, body and earth, trash and cosmos.”<sup>257</sup> The “and” between what seems to be opposites suggests a reciprocity in which both sides are kept in tension. The tension is given by the fragility of a thread that will relate them all in the moment where the poem can be, as Vicuña says, “not speech, not in the earth, not on paper, but in the crossing and union of the three in the place that is not.”<sup>258</sup> The crossing and union as the place that “is not” underlines Vicuña’s use of

---

<sup>256</sup> Prieto, “El concepto de intermedialidad”, 11.

<sup>257</sup> Vicuña, *Veroír*, 16.

<sup>258</sup> *Precairous*, 73. This place of the poem was also expanded to become a film in Vicuña’s first documentary that she created while living in Bogotá in 1973. She began by asking different people, from school children, policemen, sex workers, artists, *¿Qué es para usted la poesía? / What is poetry to you?* This assemblage of answers makes visible the role of poetry in their everydayness as well as emphasizing the power of oral history as a horizontal tool of imagination. Similarly, her film *Paracas* (1983) is considered a “visual and sound poem in seven scenes”. It consists of the animation of a two-thousand-year-old textile in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum that invites entrance into a different visual and sonic space: the universe of the pre-Columbian weavers who created the portrait of a ritual procession using a unique three-dimensional looping technique developed in the Paracas/Nazca region. Vicuña interprets the textile as a celebration of the harvest and the Thread of Life on the desert coast of Peru. Both films can be seen here: <https://mediacityfilmfestival.com/25th-anniversary/cecilia-vicuna/>



media and surfaces of inscriptions as “ritual handicrafts” that exist “outside of a history of art.” In her paintings everything appears to be “irritant, uncomfortable”, producing disturbance and a continual state of being in commotion; images are formed by tearing apart “everything that wants to come out”. When talking about these images Vicuña says “I try to capture them by talking, or writing, or painting, or doing some kind of conceptual thing, so they can serve as a spatial vehicle so they could take me to level of revelation and enjoyment.”<sup>259</sup> Vicuña’s reference to this formation of images resonates with the eroticism<sup>260</sup> and desire that should be part of a state of being in which her works are produced and seek transformation.

The *matter* of things, words, acts/process are also analyzed in this chapter as movements that suggest a radical way for how memory finds alternative ways of inscription in between what is and what is not. This instability of the in-between, the condition of being in the liminal space of the not-yet, uncovers a poetic force in which memory emerges not as a recovering of something lost, but as a power of creation that works with and exceeds its own limits. For instance, poetry is intermedial, and is perhaps the primordial force in Vicuña’s works, because, like her *precarious*, it appears to be an open-ended act that is indeterminate, anonymous, and open to hazards. This notion of openness traverses Vicuña’s practice at large so that, as she suggests in her poem “The Quasar,” something emerges in the poem’s “not-yet-being” - its “no ser-nada aún, was what attracted me”, its “being almost, a border”, an “about to happen.”<sup>261</sup> The reference to her work as this “about to happen”, emphasizes the *matter* of things and processes that act together, rather than resulting in definitive outcomes. This “matter” exposes a concern

---

<sup>259</sup> Vicuña, *Veroír*, 303; my translation

<sup>260</sup> Here I use the concept of eroticism from both Bataille and Kristeva. For Bataille, eroticism is defined as an “assenting to life up to the point of death (11).

<sup>261</sup> Vicuña, *Spit Temple*, 119.

that Vicuña has had since 1966 when writing in *El diario estúpido*: “Mis obras no deben ser concebidas como ‘obras terminadas’, sino como partes de un proceso vivo de pensamiento en el que todo está por suceder.”<sup>262</sup>. Under this light, I conceive Vicuña’s practice as one that follows a persistent search for what appears even while it vanishes. I will read the qualities of impermanence and dissolution as poetic acts that render her work even more unclassifiable than other critics have suggested so far. I will emphasize the place of an “in-between”, the “not-yet” or the “almost”, as movable categories through which her work express a creative force linked to a specific way of *doing*. This place allows me to reconsider her “arte precario” as an extended practice whose internal poiesis defies not only a way of understanding a rhetoric of hegemonic art-history and a dissolution of hierarchies present in Western ideals of art history, but also as a work that expands all literary, visual, sonic and performative categories and resituates the intensity in which things assume desire as force.

---

<sup>262</sup> Quoted by Miguel A. López in *Veroír el fracaso iluminado*, 42.

*Precarious or the Matter of Things*



Fig. 26. Cecilia Vicuña, “*Precarios*” (Precarious), 1966–, approx. 130 found-object sculptures, stones, shells, glass, wood, plastic, thread, debris. Installation view. Photo: Daniel Bock.

When I said *arte precario* an energy was born.

The two words transformed each other.

Doing (*ars*) became prayer (*precis*), and prayer, doing.

(*Precarious*, 136).

The most constant reference that appears in Cecilia Vicuña’s art and poetry is the word “precarious”. Vicuña’s first *precarious* was a portable one made in 1966, in the Chilean countryside. This first *precarious* was made by the heart of a basket, painted, and held like a wand. She describes the process of making it as “a force” that impelled her to do the *precarious*, “a desire to expand. They began as a form of communing (...) that gave me a lot of strength and

pleasure.”<sup>263</sup> The “precarious” are also “visual poems, metaphors in space as Lucy Lippard suggests.”<sup>264</sup> They are objects, assemblages of little things like feathers, plastic, herbs, shells, and threads among other found, useless objects. They often contain shades of gray, brown, black and white, united by a colored thread. Their tie is so loose, fragile and flexible, that “the parts seem to have blown together into a whole that might metamorphose at any moment into another.”<sup>265</sup> Vicuña has written that precarious is something asked for, that “which is obtained from a prayer,”<sup>266</sup> that which is uncertain, exposed to risks, and that which is unsure. From the Latin *precarious*; from *precis*; prayer, *precarious* is related to the Spanish *orar* (to pray) and *oír* (to hear). Precarious and prayer establish a reciprocity that results in a way of doing that expands writing and weaving to hearing and praying, listening and orality. The use of the Latin root that links precarious and prayer alludes to this “communing” of forms and residual objects that for Vicuña are also types of offerings. Detached from a Christian connotation, these offerings are implicated instead in a process of exposure and carrying related to an animation of things such that, as Vicuña says:

The ear is a spiral

to hear

---

<sup>263</sup> Quoted by Lippard in *The Precarious*, 8. Some of the *precarious* were also echoed as motifs in abstract paintings that Vicuña began to do when she was a teenager and kept working until the 1970s where they became more controversial. Some examples are, as Lucy Lippard explains, a painting of a menstruating angel; a “history painting” of Fidel Castro, partly nude, greeted by Salvador Allende with a butterfly; Chilean writer Violeta Parra with her body cut into three pieces; Lenin standing in a surrealist painting with a female bird carrying the good news that, quoting Lenin “the liberation of the proletariat will never be complete until liberation of women is complete” (quoted by Lippard in *The Precarious*, 9); and a painting she made when she was in Bogotá, composed of a mixture of popular songs, contemporary saints and mythical scenes that included *La Vicuña Andean Animal*, a nude self-portrait.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.* 10.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>266</sup> *Precarious*, 136

(...)

A standing stick

to speak

Piercing earth and sky

the sign begins

To write from below, seeing the efface (*Precarious*, q.12).”

The “piercing” of earth, the writing “from below” makes visible this process of animation and unfolding entangled in the correspondence between precarious and prayer. This dialogue indicates a transition between the present, in which something is being done, and a future in which this “doing” is transformed. It speaks to Vicuña’s creative method in which the act of weaving as an unfinished process that sees itself doing is the heart of her idea on relationality. For example, as de Zegher explains, the prayer understood also as a response “addresses the place as well as the no place”, the “site as well as the non-site.”<sup>267</sup> This correspondence between something and its negation, also refers a double meaning between appearance and disappearance. About this ambiguity within the *precarious*, Vicuña says that they “are made of throwaways and will be thrown away” and “Twice precarious they come from a prayer and predict their own destruction. Precarious in history they will leave no trace.”<sup>268</sup> The reference to a “no trace” resonates with another series of more ephemeral *precarious*, through which Vicuña created some reflections during her stay in London in 1972. These *precarious* were presented as a “Journal of Objects” that Vicuña made in support of Allende’s leadership.

---

<sup>267</sup> *Precarious*, 20.

<sup>268</sup> Quoted by de Zegher in *Precarious*, 21



Fig. 27. Cecilia Vicuña, *Paño e' sangre* [also *Venda / Bandage*], *Journal of Objects for the Chilean Resistance* (1973-1974). Mixed media, stick, cord, thread, cloth. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 28 Cecilia Vicuña. *Libro Tul*, *Journal of Objects for the Chilean Resistance* (1973-1974). Polaroid, cloth. Courtesy of the artist.

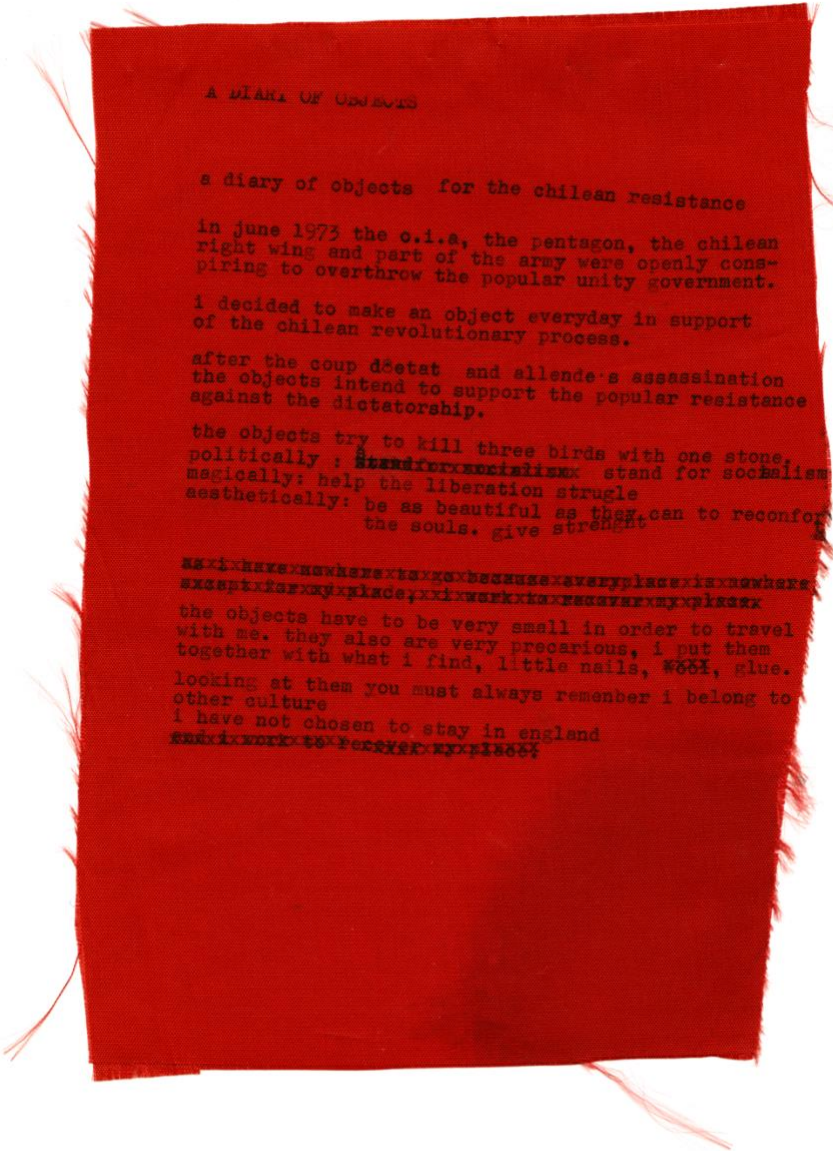


Fig. 29. Cecilia Vicuña. *Red Silk, Journal of Objects for the Chilean Resistance (1973-1974)*. Type writing on Silk. London. Courtesy of the artist.

The “precarious” that become installations are also visual poems, as Lippard suggests. However, they are so because of their capacity to be both: written words that exceed the written page to become bodies in space but that couldn’t be born without it. They were written things that amplify the notion of what a text is, what a text could do in a process of transformation that is also a process of creation. For instance, in 1966 Vicuña refers to the quipus, to say that “The quipu that remembers nothing, an empty cord’ was my first precario. Today, I continue to create metaphorical iterations of the quipu”<sup>269</sup>. In the book *Precarios*, the drawing of a cord opens the book and is interrupted by the sentence “The quipu that remembers nothing, an empty cord”. Then the cord continues and forms the sentence “is the cord” and continues to the next page. Here the cord is interrupted again by the sentence “the heart of memory” and the cord continues simulating that it will unite the entire book and everything that follows.

The relationship between the “precarious” and the quipu is seen in Vicuña’s entangled practice through the prominence of objects, textiles and threads. The quipu<sup>270</sup>, as Vicuña says is “knot in Quechua”, and explains that in the Andes, instead of writing, the indigenous people “wove meaning into textiles and knotted cords. Five thousand years ago they created the quipu (knot).”<sup>271</sup> Vicuña calls the quipu “a poem in space, a way to remember, involving the body”. The quipu is also “a tactile, spatial metaphor for the union of all. The quipu, and its virtual counterpart, the ceque system of sightlines connecting all communities in the Andes, were banished after the Conquest. Quipus were burnt, but the vision of interconnectivity, a poetic

---

<sup>269</sup> Quoted from Vicuña’s main webpage (see mla citation).

<sup>270</sup> I will return to the Quipu in the last section of the chapter.

<sup>271</sup> Vicuña makes a note explaining that \*Khipu are knotted textile record-keeping devices historically used in the region of Andean South America, consisting of colored, spun, and plied thread or strings. Quipu cords contained numeric and other values encoded by knots in a base ten positional system not yet deciphered. The quipu records included tax obligations, census data, calendrical information, military organization, as well as music, poems and historical narratives. (Wikipedia and Harvard Khipu project) in Cecilia Vicuña’s website.



resistance endures underground.”<sup>272</sup> The absence of a memory, that is also the heart of memory, seems to relate the quipu, as record-keeping device, with the word “precarious”. If quipus no longer exist, the material interconnection between the precarious objects and the threads that unite them remain as a residue that gives the quipu another life, or, better, another way to be animated. This suggests further a documenting otherwise, a performing despite what cannot be registered. Because the quipu refers to a practice of registration that was lost, it also sets the stage for what cannot be completely recovered. Vicuña, nonetheless, materializes a kind of quipu that resists this loss while creating a handcrafted language where past and present could meet, where “the heart of memory” comes from the threads and knots that she activates through weaving and writing.

The smallest thing, a “precarious” object and a “precarious” way of *doing* thus involves activating the residues at hand that sets desire as a transformative force. Such a force emerges through Vicuña’s own hands as a weaver and writer that makes an active relationality between things and people while articulating her poetic proposal. So that within both, word and thread, the *precarious* appear as what is common to them through which the fragility in everydayness become trivial, uncultured material things that, on the other hand, defies both complete permanence and disappearance.

This particular “precarious” work with the minor material, where things are both fragile as they are exposed to hazards and, at the same time, in equilibrium, and the interaction between materialities acquire more visibility in the 1980’s<sup>273</sup>. The emphasis on the material, for example,

---

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> De Zegher mentions that the influence of the artist Kurt Schwitters and his idea of the *Merzbau*, shared affinities with Vicuña’s creation of the *Quipus*. The relationship between Schwitters and Vicuña, however, is described as almost an accidental one. The procedure of the *Merzbau*, conceived by both artists alludes to a method that Vicuña had in mind when she created her first *Quipu* that she later used for her spatial weavings. The method proposed by

as De Zegher explains, resonates with a “non-objective art whose emphasis is more on connection and interaction—the directional rather than the ‘dimensional (36)<sup>274</sup>,” where the experimentation with other forms included the elements of poetry (letters, syllables, words, and sentences) that allowed for the creation of new meanings. Poetry, however, seems to be in Vicuña’s work the center through which an extended field of significations is possible. In this field words, objects, voices and textiles are detached from their original source while recomposing alternative relations that reframe their ways of appearance.

Since 1966<sup>275</sup> Vicuña has also been creating *precarious* as small, multilayered sculptures of found materials in which each *precario* is composed in such a way that “every material holds another in balance. And, although not featuring any symmetry, each whole structure stands up in a fragile state of suspended equilibrium.”<sup>276</sup> This fragile equilibrium that can be seen in her

---

Schwitters suggests that there is an artistic creation with any material. It considers a naming process that advocates for the accidental, the trivial, the inconsequential, from which the word *Merz* comes from the German *ausmerzen* (to weed out, extirpate), also part of Dadaism and expressionism. The works created by this method are characterized by using diverse materials glued and nailed on the picture surface, and by the application of color in limited sections. This highlights the importance of the creation and interaction with the material, rather than the material itself.

<sup>274</sup>For Vicuña, as many others South American artists like Clark and Oiticica, the European and North American expression of this art was different because they called “arte povera” an art done with the most advanced means, which contributed to “an assimilation of the remains of an oppressive civilization and their transformation into consumption, the capitalization of the idea of poverty”. For them, as Oiticica comments, “it does not seem that the economy of elements is directly connected with the idea of structure, with the nontechnique as discipline, with the freedom of creation as the super-economy, in which rudimentary element in itself liberates open structures” (quoted in De Zegher, 38). Even though Vicuña’s notion of the “precarious” alludes to some of these claims, the works of Clark and Oiticica claimed for a local situation in Brazil. Vicuña’s “precarious” advocates more towards an avant-garde that is traversed by both the military dictatorship and her experience of exile, making this concept a more transnational one.

<sup>275</sup> . It is noticeable that by that same year, while Vicuña was naming her works *arte precario*, Catherine de Zegher comments that in Brazil Lygia Clark was describing “*precariousness* as a new idea of existence against all static crystallization within duration; and the very time of the act as a field of experience” (38). The reference to this *precariousness* is linked to a contested notion of the Italian *arte povera*.

<sup>276</sup> de Zegher, 21. The “precarious” have appeared as a series of small sculptures and installations constructed of “rubbish” made in different scenarios like landscape, streets, or studio. As such they show an internal ambiguity in which each “precario” can mean differently according to their situations and contexts where they appear. For example, the “precarious” are not only “objects” and “installations”, but they are also the title of a book of poetry *Precario/Precairous* published in New York in 1983 by Tanam Press. The poems in this book became “precarious” installations that were the basis of the Exit Art exhibition in New York. In this installation, as Lippard explains, Vicuña chooses to weave the space in the gallery with the “origins of weaving”, which, as the artists says, “must have been done by women trying to make nests, imitating the birds” (quoted by Lippard, 10).”

works *Balancin*, 1981; *Pesa*, 1984 shows the “precarious” object not as an object in-itself, but as a chain of relations whose fragility and balance underlines their exposure as a form of transformation. De Zegher comments that the balance that holds the materials together speaks to the “impartiality (or abstractedness)” that is maintained once the found objects are appropriated as materials. The emphasis on a suspended equilibrium, presents a horizontal position among objects and people a use of materials that seems to be part of a logic that underlines interactions, intensities and devious directions, instead of programming them to do certain things and follow agendas.

The fragility implicated in the “precarious” is also seen in the way in which they are part of a process where they begin to be figured before becoming settled in a definitive form. If we go back to Vicuña’s more ephemeral precarious, for example, we can see that the fragility in them articulates a state of being that does not attempt to resolve a duality between strength and weakness, between what is easily broken or what is resistant to breaking. Vicuña’s suggestion that the precarious are “twice precarious” and therefore fall outside history is related to the danger of embodying a fixed state in the world that has aimed to make the *precarios* invisible. This does not mean that the “precarios” do not have a history, but rather that their way of appearance in history cannot be traced to the same historical narrative in which they have been excluded just as they cannot fall back and be captured by it. By saying that the precarious “leave no trace” Vicuña situates her “little objects” in a space of continual transformation in which their trace avoids captivity. As a negation of a negation, and while predicting both their origin and destruction, the “precarious” remain in a fragile state that does not make them intangible, but rather resistant of their own trace while recomposing a new one. In this sense, the precarious “speak in prayer”, that is, they speak in the interstices of what is and what is not, of what they are

and what they are simultaneously ceasing to be. The suspension and equilibrium in which the precarious hold each other makes visible the thread that unites them all, that is, the same thread that opens the channels of reciprocity and reconnection involved in her use of the “precarious” as prayer.

There is, however, another way in which the “precarious” fall outside of history. As Vicuña says, the “precarious” are little objects exposed to hazards; they contain what is uncertain; they articulate their own destruction and the possibility of morphing. Sometimes they are, as Lippard argues, “simple haikus from nature (...) a boat, a web, a tree of life.”<sup>277</sup> By situating the materials and their histories of use, freedom or misery, she calls them “that which is abandoned”, where something powerful emerges from what is denied as precarious. As insignificant things, the “precarious” are freed from the link that make them useful objects in the world. They are outside of their material and technological history. In that outside, the precarious object becomes something else, suspended in an amorphous state between the found thing and the thing not yet apprehended. This state is one that situates them in a before and after life where we can try to grasp them in a process of becoming, describing their movement of unity and separation, the movement in which they unfurl themselves before they are back in that history and for that same reason “thrown away”. In this way, the “precarious” as little things, become figurable when they exceed their own materialization as objects that can be used.

This excess is analogous to what Bill Brown describes in “Thing Theory” when thinking about the difference between objects and things in the world. For Brown, the objects of the world acquire different moments of transformation whenever they are no longer useful and then

---

<sup>277</sup> Lippard, *Precarious*, 14.

become things, in a more general sense. Things are located in the threshold between what can and cannot be named. For instance, a chair, beyond its “being” chair, can be something else when it no longer fulfills its function as chair. As Brown points, we look through objects because they are codes that our mind makes meaningful, because “there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A *thing* in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks.”<sup>278</sup> Brown’s allusion to the failure of objects in their utilitarian sense resonates with Vicuña’s “precarious” as things that not only failed when working for us, but that also remain after that failure and that need to be transformed into something else. The precarious are what is left, but also what has been arrested from the usual flow in which objects are part of the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition<sup>279</sup>. In this arrest, precisely, the “precarious” become things that work in relationality, in their capacity to affect and transform themselves, but also in the anticipation of the destruction of what they used to be.

Like Brown, Jane Bennet proposes thinking about a “thing-power” that detaches from the formulations that give priority to humans as knowing bodies and focuses on what things can do. Brown emphasizes a shift from epistemology to an ontology of things in which they are active, “not-quite-human” and therefore “vibrant matter.”<sup>280</sup> Bennet aims to give a voice to a vitality intrinsic to materiality by centering the process of absolving matter (that is, loosen off matter) from its long history of attachment “to automatism or mechanism.”<sup>281</sup> Bennet’s argument, for

---

<sup>278</sup> Brown, “Things”, 4.

<sup>279</sup> The “precarious” considered as these active residues makes Vicuña’s practice similar to those artists that, after WWII, began to select their materials from urban environments and industrial “progress” and use these discarded objects in a defiance of an excluding differentiation. This context shows the influence that Kurt Schwitters had over Vicuña’s work and the way she conceives materiality.

<sup>280</sup> Bennet, *Vibrant*, 3.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*

instance, articulates an “onto-story” that gives an account of materiality and, like Brown, identifies the things in the world as characters in this story that also highlight the non-human parts in us as vital players in the world that surrounds us. With this awareness, Bennet presents a story that will enhance receptivity to the impersonal life that infuses us and the complicated “web of dissonant connections between bodies.”<sup>282</sup> Nonetheless, I read Vicuña’s “precarious” as materialities that are vibrant in the sense that they create and are part of a web of relationalities that speaks to a way of *doing* as opposed to an exclusive focus on an ontology of things. Vicuña’s emphasis on the relationality among the little things and the weaver, the poet and/or the spectator, for example, acknowledges a much more active place in which these “little things” are even more unclassifiable because they weave a web of relations in which they need to be animated and include an external body within which they can vibrate and act together.

Vicuña’s poetic proposal of the “precarious” is more radical than Bennet’s ontology of things. The poetic acts in which weaving is central make the “precarious” not only things that intrinsically have a vitality but insert them into a chain of relations where they do not exist alone. The “precarious” are entangled in a process of continual transformation that involves other bodies as well. In fact, the proposal to think these poetic acts as intermedial sites of creation is what situates the “precarious” at the threshold of what is and what is not. As such they are part of a process in which their residual characteristic as compost becomes composition. These “little things” do not inscribe themselves in the logic that goes from nothing to something, they are neither in the nothing, nor the something, but in the “not-yet”. The “not-yet” underlines an instability within the objects as apparently stable and material bodies<sup>283</sup>. If for Vicuña the

---

<sup>282</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>283</sup> A similar movement happens in Vicuña’s *Palabramás* where the fixity of words acquires mobility by breaking up into their roots and forming new neologisms with others.

“precarious” contain within themselves the power of their own destruction (“are made of throwaways and will be thrown away”), for Bennet, on the other hand, the “vital materiality can never really be thrown ‘away,’ for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity”. She calls this continuity a “thing-power” that consists of the ability of “inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.”<sup>284</sup> Although Vicuña’s “precarious” share similarities with Bennet’s description of “thing-power”, I argue that the “precarious” contain a life force that is more related to an erotics of enjoyment, pleasure and desire much more implicated in Vicuña’s way of *doing*, rather than in a pure ontology of things that makes them reside in the object-thing binary.

Vicuña’s “precarious” are part of a movement (internal-external, in-between) that involves a dis-appointment. That is, as Ackbar Abbas suggests, when things don’t quite get to be formed, they avoid being slated into a programmatic agenda<sup>285</sup>. The “precarious” resist because they are poetic objects that emerge in the pollination that fosters germination, fertilization and creation of a new life in the flash of a new mutual exchange. The “precarious” is thus part of an open and indeterminate process that resonates with Vicuña’s search for poetry, or “what is poetry”. These processes that involve both the acts of sprouting or insemination and the production of something new from an exchange, relates to Vicuña’s way of doing as a poetics of eroticism in which the acts of birthing, nurturing and caring are part of the same movement in which things come alive in the flash of an encounter. Such a flash is what animates what seems to be fixed in the world; it comes out of relationality and reciprocity rather than just an ontology of things. Such a flash, nonetheless, is what also maintains the relation between ephemerality and

---

<sup>284</sup>Bennet, *Vibrant*, 4.

<sup>285</sup> In “Poor theory” (Unpublished).

materiality, between the thing that appears in the world and its possible transformation, that is also a restlessness state for its own disappearance.

In this restless state, Vicuña finds her way of *doing* through a poetic force that works as desire-machine and that, as such, locates this vital force as the possible haptic relationality among things and people. Here I understand desire as defined by Felix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, that is, as a form of will to live, to create, to love; the will of inventing new world perceptions and systems of value.<sup>286</sup> Vicuña's poiesis affirms this force by weaving forms of relationality that are grounded in an "arte precario" and its many forms of manifestation. In that sense, as spatial metaphors, visual and multidimensional poems, the "precarious" are much more than simple arrangements of everyday life residues. "Precarios" are minor bodies that, through relationality, acquire spatiality and motion that keep up the search to touch other bodies.

Vicuña's artistic practice thus fosters modifications in the sphere of art whose purpose is no longer to possess things, or to see them in a complete appearance, but to reinsert them in the world by reactivating them through love and desire. So that, if the hegemonic social order defines desire (and the collective formations of desire) as a flux that needs to be disciplined so that a law can control it.<sup>287</sup> Vicuña's micro and macro modifications in the artistic sphere speaks to the intensity that moves a creative process where she acknowledges that when she paints "the certainty of being at the center is so intense that the inferior part of my brain hurts. I am in the heart, in living meat, and I need my canvas to be provocative and to be this lively skin."<sup>288</sup> Vicuña's words recentralize further the erotics involved in a way of doing that manifests the poetic act in relationality. Her body acquires a centrality that expands the notion about how a

---

<sup>286</sup> Guattari and Rolnik, *Cartografías del deseo*, 255; my translation

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid*, 256.

<sup>288</sup> *Veroir*, 303; my translation



“form” comes into being, that assumes desire so as to manifest itself as the force that weaves the relation between things and people.

Similar to what Griselda Pollock argues in her analysis of Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger’s proposal of a *matrixial theory*, Vicuña’s poetic act creates a shift of the phallus that resonates with Ettinger’s introduction of the matrix. Pollock explains that by introducing to culture another symbolic signifier like the matrix, instead of the phallus (signifier of difference and division, absence and loss) it is possible to make visible the feminine bodily specificity to realign our relationship between our conscious and unconscious<sup>289</sup>. This relationship expands the notion of the matrix as an alternative to think outside of the “either/or” dynamic that still contains binarism. So that, as Pollock argues, “what is not us, strange and unknown, be the man for the woman, the other for the White European, the painting for the viewer is positioned under this phallic logic.”<sup>290</sup> By dismantling the “either/or”, the matrix also allows for the emergence of a symbol that indicates an encounter between difference that does not try to master, assimilate, reject, or alienate. It is rather “a symbol of the coexistence in one space” of two or more bodies, two or more subjectivities whose encounter is not an “either/or.”<sup>291</sup> We can see this in Vicuña’s way of *doing*, in which aliveness and disappearance do not seem to be opposites of each other, but part of a liminal encounter of differences that act in reciprocity. As such what disappears is an opening for an aliveness to emerge. For this reason, Vicuña’s “precarious” make a point by not disappearing completely, by rather maintaining a restless state of being in which their intensities are openings for other things to be born. Her eroticism is centralized in a power of

---

<sup>289</sup> Pollock refers to the modalities based on the rejection/assimilation paradigm. She extends the metaphor of the matrix to argue that the reference to sexual difference is also part of the issues on race, immigration, diaspora, genocide etc “that are tangled at the moment around the lack of means to signify other possible relations between different subjects—I and non-I” (“Ouvres Autistes”) pp-14-18.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid. 14.

birthing, as well as a power of fertilization and pollination that does not reduce them to a singular identity, but rather reclaims a body that, through her practice, can desire and take desire as an embodiment of forms.

Through these relations a creative power emerges within intermedial connections. For instance, as I already said, the reference to an “arte precario” is more related to a “way of doing” in which things can be activated, than an ontology of things. As such, Vicuña’s notion of materiality is much more indeterminate than the one suggested by Bennet and Brown, as it is always related to a practice that includes “the dangerous instant of transmutation (“Arte precario”).” Estrangement, danger and awakening all indicate a poetic act of creation that happens in the moment when a poem becomes poetry. That is, in Vicuña’s words “when its structure/ is made not of words but forces (“The Quasar”)<sup>292</sup>”. Such forces are embodied and expanded by Vicuña’s way of “doing” in a manner that includes a poetic of eroticism linked to the “precarious”. With this in mind, we can return to Vicuña’s words on her search for form:

To look for that form I need a can opener and a thread, a spiderweb that is a particular cosmos for the use of the thinker. The mind always works creating diagrams, mandalas in which every point is a relation to move within the unlimited, a milestone to be displaced and play with establishing certain ‘truths’ chosen arbitrarily to build structures (fabrics). That’s how one gets the illusion of order and time, the illusion of immobility within movement.<sup>293</sup>

---

<sup>292</sup> Quoted by Miguel A. López in *Veroír*, 19.

<sup>293</sup> *Veroír*, 303; my translation

The forces, the potential aliveness of things, the provocation and living meat serve as analogies that also define a poetics of fragility, a power in surrender that is also a “precarious” way of doing. This way of doing is related to a way of living that otherwise, as Vicuña’ writes in 1973,

Would be a castrated search, an apolitical occupation (...) that serves for maintaining the structures that have been established to serve a few and explode the rest. (...) But now, the points that can make those structures tremble would not be created from profit, power or wealth. They would rise from: the way in an out of air in the lungs, of food, of semen, of babies. This is the elemental spider web that I take as an analogy of form in my paintings (*Veroír*, 304; my translation)<sup>294</sup>.

If structures are necessary, they are so in a manner that should value what comes in and out of the body, that, among other things, makes visible the tiny fabrics in which relations, language and bodies come into being. The “precarious” contribute to this visible birthing and relationality by being part of an “arbitrary” web of encountered things that make and unmake structures. As noted before, “precarious” are not only “things” that have an ontology of their own. They are things and more than things that act in relationality as a web of assemblages. Through those assemblages, they activate each other, they change the residues of their nature, to follow instead an entangled way of being in the world. With this I mean that Vicuña’s “little things” are not only things that appear in the world, but they are also part of a process of creation that resemble a creative relational power more than a “thing-power” in Bennet’s sense. Through this power their

---

<sup>294</sup> Between the late 60’s and early 90’s, Vicuña recreated a performance entitled *The Glove*. As it is common in her work, she experimented with the human body, especially the hands, space, gender, fiber and writing. In a poem that accompanies the performance she wrote the anecdote that says “When a girl is born, her mother puts a spider in her hand/to teach her to weave (*Precarious* q. 22).” The anecdote relates to a childhood memory that Vicuña often tells and that is also an ancient myth of a Mapuche practice in Chile. The myth tells that the Mapuche women learned how to weave from observing spiders at work and by contemplating their webs (that are both nests and traps). When a baby girl is born, mothers will catch a spider and let it walk into the baby’s hand, so that the movement of the spider will stick to her hands and the spider will teach her to weave.

own coming into being is part of their disappearance. It is in their ability to morph and relate where they can show an agency of their own.

For instance, if for Bennet the “thing-power” aims to think beyond the life-matter binary as a dominant organizational principle of adult experience (22), Vicuña’s transforms this “thing-power” as a way of doing that puts desire at its center. Through this desire a relationality can be born in the form of energy, in the form of forces, rather than fixed things. In a sense, desire allows the presumed fixed/stable materiality of the world to tremble. Bennet’s “thing-power” resonates with Vicuña’s “precarious” in the sense that they attempt to build a materiality that is as much “force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension (22).” Nonetheless, Vicuña’s poetics goes further as she includes this way of doing as part of that materiality in which relations are built from an encounter of things where they can influence and affect each other. It is in this space that Vicuña’s poetic acts are closer to the Ettingerian system and to a poetics of desire in which fragility plays a role as part of a process of dissolution and transformation. This space resembles the space of the womb, that Ettinger refers to, where the boundaries of the self either are not yet completely fixed or lose or gain significance because of the experienced proximity (Ettinger, 2006b, p. 181)<sup>295</sup>. However, Vicuña radicalizes this space further by relating her poetics to an art that challenges while weaving a form and formlessness of perception, a way of seeing and hearing, while connecting and uniting a relationality that follows the cycle of air, as a continual coming in and out of the body.

---

<sup>295</sup> For an expansion on the matrixial feminine difference and its resistance to the phallic binary logic, see Pollock (2009, pp. 9 – 10). For a larger study of the evolution of the concept of the Matrix in Ettinger’s work and its various aspects, see Pollock (2006b, pp. 12 – 21).

Vicuña's poiesis is thus grounded in a way of *doing* that puts desire at the center. This not only considers the "precarious" object as such but a precarious art that contributes to the possibility of critical difference. By referring to a poiesis that keeps the intensities of things and people in motion, Vicuña creates a space for this difference in her reference to a form that is a spiderweb, mandalas, diagrams, in which every point seems to be interrelated and interdependent to the next. This relationality is what allows for the movement within the unlimited, without excluding them both. In a way, Vicuña's artistic proposal as a "precarious art" is already differential in the sense that it restores difference in order to build a new sphere where art and politics can meet. This sphere, nonetheless, challenges purity by restoring a relationship to what moves within the unlimited, that is, the intensities and movements in the body that seek to come in and out.

In that sense, Vicuña's use of the concept of "precarious" is part of a *poiesis* that relocates the status of art in an ambiguous place that should create dissensus and ruptures with time's teleology. As such, it is similar to what Christina Ross considers as "precarious visuality"<sup>296</sup> where a dissensus is created at the same time that these ruptures of sense emerge so that if the productivity of precariousness does "regroup a set of aesthetic strategies, it is never an 'emancipating solution' in itself."<sup>297</sup> Precariousness is, by definition, as Ross suggests "a state that signals both the difficulty to reconcile and the difficulty to separate two dimensions, realms,

---

<sup>296</sup> Ross defines "precarious visuality" also as a critical space. Even though Ross is mainly referring to artworks that involve the technologies of the image, the screen and the spectator, her use of "precariousness" to relocalize art<sup>296</sup> resonates with Vicuña's proposal of a precarious art. Ross refers more specifically to the return to the aesthetics of montage, in which a semantic clash of different worlds takes place on the screen, could also be a form to restore difference and challenge today's ethical configurations between art and politics. By situating precariousness instead of purity as part of a way of doing in art, Ross refers to the cut in montage as ambiguous and precarious (14). That is, the ways in which "an image or the interface of an artwork interpellates the spectator into an effective perceptual perturbation (12)". Such effectiveness, for Ross, produces an aesthetic difference where the logic of precariousness contains contradictions.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid. 15.

or experiences.”<sup>298</sup> In Vicuña’s case, the emphasis she puts on the “precarious” object and the “precarious art” relates to opening’s as creating ruptures, but also continuation of life’s cycles where every useless residue is recontained in relationality without achieving complete reconciliation. As such, Vicuña’s “arte precario” functions as a poesis that critically oscillates between the representational and the physical world, materiality and ephemerality, in ways that disrupt consensus among things, and emphasizes instead relationality and interdependence through the elemental spider web that she takes as an analogy of form. Such opening thus refers to a relational-power, rather than a thing-power, that keeps birthing webs of relations instead of completely reconciling difference that would erase desire, gaps, boundaries, and contradictions<sup>299</sup>.

Vicuña’s “arte precario” also relates to and differs from Judith Butler’s proposal of “Precarious life”<sup>300</sup> where, in the exertion of violence lives are “precarious” because they are

---

<sup>298</sup> Ibid. 12

<sup>299</sup> It is in this sense that Vicuña’s “precarious” sets her artistic practice apart from international movements like the *land art* or *participatory art* that, as Miguel A. López argues seek to respond to the debates on modernism, institutionalization, the art market or art itself (19). On the one hand, Vicuña’s little sculptures were not aiming towards minimalist art or what Rosalind Krauss calls “sculptures in the expanded field”<sup>299</sup>, that very quickly contributed to a rapid process of institutionalization between the 60s and 70s in the US and Europe. On the other hand, Vicuña’s artistic gestures with the creation of “precarious” were even more minor. Vicuña’s emphasis on the movements between doing and undoing, unsettles and differs from European/US land art, to underline a nature of things in this process of dissolution where relationality takes the stage. To this point Catherine de Zegher also comments that if the *land art* was concerned with nature as an indisputable vendor of ideas, and the use of light as a constitutive element of art and architecture, Vicuña’s “precarious” aim for an approach to nature in a dialogic way where her work is more a response to a sign, rather than an imposed mark.<sup>299</sup> In comparison to European and American land art, Vicuña’s work with “precarious” differ, as De Zegher comments, not only in the relationship with the environment, but also in their diffusion of knowledge. Artists like Richard Long and Nancy Holt, for example, have staged a romantic primitivist fantasy of virgin nature projected “no matter where in the world by an observing eye enjoying a sovereign isolation” (De Zegher, in *Precarios*, 21). The term “Sculpture in Expanded Field” was proposed by Rosalind Krauss to reconsider the traditional notion of sculpture that brought the postmodern artistic practices in the US and Europe during the 70s. See “Sculpture in Expanded Field” *October*, vol. 8, Summer 1979, pp.30-44.

<sup>300</sup> Butler analyzes this concept in the context of political responses in post- 9/11 America. She suggests that the violence involved towards the vulnerable and precarious life exposed by the attacks served to enhance the precarious nature of some lives at the expense of others. Those lives, therefore, are impossible to grieve because they are not recognized as living (12). Butler thus proposes to think about different ways in which lives can be sustained together even though we all share an existential precarity and vulnerability in the world.

impossible to grieve as they are not recognized as living (12) and Isabel Lorey's consideration of a "government of the precarious"<sup>301</sup>. Lorey differentiates the terms precariousness as existential vulnerability linked to mortality, precarity as inequality and insecurity based on social and political hierarchies and precarization as how insecurity is instrumentalized by governments to make their population more governable. Even though Vicuña's notion of "arte precario" could be in line with both Butler's and Lorey's point, I argue that her concept of precarious comes from a place where loss is an affirmation more related to a poetic of erotics where desire is part of its way of *doing*. Vicuña's use of precariousness as a way of *doing* makes the point to consider it as an open-ended possibility of relationality where there is an interdependence among things and people but as an active intensity that is also a refusal. From this intensity, that is also related to a will to affirm desire as a force, the "precarious" departs from its risky, dangerous, uncertain nature, rather than a resulting operation of power relations<sup>302</sup>. Perhaps, Vicuña's concept presents a tension between Butler's consideration of precariousness as a human existence and its vulnerable mortality and Benet's consideration of things in their ontology. Vicuña's proposal with the "precarious" is one where relationality emerges in the touch between things and people and the possibility of being touched. Therefore, there is a power of creation that is simultaneous to an awareness of an already existing woven relationality. On that logic, mortality and death are considered by Vicuña as part of a continual process of renewal that defies the capitalist valorization of things brought by Lorey and in which things acquire an alternative form and force

---

<sup>301</sup> Butler's concept is taken further by Isabel Lorey in her book *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*. Lorey points out, however, that the precarization as a form of instrumentalization and control has been internalized and normalized which has led to a self-precarization (70) in a generalized fear of insecurity by "self-government and the conduct of life" that are primarily serving political governability and capitalist valorization, making the anxiety of precariousness or the fear of loss part of what sustains this relation (90).

<sup>302</sup> In that sense, the relationship between "precarious" and "prayer" can be brought back as a double movement whose point of departure is their common root, that is, as "what is obtained by asking, that is also, a form of prayer and way of doing."

as scatter matter, as little litter, as what no longer matters and therefore matters in a different sense. In Vicuña's precarious, in a way, there is no fear of loss, because loss is part of the encounter with things<sup>303</sup>.

By underlining desire as a poetic force of what remains, Vicuña's artistic production, however, does not completely negate Western ideas, but rather redefines the forms of meaning from both Andean and Western dominant cultures, to overturn the differences between "the vernacular and the modern and to shift the international models of language" (33)<sup>304</sup>.

Nonetheless, whatever order she aims to give them can be erased by the waves in the sand, or by the wind, when the "precarious" appear as standing things on the shoreline<sup>305</sup>. The fragility implicated in the precarious locates them in a differential place where they are both lost and in formation, while they also highlight their restlessness in the limit of what is "about to happen". It is in this differential place that Vicuña finds her way of *doing* driven by enjoyment through eroticism that allows for a fluctuation of referents and ambiguity that articulates her poetic language.

I will conclude this section by briefly returning to Vicuña's poem "Arte precario" and including another set of verses:

When I said *arte precario* an energy was born.

---

<sup>303</sup> It is noticeable, for example, that her first ever-made precarious actually disappeared, there is no documentation of them. And this follows a practice of making the work of art in the moment and in the place that is called for. In an interview with Tatiana Flores Vicuña says that in most of her exhibitions she creates pieces in the moment, at the place, "I use museums as my studio. I rarely bring objects from the studio. I assemble them on the spot, often with materials I gather in or around the place itself (9)".

<sup>304</sup> I will elaborate this point further when referring to Vicuña's work in *Palabramás*.

<sup>305</sup> In 1967 in the Con-cón beaches in Chile, Vicuña created some of her first "precarious". In the book *Preacario/Precairious* there is an image of this "precario" at the shoreline with a sentence that says "The tide erased the work as night completes the day" (q.15).



The two words transformed each other.

Doing (*ars*) became prayer (*precis*), and prayer, doing.

The precarious was transformation,

Prayer is change,

“the dangerous instant of transmutation”

(...)

An object is not an object, it is the witness of to a relationship.

A thread is not a thread, but a thousand of tiny fibers entwined.

The word, unravelling in the air, begins again.

The warp is the arm

and the weft in the world.

The city is the book

and our gestures in it, the writing.

If art is the form of perception,  
a way of seeing and hearing,  
perhaps consciousness,  
*to join and to cut,*  
the double movement of the weaver  
is the art,  
*el con de la continuidad.*

(“Arte Precario” in *Precarious*, 136).

In these verses words such as energy and verbs such as birth, transform and becoming, are repeated and take different forms. Doing (*ars*) like prayer (*precis*) are in a mutual exchange that presents a way of *doing*. In the poem’s first lines things are active when they are born, when, while birthing they reveal a transformation and awakening. The energy here, I argue, is not what Bennet classifies as intrinsic ontology to matter that makes things vibrant. It is rather an energy that comes in the form of a “force of expression”. The energy that comes from “arte precario”, following the poem, illustrates this force as “energy”. The Latin root of energy is “energia” that comes from the Greek “energeia” and it means: activity, action, operation. “Energia” relates to something “that works”, “work that is wrought” “near at” (en: before) but also to a force of action, force of work. Energeia is thus a before and after action, something “that works” while “something (is) done”. This energy alludes to the way in which Vicuña locates the “precarious” in the space time relation of the “not-quite”, “not-yet” but that it is still “about to happen”. It is

the action of the in-betweenness itself, the liminal transformation from which an energy is born. Through this energy Vicuña articulates her way of doing as an erotic creation that seeks continual intensities as a force of work. From them arises the connection between *doing* and *living*, the elemental spider web that serves both as trap and nest, that transforms the familiar materiality of the web to a daily gesture of weaving that constantly takes and restages desire as a force of relation.

### ***Palabramás or The Matter of Words***

Cecilia Vicuña's poetry and riddles collection entitled *Palabramás*, was published in 1984 in Argentina. In this book Vicuña explores the poetic language grounded in a process of creation where words are assembled and disassembled. In this book, Vicuña describes her "Palabramás" as poems that move "to enter words in order to see."<sup>306</sup> For her the origin of "Palabramás" came with "a vision in which individual words opened to reveal their inner associations."<sup>307</sup> The book's title shows this relationship in which words are opened, reborn while showing their roots and engaging in a process of revelation. The book's title shows this relation in the composition of *Palabramás* as a whole unit that can be disentangled. The title is formed by *pala* (shovel) and *abra* (open as a command in Spanish); *labrar* (to work), *armar* (to arm or to assemble) and *armas* (weapons). This composition reflects Vicuña's continual search for etymological roots from which inner associations are also poems to come.

Vicuña's first articulation of *Palabramás* first came to her as a "vision" in 1966, around the same time her first "precario" emerged. She recalls that she watched how a word opened to

---

<sup>306</sup> *Unravelling Words*, 27

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*

join another and form riddles, how they could appear as a question “qué planeta nos ve desnudos en francés?” and give and answer: “Venus” or as divisions that form other meanings:

“Compañeros: compartir el paño de eros.”<sup>308</sup> Words formed in her mind as malleable things that could contain a movement of their own. Vicuña says that she first “saw” a word “armarse y desarmarse, bailar y mostrarme sus partes, como si viniera de otra ‘realidad’, la de su propia creación.”<sup>309</sup> Similarly, Vicuña describes this “vision” as a “feeling” through which a word “just came into my field of sight, almost like a person.”<sup>310</sup> From then on, she recalls discovering etymologies and understanding them through a text by René Daumal, the surrealist poet who describes etymological reflections in Sanskrit poetry. Later she found an article by Robert Randall about the possibility of an Incan system of finding etymologies. This system, Vicuña, says, is “not a precise etymology, but a poetic etymology”<sup>311</sup> that allowed her to write a

---

<sup>308</sup> *Palabramás*, 13

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.* 11.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.* 54.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.* The difference that Vicuña marks between a “precise” etymology and a “poetic” etymology could be related to the way she conceives the *palabramás* in the book as riddles. The reference to an “advinanza” primarily comes from its form as poetry, that is, as verse rather than prose. In the text “La adivinanza. Sentido y pervivencia” María Teresa Miaja de la Peña explains that the riddle is linked both to popular tradition, that includes the Western and the Indigenous, and a game between ingenious and poetry. It is constructed from elements that come from popular culture “como son los versos de arte menor, las cuartetos octosilábicas, de rima asonante y consonante cruzada, el uso de la forma paralelística, del símil, la metáfora, la metonímia, la alegoría, la analogía, y el desglose lingüístico, entre otros”. Beyond its form, the riddle throughout history has also been related to the anxiety to reveal what is hidden, to understand what is occult, to decipher it through divinatory practices. It is both an attempt to understand “lo divino”, as what is ignored and veiled, and to guess as a gifted skill that transcends the human sphere. As such, the riddle needs myths and rituals that could serve as aids to explain what is unknown or to resolve the riddle’s mystery. This drive to decipher the secrets of the world is also present in literary books like the *Bible* and *The Thousand and One Nights*, among others, as well as examples that come from the Greek and Latin traditions, the Egyptian, the Nahuatl, Maya, Quiché and more. Vicuña’s use of *palabramás* as poetry thus relates to this many forms in which the riddle takes place in history and culture. The riddle thus serves as way to access a hidden code that needs to show a process of decipherment as a chain of associations. The riddle’s main function, for instance, as Gabriela González Gutiérrez suggests, is that teaches us by trial and error to test our own process of associations. It teaches us to see and learn in a different way that alludes to at least four levels of comprehension: the intellectual or logical, the aesthetic or sensorial, the didactic and the ludic or emotive (37)”. In Vicuña’s *palabramás* we can see all these aspects of the riddle expressed in her work with forms. That is, the way they appear as poems, drawings, collages, bodily performance that also illustrates the playfulness in which the riddle becomes the method of creation and imagination.

philosophy of language from a poetic orientation. From this orientation, Vicuña perceived the experience of seeing as a haptic experience where the revealing riddles acquire corporeality.

In the book *Palabramás* we see a poetic account that retells how these words have been working in diverse context, formats and surfaces in an outside the written page. The word's dynamism shows its resistance to remain in just one medium or place, to become transient things that, similar to the "precarious", they are part of a material debris whose roots, residues and bodies cross each other in interrelations. Therefore, if the *Palabramás* first appear as a "vision", they later became material things through a process of doing, undoing, redoing where they were exposed in the encounter of two experiences: "adivinar y palabrar." Vicuña describes both actions in an interconnectedness that evokes the actions of work and proximity. "Adivinar" comes from the latin *addinivare*, that means "to imagine, to guess", the root "ad" indicates "proximity", so that together the word means: to imagine or guess in proximity. For "palabrar" the broken neologism is "pala" and "labrar". This suggests a relation between a way of *doing* that includes a work in proximity, a work with the elemental as if one was digging the earth ("pala") in search for a possible imagination. This imagination involved in "adivinar" is part of the forces that follow Vicuña's works rooted in composing an "imaginación: imagen en acción" and her almost obsessive urgency for a continual creation. In *Palabramás* the materiality of the word seems to be guided by this continuity as a need to create through proximity and imagination. We can see in *palabramás* all the different aspects that compose the riddle as being expressed in her work with forms. That is, the way they appear as poems, drawings, collages, bodily performance that also illustrates the playfulness in which the riddle becomes the method of creation and imagination. As such, the openness that involves a search in the word's components, its morphemes and phonemes, is not simply a linguistic analysis, but an unravelling

of acts that follow a doing, undoing, redoing where words produce assemblages and reconfigurations of sense while reconnecting heterogenous matter with what is proximate to us.

On the other hand, the reference to weapons in *Palabramás* alludes to Vicuña's rearticulation of riddles a hybrid manifestation (where *manifestación* is also "protest" in Spanish) in the form of visual poetry where art is supposed to take the place of weapons. As hybrid things, the *Palabramás*, are corporeal structures or non-objectivized objects that give life to words in languages. That is, as bodies that leave the written page, they go beyond their functionality and leave the fixity that confines them into a restricted space. Words as weapons underscores the inter-action among them; they can serve as tools of resistance and disruption when they keep being animated by touching each other and signifying together. This animation, that refers to how things act through affection, allows for a protest that is not entirely programmatic, but one that comes from the metamorphosis in which things become bodies, corporeal and spatial things, able to affect and be affected.

The word's resistance to confinement coincides with Vicuña's residence in London in a period in which the end of Allende's government pushed many artists to create different forms of resistance and activism organized by labor unions and political parties. Some of the *Palabramás* happened in this context in 1974, a few months after Pinochet's military coup took place in Chile. Hence, words as weapons constitutes the most militant side in Vicuña's *Palabramás* as they were part of a front in the arts that called for the weapons to be transformed into words and imagination: arte, arma, armarte. This front, as Machiavello explains, emphasized the collective participation that was the basis of Vicuña's project to publish Chilean writers in exile and the creation of the arts festival *Artist for Democracy* with Guy Brett, John Dugger, and David

Medalla (81)<sup>312</sup>. Vicuña's work thus falls at the center of social, political and aesthetic proposals that began in the 1960s, and continued through the 70's and 80's.

Some of the *palabrarmás* that emerge during those years were, for example, “ver-dad”, “men-tira” y “sol y dar y dar”. As Machiavello explains, Vicuña linked these words to the imposition of a language that was authoritarian and manipulative. For instance, the word “men-tira”<sup>313</sup> was exposed as an anagram mixing word and drawing in a poster that showed sliced bodies, while the word “ver-dad” was exposed with two open hands in an extended offering gesture. Vicuña's response to the repressive regime was to create acts that represented the opposite of confinement. As such the hands opening to an outside and drawn horizontally visualizes a discourse that aims for reciprocity, a giving and receiving that also contains and mobilizes another vision. The eye that surrounds “ver” and the hand that sustains “dad” links perception to a haptic movement in which each occur in interdependence. The wound created by a cut in “mentira” becomes in “verdad” an opening through which a truth comes out of a hole: the passage from “ver” to “dad” is separated by a blank space that is the same hyphen that separates and unites the word “ver-dad”. “Ver-dad”, in this sense, suggests a reciprocity between giving and seeing, as actions that necessarily pass through the hands and the body. This passage articulates a movement that implies the act of birthing rather than an act of wounding.

---

<sup>312</sup> The festival consisted of events in solidarity for the dictatorship that included exhibitions and auctions donated by different artists around the world. See *Artists for Democracy: El Archivo de Cecilia Vicuña*. Santiago: Museo de la Memoria y de los Derechos Humanos, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2014.

<sup>313</sup> Machiavello gives the example of what was called the “Plan Z” produced by the Fuerzas Armadas Chilenas. The “Plan” was to distribute a fake document by Allende's government under which they were going to create “un autogolpe” through a fear of a Marxist government was expressed (81).



Fig. 30. Cecilia Vicuña, *Palabramás*, 1979. Courtesy of the artist.

The word's corporeal dimension, seen above in the correspondence between word and image, later became interventions in space in 1979<sup>314</sup>, a few years before being assembled/collected in *Palabramás* as a book. During those years, the *palabramás* also became "precarious" objects where they intervened in the public space and challenged the habitual

<sup>314</sup> The ludic aspect of the riddle, for example, can be seen in Vicuña's most participatory interventions with *Palabramás*. Vicuña's art has been considered in the framework of Participatory Art that was popular in the 70s. In 1975, while she was living in Bogotá, Vicuña created proposed to the National University Museum to do an exhibition as an open participatory workshop by transforming the space into a laboratory of *palabramás*. Similar projects like this one were rejected both in Bogotá and previously by her colleagues in London. Carla Machiavello explains that this type of radical pedagogy and collective creation was found in alternative artistic areas like theater, which took Vicuña to collaborate with the Teatro de la Calendaria instead of participating in more hegemonic expressions of conceptual art and the well-known *arte comprometido* of the moment (*Veroír* 87). Nonetheless, Vicuña's *palabramás* escaped each time more the written page to become objects that interacted with the city's everyday life in Bogotá. In Bogotá, Vicuña began to create artistic interventions with the *palabramás* where people's bodies simulated the words in the posters. For example, the *palabramás* "men-tira" and "ver-dad" became an action in which they were no longer attached to the poster, but cutted from it so that the people could hold the words and use them as masks that hide vision, etc. For more information see *Ver dad, Ment ira*, ca. 1977-1979, performance e intervención en espacio público, Bogotá.



gestures of the everyday through the common materialities taken from the same context they seek to intervene. Words could be part of a game in the street, of movement and rhythms in the city, they could appear attuned to the city's forms and spaces while suggesting diverse ways of participation "en la reconexión del ser humano con el sentido profundo de las palabras y de la vida."<sup>315</sup> The reference to a liberation of words resonates with the idea of liberation of bodies that Vicuña uses to bring the corporeality of words upfront. In this corporeal sphere, words present new knowledges that attend to a liberation of desire instead of repression and confinement. Vicuña's affirmation of desire reveals a force of liberation, but also a *poiesis* that situates her practice within a group of artists that emerged during the 80's and that Andrea Giunta describes as those whose works looked for splinters of bodies, sensibilities and concepts and contributed to the formation of new languages and affects.<sup>316</sup>

The centrality of a poetics of desire in Vicuña's work is also related to her previous collaborations with the Tribu No, an artistic collective that she founded with her friends in the in the 1960's. The group's main mantra was expressed in what they called the "No Manifiesto". The manifiesto was a creative protest that emerged from love and desire as a reality from within, "which is why we are subversive and loving. Furthermore, we are so minor and unknown as to delight in our freedom."<sup>317</sup> From this premise, Vicuña's incorporation of love and desire as part of her activism also shows the importance that she gives to what is "minor" and "unknown" as tools that express the liberation involved in the process of creation. This manifestation in Vicuña's artistic production follows agendas that were not entirely unified, but that paid attention

---

<sup>315</sup> Machiavello, *Veroir*, 88

<sup>316</sup> *Radical Women*, 81

<sup>317</sup> "The No Manifiesto", in *Veroir*, pg. 301. This Manifiesto was created and circulated in 1967. It was influenced by Huidobro's creacionismo, futurists and surrealists ideas through which Vicuña, and her friends, proposed that the only contribution that came from the Southern Hemisphere vs the Northern, was that its people say "no" to the appropriation and domination of ideas, things and peoples by the hegemonic centers.

to an analysis of the socially regulated and monitored body and of sexuality as the great narrative through which, as Giunta suggests, “the West organized and stigmatized difference.”<sup>318</sup> Vicuña’s attempt to continually refer to a force that comes from a place of struggle and resistance marked by the dictatorship but also extended to her personal experience of exile, contributes to this differentiation from the great narratives that Giunta also describes as an Iconographic turn enacted by women artists in the twentieth century that separated them from feminist art<sup>319</sup> movement that happened in the United States.

This Iconographic turn involved the centrality of the body through images that showed how artists inverted the point of view from which the female body had previously been represented (the nude, the portrait, and images of motherhood) ruled by the conventions of the nineteenth century academic art and early twentieth century modernism. In Latin America, this turn took shape, as Giunta explains, through the commitment of women artists to revolutionary struggle and resistance to the region’s dictatorships, where the body appeared as a battlefield to subvert systems of representation that categorized the status of a woman as biologically and culturally conditioned beings. Vicuña’s attempt to continually unveil a corporeality that lies in the hidden and changing body is part of this iconographic transformation where her works gave shape to a process of decolonization of bodies and systems for the validation of art and where they were able to liberate desire as a creative force.

---

<sup>318</sup> *Radical*, 29.

<sup>319</sup> Giunta establishes a clear difference between feminist artists and artistic feminism. She considers feminist artists as creators who deliberately attempted to build a feminist artistic repertoire and language (most of them activists). She uses the term *artistic feminism* to refer to the position of the historians who study art from the perspective of a feminist agenda. This second one thus considers artists that do not necessarily identify themselves as feminists or considers their work as such. See “The Iconographic Turn” in *Radical Women*, pg. 34.

In Vicuña's case we can see this turn in Vicuña's *palabramás* as well as in her earlier drawings and paintings that were exposed, for example, in *Saboramí*. In *Palabramás*, the words that become poems also contain a mixture of verses, aphorisms, quotes from philosophers, writers, artists, critics, from books that range from the Bible to the *Popol Vuh*, the *Rigveda*, and an etymological dictionary<sup>320</sup>. The entire book becomes a collage of thoughts that, as Méndez-Ramírez, argues, gives the reader access to Vicuña's vision. The openness that Vicuña refers to makes visible the words inner associations. This also suggests that words are minimal parts of a greater world language that uses ancient words that carry many meanings, "palindromes y préstamos de otros idiomas."<sup>321</sup> Words that read forward and backwards characterize the temporal and material movement that Vicuña gives to words in their becoming. Through this movement, the words in *Palabramás* are not only, like I said earlier, a "dissecting of language into semantic units", as Méndez-Ramírez suggest, but also minor things that keep a relationship outside of its unity. As such, the matter of words articulates a language to come that gives them another materiality to signify. This materiality is a malleable one in which the *palabramás* become visual things and are reenacted in bodily performances<sup>322</sup>, while they continue to rediscover other surfaces to be inscribed.

The *Palabramás* that were printed later in a book in 1984 attempted to reunite these experiences in which words took different forms since their first appearances. This new format under which they appear as poems, speaks to the different layers and processes through which

---

<sup>320</sup> Méndez-Ramírez identifies the Joan Coromina's *Etymological Dictionary* (63).

<sup>321</sup> *Wik'uña*, 85

<sup>322</sup> The different movements and corporealities that the *palabramás* assume and through which they defy an exclusive relation to the linguistic sign, can also be seen in Vicuña's short film *Sol y dar y dad, una palabra bailada, a danced word* (1980). In the film there is a film still that shows a folded paper that defines "palabra" and it reads like this: "La palabra es una pala con alas para abrir la realidad" to which we can add "para parir la realidad".

Vicuña articulates her way of *doing* as an expanded field in which sensibilities act and inscribe different foundations. The diverse aspects of this production, where words are a poem or a performance, reflect, following Vicuña, different “states of being”<sup>323</sup> in which life, as poetry, can have the space to transit and transform. Within this entanglement of forms and surfaces, Vicuña aims, as Hugo Méndez-Ramírez argues, for both an autonomy of language and a romantic vision of the poet who has access to truth.<sup>324</sup> However, instead of aiming for autonomy and romanticism, the transformative space within forms alludes to a rebirth that shows the roots and channels through which the things in the world are as entangled as words are engaged in a process of revelation.

Vicuña’s *palabramás* thus suggests a different way to understand poetry that is linked to its political and activist side. It also visualizes a poetic force that triggers a revelatory process of creation that can impact both the acting being and the reality around them. The word’s form and formlessness responds to an entanglement of influences and relations that lets the word shift its origin and remake its appearance in the new surface on which the word lands. Through this shifting process, Vicuña’s *palabramás*, shares similarities with the Brazilian concrete poetry and the “poema processo”. Critics like Silvia Goldman also note that the influence of the Noigrandes poets in Vicuña’s poetic is present in the way she goes beyond the verse as the fundamental poetic unit and replaces it with the “ideogram”; thus “she emphasizes the relation between words and their context, rendering them not just a linguistic sign, but also a visual image (91).” As such, Vicuña’s use of the words as an expanded material and visual thing that creates ruptures with general forms also share similarities with the way that concrete poets

---

<sup>323</sup> Tatiana Flores, “In conversation with Cecilia Vicuña”, 11.

<sup>324</sup> *Precarious*, 62

considered poems as “experimental apparatuses” or “visual word-things in space-time, that reflect and intensify the word's material verbal, vocal, and visual dimensions (149)” like Adam Joseph Shellhorse argues. However, the intensity within Vicuña’s *palabramás* makes visible the *matter* of words through a handicraft expression linked to the process of handwriting, rather than the product of technology. A work with words implies, in Vicuña’s case, a reconnection of points of references that can vary from a word, a thread, an image or a sound, so that what seems to be too fixed contains motion.

We can see this in the image below where the *palabramás* appear first as sketches or drawings that Vicuña was articulating and disassembling so that a hand could be a wing, a glove, a mouth, or the contours of a letter. In fact, Vicuña’s *palabramás* that appear as collages and drawings allude to an imperfect and child-like handwriting whose detours gives the motion that allows for it to become an image. An image germinates from the same lines and contours through which the word is made, while simultaneously referring to the relationship between “labrar” “pala” and “palabra”. Like the warp that contains many threads, the word is malleable and related to the practice that emphasizes the use of hands and textiles, a handicraft action rather than the relation between word, image and technology that is present in the Brazilian concrete poetry.



Fig. 31. Cecilia Vicuña. *Labrar palabras como quien labra la tierra* (*Work Words Like Those Who Till the Land*) from the series *AMAZone Palabarmas*. 1978. Courtesy of the artist.

Words can reveal something in the precise and elusive moment when they unravel to form new associations. That is the point of “word working: to work speech, to speak watching speech work.”<sup>325</sup> The work that words do is intrinsic to the association of “Palabarmás” as a neologism. As words that act together and separately, the *Palabararmás* make visible the materiality and corporeality that words retake, their fragility and yet, simultaneously, their active

---

<sup>325</sup> *Unravelling*, 30.

impact in the world. They make a reference to a vision within language that speaks from the body and in which new meanings can be explored when words are considered in revelation. The relationship between “word” and “work” produces what Carla Machiavello has described as an “implosion of sense through an intuitive and loving labor around words as matter (*Veroír*, 75; my translation).” For instance, this would mean to do a type of work that is also an act of love where language is removed and carved with a shovel (“pala”) as if it was both digging and nurturing the earth. Digging to find depth is parallel to a search for the earths’ roots as a search for the roots in language. Nurturing and “work” extends this implosion of sense through acts that speak to an internal-outside such as pollination and birthing as opposed to a beyond implicated in a transcendentalism.

The hand-writing implied in some of the *palabramás* as collages recenters the word as this expansion of form, as part of a process of drawing. As such Vicuña’s *palabramás* resembles the collage style drawing that is related to the language of urban posters with their rounded letters, and saturated colors in the background in the visual language of the Cuban revolution, the Mayan hieroglyphics, and the child cursive that alluded to a process of learning.<sup>326</sup> The word’s shifting of forms and origins, that is, when words are drawings, resonates with Vicuña description of words as migrants that travel. The word’s shifting of forms and origins, that is, when words are drawings, resonates with Vicuña’s description of words as migrants that travel. The word’s form is what makes it an image and, therefore, a traveling object

---

<sup>326</sup> Machiavello explains further that Vicuña’s posters later became notebooks, prototypes of books with words that were used in schools and taken to labor union manifestations. The idea behind was to motivate adults and children to create their own palabrama and acquire consciousness through the participatory process of the transformative capacity of their own reality. The project, however, did not went through, as it lacked resources and support from Vicuñas’s political circle (72).

that reveals its own transformation, its origin and its prolonged futurity. As Vicuña says in an interview:

If you think of how a word is born, most of the words that we use now were created a few thousand years ago by different cultures: the Greeks, the Latins, the Romans, the Anglo-Saxon peoples, or Indigenous peoples. And so a word is like a traveler, a migrant that has been traveling from person to person and generation after generation. Words contain an image, and this is what allows a word to continue<sup>327</sup>.

The word's continuity is embedded in a path of appearances from which it becomes a drawing of itself. That is, a word that is part of chain of revelations, where things can be "imagined". The *palabrarma* contains the image that allows its mobilization and relation to a creative process that speaks to a political effect in everyday life. For example, if we follow Vicuña's logic from the *palabrarma*'s perspective the word *pessimismo* in Spanish, "pessimism" in English, becomes "excessive weight of yourself, *el peso de si mismo*." And "if you see the *Palabrarma*'s drawing, you see a sort of fat person, very depressed."<sup>328</sup> The relationship between word and image, in this case, comes from the residues of words as misplaced origins that can morph while traveling. Instead of creating a dialogue with a purity of language, and absolute identity or an unique system of record-keeping, Vicuña creates an ensemble of word roots whose residues activate a creative process that makes them exist outside of the written page. In the moment in which a word changes its form it grounds a language to come, that has to be nurtured and that is open to the many shifts that the drawing can follow.

---

<sup>327</sup> Interview in "The Traveling Word: Cecilia Vicuña on Amazone Palabrarma: Magazine: Moma."

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.



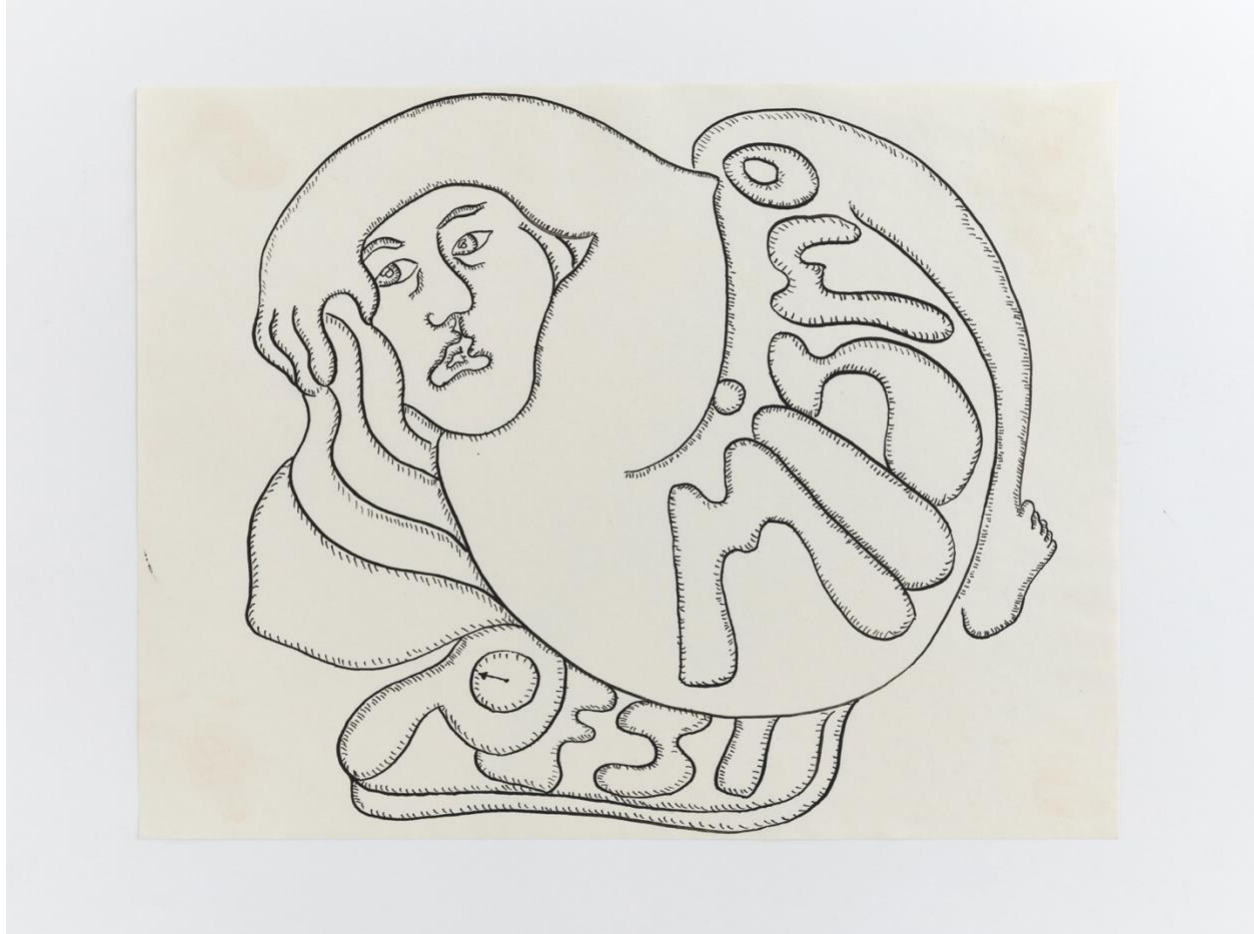


Fig. 32. Cecilia Vicuña. *Pesimismo: el excesivo peso de sí mismo (Pessimism: The Excessive Weight of Yourself)* from the series *AMAZone Palabramas*. 1978. Courtesy of the artist.

Words that become bodies evoke the use and lack of precision in etymological roots. As such they are not only unstable but have a texture. Through this texture it is possible to find different meanings from a same source and differ them into multiple expressions. This mixture between movement and texture can be seen in the transitory character that words embody in *Palabramás*. As migratory things, the traveling of words that Vicuña mentions remarks her participation in the project of relocating other tongues, primarily female ones and in which poetry assumes an important role.

In a search for a language that can tell stories from the past and using memory as a part of an artifice to express the formal boundaries between what is censored and acceptable to readers, Francine Masiello has argued that women poets in Chile bring the question of authenticity outside of the male literary field dominated by authors like Neruda and constitute an “art of transition”<sup>329</sup>. Their question remains in creating a language whose poetic diction was an advantage that could expand the possibilities of language, artifice and voice. By evoking, for example, prohibited landscapes, marginal events and lesser elements of life that “fail to enter the national canon, this poetry alters categories of information, it produces other forms of wisdom, it allows other tongues to speak.”<sup>330</sup> As a project, the texts produced by these women, in which we can include Vicuña’s writings, exposed the ambiguities of language as a “contested terrain between the state and its various marginal constituencies; they forge a different vision of an *authentic* community.”<sup>331</sup> Vicuña’s work in *palabramás* reflect this use of language that is even more radicalized through her experience of exile. For this reason, Vicuña’s constant reference to an Andean cultural past, as well as books like the *Popol Vuh*, but also the *Bible*, add to this search for both the precision and elusiveness of the poetic word, that is at the center between a language of representation and a Latin American experience.

---

<sup>329</sup> Masiello focuses on the postdictatorship years in Argentina and Chile that coincide with a rise of neoliberalism in Chile and the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> century. She articulates the “art of transition” from the aporia or “dark hole,” from the vortex of possible signifiers whose meaning has not yet been set and for which, she argues, we are prompted to a practice of suture. As such, through the writers she considers within these years we, as readers and critics, are awoken to interpretation and “the desire to travel *en route* to a conceptual whole (13)” that differs from the allegories of a national quandary as in the novels of the Boom, and more as a response to the “flattening gloss of the market the so-called waning of affect (13)”. She thus calls for a faith in literature and art and the ways in which they are strategies that force us to think of interpretative ways of resistance that interrogates the past and defies the “disabled light of neoliberal rule (13)”. She seeks within these writers, mostly women, alternative frameworks for apprehending social forms that are beyond the “ready-made” cultural products and ideas of neoliberalism, how these texts offer order and difference and show a critical sensibility that shapes the cultural realm and offers potential of a political future (14).

<sup>330</sup> Masiello, 272.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

Vicuña's refusal to follow disciplinary boundaries keeps testing the field of image and word, while articulating a power of signification in the local traditions, where the minor things of life, like the precarious objects and the roots of words, are already openings for something else to come through. In that sense, Vicuña's visual poems or metaphors in space are what creates her own language of defiance. Through this language she is not only reclaiming "the voice and traditions" of the Aymara Indians and unsettling the comfort of signifying practices offered in a dominant tongue, but breaking the relationship between dominant and subjected tongues to retain the roots of many different cultures and rewrite them while altering their categories as dominant and subjected cultures. In fact, if Vicuña's poetry performs "almost a shamanistic ritual of healing", as Masiello argues, it does so not by inverting the categories in which historically one language dominates another, but rather in a re-writing of the world through the minor commonalities that each language has and their possibility to be woven horizontally as in a loom. What Vicuña "heals" with her practice is a relocation of language, objects and the *matter* of the world. The way to do so, however, is through rewriting these minor<sup>332</sup> things in relationality so that they can perform together not as a complete whole, that is part of the etymology of "healing", but as an unstable movement of unity and separation. In this instability Vicuña's *poeisis* finds a way of expression that simultaneously disturbs the structures of knowledge and sets them in motion, at the risk of transformation.

---

<sup>332</sup> Although the notion of the "minor" seems to be overused in the critical discourses that followed the years of dictatorship in Chile and Argentina, here I agree with Masiello that the place that subalternity occupies during the discourse of the 80s and 90s, are now filled by gendered subjects. This shift of place of discourse is more resonant to a poetics from below through the perspective of gender as it reexamines "the critical distance between experience and representation in its various deployments (15)" and the possibilities of political and aesthetic difference offered previously by popular subjects. In that sense, Vicuña's articulation of what is "little, trivial, insignificant" resonates with a more gendered notion of the "minor" through which a poetics from below implies not only the marginalization of the popular subjects, but a germination and potential force that is linked to an idea of feminism that irrupts from the elemental, habitual and, perhaps, handicraft acts of everyday life. This will be discussed further in the chapter.

The *matter* of words in *palabramás* thus keeps this motion in tension to perform as active things in the world. Like this, the *palabramás* act in the world as a tool (“pala”) in a battlefield that liberates as much as it is liberated. The *palabramás* allows us to reconsider the body as both a sensible surface and an acting being that affects things as it is also affected. This double action, in which things are affected in relationality, articulates Vicuña’s attempt to emphasize the centrality of materiality and the potentiality of bodies in a continual becoming others. This is relevant if we consider that for Vicuña the body is, on the one hand, not exclusively the human body, but it is also expanded to words, little things and images that compose this “metaphors in space” as much as they become entangled fibers in the weaving of a loom or knots in her *quipus*. And on the other hand, the body is also the poetic body that produces affects through continual acts of desire.

Vicuña’s emphasis on relationality, form and formlessness thus becomes explicit in *Palabramás* as a way of *doing* that rewrites the relationship between art and life as an avant-garde premise. However, instead of merely referring to a return of art to the sphere of life, and underlining the military line involved in its definition, Vicuña speaks to an interdependent relation between a *work* with *words* that calls for the body to be present. The relationship between performance and poem becomes even more explicit when the poetic voice defies the poem’s exclusive textuality. As Vicuña states, “with a poem in front of me, the text is present and yet, in performance, I dissolve it; Sometimes I don’t read the whole line, I read a quarter of the line; or just a word, just a sound. So, the solidity of the text disappears.”<sup>333</sup> The focus on dissolution and instability in the unfinished text radicalizes Vicuña’s proposal of an

---

<sup>333</sup> *Palabramás*, 11.

interdependence not only between things, but also between media and forms so that the performance of a poem is as part of the poem as the poem is part of the performance.

It is in this way that Vicuña refers to poems and objects as “states of being” that are subject to changes. Just as the “precarious” object was a piece of debris and later will be debris again, the same happens with a word that is “pronounced in your mouth, and the next instant, it is no longer there.”<sup>334</sup> What remains is an entangled relation to a process that involves transfiguration, transformation, and dissolution in both poem, performance, and beyond. In that sense, what remains is not a complete disappearance of words and things, but the residues of a relation from which something might be born again.

Under this logic Vicuña’s poetic acts provide a fluid surface where objects, words, images and sounds are able to morph in a continual creative process. In this unravelling of signs (writing, painting, drawing, etc), as Vicuña calls them, they not only create a political denunciation of a forgotten past, but rather propose potencies out of the minimal, the insignificant, the useless encountered things and words as an expanded experience of birthing, carrying and caring. The written word defies its fixed textuality by being entangled in an interdependent process that also includes the orality of a voice. That is, an extended beat and rhythm of the poet’s voice that reclaims its detours as silences, murmurs, whispers. These detours refer as well to the voice’s minimal and fractal sound, to the voice’s minor expressions. As such these expressions suggest a minor material and vibratory connection that is at the center of Vicuña’s poetic proposal that links everydayness and life.

---

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

The matter of word thus opens the field of what is visible, tactile and corporeal to propose new associations between them. Through this open field of what we can call affects, Vicuña suggests new relations in-between times and bodies, what is common as an open an unstable place that keeps being in dissolution and transformation. This instability and renewal of associations, brings back the riddle as an embodiment of both the “seer” and the “vision”. This “vision” through which Vicuña first saw the *palabramás* is entangled in a way of *doing* and detached from a way of *seeing* in which the ability to guess or interpret suggests another way of reading poetry that mixes the rhyme and the riddle. Instead of exclusively referring to words that follow the structure of the rhyme as regulated movements or as words that seek to identically rhyme with one another from the vowel in its stressed syllable to the end, the emphasis on the riddle allows for parallel opposing expressions that contain a hidden meaning.

For instance, the word “adivinar” is both to guess and to see through, to see beyond what is immediately there. It also refers to the surprise involved in unveiling similarities between objects that, normally, would not have a relation. The act of surprise is thus, a basic element of the riddle’s composition. More than using the verb “adivinar” as a prophecy, Vicuña’s riddles propose this unexpected relationality that needs to go beyond a normalized type of seeing, and rather pay acute attention to the hidden meaning in which the reader is asked to be part of the word’s decipherment. As such, the reader is part of an ingenious game of associations that requires deep imagination (*imagen en acción*) and an unraveling not only between words, but a dissociation from the normalized logic that a reader’s mind would follow through. To see beyond is, Vicuña’s seems to suggest, this deciphering process that needs to work out the words to find new meanings from below, that is, from the roots that we dig with the *pala* to “arm” other words.

The riddles thus, set the stage for an “inverso verbal”, in which words are liberated from their order to follow, instead, the playful game of associations that goes “inventando lo que no es, es jugar al revés, crear un espejo que no refleja lo que es.”<sup>335</sup> In this game rhymes and riddles flow together not from what is regulated, but rather from what creates intervals and disbelongings where every word, nonetheless, is the “register of its own creation.”<sup>336</sup> The mirror’s reflection is then not only the form, but also the formlessness implied in the construction of meaning that allows for a playful articulation with laughter and joy. The register of the word’s “own creation” is part of the process of guessing that keeps its decipherment in tension.

It is not a coincidence, then, that Vicuña refers to the emergence of *Palabramás* as a memory of “Un gozo indescriptible (...) ¿Quién jugaba con quién, ellas conmigo, o al revés?”<sup>337</sup> From this joy, words kept opening to let her in so that “yo sentía su interior como ellas me sentían a mí. Cambiábamos de lugar con la fluidez de un gozo corporal (...) Mi cuerpo era el lago que hace pis, el océano de amor del lenguaje escribiendo en mí. Un ‘mí’ que no era yo, sino la nota del encuentro.”<sup>338</sup> The fluid boundaries between body and words, between a body that “sees” words and “works” with them corresponds to what Vicuña also describes as a poetic of language in which playfulness is the evidence of a creative desire that has a simultaneous effect on life and being. That is, a vision that links language to a vital force and participates in its nurturing (or destruction)<sup>339</sup>.

---

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

<sup>339</sup> Vicuña mentions in *Palabramás* a street game or ritual among children from the south of Peru in 1975 that is called “vida michy”, or, in Spanish “pastorear la vida”. In this game children and teenagers “se pastoreaban” through the town attracting one another with insults, chants, and verbal challenges. Then all of them went together to the mountains to “make life: pastorear las llamas, adivinar y hacer el amor a la vez”. The verbal game seems to be decisive, according to Vicuña quoting the theorists Billie Jean and Fredy, to the development of the self. For them experimenting the creation of a metaphor in their own meat is the birth of consciousness and liberation, the

Through an attention to what is hidden in the riddle, she suggests turning the eyes inward (“inverso verbal”) to revisit the way that we see through the fixity of the word and find its movement. Through these movements and tensions, that also includes the joy to decipher the riddle, Vicuña’s relocates words as powerful tools of interpretation and relationality. To guess, to interpret, “adivinar”, alludes to this vision that seems to be both beyond and behind the eyes and that challenges the way we work the ground in which life and being meet. Such an encounter suggests the relationship between a work with words and a process of nurturing where the unraveling of sense is also a displacement of the “I” so that an alternative relation can emerge between the “I” and the world. A relation, nonetheless, that needs to be in constant nurturing and gestation, so that the riddle becomes part of a continual concern with the present as much as with the past. This continuity that is not linear, but cyclical, emphasizes the relation between the “seer” and the “vision” in which matter is both a proximity and a search for possible imaginations. In this close relation, the playfulness that the riddle carries can give us a sense of language that defies the petrified implied in the linguistic order. The riddle thus creates new connotations over a referent that, through its poetic characteristics like the game of words, rhythm, and metaphor, contributes to this amplified vision through a *poiesis* that can reveal secrets. This vision, whose visionary character sets images in action (imaginación) is the poetic force that is also a vision to come or the trace of something future.

### ***Palabra e hilo or The Matter of Acts as Processes***

---

individual ‘identity’” (14). Vicuña attempts to relate the game to a poetic that has an effect both in language and in life. She attributes this vitality to an ancient time, before the Incas, that has been theorized by critics like Robert Randall. In this perspective, the combination of sexual competition, insults and riddles of the *Vida Michy* is a joy, following Vicuña, destined to increase pleasure and potency, the fertility of the mountains, the waters, the children, fire and poetry, all at once.



La palabra es un hilo y el hilo es lenguaje.

Cuerpo no lineal.

Una línea asociándose a otras líneas.

Una palabra al ser escrita juega a ser lineal,

pero palabra e hilo existen en otro plano dimensional.

Formas vibratorias en el espacio y el tiempo.

Actos de unión y separación.

La palabra es silencio y sonido.

El hilo, lleno y vacío.

La tejedora ve su fibra como la poeta su palabra.

El hilo siente la mano, como la palabra la lengua.

Estructuras de sentido en el doble sentido

de sentir y significar,

la palabra y el hilo sienten nuestro pasar.

(“Cecilia Vicuña: Palabra E Hilo / Word & Thread (1996)”) <sup>340</sup>

---

<sup>340</sup> Translated from Spanish by Rosa Alcalá: “Word and Thread.” Word is thread and the thread is language./ Non-linear body./ A line associated to other lines./ A word once written risks becoming linear./ but word and thread exist on another dimensional/ plane./ Vibratory forms in space and in time./ Acts of union and separation./ The word is silence and sound./ The thread, fullness and emptiness./ The weaver sees her fiber as the poet sees her word./ The thread feels the hand, as the word feels the tongue./ Structures of feeling in the double sense/ of sensing and signifying./ the word and the thread feel our passing. (1996)

In its etymology, the act of weaving refers to an interlace that forms a texture, to the act of making something by intertwining, to the act of moving on a devious course, to the patterns created by the interlacing of the threads of woven fabrics, among other things. Weave and text are both derived from the latin *texere*, that, in Quechua, according to Cecilia Vicuña, also refers to the threads in weaving and in language. The latin *texere* that unites both word and thread, weaving and writing, refers to an elliptical movement of time and space that defies the linear course that time “should” take. As Vicuña’s poem “Palabra e hilo” suggests, word and thread are interrelated because in the process of being entangled with others they reveal structures that can take detours and embody transformations. Both acts, weaving and writing, recenter the hand and the body as that which activates the structures into which word and thread unfold. Together they speak to the crafty, the material, the fiber that is part of the processes of connections, reconnections and re-writings. That is, processes of doing, undoing and redoing similar to the form and formlessness in the *palabrarmás*. The interlacing of threads, like those of words, refers as well to the liberation of words and threads from a place of confinement, from which the body defies conventional boundaries and rewrites the world. A body, however, that, as I mentioned before, is not an individual, singular one, but that implies multiple voices, languages and sounds that are reunited in the doble sense of “sentir y significar”.

In this double sense, weaving and writing act as metaphors, “as if” they were mirrors of each other. This relationship between acts in which the text understood as *texere* seems to be their common ground, suggests Vicuña’s poetics as a craft that is a precarious way of *doing* that opens the space for word, thread and acts to meet. This craft contains an active power that lies in the act of making itself. The instability of the “as if”, that was already mentioned in Vicuña’s childhood memory that “confused” writing and painting, is also part of the metaphoric quality in

which words, images and sounds resemble each other as well as they compose their own creation and dissolution. We can see this in Vicuña's poem "Entering". Here she describes metaphor as what "stakes out a space of its own creation. /If the poem is temporal, an oral temple, form is a spatial temple. /*Metapherein*: to carry beyond/. The "as if" appears as this movable place of "to carry beyond" where writing and weaving mirror each other and propose alternative creations entangled with a communal way of doing as a way of caring (to carry, to care).

The reference to the capacity of metaphors to transform things and make them signify otherwise is not gratuitous in Vicuña's practice. The *Metapherein* quality that is explicit in the poem indicates both a spatial movement: to carry, to move from one place to another; and a "beyond" that is not a transcendental temporality, but a temporal dimension that keeps things tied to a present that keeps referring to a past and a future, while exposing its own fragile passage. The metaphor understood as both to care and to carry, as what transfers and what is transferred from a place and time to another, defies Vicuña's *ouvre* as a nostalgic one. It rather locates her practice as a way of doing that is related to women's craft that does not remain in the past, but rather continues to contemporary forms of artistic expression. The metaphor serves as spatio-temporal bridge where things exist in a larger network of social life and memory making, but whose focus of attention and unfolding is one that necessarily passes through and is activated by the hands. Thus, for Vicuña the "tejido lleva la conexión con lo demás" as it is also the primordial metaphor that emphasizes a weaved relationship that begins, perhaps, with the umbilical cord.<sup>341</sup> I say it "begins" carefully, because the umbilical cord is both a connection between mother and child, but it is also a way to transfer food and information. The cord thus *cares* and *carries* the baby's well-being. This second relationship between to care and to carry is

---

<sup>341</sup> "Metafísica del textil", 11

what Vicuña tries to highlight when articulating an approach to the textile. Instead of falling into essentialisms and nostalgic connotations of a gone and primordial past, she indicates the relationship to an elemental way of being tied to a processual way of doing, whose act relies in the craft of its own making.

This craft can be read alongside the act of weaving that de Zegher frames as part of a long tradition of female labor of childcaring and food preparation.<sup>342</sup> As de Zegher comments, “weaving (as the resulting in cloth) and parturition (as the resulting in babies), display women’s generative capability.”<sup>343</sup> This division of labor not only speaks of a specialized labor composed around the ability to do things, but rather to a type of labor that revolves around reliance. We can see this reliance in Vicuña’s analogy of weaving and writing. In her case, reliance is an interdependent relationship where the body is the locus for both actions (weaving and writing) to occur. The word parturition, for example, is related to the verb “palabrir.” A verb that for Vicuña is a composition of “palabra” and “abrir” as we already saw in *palabramás*. For her, “palabrir” means “to open words” and “abrir” (to open) was originally *parir*: to give birth. The *palabrama* “palabrir” includes the presence of the body as a performance that involves a relational dynamic and an affective experience grounded in the sensorial.<sup>344</sup> Like the act of “labrar”, the act of weaving and the act of writing (as handwriting) defies the centrality of words subjected to semantics to propose an entanglement of affects as instances that can alter the public sphere with its emergence. Words are sensible things reanimated by the hands that “labran” the earth, as those that “weave”, “write” and “draw” them. So that, the relationship between abrir (to open)”

---

<sup>342</sup> *Precarious*, 19

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>344</sup> I read here Vicuña’s use of the word “performance” as an “affective performance” that, like Irene Depetris Chauvin and Natalia Taccetta argues, recenters the interests in the corporeality of forms and the sensible experience that finds in art the coordinates to inquire the political and sociosexual frameworks in the contemporary world (10 my translation).

and “parir (to give birth)” in “palabrir” is analogous to opening the body, as if one would open their eyes, so that the act of manipulating words is also an act of birthing words.

For Vicuña, however, the body that gives birth is an open structure that does not rely primarily in maternal reproduction but rather in the births and rebirths as cycles of time where words, threads and the precarious “little things” keep moving in the world while both living and dying. As visual poems, metaphors in space, and in continual relation to the “precarious” objects, the creative processes that Vicuña enacts in weaving and writing is part of a larger embodiment of forms through which things become more material and proximate. As such, the words, the little objects, the images and sounds rely in acts of transformation of the spatial and corporeal. This reliance sustains Vicuña’s suggestion in which the gestation of words is also the gestation of life. The women’s body is not merely a place of reproduction, but is rather an open material that, like a loom, is divided into infinitesimal parts that relentlessly gestate and transform each other in and out of them. So that the act of birthing is an opening that refers to another opening, and so on, where the body takes a fractal shape that exceeds its own dimensions. In this sense, it is not gratuitous that the word “matter” comes from the *Latin* word *mater* that refers to mother and is later transformed through time into *matter* as substance.

This birthing is also related to the craft and way of making history through the body and the hands that could be extended to a storytelling function as told by a way of *doing*. These crafty acts are also recalled by Bell Hooks when speaking about her grandmother’s quilt making practice as a tradition of black female artistry that initially were also made from scraps. Hooks says that her favorite quilts were those for everyday use and expresses a fascination to the link between the creative artistry of quilts and their fundamental tie to daily life, and the focused on creative pleasure. “The magic of quilts”, she says “as art and artifice, resides in that space where

art and life come together. Emphasizing the usefulness of a quilt, she reminds us: ‘it covers people. It has the possibility of being a part of someone forever (161)’. Sharing this story is a way for Hooks to retell the stories embedded in her grandmother’s quilts through which she herself used to show her quilts and tell their stories, to her mind “these quilts were maps charting the course of our lives. They were history as life lived (161)”. The storytelling functions to exhibit the work of the hands, a working through generations that also reflects the changes in the economic circumstances of rural black people, the changes in the textile industry, and, as Hooks says, “the legacy of commitment to ones’ ‘art’”. This type of commitment resonates with Vicuña’s way of doing that is based on these double acts of care and carrying, writing and weaving, feeling and signifying, as processes that sustains a type of history weaved by the hands.

The interlaced process of weaving and writing is also described in Vicuña’s poem “The Origin of Weaving.” Here she describes this origin as a “cross-thread/ the coming out/ of a cross-star/ the interlacing of warp and weft”, “the first knot, beginning of the spiral”<sup>345</sup>. This beginning as one that is continuously deferred resonates with the quipu’s system of recording. As noted earlier, the reference to the *quipu* is common in Vicuña’s art and poetry and linked to her practice of weaving. As de Zegher explains, in 1965, moved by domestic and precarious aspect of the work of Kurt Schwitters, Vicuña outlined a bare thread in her own bedroom and gave it the title “*Quipu que no recuerda nada*” (*Quipu which Remembers Nothing*). The quipu consisted of woolen cords with knots and were used to register events, circumstances and numerals in the Incan empire. They were used as artifacts during the *Conquista* and were later replaced by written systems. Today, in some communities in the Andes, similar artifacts still exist<sup>346</sup>.

---

<sup>345</sup> *The Origin of Weaving*, Exit Art, New York, 1990, quoted in *Precarious*.

<sup>346</sup> There is a large and complex quipu that was found in the region of Tawantinsuyu that is on display in the Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino in Santiago. As de Zegher notes, the exhibition catalogue mentions that this quipu was excavated from an Inca cemetery in Mollepampa, in the valley of the Lluta river near the city of Arica. The

Because Vicuña's act of weaving exceeds the page as the unique surface where a poem could be inscribed, this weaving is spatialized and takes the form of large textiles that hang from the ceiling in a museum room, or they are parts of the threads that create the relationality between two precarious objects, and the word that is weaved in a poem. The *Quipu que no recuerda nada* is Vicuña's first spatial work in which weaving acquires another dimension that still carries with it the idea of the quipu in both its creation and undecipherability.

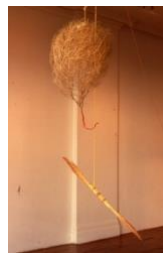


Fig. 33. Cecilia Vicuña, *Origen del Tejido* (1990), mixed media. Courtesy of the artista.

Beyond the poem, but still related to it, the relationship between weaving and writing is more explicitly condensed in the rearticulation of the quipu and the uses and reuses Vicuña's gives to this record-keeping device. When mentioning the quipu that is exhibited in the Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino in Santiago, Chile, de Zegher emphasizes that the *quipu* carries meaning not only in the thing that it records, but also in the length, the form, the color, and the number of knots that it contains. For instance, the constant making and remaking of knots allows for marking and alteration, that is, immediacy and writing. One could say, for example, that the

---

catalogue describes the quipu as containing “seven white cords without knots, joined to the main cord by a red bow, divide six sets of ten groups of cords each. Near the end of the instrument are nine white, knotless cords and one with only one knot. The *quipu* ends in eleven sets of cords. These sets of cord, each with its knots, are formed by a main cord from which secondary ones derive, some of which produce more cords of a third category. The location of these sets and that of the cords and knots within, the way of twisting each cord and the colors used are part of a symbolism still not completely deciphered. We know only that the position of the knots on the cord makes use of or refers to the decimal system. It seems that the colors encoded nonnumerological information. Recent research suggests that the *quipu* was also used as a mnemonic device for oral poetry and philosophy (34).”

*quipu*, contrary to other systems of writing, gives the opportunity for “an infinite inscription” since what is “inscribed” is never fixed. The act of doing, undoing, redoing offers multiple possibilities for beginnings, flexibility and mobility within a system that aims to register and capture the fleetingness of life. The textile negotiates between flexible and fixed elements, it acquires a spatial feature of weaving, it appears in different levels through interpenetrating movements “that are both external to the defined surface and at the same time create that surface (33).” Nonetheless, the disjunction between the experience of space and the discourse of space, between the hand and the weaving, between the gesture and the work centers Vicuña’s weaving as a practice that relies in an in-betweenness.

The in-between that is also the space of the “as if” in the metaphor, restages Vicuña’s saying that “The ‘quipu that remembers nothing,’ an empty cord was my first *precario*” (*Precarious*, 132). What is empty is actually already full, as a cord is already composed of other ones. The cord seems to be a disruptive entry to culture from its inception, it assembles a world of residues, where whatever seems to be a loss is reactivated and transformed. The *Quipu that remembers nothing* illustrates this vital point of openings whose “nothingness” contains the affirmation that it remembers nothing except its own memory, its own way of marking and inscription. As a memory of its own, Vicuña expands the quipu to multiple interpretations, forms and colors where the writing and erasure of memory is exposed. This malleability in which memory is used and transformed to affect bodies speaks to the way in which word and thread are entangled with the hand’s movement that gives them form and formlessness. Through those engagements, Vicuña suggests that languages from indigenous cultures and western traditions are interwoven. This relationship becomes visible in the act of weaving, which, as we already saw, she includes as part of her experience with the women from the Andean region. For Vicuña



the shaman is “she who ties,”<sup>347</sup> is also she who weaves, as the poet is she who serves “like a midwife who helps humanity be reborn within the consciousness of being.”<sup>348</sup> Similarly to the word’s inner associations that we saw in *palabramás*, the entangled processes of weaving and writing allows “ancient and newborn metaphors to come to light.”<sup>349</sup> Those associations are the threads in a loom that slowly come to be interlaced as the weavers weave a birthing community. Within this process, art and life merge when things exist as birthing and rebirthing acts of interconnection.

Weaving and writing are, once again, criss-crossed actions that keeps reappearing in Vicuña’s works. As we already saw in the *precarious* objects, the small sculptures represent the act of weaving that weaves the unity of opposites, the horizontal and the vertical, that in the Andean communities represents fertility and the continuation of life<sup>350</sup>. The objects assembled from everyday materials and held together by yarn, rope or thread are exposed to hazards, as they might be blown away by the ocean or the wind. This fragility illustrates the instances of transformation through an ephemeral writing that weaves threads of connections. The cross can also mean the symbolism for a bicultural experience, as Lucy Lippard suggests, can refer to roads that cross each other and that are far away, like “the thread that comes from the moon is associated to women”. In the sacred Quechua, the word for “language” is “thread” and for a longer complex conversation is “trenzado.”<sup>351</sup> Similarly, in *palabramás* the act of weaving, that also includes unweaving, is analogous to a process of writing where inner associations express how words arm and disarm themselves while morphing into a poem, a collage, or a performance.

---

<sup>347</sup> *Precairous*, 62.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>350</sup> This was the base for the installation *El Ande Futuro* in the Berkley Art Museum in 1992.

<sup>351</sup> In *Veroir*, 101.

Through that state of passage, words articulate webs of connections that underline the gestation of words in a web of connections rather than completing definitive actions within language.

Vicuña's artistic practice brings together two seemingly separated postwar practices that included the textile handicraft and conceptualism<sup>352</sup>. Even though, Vicuña's works is much more influenced by the emerging conceptualism of the times, her practice still differs from the most popular groups in the Southern Cone, like those led by Jacoby and Massotta in Argentina and the CADA in Chile<sup>353</sup>. In fact, Vicuña's works based on the idea of textile as text could be more related in practice to the works by Gego that emerged during the 1970's. Gego's famous "Reticuláreas", for example, conceived a radicalized relationship between a vision that is tactile by confronting the shared space of a room with the viewer's body and the volume that occupies the work of art. It brings a revised meaning of opposites and values like "the constant and the variable, the mobile and the fixed, the supple and the solid"<sup>354</sup> at the service of change so that a fluidity of borders is reinforced both in her visual art and poetry at large. The double movement between the hand and the weaving, or the hand and writing that is repeated throughout Vicuña's

---

<sup>352</sup> It is important to note that the reference to conceptual art here differs from the global idea of conceptual art that was marked by the hegemonic North American model through the transition between Minimalism and Conceptual Art. As Mari Carmen Ramírez has explained, the works produced in Latin America during the last thirty years categorized a big moment of rupture. Artists like Roberto Jacoby and Oscar Masotta represented this emerging group in that was invested to produce a new critical space to think about the function of art in and from Latin America. From the 1960s, artists like them, that also included Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, Waldemar Cordeiro and others like León Ferrari and Luis Camnitzer, were concerned about producing signification in conceptual practices. As such, they converted the "text in a support and surface to communicate new axiologies. The works under these years represented tactics of sense employed by artists and groups in a profound questioning about the function of the work of art in societies marked by repression, censorship, vigilance, and control by authoritarian governments (*Heterotopías*, 41; my translation).

<sup>353</sup> Vicuña's experience of exile has placed her art in a less discussed sphere than the CADA group, who has been largely analyzed by Nelly Richard. *Arte en Chile desde 1973. Escena de Avanzada y sociedad*. However, in 1979 Vicuña created *Vaso de leche* (Glass of milk) in Bogotá at the invitation of the CADA group. The action involved a glass of milk that served as reference to both a policy under Allende's government where it distributed half a liter of milk per day to every child and a case in Colombia where 1,920 children died, poisoned when a private company added water and paint to milk. The work consisted of the simple act of spilling a glass of white paint with red yarn tied around it in front of Simón Bolívar's residence in Bogotá. For more information about this action see *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

practice, emphasizes her *poiesis* as one that, as Julia Bryan-Wilson suggests, not only speaks to traditional craft techniques but also opens a metaphoric realm of signification that is concerned with the line, communication, and the body by using “ever-evolving forms and means.”<sup>355</sup>

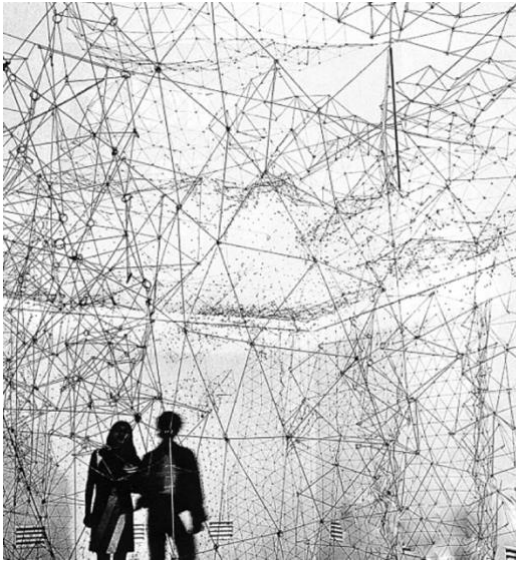


Fig.34. Gego. *Reticularia* (environment installation), 1969. Asemblage at the Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, Hall 8. June-July, 1969. Photo: Paulo Gasparini. Collection: Fundación Galería de Arte Nacional.

---

<sup>355</sup> 111.



Fig. 35. Cecilia Vicuña, *Quipu menstrual (la sangre de los glaciares)*, 2006. Courtesy of the artist.

The main idea behind Gego's *Reticuláreas* was that the painting, considered as trace and drawing, must be transcended to a new tactile dimension that take us to the volume and to the

object. That is, the capacity of the line and the drawing to go beyond their surface while thinking about the surface's own texture<sup>356</sup>. Vicuña's *Quipus* resemble Gego's *Reticuláreas* in its articulation as "spatial metaphors" or "poems in space". The concept of spatialization as a condensed action of time and space, indicates the relationship to a present moment of multiple beginnings<sup>357</sup>. In Vicuña's case, however, the tactile experience is taken further to become much more intertwined with the textual. The way that Vicuña conceives this present moment does not exist separately but is implied with the past as much as with the future. In that sense, the reference to a "weaving" is first and foremost a corporeality that weaves and unweaves itself, while showing, or trying to show, "the moment in which the visible becomes invisible (...) to that when the definition is not yet formed,"<sup>358</sup> that is, when moving through the room of a gallery or museum, people should experience the "limits and traps of their own perception, the wandering attention."<sup>359</sup> What Vicuña attempts to illustrate is an idea of space that is as transparent as it is obscured, where the type of weaving and interconnectedness among dissimilar things is softer, more malleable and fluid.

This intertwined relationship can be seen in Vicuña's various and distinct production of *quipus* that is also attached to a practice of writing and to her work as a poet. For her the spoken and written words are not more or less important than what a work of art can propose. Instead,

---

<sup>356</sup> As Mari Carmen Ramírez explains, the synthesis of sensorial experiences proposed by Gego and Mira Schendel was also the basis for the optic-haptic idea in the works of Clark and Oiticia. For them, the successive spatialization of the point to the line, or the line to the plane, the plane to a folded surface that wants to become volume, open the visual to a reconciliation with the tactile object (*Heterotopías*, 41; my translation). Nonetheless, the sensorial practice of these artists is also considered conceptual because of the dialogues and paradoxes implicit in the optic-haptic experience to the mental one.

<sup>357</sup> Catherine de Zegher explains this by quoting Neoconcrete Manifesto posted in the 60's by Clark, Gullar and Oiticia that characterized the relation to space as in "the fact that it is *always in the present, always in the process of beginning over*, of beginning the impulse that gave birth to it over again—whose origin and evolution it contains simultaneously (Quoted by De Zegher in *Precarious*, 39).

<sup>358</sup> *Precarious*, 40.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*

part of her difference within these groups of artists, is that art and poetry appear to be in interdependency. The word, orally and written, continuously moves and transforms to acquire an importance when it becomes a mediating object that helps to bridge textile form, bodily performance, linguistic and sonic structures, Western and Andean cultures. In part, this is why Vicuña's *ouvre* at large is difficult to classify within the major and more influential groups of artists during the last thirty years. Vicuña's persistent actualization and rearticulation of fiber-based materials, like the weavings and knots in her *Quipus*, is distinctive within the larger range of conceptualism. As Bryan-Willson also suggests the dematerialized art of the 1960's was rarely actually so but rather generated material residues in the form of postcards, contracts, photographic documentation, etc., "stuff of undisputed concrete materiality that nonetheless was widely understood at time to be somewhat resistant to the market's lust for commodity objects."<sup>360</sup> Vicuña's conceptual quipus as a dematerialized artwork exists paradoxically as a thought about the *material*. And a material that works as a connective thread "punctuated by an indetermined number of moments, all dedicated to the marking and erasure, of memory."<sup>361</sup> The quipu for Vicuña is a visual and tactile manifestation whose power resides in this relationality

---

<sup>360</sup> 110. *Bryan-Wilson* briefly comments Marx and Engels thought on textile manufacturing as a precipitating event in the history of capitalism. She explains that the crafts such as knitting, and sewing have been part of a resolution to the crisis of commodity manufacturing and alienated labor in the fabric line. She describes moreover about the emergence of an "amateur" art vs professionalism that has also been recently commodified, as many handmade textiles have also been part of non-revolutionary pro-choice crafters. As such, the notion of high and low art, as well as amateur and professional, seems to be much more contingent and ambivalent. For a longer discussion on these terms see the introduction to *Fray: Art + Textile Politics* (1-36).

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.* Bryan-Wilson specifically relates this to the thought behind the making of the quipu, where no documentation exists. The piece *Quipu that remembers nothing*, for example, consisted of her act of thinking about a quipu, there are no preparatory sketches, no material remains, of Vicuña's first imagined quipu, aside from her retelling the thought to others and writing a note about it. This corresponds to Vicuña's "mental thread", as the critic describes, that "stretches from her youth to this page like an oral history, told first to herself, and then retold by others, reknotted as it is rearticulated over time" and as Vicuña says herself "It was a thought that was a perfect complete concept" (Quoted by Bryon-Willson in "Threads of Protest", 109).

between fiber-based creations and their possibility to morph so that each knot, form, color, or texture has a meaning and contributes to a making and unmaking of memory.

Handmade textiles, as *Bryan-Wilson* also explains, have been foreshadowed as materials that could resist the massification of everyday life by reinscribing the intimate and personal procedures of their making.<sup>362</sup> In Vicuña's work there is certainly a reinscription of this intimacy that is central to her handicraft practice. However, her craft should be considered as one that proposes a relationality between text and textile, which gives words (oral and spoken) also an important role. Her focus on everyday life materials extends a notion of materiality that goes beyond raw commodities and becomes more a practice in which the power relies on the act and multiple acts that are entangled to each other. Her use of weaving and writing also contributes to a record, or lack thereof, of her own processes in which both acts unfold. The separation between art and craft is one that relates more to the domestic labor and its outside, but also the notion of a craft that is tied to a minor manipulation of words, objects and materials that happens through the hands while expressing desire as part of its form.

It is in this sense that Vicuña says that the quipus “were burnt, but the vision of interconnectivity, a poetic resistance, endures underground”<sup>363</sup> and that “only desire sustains them”.<sup>364</sup> The quipus are also part of her “arte precario” insofar as they exist at the border of dissolution and collapse, and yet resist from below. The desire to resist reveals a way of *doing* that locates the relationship between art and craft, art and life, in the in-between the place of

---

<sup>362</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>363</sup> Cecilia Vicuña, “Notes on the Works,” *Read Thread. The Story of the Red Thread* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 135.

<sup>364</sup> Artist statement accompanying the Brooklyn Museum installation of *Quipu desaparecido* (Disappeared Quipu), May 18–November 25, 2018, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/3359>.

what is “not knowing, from allowing a deeper truth to come forth. Touching, sensing, playing with what arises as a relationship unfolds” and from which art becomes “the witness, the testimony of this exchange.”<sup>365</sup> Much like the definition of *precarious*, as something asked, “which is obtained from a prayer,”<sup>366</sup> that which is uncertain, exposed to risks, which is unsure. Vicuña’s *poiesis* relocates this request and readdresses it to what is and what is not physically present, but that still resonates in the world. It is also a dialogue that mediates between what is and what could be: a word, a thread, a body that links them both. Like the threads in the loom and the poetic word in writing, the hands activate the thread that irrupts as potency. That is, a potency where “prayer is change, the dangerous instant of transmutation.”<sup>367</sup> Such a potency allows for a body that is an open structure as being multiple, collective and in variation.

The body as an open-structure allows for new beginnings to emerge from an exchange and reliance. Earlier in the chapter I suggested that Vicuña’s “arte precario” is rooted in a way of *doing*, a *poiesis* of eroticism. What I mean with eroticism is similar but also different to Bataille’s and Kristeva’s articulations of the concept. For Bataille, for example, eroticism is defined as an “assenting to life up to the point of death,”<sup>368</sup> that is, it presumably centers desire as part of a loss of the self that is involved in the ability to desire related to death and submission rather than an experience of unsatisfied possession linked to capitalist consumption. In Bataille’s logic, the “assent to life” refers to the intensities with which life manifests itself that unites the human with the animal, but also to a definition of human existence that requires a defiance to rationality. As intensity life continues to be even in the interruption of death understood as discontinuity. Eroticism is thus articulated as an excess, or surplus, that is also a reminder or

---

<sup>365</sup> Vicuña “In Conversation” 12

<sup>366</sup> *Precairous*, 136.

<sup>367</sup> “Cecilia Vicuña: Listening with the Fingers on Disclaimer”

<sup>368</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism*, 11.



residue that could be used for other purposes that do not necessarily involve an economic loss<sup>369</sup>. For Kristeva, on the other hand, eroticism lies primarily in the maternal. The concept is rooted in the invention of the unconscious before it takes a definitive form “in *eros* and *Thanatos*, the binding and unbinding pair.”<sup>370</sup> However, rather than being a complete loss of the self that ruptures the limits of our ego when reaching the flashy ecstasy in sexual orgasm, Kristeva’s eroticism relies on the maternal for its capacity to both “*establish* and *overcome* the ‘pathological split’” by which the maternal “actualizes the connection between internal and external reality, matter and symbol, masculine and feminine, and restores the loss from which the process of individuation suffers.”<sup>371</sup> The movement to both *establish* and *overcome* is part of a “passion/vocation” that is a biophysical zone that surrounds the maternal reliance and defies rationality. This zone is what comes as *sense* before *signification* (what she also calls “the semiotic”), where, for example, “the writing of *metaphors* that, charged with sensations and affects, become *metamorphoses*”<sup>372</sup> and, in which, the link between subject to materiality is a self-exile, a lasting ex-tasis, that “regulates the time of death into a temporality of new beginnings: jubilatory affirmations and anxious annihilations that literally put me beside myself, outside myself, and, without annihilating me, multiply me”<sup>373</sup>. Vicuña’s “*arte precario*” bridges both considerations and gives them a new light.

---

<sup>369</sup>Bataille’s economic model is better explained in *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy* and *The Tears of Eros*, which the latter explains further the relationship between violence, sacrifice and the sacred as also part of his notion of eroticism.

<sup>370</sup> Kristeva, “Maternal reliance”, 69.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid. This note on multiplication relates to Vicuña’s experience of exile in the way she conceives her own migratory body as displaced for complete and definitive identities. It also speaks to the fragmentary quality of her work in which her body assumes a fragmentary projection between Spanish, English and Quechua speaking worlds.

For instance, Vicuña's eroticism acts through a desire that is both an excess considered as waste, surplus or expenditure (Bataille) and a reconnection to a materiality that, outside of an origin, returns to the fleshly body<sup>374</sup>. In this reconnection to the material in us with the material in the world, Vicuña articulates this zone of *matter* that contributes to a lasting formation of *sense* (Kristeva) and affirmation of life as energy and intensity (Bataille), that makes the case for death (as loss or waste) part of a temporality of "new beginnings" or what I call "birthing". Vicuña's artistic proposal could also be considered as an attempt to actualize these reconstructions between people and the *matter* insofar as it emphasizes loss and healing as an affirmation of life rather than a reclaiming of what was lost in the past as a memory. Vicuña's practice is rather a memory-making practice that centers on multiplicity, rather than a memory that comes from a traumatic cut, the wound, or a complete loss. The intensity that keeps a poetics of eroticism bound to the elemental world is thus one that faces its own risks, dangers, ("the instant of transmutation" in "Arte precario"), endurance and creativity similar to what Kristeva calls a "state of emergency in life". That is, an energetic quality, an affect that endures to some extent prior to a repression. I would add, in Vicuña's case, an affect prior and before, and in spite of, a repression. As such, the maternal act of birthing (instead of reproduction), reconsiders Kristeva's point into which the maternal eroticism "lets the death drive loose in the vital process, all while binding (reliant) the two together<sup>375</sup>. The maternal thus transforms the abjects<sup>376</sup> into objects of

---

<sup>374</sup> We can quote again here, Vicuña's own account on her way of conceiving her own artistic process: "the certainty of being at the center is so intense that the inferior part of my brain hurts. I am in the heart, in living meat, and I need my canvas to be provocative and to be this lively skin" (*Veroir*, 303; my translation).

<sup>375</sup> Kristeva, 76.

<sup>376</sup> Kristeva refers to "abjects" as the result of a process of *ab-jection*, that is, an inevitable process of both fascination-repulsion, where there is not yet either a subject or an object, but only abjects. She gives the example of the moment in which the child "loses" the mother ("kills" her) to leave her, to the breakdown in meaning caused by the distinction between self and other. In a sense, Vicuña's "arte precario" resonates with Kristeva's notion of reliance that she describes as the "the work of the negative", that is a work that needs to overcome the negative as whatever is intolerable to the ego. because it is linked to a cathexis on physical and psychical survival, on the care of the living and the concern for transmission. It is at work, only if its *unbinding* is immediately recathected and

care, into survival, into life. This maternal is what moves from the *mater* to *matter* whose vital process that, also involves death as renewal, relocates this binding, or reliance, as the weaving acts of birthing, nurturing and caring that Vicuña centralizes as part of her *poiesis*.

Vicuña's poetic act emphasizes the aperture of things, rather than a wound, their exposure and possibility to transit and transfer into the world, that underscores, as we saw earlier, the birthing body as an open-structure. If we go back to the verb and *palabrarama* "palabrir," as the result of "palabra" and "abrir", we can see how it repeats along Vicuña's work while articulating this *poiesis*, perhaps excessively, in the mixture between "to open words", "to work the words", "to give birth" and "to expose things to hazards". The relationality between these acts recenters one more time the place of the "as if". The "as if" does not make writing and weaving, or writing and painting as in Vicuña's memory, lose their own specificities. The "as if" gives them instead a movable place in which they emerge as poetic acts detached from the constraints of the "arché" as a foundational origin that once gave them logic and sense, rules and orders. The "arché" implicit in the "archi-intermedialdiad" proposed by Prieto is reconsidered by Vicuña in the sense of gestating, birthing, carrying and caring, as the reference to the *metapherein* suggests. Therefore, Vicuña's poetic acts are an attempt to re-write and re-weave the world that alludes to this origin without an origin. This liminal place of the origin that is not, counteracts the logical order that organizes the world to make visible the materiality of a world that resemble remanent traces similar to how, "in the rainbow, one color disappears to let the other be."<sup>377</sup> These traces are also those from which Vicuña actively unsettles etymological

---

reattached. This binding-unbinding relation brought up by maternal eroticism, could be similar to Vicuña's *poiesis* through the acts of weaving and writing. Both acts are part of these double relations through which the process of creation and memory-making needs to overcome and reconnect and follow what Kristeva calls "a *fabulous investment in the state of emergency in life*" as what makes the space for survival and care to emerge. Reliance thus, is another dimension of *religere*, it rebels against its powers and laws (82)".

<sup>377</sup> Vicuña & Paternostro, *Dis solving*, 7

roots in the combined neologisms in *Palabrarmás*, or dismantles the object's utilitarian aspects in *Precarios*, or how a poem transforms into performance acts by introducing cries, murmurs, whispers and destabilizing the linearity that the act of reading and writing usually follows.

These unsettling and, perhaps, uncomfortable movements could be considered as “precarious” gestures or, in Vicuña's words an “Arte precario”<sup>378</sup> in which poetry reaches a temporality tied to a thousand of minimal fibers and that, like the riddle, those fibers are able to reveal secrets in their unfolding. As the epigraph that opens this chapter suggests, Vicuña's way of doing emerges from the smallest and fractal things that appear as life forces when revealing their “seed body”<sup>379</sup> and awakening dormant associations. In-between revelation and awakening, the poetic act in Vicuña's works compose two moments in time: the becoming of a narrative and its possible transformation in between immediacy and writing, materiality and ephemerality. Within this temporality, the poetic emerges through insignificant and small things entangled to a process of weaving that is also a process of creation and political imagination.

In this sense Vicuña is in line with what Paola Cortes Rocca and Cecilia Palmeiro calls a “feminist avant-garde”. For them this avant-garde is more than a recovery of the relationship between art and life, but rather a reunion that “comes from a power of creation, a ‘pollination’ [...] and germination of potential worlds [...], through the resonances that can be awakened in them [...] (11)”. Here a feminism leaves the “the counter-state itself to gestate—[...], in each act—the world we wish to inhabit [...]”<sup>380</sup> In here, feminism becomes in Vicuña artistic practice a way of

---

<sup>378</sup> It is important to note that *Arte precario* is, as M. Catherine de Zegher suggests, “the name that Vicuña gives to her independent voice within the Southern Hemisphere, challenging her colonized position. Her art *is* Andean, is not *about* Andean art. It belongs to this urban mestizo culture and not to the Western purist version of its appropriating ‘little lama’” (*Precarios*, 24).

<sup>379</sup> *Unravelling* 29

<sup>380</sup> In *Operación araña*, 14.

doing that resembles a way of “reading and reordering [...] to design a device oriented toward the transformation of experiences, bodies and languages.”<sup>381</sup> With Cortes Rocca and Palmeiro’s definition, Vicuña’s gesture is political because it is poetic. In Vicuña’s artistic practice feminism becomes a way of doing that restages poetic acts in the double movement of endlessly framing and re-framing the space-time relations through which words, threads, and language reappear. She relocates poetry as that which weaves and reconnects the quotidian relations between the subject that weaves-writes and the physical object world, a first step to overcoming the rupture between things and people, to achieving an active contact with encountered things. This persistent movement of weaving acts through its course finding ways of union and separation. It connects the things of the world to a handcraft practice that does not achieve a total materiality, but rather works in between the poetic subject who registers the writing-weaving act and the material fragile interconnection between subjects and things. That is, it situates an “inter-medial” place where the poet’s voice repositions the body away from normalizing functions. It also works as a critical tool where another type of distribution of time and space becomes possible and where its reenactment (as a performance, chant, or song) is the force of an imaginative way of being-with.

Vicuña’s poetic act is thus exposed and unfolded in weaving and writing as pollinating forces that propose intermedial ways of *doing*. In this *doing* the poetic emerges when weaving and writing keep gestating each other in an interdependent relationship that sets the basis for a communal reliance of forms that exceed their origins. In that sense, Vicuña’s practice is a feminist avant-garde because, as Cortes Rocca and Palmeiro suggests, this avant garde does not explicitly propose a sort of revolutionary elitism, but because it is horizontal and transversal because it is a force that comes from below. This “below”, in Vicuña’s case, comes from the

---

<sup>381</sup> Ibid.

unravelling of words, things, and voices, as signs that regenerate their process of appearance in the world while maintaining in tension their nature as floating signifiers. That is, as signs that are, as Catherine Malabou's reads Deleuze, the tangible inscriptions of poetry in language, the opened space of non-sense within sense.<sup>382</sup> These signs come alive as poetic acts in Vicuña's works that highlight their appearance as blind spots that include not an absence of sense, but rather something other than sense, that Malabou has described as "an unlimited gliding or detachment from reference that is also the possibility of literature,"<sup>383</sup> and I will add poetry. This revelation is radically expressed in Vicuña's poems where orality has the power of a request performed when the poem becomes songs, murmurs, or chants. In this ability of the word to become both ephemeral and material, poetry shows the opentexturedness<sup>384</sup> of social, material and linguistic relations.

An intermedial way of *doing* thus locates the act of creation upfront. It refers to a feminist avant-garde in which the processes and techniques emphasize their own way of interrelating "form" and "medium" and therefore resignifying and reusing them in new contexts. Through this defiance of forms, the poetic act links the aesthetic experience to a reanimation of complex sensations that is at the center of art and life. This reanimation is the affect that moves Vicuña's work to generate change and transformation. It implies a sensible body that works through a desire to perform and alter. The entangled process of weaving and writing speaks to

---

<sup>382</sup>Deleuze, *The Logic*, 71

<sup>383</sup> Malabou, *Plasticity*, 256.

<sup>384</sup> We can also see this open-ended relation within media in Vicuña's poem "Arte precario" (*Precarious*, 136)<sup>384</sup> that is also extended to the word "*precarious*" itself. In this poem Vicuña suggests that "precarious" and "prayer" are related to each other since they share the same Latin root *precis*. From this shareable space a poem is born as it can transform a type of "Doing (*ars*) became prayer (*precis*), and prayer (doing) (*Precarious*, 136)". However, Vicuña's *precarious* are also collective and oral performances that appear in different media and languages simultaneously. Their oral characteristic also alludes to the same roots that share the words *oír* (to hear) and *orar* (to pray). Orality here, then, has the status of a request performed when the poem becomes songs, murmurs, or chants.

this affective center that links *matter* as potency, an art of dissolution as renewal. So that the matter of things in “precarious”, the matter of words in *plabramás* is the force through which they become woven, sensually, visually, sonically, and performatively. As such, the relationality between them creates a haptic experience that contributes to this rewriting of the world as it regrounds our approach to things, words, and processes.

This feminist way of *doing* is explicit in Vicuña’s “arte precario” that, as I already mentioned, takes materials, procedures, and content from a handcrafted world and brings together different traditions and temporalities. This way of doing re-centers art and handicraft as shareable acts grounded in gestating, birthing and caring where indefinite possibilities of creation might take place. In such compositions the poetic unfolds in the course of time, even as it carries these acts own dissolution. Within this differential space Vicuña’s “precarious” is in the here and now of its specific conjuncture and produces echoes and resonances in pursuit of new forms of relationality. From the constant weaving and unweaving of words and threads, the poetic act thus exposes it’s intermedial nature because it challenges both permanence and disappearance. A dissolution, however, that does not achieve finality, but that rather emerges from a place of indeterminacy while pollinating anonymous life forces of what remains.

## Chapter 4:

### *Echoes of the Desert: Voices, Archives, and Writings*

*Hearing... is an assembling,  
a gathering of one's thoughts and self toward the speech that is addressed to us.  
(...) We hear when we forget our ears and auditory sensations so as to transport ourselves,  
through them, toward what is said and of which we are part of.*

Jacques Derrida—*Heidegger's ear*

To hear as an assembling of thoughts and speech suggests both a displaced origin and a delay in destination. Hearing as an assembling, as Derrida suggests, is to think based on listening or lending an ear even as we always forget that we have ears.<sup>385</sup> To hear is to listen while forgetting the organs that gave an origin to the verb. To displace this origin, however, does not mean making the organ disappear completely, but rather forgetting the ear while simultaneously following its ephemeral transit as a sonic trace from one place to the next, from an address to a possible destination, from a *there* to a *here*. Derrida's quote seems to allude to the echo's sense of place as it suggests an opening to a communal hearing. The traveling of hearing as an assemblage of thoughts and speech involves a repetition or an echo chamber. Through repetition, words rebound and displace their origin to become vibrations that resonate like an echo.

The echo, as a sound that expands itself according to the acoustic dynamics of a given space, can be heard for its repetition and multiplicity. As the critic Brandon LaBelle suggests, the echo appears as a "splintering of the vector of sound into multiple events, turning a single sound into a *mise-en-scène* of audible figures. It disorients the origin, supplanting the sound source with an array of projections and propagations. It mirrors back while also fragmenting any

---

<sup>385</sup> Derrida, *Heidegger*, 379.



possible return.”<sup>386</sup> Considering the echo as a rupture in time that allows for sonic events also suggests thinking sound beyond its origin. The echo, on the other hand, also refers to a temporality that *comes in delay*. This reflex is not entirely a static image of the past, for it needs other bodies to resonate and to give sound its specific timbre. To disorient the origin is a way of creating temporal ruptures so that the echo, in its possible return as vibration, can resonate in another materiality that simultaneously defers and multiplies it.

In this chapter, I will first analyze Valeria Luiselli’s novel *Lost Children Archive* (2019)<sup>387</sup> which narrates a family road trip from New York City to Arizona in which a wife and her husband document sounds for different professional projects. The wife looks for the “lost” sounds of children who have crossed the border into the United States even as the husband searches for the “lost” sound of the Apaches in the region. In a second part, this chapter will analyze the musical instruments created by Mexican composer and artist Guillermo Galindo from objects found along the U.S.-Mexico border, transforming them into sound-generating devices that perform musical scores. I focus on how, through writing and sound, Luiselli and Galindo resignify the traces of people who have crossed the border by proposing unanticipated relations between voices, archives, and writing.

The chapter has two parts. In part one, this chapter reads how Luiselli’s novel produces echoes as the “lost” sounds and voices of migrants that appear in reference to the *Elegies*. The *Elegies* are a book in a third-person narration written by the fictitious author Ella Camposanto, a name that joins the third-person pronoun in Spanish with the cemetery as a similar word for

---

<sup>386</sup> LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories*, 28.

<sup>387</sup> From now on the novel will be cited as *LCA*.

“camposanto.” “holy field,” or “graveyard.” The *Elegies* are composed of seventeen entries that intermittently repeat each other. Some passages from the *Elegies* are read out loud by the two main narrators and recorded. The *Elegies* work as recurring echoes given force not only by their present readers but their future readers, to whom they will travel to reach an ear.

I analyze Luiselli’s novel through the concepts of sound and the archive as frames that offer two parallel entries into the novel and as themes that unfold throughout it. By centering on these two concepts, this part of the chapter considers how writing and the archive produce sound to disorient notions of time that are not immediate, but they are rather ways of inscription, preservation, and containment to which we can return. These concepts presuppose physical and temporal distance between their moment of creation or arrangement and a potential reader, auditor or archivist. The relationship between sound and the archive in Luiselli’s novel involves a process that reshapes the consideration of how photographic images and sounds were conceived in relation to memory and preserved through machines of technological reproduction.

This is a relation where images and sounds are perceived when they fix an image in time, reproduce it, and record and replay a sound, like the voice. As Sarah Townsend argues, the phonographic recording of the voice is an indexical sign, “a physical trace of the acoustic vibrations produced in the act of utterance.”<sup>388</sup> Rethinking this indexical characteristic of the phonograph, considered as the writing of sound, relates the phonograph explicitly to the practices of reading and writing (as the writing of sound). The apparatus thus reshapes the literary field and its ideas about authorship (and authority), representation (versus reproduction), and the documentation of the “real.”<sup>389</sup> Townsend relates this reshaping to the Spanish American novel,

---

<sup>388</sup> Townsend, “His Master’s Voice”, 199. Townsend analyses can be a framework for thinking about the production of sound in a textualized media like the novel today.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

the sound technologies associated with dictatorial regimes, and the growth of U.S influence in the region as a form of integration into globalized networks of commodity exchange.

As in the early days of the photographic camera and the phonograph, both the photographic images and recorded sounds were sold to be used at home to preserve the voices of loved ones who had died. For Jonathan Sterne, this takes place in a “late-Victorian death culture” which include practices like the chemical embalming of corpses, a practice with which photography has also been associated insofar as it involves the fixing of images in time. Instead of reading sound and the archive as instances of preservation and embalming, however, I focus on the echo as a medium that potentializes repetition and multiplicity. The echo is part of a process of mechanical reproduction whether it is reproduced through a recorded machine or through writing. In that sense the echo has a temporality that allows for the continuation of a voice that can emphasize its presence and aliveness. On the other hand, the echo introduces futurity by challenging the origin’s death through its repetition and its capacity to multiply, amplify and project itself. The echo enhances an embodied repertoire where a simple sound or material in the archive can be part of a *mise en scène* where detours are possible.

In Luiselli’s novel, the echo appears as two different narrative voices that tell the *same* story, embodied by the characters of the woman and the boy. Through the sound of their voices while reading the *Elegies* “out loud,” the migrant’s stories become present. They no longer appear as buried voices in the past, but rather as sonic repetitions through which those voices become alive and resonant as echoes. In that sense, through the echo, the migrants are repeated and amplified in a futurity where their presence become aliveness. While constantly engaging with the *Elegies* out loud, the narrative voices shift their meaning. making the materiality of the archive acquire a trans-historical sense where no single reading or listening can claim an absolute

truth with respect to the past. The voices “out loud” can travel as vibrations whose resonance defers the temporal progression of time. Considered as a repetition, rather than a form of embalming, the echoes produce another relationship in which sound and the archive achieve a different position in the production of memory.

In the second half of the chapter, the transformation of the migrant’s voices acquires a radical materiality. In this part, I analyze the migrant’s personal belongings that are transformed into musical and material compositions by Galindo as echoes. Such echoes in Luiselli’s novel and Galindo’s artifacts allow me to rethink the possibilities and impossibilities of documentation through music and writing. To think about the afterlife of what is “lost”, or what seems to be trapped in the archive’s confinement, is to think about the echoes’ possible articulation as vibrations that call for alternative modes of composition. Those modes are expressed in a parallel way through the questions: How do we tell a story? How do we document sound? Where do stories and sounds come from, and where do they go?

I attempt to answer these questions through the lens of sound studies. Yet this chapter dialogues and moves away from sound studies as an exclusive field to think of sound as an intermedial possibility to think about and with other media such as writing and photography. It also proposes a contribution to Latin America’s place within this field. The field of sound studies in general was established by Jonathan Sterne’s analysis of sound reproduction in *The Audible Past* (2003). Sound studies radicalized the concept of media. As Anke Birkenmaier suggests, if McLuhan defined media as an extension of man it is necessarily something other than or outside the human body, but for Sterne, the body itself is the first technical object that reproduces sound.<sup>390</sup>

---

<sup>390</sup> Birkenmaier, “Sound Studies and Literature in Latin America,” 350.

By focusing on reproduction rather than sound as an ontology, Sterne criticizes the “audio-visual litany,”<sup>391</sup> the seemingly essential difference between sound and vision where sound is interiorized while writing and vision are exteriorized.

These more material conceptions of sound media by critics like Friederich Kittler and Sterne are taken further by Birkenmaier. For her, the emphasis on writing media history and building archives that include sound produces a rich space for sound in Latin American Studies<sup>392</sup>. In that sense, we can consider the field of sound studies as not only intrinsically interdisciplinary but also continually emergent.<sup>393</sup> In Latin America, for example, as Birkenmaier explains, with the emergence of sound studies, the contrast between the written culture of Àngel Rama’s *letrados* and the oral popular culture of Indigenous and Afro-descendant minorities with less access to education has been more visible. Critics like Ana María Ochoa Gautier, for example, have examined the relationship between colony and postcolony in the context of nineteenth century Colombia through sonic practices like listening, speaking, and singing and the possibility of registering them in writing.<sup>394</sup> She considers these to be networks of difference composed as “acoustic assemblages.” This chapter thus considers sound studies an expanded field to think with and through sound and its embodiment in literature and the arts in Latin American contemporary culture.

---

<sup>391</sup> Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 15.

<sup>392</sup> Birkenmaier, “Sound Studies and Literature in Latin America,” 350.

<sup>393</sup> For this reason, sound studies is a difficult field to situate and pin down, as well as to engage completely with all that has been written about it. In this chapter, I will center on some of this bibliography relevant to literature and art in Latin America in particular.

<sup>394</sup> Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth Century Colombia*, introduction, 23.

My contribution centers on sound as a material and intermedial reproduction that allows for those “acoustic assemblages” to happen and to be composed. For example, we can listen to novels, we can trace echoes, and we can also trace a history in the material itself. Since sound waves travel through different material media, sound is both process and materiality. To read both Valeria Luiselli’s novel and Guillermo Galindo’s musical scores and artifacts is to consider literature and art as two forms through which sound can be conceived as process, that is, in a double relation between materiality and elusiveness. Rather than solely being an object, as James Steintrager and Rey Chow suggest, sound as a process sets in motion its own capacity to reverberate, to be delayed and repeated, and to cohabit with other media.

Sound as process emphasizes a materiality through which new types of relationality are possible. This relationality is similar to Ochoa’s account of the term “aurality,” that is a mingling between orality and aurality, hence, the *ear in relation to the voice*, where the voice is a generator of difference between lives that are included and excluded from citizenship. With Luiselli and Galindo’s work, sound does not just offer an account of what cannot be seen, or an alternative to the dominance of the eye and the letter. Sound as process implies an intermedial relation where sound can produce what Tom McEnaney calls “narrative acoustics,” which Birkenmaier, drawing from McEnaney, defines as new “literary media theory at the intersection of listening practices, literary form, and audio engineering.”<sup>395</sup> These definitions can trace how Latin American and U.S. American writers have created alternative forms of popular speech in their novels, forging a transnational “new neighborhood of the Americas.”<sup>396</sup> This new communitarian impulse to

---

<sup>395</sup> Birkenmaier, “Sound Studies”, 351.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid.

produce literature and art at the intersection of media challenges notions of authorship and ownership.

Along these lines, both Luiselli and Galindo use sound as a process that works with textual and visual media in a palimpsestic relation where they are already related to each other in diverse layers while offering another surface through which things can be articulated. Even though it can be true that we can close our eyes, but cannot close our ears, the way that listening appears in this relationship is divergent. Or, in other words, we cannot entirely close our ears, but we can cancel sound with our ears by using earphones. We can choose to stop listening as much as we can choose to close our eyes. This does not mean that when we close our eyes or cancel sound, we stop seeing or hearing, but rather that we see and listen to something else. It also means that we can hear silence as much as we can hear noise, that we can see with our eyes closed as much as we see with our eyes open, although, again, differently. By paying attention to the different layers and modalities with which sound appears in literature and art, sound as process can disturb hegemonic forms of historical documentation and archivization. Through this disturbance, the migrant's voices in both Luiselli and Galindo appear as instances of differentiation that claim alternative ways to resonate and materialize.

Lutz Koepnick's concept of resonance is important here. Koepnick focuses on the vibrational aspects of sound, and its ambivalent nature—in between science and aesthetics, fact and metaphor, causality and affect—to explore how sound offers a hospitable place for an unconditioned encounter with what is other<sup>397</sup>. Resonant objects, like those composed by Galindo

---

<sup>397</sup> I am grateful to Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, who recommended this wonderful book to me and was incredibly helpful in thinking about the concept of resonance.

for example, echo the vibrations of other matter, yet such echoes often render a nearby source's sounds strange and animate what is dormant. Thinking through resonance implies thinking about the material and relational aspects of sound. Both materiality and relationality expand sound to consider the detours that humans and nonhumans, subject and objects might follow instead of the straight lines.

Considering sound more than a definitive and primary thing allows for different types of relationality in writing, for example, when sound is not "there" and when it is not a mere textual description either (Luiselli). To focus on sound as an assemblage of media through which sound passes through while it is amplified, is to ask not what sound "is," but what does sound produce? How is sound transformed when it works alongside other media like writing and visual scores (Galindo)? How does sound as a medium restage other media to be transformed with them? Sound as process implies a continual restaging of sound with the "sonic traces" that travel through media. While traveling, these traces are staged as resonances and awakenings. As such, sound is expressed through material residues that, as voices out loud, carry foreign relations in a call for communal sharing.

Sound's material characteristics become as perceptible as it travels through and interferes with other media. By working with and through sound and by making its relation to other media explicit, Luiselli and Galindo present alternative figures, like echoes and resonances, in which those traces find their material expression. Both artists challenge the traces that are buried by systems of power and oppression, by unilateral and total histories, by the instrumentalization of media and the commodification of discourses that seem to master and control the stories of the recent migratory refugee crises between Mexico and the United States. This does not mean that sound is completely graspable in their works. Rather, it is both elusive and shareable, ephemeral



and present. Their projects are less about recovering the traces of the past, but rather about letting those traces emerge between their appearance and disappearance, keeping them alive in both their elusiveness and materiality, in their presence and continual deferral.

#### 4.1: Voices “out loud”

*This is Ground Control. Can you hear me?*

*Do you remember that song? And our game? After the moonwalks comes the part we love the most. Two, one: and you're launched into space. You're up in space, floating in a most peculiar way. Up there, the stars look really different. But they're not. They're the same stars, always. You might feel lost one day, but you have to remember that you're not, because you and I will find each other again (Lost Children Archive, 334)*

The allusions to space, the stars and two or more voices that remain connected through a sonic artifact are marks that we keep seeing through Valeria Luiselli's novel *Lost Children Archive*. The stars, as luminous points in the sky, are recognized because of their light. The light that we see in the present is, however, the luminous trace of something that no longer exists through time. The light is the explosion of a star that travels with us but whose referent is no longer there. The materiality of traces that are also found in the desert<sup>398</sup>, from the objects of migrants to human and non-human bones, maintains a material relation with the stars: they are traces that come to us with some delay even as they also last, intermittently, through time.

Valeria Luiselli's novel *Lost Children Archive* (2019), later translated into Spanish as *Desierto sonoro* (2019) is a wide artifact that contains multiple thematic and narrative layers. On

---

<sup>398</sup> The parallelism between the stars in the sky and the traces in the desert mirrors Patricio Guzmán's portrayal of the remnants of those who disappeared during Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile, as depicted in his film, *Nostalgia de la Luz* (2010).

the one hand. we have the story of a family composed of a mother and her five-year-old daughter and a father and his ten-year-old son, the children raised by both, that travels together from New York City to Arizona, where the husband's new project will be developed. The character's proper names are never known by the reader. The wife considers herself to be a "documentarist," while the husband says he is a "documentarian."<sup>399</sup> Both carry microphones and recording machines that they use for their respective projects. Weeks before their departure, the wife meets Manuela, an undocumented immigrant. The wife helps translate some documents to retain a lawyer to ask for the release of Manuela's two daughters, who are being held at a U.S. detention center. Inspired by the encounter, the wife decides to document the experience of the "lost children"—the kids who were never reunited with their families and who were sent back to their countries. The husband, on the other hand, is more interested in documenting the lost sounds of the Apaches. In between these two projects, their life as a family is revealed during the long journey.

The first part of the novel, titled "Family Soundscapes" is narrated by the wife. The second part titled "Reenactment" echoes the first part and is narrated by the 10-year-old son. In this second narrative voice the boy incorporates the practices of both parents and in him the characteristics of documentarian and documentalist seem to fuse. As he says: "I could be both, for a while, at least on this trip"<sup>400</sup>. The boy documents the family trip through photographs that he takes everywhere with his Polaroid camera. These photographs are also part of the archival drive that the novel incorporates into its plot, where references to literary works and music, maps, official records and documents, and photographs find their expressions. All these pieces

---

<sup>399</sup> "We'd say that I was a documentarist and he was a documentarian, which meant that I was more like a chemist and he was more like a librarian" 95.

<sup>400</sup> *LCA*, 189.

are contained as documents archived in seven boxes that the family takes with them. They compose a wide intertextuality that is important both in the novel's themes and methods as suggested by the woman narrator.

The boxes, as an ambulatory archive, or, as the narrator says, "as an appendix of us"<sup>401</sup> are a structural axis that organize and disorganize the novel as a static or absolute unity. Boxes I through IV are the husband's, box V is the wife's, box VI is the girl's, and box VII is the boy's. The kid's boxes, however, are empty as they want them to be filled throughout the family's journey "to collect stuff along the way"<sup>402</sup>. In addition to the two narrative voices of the woman and the boy, a third-person narration also emerges in the novel. This third voice corresponds to the fictional text titled *Elegies for the Lost Children* written by the apocryphal author Ella Camposanto and appears intermittently and repetitively along the novel.

The novel is thus a long narration interrupted by the kids' sudden questions, the couple's silences, photographs, documents and intertexts, all of which somehow delay the narration and end-point of the trip. They represent ways in which two or more stories touch each other where they reach an end. In the novel there is a recording machine that registers sounds all around without having a specific source. The recording machine works as a point of departure from which the woman narrator builds a method for how to tell the children's story.

The concept of the archive helps amplify the field of sound to rethink sound not only as an ethnographic documentation but as a theory that incorporates storytelling as part of its mediation. Considering sound and the archive conjoined, and not only sound or the archive as separate instances, will help me ask the following questions: How does the idea of

---

<sup>401</sup> *LCA*, 27.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

“documenting sounds” work as part of a polyphonic and intertextual methodology that transforms documentation? How do different media like sound, writing and photography give an account or “fails” to give an account of such processes of documentation? Where is the place of echoes in writing? How do you find these echoes, to let them emerge and convey another type of storytelling?

Two epigraphs open the first fragment of the novel titled “Relocations”. The first one is from the French historian Arlette Frage and says: “An archive presupposes an archivist, a hand that collects and classifies.” The second one is a migrant prayer: “To leave is to die a little. To arrive is never to arrive.” Both epigraphs allude to movement: the movement of the hand that makes and remakes an archive, and the displacement of a body that moves in between a loss and an arrival that does not fully arrive. The migrant’s prayer that accompanies her path emphasizes the desert and the journey as a liminal place of departures and arrivals. Such a place becomes an archive of time in which traces like personal objects, body parts and any other material residues are left behind. In the novel, this in between place is documented through devices, such as writing as a phonetic tool and the recording machine. The novel stages the composition of dissonant archives (like the family’s boxes), as well as the movements of hands that collect and classify them.

On the other hand, prayer refers to orality, to a *re-citare* as a ritual that calls out loud for a community. As a *re-citare*, the prayer becomes a voice that passes from mouth to mouth to another person. It works as a way of passage, from one mouth to the next, and as an echo, before and after the migrants cross the border. The prayer circulates along the frontier’s walls, wood ladders, ropes and improvised props that the migrants use to cross and travel. The prayer can also articulate a type of voice that is repeated when it resonates in another body. Like the tools that

pass through the border, the prayer constitutes what is passed, as the fifteenth Elegy narrates in the novel, “horizontal to the wall. And over the wall—quick, invisible—bodies climb and cross to the other side”<sup>403</sup>. The prayer suggests the embodiment and circulation of other voices that resonate together, in difference. As a sonic medium, the prayer expresses both the loss—“To leave is to die a little”—, the movement of that loss—“To arrive is never to arrive”— and their resonance in the bodies that pass through. The prayer becomes a relational position which, like the archive, implies the condition of *oikos*, “house, residence”, but does so in the precise moment of its movement and departure.

Both epigraphs suggest a relation between movement and departure, in which the archivist plays an important role. Considering the novel’s palimpsestic nature and the multiple intertextual connections that explicitly unfold along the text, the archivist is not only someone who organizes the structure of the archive but also someone who manipulates what is inside the archive. Up to a certain extent the mother and the boy are the main archivists in the novel, not only because they document stories, but because they repeatedly compose, shuffle, and reshuffle each other’s boxes as they wonder about the right way to tell a story and to record it for a future reader. The mother, for instance, refers to the boxes as their “portable mess” and when she decides to look into the husband’s box, she says she was “studying the contents of the trunk as if reading an index, trying to decide which page to go to.”<sup>404</sup> She later talks about the practice of “shuffling” as constitutive of the archive, by saying that when the husband is not looking, and “by trying to listen to all the sounds trapped in his archive, I might find a way into the exact story I need to document, the exact form it needs.”<sup>405</sup> The archive becomes a displaced materiality that

---

<sup>403</sup> Ibid, 276.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid, 44.

enables the possibility to relocate whenever a hand manipulates and reshuffles it. The sounds “trapped” in the archive, refers to the invisible details that can reveal the story’s form while echoing the migrant’s voices.

Through the archive a relationship between someone’s private content and the possibility of an outside is built. This outside situates a relationship based on intimacy rather than absolute publicity. As the woman narrator says,

an archive gives you a kind of valley in which your thoughts can bounce back to you, transformed. You whisper intuitions and thoughts into the emptiness, hoping to hear something back. And sometimes, [...] an echo does indeed return, a real reverberation of something, bouncing back with clarity when you’ve finally hit the right pitch and found the right surface.<sup>406</sup>

The sonic language that the woman uses to describe the archive suggests that the archival materials refer to preserving a life's privacy. A life, however, that resonates through echoes defying the limitations of what seems to be confined in the archive. As a soundbox where thoughts and words resonate, the archive is an expanded place where sounds are reproduced, but also where the things “trapped” transgress the privacy of its contents. For example, when the woman shuffles the husband’s box, another archive emerges from the intimacy that they both share. This archive is composed of minor details that can trace the materials, documents and stories they once shared. Such materials in the archive rebound as in an open chamber in the novel’s body modifying the various ways in which each character, or each reader, gets closer to them and helps transfer into the world whatever traces resonate in each other. This transfer

---

<sup>406</sup> Ibid.

suggests that the resonance that the archive creates could only happen through an intimacy that can resist the institutionally organized commandment that archives carry.

The woman narrator proposes to think about the archive as a container of intimate details where a life resonates beyond its preservation and containment. This type of archival formation goes beyond a mere accumulation of things and materials where things are situated in a privileged institutional place that grants authorization for its access. The archive that the woman refers to is an archive that is reconstructed by the hand of the archivist. The archivist's hand works meticulously through the archive, and skillfully handles its objects and materials to dig it, fill it and re-fill it. We can see this through the woman's and the boy's hands, that, by doing a very close reading into the novel's boxes, they are able to find and relate each narration to the details of each other's relationships. They rediscover patterns and gestures to think about how to tell a story that no longer resides in a single gaze, but that is built through the diverse collection and reinterpretation of materials in the archives.

In some way, the things in the archives mimic the movement and departure that the migrants follow in their path, the routes, detours, and relocations that they are forced to make. Such a movement within and outside the archive suggests that stories keep going, that they find different ways to be expressed and, like the narrator says, find the "right pitch" and "surface" where they can keep being alive. In that sense, the materials in the archive become stories that, instead of being in a static preservation and confinement, never cease to find ways to make it to another place, to another surface. However, finding the "right" way to do so does not mean attempting righteousness but rather to find a possibility where these stories, like an echo, can keep coming back.



The woman narrator suggests the notion of the archive is both intertextual and archaeological. In a way, all the sources that compose the multiplicity of the novel's palimpsestic character are exposed, and even overexposed, with extratextual fragments like the section titled "Works Cited" that appear at the end of the book. It is the task of the reader to dig and make relations with those sources; it is a call for the reader to become herself an archivist. As the author explains at the end of the book "I'm not interested in intertextuality as an outward, performative gesture but as a method or procedure of composition."<sup>407</sup> Intertextuality is an archaeological method related to the archivist's hands and their manipulation in the archive, their digging through and search for relations.

This method resembles the novel's architecture while negotiating between the public and the private. Earlier in the novel, the woman narrator refers to the conversations that the family has as residues that become a "linguistic archaeology", because they build the world they share, "layer it in a palimpsest,"<sup>408</sup> give meaning to our present and future. The question is, when, in the future, we dig into our intimate archive, replay our family tape, will it amount to a story?"<sup>409</sup> The method of intertextuality as composition, rather than a performance, emphasizes the possibility for an archive that composes stories as if they were musical pieces to be re-played. In such a repetition, the stories acquire a different meaning from what resonates in the future reader or listener. To compose is to constantly place and replace the archival materials whose movement become alternative stories in every arrangement and possible ways of creative imagination.

---

<sup>407</sup> Ibid, 335.

<sup>408</sup> I am in debt with Viviane Mahieux, who pointed to me that the palimpsest is both visual and material and that considering an auditory palimpsest is already going beyond its original definition. In the context of this novel, it is important to think further about an auditory palimpsest because it is both ephemeral and material. I am interested in this tension that also speaks about the immateriality of an archive and its possible articulation as a memory for the future.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid, 31.

The reference to what could be an archaeological method links the notion of the archive to Foucault's reading of the archive that presents a radical paradox. If the definition of the archive is associated with the *arché*,<sup>410</sup> domiciliation, that is, with the place that "houses" it, the archive can be two things. As the *Diccionario de términos críticos de la literatura y cultura latinoamericana* suggest, the archive is an ensemble of documents, objects, and materials valuable for a specific culture, people, or state, and also a physical and public site in which those materials are protected.<sup>411</sup> As an ensemble of things and as a site that needs protection, the archive seems to be a static place where things remain dormant in the institution that houses them.

For Foucault, however, the archive is constituted as discourse, from which he reconstructs the notion of archaeology as a method that presupposes the excavation of the archive. Foucault names the archive as the law of what can be said, as the system that "governs the appearance of statements as unique events," as well as that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate "as an amorphous mass," or "as documents attesting to its past, as evidence of a continuing identity" and "inscribed in an unbroken linearity."<sup>412</sup> For Foucault the

---

<sup>410</sup> The physical location of the archive has been analyzed by Derrida in his text *Archive Fever* where he presents the archive through the etymology of *arkhé*, which recalls at once the: *commencement* and the *commandment* (...) *there* where things *commence* (...) but also the principle according to the law, *there* where man and gods *command*, *there* where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given (9). The archive as something that commences and that is ruled under a command, namely, the *archons*, situates the very old relationship between the public and the private. What most interests Derrida, however, seems to be, on the one hand, the connection of the archive with political power and governance, and its place as a privileged one like the *domicile*, the *oikos*, that could keep the archive in place. On the other hand, he is also interested in the archive in relation to memory and he recalls Freud to set both a critique, a discussion, and an exposure of Freud's own archival drive. The Freudian thought is important in this matter because of Derrida's consideration that the archive not only shelters the name of the *arkhé*, but also because it "shelters itself from this memory (...): which comes down to saying also that it forgets it". The archive, then, is at the same time situated in the privileged place of the *domicile*, while it also protects itself from that *domiciliation* by forgetting. This movement between memory and oblivion is compared to the mind as the place where both erasures and inscriptions take place in the effort to remember past events. Similarly to the archive, the mind also has repressions that protect it from what it cannot tolerate. Residues, however, remain from these intolerable and unforgettable pieces that the mind or the archive holds within.

<sup>411</sup> My translation; 39.

<sup>412</sup> Foucault, *The Archeology*, 128.

archive is a set of relations that determine how things appear to be said, as well as what determines “how these things said do not create a mere accumulation of things passed.” To avoid this, the materials in the archive are grouped in distinct figures and composed according to specific regularities which determine that they do not disappear at the same place in time, but “rather shine, as it were, like stars, some that seem close to us shining brightly from afar off, while others that are in fact close to us are already growing pale.”<sup>413</sup> The archive is that differentiation within discourses. That is, the archive opens interstices where discourses appear in multiple existences and specificities that permits them to unfold in their own temporal duration instead of being unified in a death sentence by ensuring that what exists only does so in a preserved discourse.

The search for those relations in the archive, that makes visible the difference of discourses and the difference of times that works far away from what an origin forgets or recovers, is the dispersion that we all are and make. Foucault calls this search the *archaeology*, as a method that moves away from any search for a beginning, or to a geological excavation, but one that rather questions the “already-said at the level of its existence: of the enunciative function that operates within it, of the discursive formation, and the general archive system to which it belongs.”<sup>414</sup> In that sense, the woman narrator in *LCA*, proceeds to tell a story using a method that reveals the process through which such composition, with all its reverberations, takes place.

The process of documentation that both the boy and the woman use to tell and re-tell a story exposes its modes of manifestation. Modes, nonetheless, acquire different types of

---

<sup>413</sup> Ibid, 129.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid, 131.

documentation that exposes their possible rebirths. The woman, for instance, documents the stories related to the children's refugee crisis, and their stories as a family, with a sound recording device. The boy, on the other hand, takes photographs that he accumulates in his box. He also records the children's stories, their family's journey and minor details of their family's separation from the girl in the future.

In the first part of the novel, we can see how documentation begins to occur when the woman answers the boy's question about what it means to document something: "I suppose that documenting things—through the lens of a camera, on paper, or with a sound recording device—is only a way of contributing one more layer, something like soot, to all the things already sedimented in a collective understanding of the world."<sup>415</sup> These multiple ways to document stories refer to accretion of layers of history that add up to an archive. This kind of archive is one where these layers create a labyrinth in their own making. Through many detours, the character's boxes expose the historical and personal layers so that the digging and exposition of the archive culminates, as the woman says, in "long sleepless nights reading about archive fevers, about rebuilding memory in diasporic narratives, about being lost in 'the ashes' of the archive."<sup>416</sup> The urgency, necessity, and anger through which the woman expresses her own drive to document everything that is out there not only suggests a type of collective memory to which she contributes, but rather an alternative way of telling stories in which written documents, photographs and voices compose a layered accretion.

The accretion that I refer to, however, does not produce the "amorphous mass" that Foucault also criticizes, but one that is built up from singular stories. This focus on the

---

<sup>415</sup> *LCA*, 55.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

singularity of stories, rather than a homogenous mass of history, is rooted in the willingness of the woman narrator, and later the boy, to read and repeat the many ways in which the refugee children mark their paths and what those marks leave behind. By reappearing again and again through the *Elegies*, as well as through the woman's and the boy's voices, these traces keep transforming their own appearance on different surfaces and materialities, and therefore, resist being subjected to a rigidified history. What I mean by the singular is not individualistic stories, but rather the ways in which stories resist a petrification in the past or present. It is to say that there is no such thing as a simple story, but rather stories that emerge through the scattered details that broke through in the excavation of the archive.

As historian Arlette Farge proposes, these details “form a gap-riddled puzzle of obscure events.”<sup>417</sup> Farge compares this puzzle-like characteristic of the archive to a kaleidoscope within which we must develop our reading through “ruptures and dispersion and must mold questions out of stutters and silences.”<sup>418</sup> The archive, like a kaleidoscope, is “revolving before your eyes. Pausing for an instant, it fixes the precise shapes of imagined figures, which then burst into iridescent light before coming together in different configurations. These figures are ephemeral, and the smallest movement scatters them to produce others.”<sup>419</sup> The meanings that can be found in the archive are also the stories that emerge in between this “coming together in different configurations”, where they have both the strength and the evanescence of figures that are “one by one brought up forward by the whirlwind of the kaleidoscope.”<sup>420</sup> This oscillation between the ephemerality of the figures that appear before our eyes and the pause that Farge suggests, expands the notion of the archive, and emphasizes its incompleteness. Nonetheless, it also

---

<sup>417</sup> Farge, *The Allure*, 92.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*

proposes another way to relate to the archive: rather than a hand that controls and commands, one may have a hand that handles and collects instead. The documents, photographs, maps, or any other material that the archivists encounter in the archive still need to be processed, interpreted, and handled by her. The facts, in that sense, whether found in documents or not, need to pass through a process, one that makes use of them and reveals their processing, decoding, and decipherment.

The woman's constant questioning of how to write the exact story expresses the need to find accurate tools that could give an account of those stories. The use of the novel, however, as a form that incorporates a work of fiction as opposed to the essay form in *Tell Me How it Ends*, proposes that the way is not the objective documentation of an institutional and official report, but rather one that uses fiction as a way to stage the truth. The woman narrator is closer to Foucault's point when he says "I have never written anything other than fictions", only to add, "But I believe that it is possible to make fictions function within truth."<sup>421</sup> This function that Foucault attributes to fiction is not entirely a fictionalization of the truth, but rather the emergence of truth in the reconfigurations and recombinations revealed in the excavation of the archive. The selection, classification and presentation for analysis make an object archival and the recombinations and reconfigurations that make the archival objects move, defying the myth that they resist change and transformation. The novel then, both as form and content, composes a display of methods, materials, voices, and stories that are revealed in the process, in its own unfolding, suggesting that this process is itself the way to tell the stories.

---

<sup>421</sup> Interview with Lucette Finas, quoted in Maurice Blanchot, *Michel Foucault as I Imagine Him* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 86.

The analogy of the kaleidoscope indicates as well that these small movements that the figures undergo are combinations and recombinations that do not achieve unity, but rather create a tension between continuities and discontinuities between the past and the present. It also suggests that these figures function as traces in the archive that do not entirely arise from the ruins of the past, but rather emphasize a trace that keeps referring to another materiality. The ashes that the woman in *LCA* refers to are traces that emerge in the incompleteness of the archive. Instead of remaining in a petrified past, those traces remain to become another figure and another set of relations between figures.

The archival principle of the novel is related to what Diana Taylor calls the “again-ness” in the repertoire. Suppose the repertoire is, for Taylor, all the acts like gestures, orality, and movement that are thought as nonreproducible knowledge that enact embodied memory. In that case, the again-ness is what keeps and transforms “choreographies of meanings”<sup>422</sup> within those acts. The archival movement that *LCA* follows is similar to this again-ness in the repertoire, as it gestures while reproducing its own structures and codes. This movement is also what allows for a mediated process to take place. That is, a process where selection, memorization and transmission appear within specific systems of representation and where many forms of embodied acts are constantly present. Luiselli’s novel expresses the “again-ness,” on the one hand, through the different voices, documents and archival recombinations that the novel exhibits as processes of embodied acts. And, on the other hand, through the novel’s constant movement of transmission where communal memories can pass from one generation to the next.

---

<sup>422</sup> Taylor, *The Archive*, 20.

Memories, however, that instead of being passive transmission of information, become embodied acts that perform as much as they record, generate, and transmit knowledge.

*LCA* thus composes this constant movement of “again-ness” as an embodiment that is more generative than preservationist. Through various forms of reenactments and by emphasizing the details, the smallest movements within figures that keep recombining with one another, the archive becomes a place open to shufflings and reshufflings, as well as a soundbox where echoes keep reverberating. The allusion to repetition as an “again-ness” suggests that stories resist their erasure in front of dominant discourses of power and their memorialization as fixed signs in the past. The stories continue to emerge whenever they are told and re-told, rewritten, and recorded. This resistance is what the boy articulates as part of his own method of documentation, a movement where stories have to be remembered not to be preserved, but to let them reverberate in constant “again-ness.” We can see this at the end of the novel, where the boy says the following words to the girl whose voice is in the tape-recorder:

When you get older, like me, or even older than me, and tell other people our story, they’ll tell you it’s not true, they’ll say it’s impossible, they won’t believe you. Don’t worry about them. Our story is true, and deep in your wild heart and in the whirls of your crazy curls, you will know it. And you’ll have the pictures and also this tape to prove it. Don’t you lose this tape or the box with the pictures.<sup>423</sup>

The boy’s suggestion to the girl is that through an imaginative “again-ness,” stories can defy their categorization as impossible or unbelievable. He stages the force of fiction as a defiance to truthfulness. It is less important to discuss whether the story of the lost children narrated by the

---

<sup>423</sup> *LCA*, 305.



boy is true or false, but rather how a new type of truth can be restaged through fiction. The photographs and the tape serve as evidence of documentation that protect the storytelling function as well as the imaginative force that tells the lost children stories, stories whose traces are not dormant, nor buried, but rather emergent whenever they can be restaged as an “again-ness”. The “evidence” that the boy alludes to also works as an intimacy that is built into the story and its repetition in the recording machine, a story that only they would know and that will persist despite the family’s dissolution as well. The boy’s final claim is related to an excavation and reenactment where stories reverberate and with their appearance as “again-ness” build possible communal futures whose foundation is a filiation outside of their blood composition, outside of the family as a linear structure of inheritance.

Critics like Mabel Moraña also refer to the archive in *LCA*. Drawing on Freud’s notion of the archive as an imprecise concept that refers to ideas like the origin, memory, repression, and transference, Moraña argues that Luiselli explores the topic of echoes as ghosts of that which returns in order to remember what has been gone, what in its absence actualizes itself to confirm its own disappearance.<sup>424</sup> Moraña suggests that the construction of the archive in *LCA* is, a process that both reveals and represses, that relegates and recovers, that is much more fluid than progressive. As Moraña indicates, even though the archive withholds a relation to the fixation and institutionalization of memory, in *LCA* the archive flows with old and new incorporations of documents through a process of constant reconfiguration of meanings and materials. Up to a certain extent, Moraña compares the archive with the desert. She describes both as romantic spaces as well as ones that one can map only partially, that escape control and the figuration of

---

<sup>424</sup> Moraña, *Nosotros*, 227.

directions and distances, an empty labyrinth in which obstacles are invisible and the cardinal points are confused.

The desert, following Moraña, seems to be an infinite and immaterial place; more a category than a habitat, or a place where the human and the non-human can inhabit. The desert's secrets can only be captured through residual elements: echoes, memories, ghosts of the past, footprints, silences.<sup>425</sup> Moraña also underlines the position of the husband and wife in *LCA* as exterior to the landscape they are traveling through. She criticizes such a position as an intrusion in the silences of the desert and an intellectual intervention in a sociocultural space that is not their own.<sup>426</sup> Even though Moraña's reading of the archive accurately captures Luiselli's novel as a composition of residual elements, I argue that such residual characteristic acquires a force that is articulated as small movements that erupt in the handling of the archive, rather than mastering big narratives of heroic salvation. This residuality is closer to what Valentina Montero Román argues when situating *LCA* within and against the BAN tradition or the "big ambitious novel". For Montero Román, *LCA* is ambitious because it does not seek to produce a totalizing- synthetic representation that claims to understand and represent the urgent questions of our time, as understanding has a passive connotation.<sup>427</sup> The novel is ambitious because this type of understanding is a space of "recognition in the sense of *re-cognizing*", of constantly knowing again and keep knowing how to tell a story. It is a story that not only highlights the absence of refugee voices or attends to the histories of violence through which those voices disappeared but also one that brings those voices, both intimate and impersonal, closer to the ear. Through that

---

<sup>425</sup> Ibid, 224.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

<sup>427</sup> Montero Román, "Telling Stories", 191.

type of intimacy that is built in between the voice and the ear, I suggest that stories can aspire for a communal archive where those voices keep emerging in re-cognition.

The residuality that I allude thus helps to articulate a narrative of detours through which the migrant voices return less as absences, and more as presences and whose materiality in writing shift from a loss to an alternative composition of that loss. This composition moves away from a loss that tries to recover stories, to make explicit a constant movement of recompositions where those residues find their ways of expression. The desert, in that way, also is particularly favorable to the preservation of traces. This characteristic makes it similar to the archive as a repository of traces. However, far from considering these traces as an attempt to recover them, the novel, I argue, shifts how those traces, as residues and fragmentary things that come back as echoes are conceived.

In that line, for example, echoes and ghosts are not entirely the same, at least not in this novel. This is so, because in *LCA*, what seems to return, or what keeps referring to a past that comes back, is not a nebulous image or a faint trace, but rather sounds whose echoes find material inscriptions in the mediums in which they are inscribed. Echoes and silences, for instance, also have a materiality, just a different one. Rather than being immaterial things, the sound's echoes in *LCA* are material inscriptions that resonate in other surfaces as well as diverse types of documentation and storytelling.

The archival composition that the novel adopts as its methodology is, once again, more like a sounding box than an institutional tool of governance and power. The novel suggests an archival practice that emerges as a commencement rather than a command. The wife's and husband's position in front of what they look to document is not an intrusive one, but rather a responsible one that precisely holds in awareness the question of how to tell stories and stories

that should not reach any ending, as this type of ending aims for a closure. Such a closure would mean what Foucault also fears, and that is, the status of the archive that, in its consideration as a site where materials are safeguarded and preserved, where things remain inert, they hold their statuses as an escapee.<sup>428</sup> In a sense, giving closure to these stories is also to retain them in a status of escapee. Those stories should not have to be what “ensures that we exist in the midst of preserved discourse”, but rather, what “differentiates discourses in their multiple existence and specifies them in their own duration.”<sup>429</sup> An archive, then, where stories keep commencing is one that in each commencement, they are constantly referring to one another, and by one another I do not mean one voice to the next, but rather an intermingling of voices, images and writings that acquire multiple existences in the novel and highlight their specificities, unfoldings and durations.

The novel suggests how to compose stories and keep composing stories that reverberate inside and outside of the book. As Luiselli suggests, the stories are “intra-linear markers that point to the many voices in the conversation that the book sustains with the past.”<sup>430</sup> The use of the word conversation is interesting because it repeats the woman’s narrator use of the word as a linguistic archaeology, from which a world is built on what they share. But when this shareable quality exceeds the family itself to become “intra-linear markers” that compose the book, a different type of intimacy constructs the possibility that this conversation is relational. A familiarity outside of the family in its traditional, nuclear, and hegemonic sense, and more as intra-linear details in which different stories can share what lives in the book. This does not mean that the novel tries to recover a story of the past, or to give voices to people that have suffered in

---

<sup>428</sup> Foucault, *The Archeology*, 129.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>430</sup> Luiselli, *LCA*, 335.

the past and the present, but rather the novel, as it unfolds, suggests a composition that is built through these markers, that can be called traces, and within which a familiarity and intimacy can imply a relation to the past and to the future.

The traces that reverberate in the novel as echoes, are also those type of markers that reveal how to tell stories. However, I want to point out that this “telling” is not about a narrative that seeks for reparations. This is something that the woman narrator expresses in the novel by suggesting that “stories don’t fix anything or save anyone, but they can, with a certain rage and fierceness, articulate a specific pulse, a gaze, a rhythm, the right way of telling the story” that might “make the world both more complex and more tolerable.”<sup>431</sup> Rather than presenting stories that aim for a totalizing history and articulation of the past, the woman insinuates a type of composition where these stories achieve specificity in front of mediatic and instrumentalizing discourses that make the refugee crisis a commodity. The woman exposes some concerns and sets the telling of the children’s stories as far away from the media as possible:

because the more attention a potentially controversial issue receives in the media, the more susceptible it is to becoming politicized, and in these times, a politicized issue is no longer a matter that urgently calls for committed debate in the public arena but rather a bargaining chip that parties use frivolously in order to move their own agendas forward.<sup>432</sup>

The compromise to tell stories in a certain way that avoids mediatic instrumentation is also related to Saidiya Hartman’s endeavor to represent the lives of the nameless and the forgotten. In Hartman’s case it is about the African narratives and the silence that she encounters in the

---

<sup>431</sup> Ibid, 185-186.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid, 77.

archive about the absence of the female African slave. As she says, “narrating counter-histories of slavery has always been inseparable from writing a history of the present, by which I mean the incomplete project of freedom.”<sup>433</sup> Hartman’s reference to a condition of vulnerability that presents the precarious life of the ex-slave strives to illuminate the “intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past, and to imagine a *free state*, not as the time before captivity or slavery, but rather as the anticipated future of this writing.”<sup>434</sup> Hartman writes from an engendered and painful place that she encounters with the “scraps of the archive,” and from which she asks what stories are to be told. In that sense, Hartman says:

Romances? Tragedies? Shrieks that find their way into speech and song? What are the protocols and the limits of the narratives written as counter-history? How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence? (...) If to ‘read the archive is to enter a mortuary; it permits one final viewing and allows for a last glimpse of persons about to disappear into the slave hold,’ then to what end does one open the casket and look into the face of death?<sup>435</sup>

Hartman’s reconceptualization of the archive suggests that looking into the archive means stumbling upon the only certainty that we might have, that is, the condition in which we find the subjects of histories as their own disappearance, because we “will lose them again, and they will expire or elude our grasp or collapse under the pressure of inquiry.”<sup>436</sup> Hartman sees the institutionalized place of power in the archive where stories are always incomplete. How then,

---

<sup>433</sup> Hartman, “Venus”, 4.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid, 6.

we could ask, can we tell stories through and with this impossibility? Hartman's point and Luiselli's account of telling the children's refugee crisis share similar ethical concerns that expose the limits of historical representation and the pain and rage that exceeds or recomposes what is considered limited in discourse. They both explore these negotiations at the heart of archival research that not only entails research as a mere accumulation of facts and data, but rather research as a critical tool with and against the *commandment* of the archive and one that also expresses the figurative dimensions of history. As Hartman says, "I intended both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling."<sup>437</sup> For Hartman this means a double gesture that far from redeeming the dead, aims to give as full a picture as possible about the lives of the captives. A double gesture that she describes as stretching the limits of the archive while enacting the impossibility of representation "through the process of narration."<sup>438</sup> Hartman's writing is based on a practice that she calls "critical fabulation". Similar to the woman narrator in Luiselli's novel, the archive as the novel itself is contested by playing with the arrangements of basic elements of the story, by presenting and re-presenting scenes, voices and divergent viewpoints.

The type of storytelling method Hartman alludes to, however, does not give voice to the slaves, in Hartman's case or the children and the multiple deaths that have taken place during the ongoing systems of oppression, in Luiselli's case. Rather, it creates "recombinant narratives" that weave present, past, and future. Hartman calls for a narrative that imagines what cannot be verified and that reckons "the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of disappearance."<sup>439</sup> It is about an impossible writing because it attempts to say that which "resists

---

<sup>437</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid.

being said (since dead girls are unable to speak)”<sup>440</sup> because it refuses to fill in the gaps and give closure, but also because it tells a history of an unrecoverable past and a history written with and against the archive.

I would not say, however, that Hartman’s account of telling the story of Venus, as the emblematic figure of the enslaved woman in the Atlantic world, and Luiselli’s account of telling the story about the children refugee crises is the same. However, I consider that Hartman’s notion of recombinant stories and critical fabulation are also present in how *LCA* unfolds. Nonetheless, both attempts to tell a story are based on similar concerns about how to tell stories in politically complicated times while also facing the danger that they will be instrumentalized and commodified. If for Hartman this telling is about “flattening the levels of narrative discourse and confusing narrator and speakers,” Luiselli’s novels takes on a similar recombinant narrative, but with a more textualized version of the narrative levels. The main difference is how they use the word fiction to compose and narrate stories. For Hartman, it is more about narrating stories whose goal is to expose the incommensurability between experience and the fictions of history. For Luiselli, on the other hand, it is more about re-staging experience and presenting narrative layers that do not entirely expand the impossibility of telling stories, but rather restage and dwell in this impossibility by exposing them in a more horizontal type of documentation. We can see this in the way the boy embodies both the mother and the father’s documentary projects to present a history through storytelling so that the girl could have “at least two versions of everything and know things in different ways, which is always better than just one way.”<sup>441</sup>

---

<sup>440</sup> Ibid.

<sup>441</sup> *LCA*, 305.



Both Hartman and Luiselli, nonetheless, contest the traditional requirements of how a story should be told, that is, through plots and endings. I would argue that both aim for stories that keep commencing, rather than stories that follow a linear path of beginning and ending, stories through which they both negotiate and exceed the limits of the archive and its relation to power. By fashioning a narrative based on archival research, that is, by critically reading the archive while mimicking the figurative dimensions of history, both Hartmann and Luiselli tell impossible stories while they amplify the fissures and interstices of their own dwellings. They also repeat the narrative gestures that preceded the theoretical frameworks that Montero Román identifies as those working for the “democratization and archival inclusion”, where “women and people of color sought to correct their elision and misrepresentation in the national imaginary.”<sup>442</sup> As Montero Román notes, in the writing of fiction and non-fiction, women across racial and ethnic differences worked to address the unilateral and archival recollection of history through storytelling.

The use of fiction as storytelling works as a tool of resistance that women writers have used to experiment with styles like stream-of-consciousness and free indirect discourse in ways that challenge the historical accounts that have excluded them. In *LCA* we can see this stylistic use when the boy narrates the moment when he and the girl run away to find Manuela’s daughters and get lost in their journey in the Chiricahua Mountains, where the Apache children used to hide. Here the novel gains intensity and a long paragraph of twenty pages begins. The boy narrates the journey as a stream of consciousness, using free indirect speech. Here the Elegies also become part of the boy’s narration and the children’s journey. The section begins

---

<sup>442</sup> Montero Román, “Telling Stories”, 174.

with the lines that begin with the journey: “And south into the heart of light we walked”<sup>443</sup> and ends with an echo “and we heard them saying we’re coming, oming, oming, and probably something like stay where you are, are, are, (...) and called it out, your beautiful name, and it came back mighty and powerful all around us, Memphis.”<sup>444</sup> Once again we see in this paragraph a correspondence between the children’s journey, which is also the movement between departure and arrival, and the embodiment of an archive through the boy’s narrative voice and the sonic traces that add to an endless narration that keeps bouncing back. A narration like this contains fragmentation through silences and whispers. It reminds us that, at the end, we are reading a story that is being recorded and accentuates the polyphony and the stylistic recursiveness to narrate a story in different mediatic accounts. This multiplicity and recursiveness locates *LCA* as part of a genealogy of woman writers who used fiction as a tool for resistance to complete and instrumentalized historical narratives.

These other narratives, that *LCA* embodies is thus expanded to a transnational and multimediatric sphere. In this sphere, both sound and the archive are part of a double composition in the novel’s attempt to compose unilateral stories that should not be static, but rather regenerative. These stories play with their rearrangements and basic elements to tell a story by staging their “again-ness” in divergent voices and texturizing the apparent transparency of historical sources. By displaying the displacement of the historically “authorized” accounts,<sup>445</sup> the novel finds the imaginative force to stage what could have happened and what happens when the lost children, coming from different places, meet in the boy’s narrative voice.

---

<sup>443</sup> *LCA*, 283.

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid*, 297

<sup>445</sup> Hartman, “Venus”, 11.

Luiselli's novels adopts and exceeds the impossibility of telling stories through the recomposition of an archive that aims to keep echoes reverberating. The book thus articulates a fragmented and layered accretion where things are added and recomposed. This layered characteristic assumes the position of being in constant movement where things, documents and photographs are constantly organized and disorganized. This allows them to reappear in other places and where narrative fragments like the *Elegies* are repeated. The four main parts of the novel titled "Family Soundscape," "Reenactment," "Apacheria," and "Lost Children Archive" reveal some aspects of the boxes and contain different narrative voices that keep crossing and repeating each other. This repetition aims, however, for a distorted version of that sameness.

Like the kaleidoscope, which contains mirrors and pieces of colored glass or paper, whose reflection produces patterns that keep changing, the box's contents and the voices in the narration become visible depending on how the book is rotated. The novel's fragmentary nature allows for each main part to have subparts. The first one, "Family Soundscapes," which corresponds to the woman's narration, contains substories titled "Relocations," of about thirty pages, as well as twenty-one episodic segments with subheadings like "Inventory," "Itemization," "Joint Filing," "Foundational Myths," "Mother Tongues," "Time," "Teeth," and "Tongue Ties." This is a segmentation that is later repeated but changed by the boy. For example, as Montero Román notes, "Time," "Teeth," becomes "Time & Teeth."<sup>446</sup> The shifting of registers also demonstrates the boy's mixing of the archival and documentary practice of the mother and father. The inclusion of the "and" that both joints and separates suggests what the boy would later tell the girl, that every story should have two versions of it.

---

<sup>446</sup> *LCA*, 180.

Towards the novel's end, the boy says, “When you *look* at all the pictures and *listen* to this recording, you’ll understand many things, (...). That’s also why I decided to be both a documentarian and a documentarist—so you could get at least two versions of everything.”<sup>447</sup> The boy’s suggestion that he would become two things is also manifested by recording the story for the girl and taking photographs along the journey and later collecting them in the box that he will leave for the girl in the future. The boy’s documentation practice suggests that neither sonic, visual, or textual sources and materials alone are enough to tell the stories that need to be remembered. It is rather the interaction between all these registers, and the way in which they restage the narrative in relation to each other that disorganizes the univocity and hierarchy between documentary registers to account for the ongoing refugee crisis. It is not enough to look or listen, the boy suggests. We must look, listen and rewrite a narrative where these registers unfold to make some sense of the ongoing systems of oppression. Those systems that need to be constantly revisited under different versions and where materials, textual and non-textual, contribute to this understanding through an instability that makes them constantly relocate.

Even though the woman and the husband are both working on projects that document sound, the relationship between sound and the archive is also seen, on the one hand, in the use of sound’s language to refer to the archive, and, on the other hand, in the boy’s attempt to fuse both documentary practices by including a third one: the photographs. The woman, for instance, refers to the husband’s project as an “inventory of echoes” as she also suggests that the gaps in the archives could be understood as “sound rubble, noise, and debris.”<sup>448</sup> In another fragment the woman looks at one of the books that the husband left on his side of the bed from one of the

---

<sup>447</sup> *LCA*, 304. My emphasis

<sup>448</sup> *LCA*, 29.

boxes titled *The Soundscape*, by R. Murray Schafer. Inside the book she discovers a note from anthropologist Steven Feld, whose research coined the term acoustemology in reference to the Bosavi people, whose sounds he documented in Papua New Guinea. Feld referred to the idea of the “inventory of echoes” by saying that the idea itself resounds the “Bosavi dual power of forest agency, being at once acoustemically diagnostic of the h/wealth of a living world, and the “gone reflections/reverberations” of those who have “become” its birds by achieving death.”<sup>449</sup>

Drawing from Feld’s research, the woman states that, after listening to those sounds of birds for so many years, the husband realized that the Bosavi understood birds as echoes or “gone reverberations” —that is, “as absence turned into a presence; and, at the same time, as a presence that made an absence audible.”<sup>450</sup> The Bosavi emulated bird sounds during funeral rites because birds were the only materialization in the world that reflected absence. Bird sounds were, according to the Bosavi, and in Feld’s words, “the voice of memory and the resonance of ancestry.”<sup>451</sup> After this moment of reflection, the woman realizes that both hers and the husband’s projects similarly rely on an “inventory of echoes”. However, she stresses that this inventory is “not a collection of sounds that have been lost—such a thing would in fact be impossible—but rather one of sounds that were present in the time of recording and that, when we listen to them, remind us of the ones that are lost.”<sup>452</sup> What the woman suggests, through the idea of the “inventory of echoes”, is another way to think about the practices of documentation and its relation to the past. Instead of emphasizing loss, the relation to the past focuses on how

---

<sup>449</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid, 141.

this loss reemerges materially in other thing, namely, the sounds of the birds in the Bosavi's case.

The concepts of *soundscape* proposed by R. Murray Schafer and “acoustemology” by Feld refer to two things. The first one is related to any acoustic field of study. For example, a musical composition, a radio program, or an acoustic environment can all be soundscapes. It is like a landscape, with the difference that it is less easy to formulate an exact impression of a soundscape than of a landscape. Schafer compares sonography with the instantaneous impression which photography can create. And he adds, “with a camera it is possible to catch the salient features of a visual panorama to create an impression that is immediately evident. The microphone does not operate this way. It samples details. It gives the close-up but nothing corresponding to aerial photography”. Soundscapes refer to “events *heard* not objects *seen*.”<sup>453</sup> Schaffer's comparison to photography argues that sound gives another understanding of the world that is far from the dominance of vision even though both the camera and the microphone are inventions of modernity.

However, he later returns to say that while we may use the techniques of modern recording and analysis “to study contemporary soundscapes, for the foundation of historical perspectives, we will have to turn to earwitness accounts from literature and mythology, as well as to anthropological and historical records.”<sup>454</sup> The way that Schaffer compares soundscapes with photography is rather contextual as it refers to a specific type of photographic practice that resembles his own practice of sound documentation, that is, the vision and hearing of a landscape

---

<sup>453</sup> Schaffer, *The soundscape*, 8.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*

that is still objective. In a way, Shaffer reproduces his critique as he discusses his foundational attempt to build historical perspectives.

The photographs the boy takes with his Polaroid camera do not strive for an objective reality of what is seen. The photographs alone do not necessarily mean something. The photographs in the novel are images that the boy takes during the roadtrip in his attempt to learn how to take pictures. This learning process is parallel to the process through which the boy tells the story and reenacts the woman narrator's voice in the second part. Although the boy is mimicking both forms of documentation, the mother's and the father's, he adds another layer to these forms: the photographs are not only taken, but also revealed through material objects like the *Elegies*. The whole process of learning is itself another type of documentation which bears witness not only to the road trip and the children's stories, but also to the boy's own apprenticeship with the camera and the recording machine.

A process of learning that is part of the composition and development of the novel's narrative also means that the different mediums through which a story is told are the same layers that compose the novel at large. These, however, are fragmentary layers. They do not aim to document a total history, nor do they aim to tell an impossible story, but rather to put the pieces together as much as possible and generate a heterogenous composition of media that could leave clues on how to tell difficult stories. How to build a counter-archive, for example, where the various narrations become compositions and recompositions of media, even as they maintain their own difference and their own duration in the novel. This multiplicity is irreducible to a unilateral version of both history and the composition of traditional novels.<sup>455</sup> The novel's

---

<sup>455</sup> The novel both engages with but also distances itself from some formal aspects typical in the modernist novel and tradition, like James Joyce's and Virginia Woolf's famous use of free indirect speech, or the Western roadtrip novel. At the same time it also explores and traces a historical interlacing of documents, photographs, literature and

interlacing of various sources suggests a cartography that oscillates in and out of sight, beyond the listening of an exclusively Western listener. Like a soundbox, the novel unfolds a sonority that is both specific and fluid, even as it carries a dissemination of resonance.

For that reason, the argument that sound replaces vision, or that the visual replaces the textual is more complicated. The hybridity the novel presents between media and genres is more than a mere assemblage of sources.<sup>456</sup> The narrative allows for a staging of both vision and sound just as the boy's narration embodies two types of documentation.<sup>457</sup> This documentation is also exposed through the *Elegies*. As the epic narrative, the *Elegies* mixes orality and writing and inserts itself as fragments in the novel. It is also the discourse that, as Mabel Moraña argues, begins to trace the pathway that reaches the limit, that recovers the distant scenes of other children in the diaspora and that is part of the historical matrix that *LCA* actualizes in a new context<sup>458</sup>. As the woman narrator explains, Camposanto's work is loosely inspired by:

the historical Children's Crusade, which involved tens of thousands of children who traveled alone across, and possibly beyond, Europe, and which took place in the year

---

audiovisual sources, that become part of a sound-related mobile archive. Critics such as Patricia Stuelke read Luiselli's novel as an archival one that reveals the violence of the United States' border policy as an extension of settler colonial ideologies that were enhanced in the traditional American road novel like Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. This type of "revelation" can be seen in the novel's form that explicitly exposes itself as an archive by laying bare its writing and its sources as a kind of curatorial practice of research and imagination. It is a procedure that acknowledges the incompleteness of any representational project (Stuelke, 44). Stuelke argues that *LCA* is a novel of "The Age of Amazon" because its reflexive concern for the misuse of data is exceptionally discerning about the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's effort, in partnership with Amazon, to build databases that facilitate the criminalization of massive populations of undocumented immigrants and noncitizen residents (45).

<sup>456</sup> Even though the novel has photographs, I do not consider it intermedial per se. Rather it brings together intermedial artifacts come together to produce something else: like voices and sounds. The photographs do not appear with the same frequency as the narrative text. They work as interruptions and additions to the text, as materials that are and will be in the archive and future archives (like the girl's box). In that sense, the novel works more like an archive, where things come and go, like a kaleidoscope of narratives and media, but also like an open book, like the *Elegies* themselves, where things are revealed as we keep reading.

<sup>457</sup> Here we can return to the idea of the stars and their intermittent lightning as a way to conceive the notion of memory within the novel.

<sup>458</sup> Moraña, *Nosotros*, 234.



1212 (though historians disagree about most of this crusade's fundamental details). In Camposanto's version, the "crusade" takes place in what seems like a not-so-distant future in a region that can possibly be mapped back to North Africa, the Middle East, and southern Europe, or to Central and North America (the children ride atop "gondolas," for example, a word used in Central America to refer to the wagons or cars of freight trains.<sup>459</sup>

The reference to the children that ride atop trains is also exposed later when the photographs of box V, the mother's box, are revealed as the novel reaches the end. The dangerous voyage alludes to the children's travels in wagons from Central America to Mexico and is also comparable to the relocations of slave children in the *Orphan Train* seen on page 225, as well as the voyage of the Apache leader Geronimo, described in the photograph's caption on page 227 as *Geronimo and his fellow prisoners on their way to Florida, September 10, 1886*. The train also refers to the narrative moment when the boy narrates the journey in which he and the girl are lost and meet the other lost children who are about to cross the border. The boy's main motive to begin the journey is to find Manuela's daughters, the migrant whose mother is helping translate some documents and who disappeared while traveling by plane from New Mexico to Arizona without any explanation. The *Elegies* thus compose a third-person narrative voice that both embodies and disembodies the many stories of lost children ranging from the migrants that are lost in the desert, the Apaches, and the couple's children who try to follow their traces. To follow these traces also means that a new story begins, the epic narrative that the boy narrates until they find their parents again towards the end.

---

<sup>459</sup> LCA, 130.

The *Elegies* are much more than a simple narrative resource. In the “Notes on the sources”, the author refers to the *Elegies* as the container of more intertextual sources that speak to the “interlineal markers”. As Luiselli says, while referring to the woman’s and the boy’s narrative voices, the reference to other literary texts “are spread nearly invisibly across both narrative voices as well as the *Elegies for Lost Children* and are meant to appear as thin “threads” of literary allusion.”<sup>460</sup> And then Luiselli adds:

In the parts narrated by a third-person narrator, *Elegies for Lost Children*, sources are embedded and paraphrased but not quoted or cited. The *Elegies* are composed by means of a series of allusions to literary works that are about voyages, journeying, migrating, etc. The allusions need not be evident. (...) The first *Elegies* allude to Ezra Pound’s “Canto I,” which is itself an “allusion” to Homer’s Book XI of the *Odyssey*—his “Canto I” is a *free* translation from Latin, and not Greek, into English, following Anglo-Saxon accentual verse metrics, of Book XI of the *Odyssey*. Book XI of Homer’s *Odyssey*, as well as Pound’s “Canto I,” is about journeying/descending into the underworld. So, in the opening *Elegies* about the lost children, I reappropriate certain rhythmic cadences as well as imagery and lexicon from Homer/Pound to establish an analogy between migrating and descending into the underworld. I repurpose and recombine words or word pairings like “swart/night,” “heavy/weeping,” and “stretched/wretched”—all of which derive from lines in “Canto I.” Sources in the *Elegies* embedded in the third-person narrative follow a similar scheme as above and include the following works: *Heart of Darkness*, by Joseph Conrad; *The Waste Land*, by T. S. Eliot; *The Children’s Crusade*, by Marcel Schwob; “El dinosaurio,” by Augusto Monterroso; “The Porcupine,” by Galway Kinnell; *Pedro*

---

<sup>460</sup> LCA, 334.

*Páramo*, by Juan Rulfo; *Duino Elegies*, by Rainer Maria Rilke; and *The Gates of Paradise*, by Jerzy Andrzejewski (translated by Sergio Pitol into Spanish, and retranslated by me into English).<sup>461</sup>

The *Elegies* function like a liminal discourse that unfolds and grows as the novel reaches the end, but also a narrative that builds a threadlike archive that keeps the novel going and stopping even as it thematizes the storytelling function as a more complicated matter. The excessive explanation, as well as the excessive number of sources needed to narrate and compose the *Elegies*, suggest a “literary allusion” that instead of demonstrating complete mastery, an encyclopedic version of history, or total control of a story, composes pathways and detours that makes the sources difficult to follow. This “allusion” works like an attempt to follow literary traces just as the children search for the traces of Manuela’s daughters in the desert and the woman’s storytelling looks for a way to tell the lost children’s story.

The allusion also shows the infinity of a project that is both literary and documentary, and that does not end when the book comes to its end. Rather, it shows that the book itself resembles Borges’s “Library of Babel” where “The Library is a sphere whose exact center is any hexagon and whose circumference is unattainable.”<sup>462</sup> The *Elegies* seem to be that “center” around which the novel revolves and through which it keeps reorganizing itself. However, this center proposes a decentralization in which the *Elegies* also work as a book of revelations, as a site where stories are not exactly graspable, but revealed in the recombination of voices as an acoustic assemblage of different sources.

---

<sup>461</sup> Ibid, 335.

<sup>462</sup> Borges, “La biblioteca”, 115

The elegiac discourse works in the novel on many levels. Traditionally, the elegy refers to a written discourse that comes from oral traditions. Specifically, within the epic, it is a chant of mourning and grief over death. It alludes to the oral storytelling of heroes, famously in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The epic also tells a journey commonly associated with myths, heroic legends, religious tales, animal stories or philosophical and moral theories (Yoshida). It is also a form used by different traditions to keep transmitting their knowledge from one generation to the next through long narratives about the deeds and failures of national heroes and is associated with "heroic poetry."<sup>463</sup> Although the *Elegies* in *LCA* is embedded within this tradition, it also differs from it. First, the elegiac discourse in the novel tells a counter-history of heroic journeys. As it focuses on the children's journey across the border, their departure and the obstacle-strewn path from which they sometimes do not emerge, the *Elegies* serve as a focal point that repetitively tell the experience of violence and migration, survival, political persecution and hunger. As Moraña suggests, the elegy expresses universal mourning and condemns the biopower that implements the expulsion of subjects by the dominant order.<sup>464</sup>

Following Moraña, the children's search in the desert generates other losses, new traces and new disappearances, as if an extermination machine has been set up for a genocide, reclaiming the production of capital and the accumulation of territories at a terrible social cost.<sup>465</sup> Moraña continues to argue that the elegiac *pathos* that the novel carries serves as the basis for intellectuals to register such events and translate them as discourse and archive. In doing so, they are guided by a historicist compulsion that exhausts itself in the recovery and organization of

---

<sup>463</sup> Yoshida.

<sup>464</sup> Moraña, *Nosotros*, 235.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid*, 236.

data, so that orality and writing converge in the archive that the intellectual middle class venerates as a monumentalization of loss.<sup>466</sup>

Even though the *Elegies* in the novel has a strong pathos, I argue that the novel does not attempt a recovery of data, nor a historicist perspective that considers loss and memory as two types of monumentalization of history. Moraña overlooks, for example, the fact that the *Elegies* are not mere discourse. In the novel the *Elegies* are also the material book through which the boy reveals his photographs. It is also the book that the boy carries with him when he and the girl begin the search for “lost children,” that is, Manuela’s daughters. The *Elegies* are a materiality that also travels through. They contain a repetitive and reiterative discourse that is both surface and media and that opens the sonic field to a revelation. If the entire novel seems to be elegiac, as Moraña suggests, it is only because it suggests a type of history that is built through a storytelling function that is hybrid and, in fact, open.

Rather than transmitting the excessive pathos that it sometimes carries, the *Elegies* work more like the migrant’s prayer that opens the book to a sustained conversation that passes from mouth to mouth. This conversation travels through intimacy, through a familiarity that breaks free from the family’s confinement. The book of *Elegies* serves as guidance to the children, as a distraction in moments of despair and as a point of departure for their own nuclear family. The *Elegies*, in that sense, also work as a revelation through which the novel passes through, opening it to the possibility of traveling. As the book is also a type of darkroom where photographs are revealed, the way to “reveal” the boy’s photographs parallels a revelation of stories that passes through an acute attention to intimacy and that destabilizes the binary relationship between

---

<sup>466</sup> Ibid.

public and private, as a resistance to the mediatized and commodified exposure of the migratory crisis. The way to deal with this excessive instrumentalization is to center the narrative on the intimacy of a voice that passes on its breath to the next, that is, to the voices (woman and boy) that record them and reveal their breath by singularizing its mediation.

The reference to the archive in Moraña's argument seems to refer to the institutional drive to preserve, sometimes guided by the morality and guilt of the intellectual middle class in the present. The novel, however, seems to go in a different direction, one that recognizes that the archive is much more than a simple preservation of traces, or the sacralized site of a cultural collectivity like the nation, that works as an accessory to policing, surveillance and governmentality. As Arjun Appadurai suggests, the creation of documents and their aggregation into archives "is also a part of everyday life outside of the purview of the state."<sup>467</sup> Examples such as the personal diary, the family photo album, the community museum, and the individuals' libraries are, for Appadurai, popular and oral archives that have been "repositories of intentional remembering."<sup>468</sup> In that sense, documentation is itself an intervention, and all archives are part of a collective project. Rather than "the tomb of a trace," the archive is more frequently the product of an anticipation, an "aspiration, rather than a recollection," a deep function that has been obscured by the officializing mentality of the nation-state, which rests on seeing the archive "as the tomb of the accidental trace, rather than as the material site of a collective will to remember."<sup>469</sup> Appadurai's notion of the archive resonates with Luiselli's novel and the archaeological methodology that treats the materials of everyday life as part of this accretion that builds up for an anticipation while suggesting a future communal archive.

---

<sup>467</sup> Appadurai, "The capacity" 16.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

The “revelation” that the *Elegies* produce is also related to this building of an archive as an “aspiration” rather than recollection, where telling a story, as the woman narrator suggests, is a way to find the precise pulse, knowing in advance that stories do not fix anything nor save anyone, but that they rather are a way of “subtracting the future from the past, the only way of finding clarity in hindsight.”<sup>470</sup> The children are, in fact, those who suggest the narrative to write the story. By forcing their parents to find the precise shape, the children give clues as to the storytelling function that the novel assumes. This function is shaped by what the narrator calls “little knowledges,” that is, practical, minor and apparently insignificant pieces of advice on everyday life like “how you cut your own nails, this is the temperature of a real hug, this is how you untangle knots in your hair, this is how I love you.”<sup>471</sup> Precision, in this case, does not mean fixity, but rather attention to minor details that, like a photograph, are cut out but related to a collective project.

Storytelling through the intimacy of the voice as something more shareable and tied to the everyday can be seen both in the novel’s composition through intertextuality as a deliberate project in which the *Elegies* embody the “intralinear” markers, as well as the oral function of the prayer that calls out a community of migrants. In that sense, the temporal subtraction that the woman narrator identifies as part of the little knowledge that parents can pass on to their children resembles the minor details that the woman narrator encounters in the husband’s box. A little before the woman records a voice note in the novel, she, once again, shuffles the contents of one of her husband’s boxes and finds the book of photographs by Sally Mann titled *Immediate*

---

<sup>470</sup> *LCA* 170.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*

*Family*. The woman says that she has always liked the way that Mann sees childhood and what she chooses to see as childhood:

vomit, bruises, nakedness, wet beds, defiant gazes, confusion, innocence, untamed wildness. I also like the constant tension in those pictures, a tension between document and fabrication, between capturing a unique fleeting instant and staging an instant. She wrote somewhere that photographs create their own memories, and supplant the past. In her pictures there isn't nostalgia for the fleeting moment, captured by chance with a camera. Rather, there's a confession: this moment captured is not a moment stumbled upon and preserved but a moment stolen, plucked from the continuum of experience (...).<sup>472</sup>

To steal a moment from experience and an instant from the time that advances suggests a recomposition of the ephemeral and its staging as a reinscription of memory. Rather than attending to a type of memory that looks for absolute preservation as a static domain in reference to a nostalgia, the woman narrator proposes that “vomit, bruises, nakedness, wet beds, (...)”, are marks that survive experience, there where the image captured not only indicates the absence of a body that was there, but the mark that emerges, that reverberates as a possible staging. To choose the mark that emerges as a staging of the instant, is to understand this mark as residue that, by becoming photographic, becomes “partial slivers and borrowed memories.”<sup>473</sup> To tell a story parallels “making” a memory, as a staging of these marks. In the enactment of these marks, these apparently minor details are no longer passive descriptions but details that inform and affect experience.

---

<sup>472</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid, 45.



How to tell a story or create a memory are questions that stage themselves in the boy's narration, in the recording that becomes a composition for the girl in the future. In this other documentation, photographs are subtracted from the continuum of the journey as instants that, like echoes, resonate in another body and follow a retrospective listening. This other documentation synthesizes a collection of minor parts produced with and outside the novel, from its immediate present of reading to an open future for readings to come.<sup>474</sup> A new synthesis that might as well be called an archive of aspirations, where “vomit, bruises, nakedness, wet beds, (...)” become minor details in which the looseness of memory, of experience and the building of an archive is exposed. There the index alludes to forms of life that, in commonality, keeps telling a memory from the intimate detail that irrupts in the institutional archive, the culturized gaze, the commodified listening and programmatic time.

On the other hand, the analysis of Mann's photographs allows for a “now” that becomes the object of memories. These objects express themselves as sonic traces through a second reflection by the woman, one that she manifests while reading the *Elegies* out loud and recording her voice in the tape machine:

My eyes move along the ink lines of the page; my voice, low and steady, speaks the words: gulp, spit, snap, crackle, crush; my recorder registers each one of them in digital bytes; and my mind converts the sum of them into impressions, images, future borrowed memories. I take a pencil from my bag and make a note on the last page of the book:

---

<sup>474</sup> The elegies travel through the train and get lost. They aim to reach out someone else who will find it, touch it and read it, and, perhaps, why not, reveal some photographs.

‘Must record a document that registers the soundmarks, traces, and echoes that lost children leave behind.’<sup>475</sup>

Photographic marks: vomit, bruises, nakedness, wet beds become soundmarks “gulp, spit, snap, crackle, crush”. This passage from one medium to another insinuates that neither the audible nor the inaudible manifests itself without a mediation that reproduces it, that transports it and refracts it as vibratory energies. The translation from images to sounds and from sounds to images, situates the woman’s voice in the narrative space through the sounds that, like echoes, she repeats while reading the *Elegies*. Through the *Elegies* the voices reemerge out loud when they are reread by the woman and the boy’s voices, suggesting a new order in which they reemerge as echo of an existing order, that corresponds to the woman’s narration, and the reconfiguration of another order, the boy’s narration, to an order yet to come: the possibility that both stories will be listened to in the future. This possibility allows for an intimacy where the voice becomes a communal place. In that place the story continues in the girl’s future memory and the future readers who will find the *Elegies* travelling on the train. Such a voice is open to encounters with others, possible transformations, and a constant “again-ness.” In the voice note the woman rewrites the *Elegies*, just as the boy rewrites the first part of the novel out loud. The verbs “gulp,” “spit,” “snap,” “crackle,” and “crush” are active soundmarks that expose themselves as vibrations that are known and perceived through their materiality.

The materiality of vibrations makes visible the continual oscillation between the ephemeral and its staging, between the story that passes by and its continual composition. This materiality corresponds to the intervention and composition—in the musical sense—of *a scene*

---

<sup>475</sup> Ibid, 136.

of reading that is both intimate and impersonal. It is a scene in which the vibrations of the voice are not measured recurrences of the same, but metrical rhythms, detours and differentiations. The visual and sonic marks that the woman narrator refers to are the pulsations that mark these rhythms that interrupt time. Those pulsations allow for the fragmentariness and recursiveness through which stories are told by what they have in the immediacy of everydayness and the capacity to return to them through the echo's delay. This scene alludes to the doubling of immediacy and delay, and insinuates that there is movement whenever one is moved by something else. This oscillating nature that sound embodies articulates a liminal space of intimacy that resonates in writing.

Sound is sonic matter and relation, displacement and residue that not only exhibits the “unarchivable residue of the archive,”<sup>476</sup> but that, when it resonates, also searches for new surfaces on which this residue can signify. Sound as resonance maintains the tension between ephemerality and the possibility to produce temporal transformations in the continuum of time, but from a different equilibrium that alters the story. The boy's narrative use of free indirect speech makes the *Elegies* become part of the main narrative that he is now narrating. The boy's narrative produces a tension between what is not entirely fixed, not entirely silenced, and possibly reverberant. It also suggests that echoes, like the prayer, survive in intimacy. An afterlife of echoes suggests a life where the echoes emerge from the minor details of everydayness, or from the minimal unit of phonemes as another form of how sound is written. Little details can be considered fragmented units that generate an instance of closeness between

---

<sup>476</sup> Derrida, *Archive*, 12.

the voice and the ear, setting the stage for the familiar outside of the family, for the archive outside of its institutional *oikos*.

In *LCA*, sound and the archive are materially related. This relationship emerges from the re-inscription of echoes as sonic and visual residues within which a memory and a story are in the making. This processual characteristic of being in constant “againnes” allows for an archive that is much more imaginative than nostalgic, one that aims for mobility where the archive keeps reshaping itself. The scene of reading out loud, that later becomes a recording, refers both to the migrant’s prayer and its condition of *re-citare*. That is, to quote, to repeat, once again, while emphasizing, in this case, breath as the intimate medium that calls for a community out loud. The prayer works like a reading out loud, there where the woman narrator says that “reading others’ words, inhabiting their minds for a while, has always been an entry point to my own thoughts.”<sup>477</sup> How do we think about her sound project? Where does it start and where does it end? Standing and contemplating the seven boxes, the woman wonders about what other minds might do with the same collection of “bits and scraps, now temporarily archived in a given order inside those boxes. How many possible combinations of all those documents were there? And what completely different stories would be told by their varying permutations, shufflings, and reorderings?”<sup>478</sup> To inhabit the minds of others while reading suggests that the act of reading is also an act of listening that emphasizes both proximity and distance.

The scene the woman describes is much more auditory than visual and tactile. She describes her eyes moving along the book’s ink as if she was almost touching the words with her eyes. As the woman decides to record her voice out loud, this auditory experience becomes a

---

<sup>477</sup> *LCA*, 56.

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid.*

reconfiguration of space that is more fluid. As it is not only a reading in silence, but a reading aloud and recording, the woman's voice gives way to a plural and permeated space embodied through the *Elegies*. This book, as it keeps passing from hand to hand, becomes a container of echoes that carry with it the possibility to keep moving, that is, the capacity to be inhabited by others and set off revelations. This can also be seen at the end of the novel, when the boy reveals the last segment of the recording he is making for the girl. As he talks to her, he interrupts himself to talk to the mother. He says:

I'm sorry I lost your map, Ma, and took your book about the lost children, and then went and lost it, too. I left it on the train that took us from Lordsburg to Bowie. Maybe someone will find it one day and read it. And maybe a train was the right place for it to end up. At least I recorded some parts of it in this recording, so not everything is lost. I know you also recorded other bits, so perhaps we have almost all of it on tape.<sup>479</sup>

The *Elegies*, as the book about the lost children resembles both what is lost and what can be found, expresses its condition of being open to being touched by others. Like the children and the Apaches, like many other refugees and migrants, the book travels through the train, it becomes a site of encounters that carries ephemeral residues of previous ones. What seems to be too intimate in the book becomes shareable and transient. The *Elegies* become a place for materiality and relationality. Like a soundbox, the book mirrors the novel and vice versa. The experiences of listening, reading, and recording become auditory as they are embodied in a voice that responds and resounds. In this quality of resonance, sound is, as Jean-Luc Nancy explains, "tendentially methexic (that is, having to do with participation, sharing or contagion); it spreads in space,

---

<sup>479</sup> *LCA*, 302.

where it resounds while still resounding ‘in me’.”<sup>480</sup> More than contagion, the *Elegies* suggest an entanglement of sources, as well as an entanglement of voices that compose acoustic narratives.

In *LCA*, the *Elegies*, slowly take their own space throughout the novel as a book within the book. The book reveals both the photographs and an alternate way to make memories, write stories, and document history. In this other way, memory and the archive meet in a heuristic way where things are revealed along the way and in a retrospective position in front of the past. The echoes work, in that sense, as channels through which temporalities and stories are revealed with some delay and in view of a prospective future. The photographs and documents that are in each of the character’s boxes, as well as the stories, work as tools that present alternatives to the silences, gaps and erasures of history. They focus on a movement within the gaps of dominant narratives and create possibilities for accentuating their fracturing and materializing it on other surfaces that open spaces for those stories to emerge.

To read Luiselli’s novel through the relationship between sound and the archive is to think about how both concepts are continuously entangled with one another. As two entries they contain residual and ephemeral traces that are actualized in each narrative voice, but also in future memories and stories that will come to transform the experience of reading and listening. If, in the realm of sound, for example, a kind of ephemerality is structural to the process of transmission has been made explicit with digitization, as Rey Chow and James A. Streintrager suggest, such ephemerality might be treated as less about decay, degradation and depletion and more about “a state in flux” in which the object of sound becomes a “series of infinitely encodable variations” and in which the discourse of loss, as part of what constitutes sound, will

---

<sup>480</sup> Ibid, 10.

be “remixed and reprocessed.”<sup>481</sup> What is lost, even in the technical sphere, is part of what can be reused and remixed in the realm of sound. The remediatization of sound that Chow and Streintrager refers to becomes a way to redirect the discourse of loss and nostalgia that the woman narrator alludes to in Luiselli’s novel as part of Mann’s photographic practice.

To find a place for the sounds trapped in the archive is to allow them to resonate as echoes. As such, those sounds resist being what they were, they survive their own loss and become sounds that are stolen from the continuum of time and history. They find tiny temporal breaks as they reemerge in the voices that read out loud in a *re-citare*. This repetition that does not aim to recover a lost history or to replace it but rather for what aspires to come: an archive for, not about, the lost children, both in the past and the future. It is a re-trace, or re-citare, that aims for an aspiration that, while having no place in its moment of articulation, pulses for its presence and appearance. It is an aspiration in which the lost children maintain their presence while they are being re-cited, recorded and where the Elegies become a prayer that keep the migrants’ paths alive as living interstices where life and history are forged. In those fissures the migrant’s voices can be heard, seen, and written as echoes. Their voices rebound in the echo’s repetition, in the in-betweenness of their arrival and departure, in their moments of appearance and in those where they are not only coming but about to come.

---

<sup>481</sup> Chow and Streintrager, “Sound Objects”, 7.

#### 4.2: When Air becomes Whispers



Fig. 36. Guillermo Galindo, *Caravana a Color (Color Caravan)*, 2015, archival pigmented inkjet with acrylic, 112 x 76 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Magnolia Editions

In his book *Listening* Jean-Luc Nancy Jean-Luc Nancy perceptively describes the presence in sound as “a coming and a passing, an extending and a penetrating.”<sup>482</sup> He articulates sound as a phenomenon that both emerges and expands, simultaneously deferred and transferred. Accordingly, sound's inherent vibrancy does not merely emanate from the sonorous body; instead, it extends and propels itself, resolving into vibrations that simultaneously reflect it back onto itself and position it beyond its original confines.<sup>483</sup> This interplay between a self-

---

<sup>482</sup> Nancy, *Listening* 13.

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid.*



propagating sound and its eventual settlement onto another surface, manifested as a vibration that places it both within and beyond itself, can be suitably conceptualized as resonance.

In this context, Lutz Koepnick offers a compelling definition of resonance. He positions it in direct correlation with the production of echoes, proposing that to resonate is also “to echo with something, to enable or create an echo.”<sup>484</sup> It implies giving an echo to something, allowing it to arrive and occupy a space so that there emerges a “connection, attachment, and reciprocity,” which we characterize as resonance, whether it is strictly physical or stunningly affective in nature.<sup>485</sup> By exploring the concept of the echo in conjunction with Nancy’s ideas, we can argue that the echo is not merely a penetrating sound. Instead, it is a generative and expansive force that arrives and transits through spaces. It doesn’t pierce but explodes in its repetition, causing reverberation. The echo, therefore, isn’t an intrusive, penetrating, presence but a rhythmic, transformative entity that resonates and amplifies.

The echo is sound open to transformation. Because sound can resonate, or sound *again*, it has even more unexplored capacities to affect experience and to suggest alternative forms of life. The echo is not just a sound that bounces back as the same, but rather returns in order to reverberate with something else. To think about the echo is also to rethink the muted feminine counterpart of Narcissus in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Is to think about Echo beyond her resonant life and death, and beyond the confinements of male fantasies that, as Koepnick explains, still frames today’s uses of the term<sup>486</sup>. But Echo was not just the feminine muted attachment to the

---

<sup>484</sup> Koepnick, 6.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid.

<sup>486</sup> Ibid, 5.

Narcissus, not a mere resonance chamber of the world, either, but an active attentiveness and vitality through which the sound of others resonated.

Viewed as an embodiment of a sound that cannot generate new sounds, but only repeats and amplifies the existing ones, Echo suggests a unique form of echo. Its novelty lies not in the seemingly redundant repetitions it creates, but in the way it engenders a system of thought. Through this system, it becomes possible to conceptualize a kind of resonance that sustains the world's sounds—an always interconnected resonance that functions as a vital force. Through this force, relationships find ways to extend beyond their confines, and to interact with others outside of predetermined frameworks. The echo, thus, is not simply a repetitive phenomenon, but a transformative force that pushes boundaries and redefines relationships.

Owing to its inherent characteristic of resonance, the echo facilitates a reconsideration of how the concept of resonance influences the world—propagating sound in repetitive patterns and evoking emotions that alter the connections between listening, reading, and writing. In this second section of the chapter, I turn my focus to Mexican artist, performer, and musician Guillermo Galindo, whose innovative practices of composition through musical artifacts redefine the written, visual, and sonic realms, as well as the relationships among them. In that sense, Galindo's musical instruments allows for a reconceptualization of the echo beyond traditional borders of what is perceptible. These echoes reflect not only the passage of the migrants but also the invisible yet material traces of their experiences. As I will develop further, in this chapter I explore how these sonic traces, far from being mere auditory phenomena, embody the paradox of the material transience and the ephemeral continuity of experiences inherent to the migrants' journey. By recasting these residual objects into audible bodies, Galindo challenges us to experience and engage with these overlooked narratives in a unique way.

Because the echo carries with it the characteristic of resonance, it allows us to rethink the ways in which the concept of resonance impacts the world, carries sound in repetitions and affections that can change the ways in which listening, reading and writing are related. Galindo's unique approach is characterized by his use of residual objects left behind by migrants crossing the border between Mexico and the United States. These remnants are transformed into musical instruments and graphic scores. I analyze Galindo's works as ones that foster a different form of relationality, thereby shedding light on contemporary debates about the interplay between matter and media and their relevance to a critique of modernity.

As Veit Erlmann suggests, resonance's denotation of the materiality of auditory perception allows it to transcend the dichotomy between "the materiality of things and the immateriality of signs that has been at the center of Western thought for much of the modern era."<sup>487</sup> In essence, resonance prompts us to question the intrinsic nature and essence of objects, as well as the origins and destinations of sonic sources and traces. Consequently, resonance becomes a dual entity, embodying both matter and relationality, emphasizing the potential second life of objects and their activation as sonic events. It also underlines the role of the echo, not merely as a passive resonator of the world's sounds, but as an active amplifier of others' sounds.

Invoking the echo and resonance as auditory figures, also implies to consider sonic traces as part of the echo's vitality. If in the Narcissus myth, the role of Echo produces this force, it also

---

<sup>487</sup> Erlamn, *Keywords*, 181. I am in great debt to Luis F. Avilés who introduced me to this book which became the basis to my thinking about sound.

means that Echo magnifies the world's sounds, indicating that resonance requires a process of mediation and activation that travels through the intimacy of the voice channeled through Galindo's musical objects. In this sense, In Galindo's artistic practice, the assemblage of material residues into musical instruments, or sound objects as he calls them, puts this mediation upfront. The voice's resonance that travel through sonic objects transforms individuality, fixity and pre-determination of forms into a shared relationality. In here, the echo moves beyond the idea of evoking the past, and rather gives an afterlife to the migrant's personal belonging. As such, in this afterlife, the object's voice resonates, arrives, and lands into an ear where residues and bodies intersect.

Bridging from the previous analysis of resonance and the echo in Guillermo Galindo's work, we can further delve into the broader roles of music and sound. They aren't just mediums for subjective enjoyment and temporal experiences but also vital forces that shape our perception of reality. To better understand these characteristics, Mexican curator and philosopher Carlos Prieto Acevedo proposes the concept of 'audiotopía' – a time-space made of rhythms and refrains initiating relationships between bodies and objects. As he puts it, music “creates an order, defines a territory, institutes a culture, identifies or disaggregates”<sup>488</sup>. It is a catalyst for both differentiation and dis-identification, concurrently producing familiarity and embodying the strange and foreign.

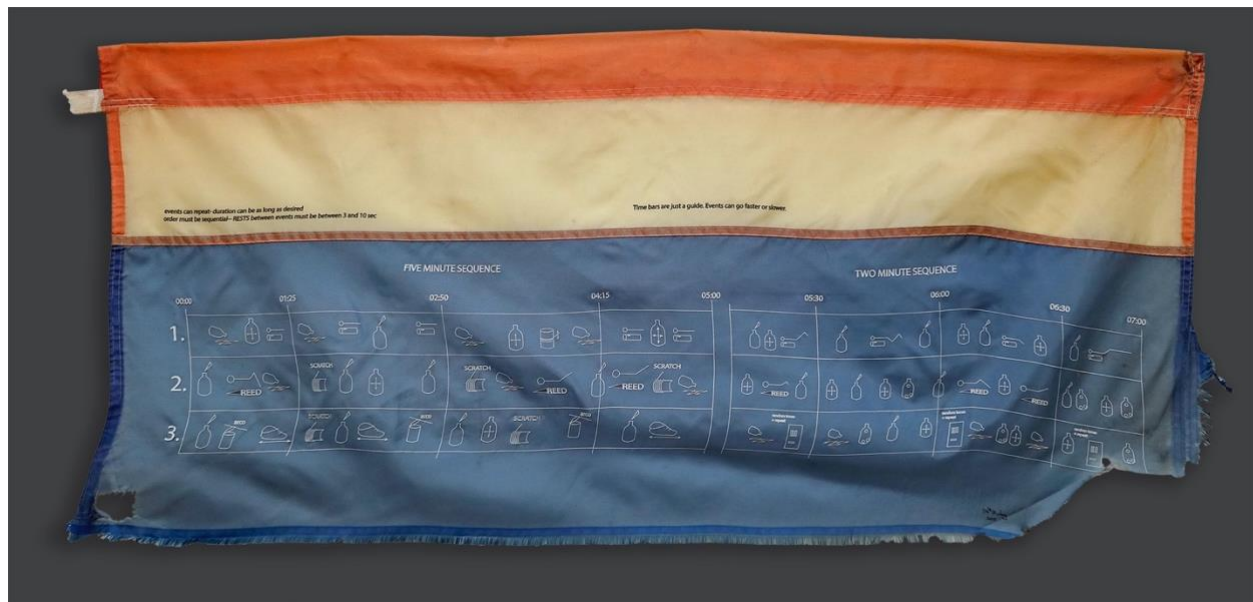
Sound, contrastingly, has ushered in novel sensorial experiences and has reshaped the realms of thought and artistic contemplation. Prieto Acevedo posits that sound today provides a fresh perspective on the era of world images, steering us towards a realm of ambiguities,

---

<sup>488</sup> Prieto Acevedo, 4.

latencies, and potentialities. However, the world itself is also an image, he says, and sound imparts a distinct life to these world images. Sound insinuates and animates images, displaces, and dilutes them, intensifies and disrupts them, and makes them vibrate. Music, as Prieto Acevedo describes, "makes the image resonate beyond pure visibility, and together they form a habitable place within the vast desert of the real. An ephemeral but consistent place where we hold ourselves against nothingness"<sup>489</sup>. According to Prieto Acevedo, sound is not just a liberation from the realm of images and visibility—it's a medium where the ephemeral and the visible find potency. It also offers a space where images obtain a unique composition of the world and foster new associations.

In this context, and relating back to Galindo's work, we can further appreciate the resonance that emerges from his assembled objects. They not only create music but create an 'audiotopía', they define a new sensory and cultural territory—sonic traces that follow the singularity of migrant experiences. The resultant sounds provide an alternative perspective to the



<sup>489</sup> Ibid, 5.

visual representations of their journey, thus creating a richer, more complex composition of a world told by the residues of their personal belongings.

Fig. 37. Guillermo Galindo. *Voices Flag / Bandera de voces*, 2015. Acrylic on beacon flags used by humanitarian aid group Water Stations. 22 x 47 in.

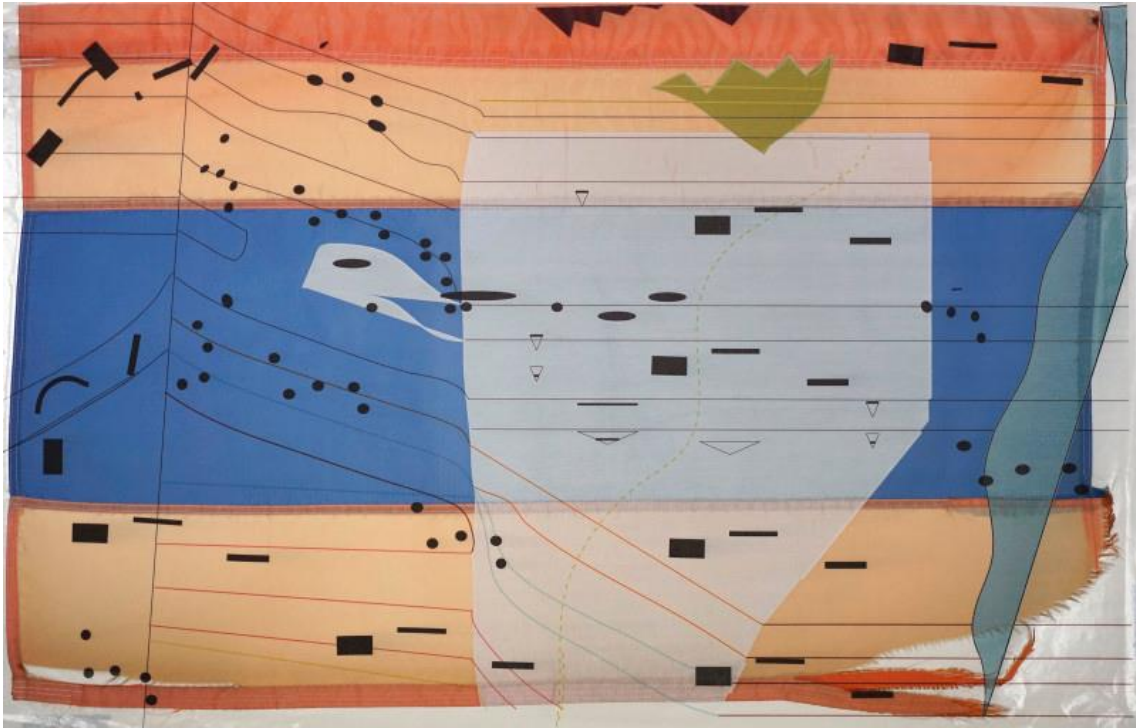


Fig. 38. Guillermo Galindo. *Sarape Tracking Flag, Variation / Rastreo de sarape*, 2015. Acrylic on beacon flags used by humanitarian aid group Water Stations. 31 x 47 in.

Galindo's installations, *Voices Flag* and *Sarape Flag*, serve as examples of his use of both writing and sound to retrace a territory. In these installations, Galindo superimposes his musical scores onto an assortment of faded, weather-beaten flags discovered at the border. Each artwork is overlaid with one of Galindo's distinctive musical scores, inscribed in a unique notation system that evokes the graphic scores of John Cage, Cornelius Cardew, and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Each piece vibrates with its own unique visual resonance: for instance, *Voces Flag*

is neatly printed with clear, rebus-like performance instructions, while the line and color abstractions in *Sarape Flag* echo the playful improvisations of a Joan Miro painting<sup>490</sup>.

Within these flags, Galindo employs the rhythms and patterns of music, reinterpreted through various innovative modes of visual representation, to evoke a living history from discarded and forgotten residues. Both works illustrate how Galindo uses sound as a dynamic medium, offering a fresh perspective on the relationship between matter and the world. However, he consistently reminds us that his practice extends beyond the confines of sound—his musical scores are a vital component of his overall works and composition process. In doing so, Galindo actualizes Prieto Acevedo's concept of sound being a medium that doesn't entirely displace images, but rather collaborates with them, proposing a novel form of composition in which images also partake.

Sound, Galindo seems to suggest, reshapes how we position ourselves as auditory subjects, and reconfigures modes of writing and reading in our ability to listen. It does so not just in a literal sense but also through its poetic and political reverberations that reflect on these forms' capabilities to resonate. Resonance, as an active byproduct of sound, can impact how we perceive history, culture, and politics. As both vibration and reflection, resonance alters our relationship with the past, present, and future while generating what Brandon Labelle dubs as "micro-epistemologies"—where sonic materialities like echo, vibration, and rhythm uncover specific ways of understanding the world.<sup>491</sup> These materialities respond to both the lives that have passed and what they have left behind. It's a simultaneous call and response to the everyday lives lived and their potential for sharing in anticipated futures. Resonance suggests thus a way to

---

<sup>490</sup> For more examples about his works see <https://www.magnoliaeditions.com/artworks/sarape-flag/>. The collaboration between images and sound is taken further in the *Border Cantos* composed by sound, writing and photography by Galindo and Richard Misrach. I will develop more on this further in the chapter.

<sup>491</sup> Labelle, xviii.

trace this openness through which sound and matter, traces, and residues retrace those lives and their remains. The intention is not entirely to preserve them, but rather to allow them to resonate one more time<sup>492</sup>.

In the introduction to the exhibition, "Critical Constellations of the Audio-Machine in Mexico: Ruins and Reconstructions of a Sonic History," Prieto Acevedo places sound at the forefront, emphasizing its integral role in the creation of Mexican myths and the construction of a collective experience that addresses the illusion of progress. However, Prieto Acevedo also posits that sound has been instrumental in both the dismantling and destruction of these illusions, noting that just as utopias have their own rhythms, they are equally "besieged by dissonance or silence, by inharmonious shouts or by the screeching of the accident that makes them vanish"<sup>493</sup>

When Mexico's landscape is crowded by tragedy, he suggests, we find ourselves engulfed by sounds potential transformation. Acoustic vibrations, following Prieto Acevedo, emit "an energy of hope, a sigh in the middle of the night, where many life forces come together; we hear something breathing, something vibrating."<sup>494</sup> Yet, these sounds are far from homogeneous. Some resist, having "escaped alienation", while others have propelled us "toward our own desire". Consequently, sound is steeped in "the traces of numerous struggles and conflicts".<sup>495</sup>

The exhibition showcases an array of objects and documents related to music and sound, encouraging a form of listening that goes beyond our ears, and includes visual and recording tools that have expanded different expressions of sounds in multiple materializations. Prieto

---

<sup>492</sup> Because not all of the instruments are the same, as they require different specificities, we could say that they are specific as much as they are elusive. In between specificity and elusiveness, the hand and the voice singularizes sound to explicitly bring bodies together.

<sup>493</sup> Prieto Acevedo and CTM Berlin 54, 3.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>495</sup> Ibid.



Acevedo's introduction to the exhibition divests sound of its assumed role as a transparent carrier and receiver of information. Instead, he presents sound as a medium that both adheres to and challenges the utopias of Mexican modernity, as well as their eventual downfall.

Prieto Acevedo thus puts forth an alternative type of listening which aspires to restructure the sonic archive through four distinct motifs: *Indio-Futurism, the Mexican Cosmopolis, Becoming Monstrous, and Emanations of the Body*. Guillermo Galindo's works are classified under the motif of *Indio-Futurism*. Prieto Acevedo characterizes this category as one in which the Indio-futurist discourse offers us "a fresh outlook on how Mexico's modernity project melded the country's pre-Hispanic past as a cultural identity source with technological and industrial progressions."<sup>496</sup>

Central to this discourse are clear references to the literary and artistic expressions of sound that have surfaced since the historical avant-garde movements of the 1920s in Mexico until the present day. However, the Indio-futurist discourse, coupled with electroacoustic thought and practice, has shaped diverse forms of the pre-Hispanic era and its position within contemporary Mexican culture. Simultaneously, it has assisted in dismantling essentialist aesthetics and ideologies. Galindo's works are characterized as "Indio-futuristic," specifically due to the amalgamation of avant-garde practices in music and art originating from movements such as the Mexican "estridentismo,"<sup>497</sup> and his references to indigenous cosmologies and thought

---

<sup>496</sup> Prieto Acevedo, 7.

<sup>497</sup> The movement of Estridentismo in Mexico was one of the first that created experimentations between sound, literature and technology. As Rubén Gallo explains in his book *Mexican Modernity*, the rise of radio broadcasting had a great influence in the avant-garde poetry of the time. The young poets of the Estridentista movement, who loosely modeled Marinetti, saw radio as the perfect vehicle for a "radically new poetic project: it was a medium characterized by the ability to transcend national boundaries, by the power of simultaneously broadcast a myriad of different programs, by the capacity to transmit the sounds of modernity, including interference and static, and by the potential to inspire a 'wire-less' imagination'" (26). For these young innovators, a "radiogenic" literature was necessary, as it would not merely take radio as a subject but would rather "use radical textual technologies to

systems. These propose alternative ways of engaging with the world during politically contentious times.

In many of Galindo's works, this hybrid or syncretic characteristic is evident. For instance, his work titled *Maíz, Hand Made Instrument*<sup>498</sup>, a compound sonic device is crafted. As I have been emphasizing, many of Galindo's sound devices, the instrument is constructed from discarded items, found objects, organic materials, and technology. His method, which predominantly involves collaboration with other artists, embodies the notion of an expanded instrument and innovative performance techniques.

As another example of Galindo's work with graphic scores and instruments is his collaborative project with American photographer Richard Misrach regarding the Mexico-US border, showcased in the book *Border Cantos*. In this collaboration we can further see how Galindo dismantles essentialist concepts of identity and "Mexicanness". For example, he translates the cosmic mythology ingrained in the Aztec Calendar into an orchestral score via mathematical computations. His work titled *Ome Acatl* (1994)<sup>499</sup> demonstrates these acts of

---

replicate the technological marvels of wireless broadcast" (26). The Estridentistas poets like Manuel Maples Arce and Kyn Taniya, for example, composed poems about radio and broadcast their voices over the airwaves. So, if Gutiérrez Nájera had dismissed machines as noise distractions, Manuel Maples Arce praised them as a model for modern literature in the 1921 "Manifiesto del Estridentismo".

<sup>498</sup> The use of *Maíz* as the title of the work also alludes to both to the basic sustainable food and the myth of creation of men in the Mayan tradition. The myth appears in literature since the *Popol Vuh* and the novel *Hombres de Maíz* by Miguel Ángel Asturias written in 1949. Both texts refer to the colonial times in Latin America. In the Mayan tradition, the corn is also significant to the cycles of planting and harvesting related to the cyclical calendar where both the moon and the sun were determinant to the crop seasons. Galindo draws from the Mayan calendar to create his first work and making direct references to the indigenous cosmologies to build his relationship to music.

<sup>499</sup> Guillermo Galindo presents his sculpture "**Ángel exterminador**" (2015), made from the remains of a border fence. It was created as part of *Border Cantos*, a joint project with Richard Misrach, where the two artists collected objects thrown away along the border between Mexico and the United States of America in order to build instruments. The artist will activate the sculpture in a ritual performance using further instruments.

deconstruction and translation from one medium to another, proposing a post-Mexican indigeneity marked by both enforced and violent migration. It also references a fetishistic universe resulting from the folklore of the wasteland that exists between the two nations.



Fig. 39. Guillermo Galindo. *MAIZ: A Cybertotemic Instrument*. Courtesy of the artist.

Galindo’s work *Maíz: A Cybernetic Totemic Instrument* provides a fitting example of his approach. This piece is a variant of *Maíz, Handmade Instrument*. It’s a kinetic sound structure constructed from repurposed industrial materials and found objects, all regulated by a computer. This piece serves as a syncretic cybersonic talisman or a “hyper-folkloric object of reconnection”<sup>500</sup>, melding contradictory Western and Mesoamerican concepts such as "myth and

---

<sup>500</sup> Galindo, “MAIZ: A Cybertotemic Instrument”, 40.

science, faith and reason, and technology and animism"<sup>501</sup>. Most importantly, the sonic structure delves into the relationship between the sound and its source.

It also presents an alternate perspective to qualitative listening, as opposed to the concept of “reduced listening” proposed by French composer Pierre Schaeffer. This suggests a cognitive dissociation of sound from its originating source, thereby depriving it of any associated meaning<sup>502</sup>. The structure of *MAIZ* lies in the singular focus on sound and its relationship to the object. It further implies a pre-Columbian perception of the sound object as an entity intrinsically connected to the material of its construction.

The emphasis on materiality is seen in how *MAIZ* is assembled "from a wine box, metal parts from a mechanical street cleaner (which became the tongues of a kalimba), a cigar box, and my wife’s credit card, which plays three strings (tied to a guitar neck)."<sup>503</sup> This structure can be activated by "light sensors, motion sensors, controllers, or even the human voice," and its dynamism permits its use as an independent interactive instrument or a live performance device<sup>504</sup>. This suggestive creation speaks to the manifold ways that the structure can be conceived merging the migrant’s personal belongings and residues from Galindo’s own personal life.

The structure's composition, made of various recycled objects, resonates once more with the concept of echo as a reiteration or reflection of past things, underscoring the narrative of their prior existence animated in the present. The everyday materials used in its creation each carry their own sonic properties, histories, and meanings, which become part of a story that is being retraced by components of the work. These materials do not merely produce sound; they echo

---

<sup>501</sup> Ibid

<sup>502</sup> Ibid.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid.

<sup>504</sup> Ibid.

their past states, resonating and amplifying its possibilities in the present context. The ability of the instrument to interact with various triggers (light, motion, controllers, or the human voice) further amplifies this concept of resonance, allowing the work to respond and adapt to its surrounding environment. This responsiveness, echoing back the inputs from its surroundings, adds a dynamic, multi-dimensional aspect to the concept of resonance. As such, Galindo's structure transforms echo and resonance into tangible, interactive experiences, creating tension between sound's ephemerality and materiality, while enhancing our understanding of their roles in the broader realm of sound and composition.

### *Voices of the Desert*

In an interview, Galindo explains that after completing *Maíz*, his initial project, he heard a documentary about objects left at the border. Around the same time, a wind quintet asked him to create an original piece. He states, "Typically, as a composer, when you are asked to make a piece, you might say, 'Well, I'm going to do an arrangement of "La Adelita"' —that is the type of nationalism that doesn't resonate with me as it's so overused"<sup>505</sup>. Consequently, he chose to visit the desert to gather objects for the piece requested by Quinteto Latino, which led to the creation of *Voices of the Desert*.

The piece, Galindo elaborates, has two movements. The first is titled "El aire se Vuelve suspiro" ("The air becomes a sigh"). Here, "you only hear the people breathing into the instruments. They are pure breaths: the breath of birth, of death, of the desert wind". This movement is composed of a sequence of timed actions that the performer has to execute, guided by a highly complex score that Galindo considers the "most complex I've ever created in my life.

---

<sup>505</sup> Galindo, 'La Música Es Editar', interview by Elvira Aballi Morell.

I worked closely with each of the members and explored thousands of sounds. I requested two hours a week with each of the quintet members, for almost a year"<sup>506</sup>.

The second movement is a cumbia, inspired by a scene from the film *Babel* by Mexican filmmaker Alejandro González Iñárritu. In the film, as the characters are entering Mexico, the song "La Cumbia del Río" by Celso Piña plays. Galindo recognized that the cumbia encapsulated "how it feels to enter Latin America."<sup>507</sup> Consequently, the piece's second movement is composed of reinterpretations of several cumbias<sup>508</sup>. Both movements, gives a second life to the found objects and embodying their ability to resonate, the objects echoes, once more time, the migrant's lives.

Galindo's musical compositions in *Voices of the Desert* locate the instruments in a realm where they echo multilayered experiences. These experiences are not only generative but also disorienting, compelling the audience to engage not just with improvisation, but also with meticulous attention wherein every minute detail can be perceived. The minute fibers in the strings, or the musician's breath, reverberate not only with past life, but also with a vitality that the instruments inherently possess, magnifying communal rhythms and the pulse of breath. Within these rhythmic pulsations, the desert's air transforms into a multiplying singularity. The material residues resonate sound as a movement among differing forces and an amplified plurality, revealing them to a mode of listening that disrupts the conventional auditory paradigm.

---

<sup>506</sup> Ibid.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid.

<sup>508</sup> This expressive quality aligns well with Guillermo Galindo's work in "Voices of the Desert," where he uses sound to explore and express the complex experiences of those inhabiting and traversing the borderlands. In the context of Galindo's composition, the choice to include a reinterpretation of several cumbias in the second movement resonates with the idea of cultural movement and transformation. Just as cumbia has moved and changed across borders and generations, so too are the lives of the people at the border, their experiences echoing in the diverse and ever-changing rhythm of cumbia.

This paradigm, as Labelle describes, should be investigated through a discourse that allows the sounds, emerging from the vestiges of objects in Galindo's case, to impact and permeate the private-public dichotomy of intimacy<sup>509</sup>. This dynamic trigger a sense of connection to both the proximate and the distant, the obvious and the unseen. Consequently, we could argue, following Labelle, that Galindo's sonic objects disassemble territories to trace routes of both departure and arrival. The sounds generated by these objects sketch a relational and frequently emotional geography that is also "disputable, mutable, and stimulates a form of knowledge shaped by intensities"<sup>510</sup>. These intensities are the echoes and their reverberations, the audibly perceived, the casually overheard, and the unheard.

On the other hand, the wasteland, as a vast and inhospitable desert land that divides Mexico and the US, in this case, has been a vast archive that contains echoes and materialities. As a place through which people and things, humans and non-human lives pass through or are lost, has been intervened by Galindo in his attempt to recollect residual objects. Objects that mimic the migrant's journeys that were completed, or not, and that Galindo transforms into musical instruments that vary from percussion to wind instruments, as well as an orchestra ensemble, among others.

Small things like pieces of clothes, boxes of gum, toothbrushes, and bottles among others, to bigger ones like fragments of the wall, chains and tires, these material residues become artifacts of sonic production. In its darkest side, the desert has also been a container of lethal zones calcinated by the sun, severe places of death that are the scenery for massive disappearances. It holds miles of traces, forensic clues of lost lives and fragmented families that lead to dead ends. These zones also depict a stark reality of an unprecedented wave of femicide

---

<sup>509</sup> Labelle, xix.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid.

- the naturalization of systemic violence against women resulting from global industrialization and labor exploitation.

Galindo's work further embodies an exploration of the relationship between the materiality of the desert and the creation of his musical instruments. His work not only transforms discarded objects from the borderlands, traces of human life and migration, into sources of sound, but also gives these materials an alternative way to impact experience. These objects become resonant bodies, physical embodiments of singular journeys that acquire another body to resonate and be amplified through Galindo's compositions and performances.

Resonance, in this context, goes beyond the mere production of sound. Each instrument not only produces vibrations that reach the ear but also resonates with deeper meanings and narratives related to migration, struggle, and survival, brought forth from the materiality of the desert. The recovered artifacts - the clothing, bottles, fragments of the wall - are animated with the experiences and stories of those who once touched them. When these objects are used in Galindo's compositions, these stories reverberate in the resulting sounds.

Thus, in Galindo's work, resonance becomes a vehicle that amplifies the migrant's voices giving them some ground to otherwise signify through the desert's material residues. By bridging together, the physical and the immaterial, Galindo creates sound as an amplified echo that increases the volume, intensity and magnitude of a lost sound signal, that is the migrant's residues. In that manner, the migrant's residues resonate as voices through Galindo's instruments and performances by making them part of a phenomenon in which they can vibrate at the frequency of their residues. As such, the residues resonance become part of the phenomenon that occurs when an object or system is made to vibrate at its natural frequency by absorbing energy from a different object that is vibrating at the same frequency. This aspect mimics sound's



resonant quality that can cause an object to vibrate and produce sound, or it can amplify sound when the frequency of the sound matches the natural frequency of the object<sup>511</sup>. In a broader sense, resonance amplifies the ways in which ideas, messages, or themes are made more powerful, reach more people, or resonate more deeply within a particular context or audience.

This connection is further seen in the way Galindo composes his instruments and how he performs with them<sup>512</sup>. For example, for Galindo, the convergence of art and music lies in the meticulous craftsmanship with which things are made. He relates the production of music to the handiwork of an artisan, such as a weaver, or the intricate work of an architect engaged in ancient ceramic techniques. As such, he proposes that the creation of music results from a practice that cherishes each step of assembly and transformation, as well as a collaborative process where objects are not passively created but continually activated. His artistic approach seems to involve activating and intervening in spaces with sound, particularly those burdened with difficult histories like slavery or migration. In doing so, he layers sonic events onto these spaces, each layer amplifying the resonance of its history and adding a new dimension to its narrative.

The way to intervene these places, Galindo seems to propose, is not through a goal-oriented action. It is rather through the use and transformation of discarded objects that, through their resonance, they can open the confines of our imagination, that, unsettles intended outcomes

---

<sup>511</sup> In a musical context, these two principles of resonance often work together. For example, in a guitar, the strings create the initial sound, which is then amplified by the resonance of the guitar's body. Amplification devices like speakers or amplifiers can then be used to further increase the volume of the sound.

<sup>512</sup> Much of Galindo's work involves creating musical instruments that needs both the hands of the musician and the mechanical operations that the sonic artifacts inherently generate. Galindo sees the creation of these objects as a collaborative process integral to the composition of the instrument. He initiates the creation and design of the object, then another person, usually another artist, helps assemble the pieces, ensuring it remains intact and maximizes resonance<sup>512</sup>. This collaborative method appears to be a fundamental aspect of Galindo's artistic approach, one that eschews the notion of the artist as the sole authoritative figure.

and predictable results, and causes us to reckon with what defies instant recognition. The unpredictability embedded in Galindo's instruments is what Lutz Koepnick has defined as the capacity of things to resonate in the world. For that, as Koepnick argues, the demands of resonance foils the surfeits of intentionality as they make "humans and nonhumans, subjects and objects, follow detours rather than proceed in straight lines (...) it asks us to attend to the ripples we set in motion when throwing a rock into a pond rather than focus on the hand that initiated the process."<sup>513</sup> Galindo's artistic practice follow Koepnick's definition of how we can think resonance as an impact in the world that create vibrations without intentionality.

Galindo, however, takes Koepnick's definition further.

For the artist, the capacity of resonance is in both movements, what sets things in motion to produce vibrations and the amplification of those vibrations. The objects themselves are also amplified with the contact microphones. In *Voces del desierto*, for example, as Galindo explains in the preview of the piece, a French horn provides a breathy counterpoint to mulitharmonics and embouchure experiments on a bass flute. Or a juice can becomes a resonating chamber for a stringed instrument that can be plucked or played with a bow.<sup>514</sup> Another instrument is a kind of loom that provides a whooshing sound made from sewn-together pieces of fabric moving through the apparatus.

To amplify these objects, Galindo attaches piezoelectric elements to pick up the resonances and then wires them to ¼-inch jacks for audio output. Together, they complement the instrumentation of the quintet: bass flute, bass clarinet, French horn, oboe and bassoon.<sup>515</sup> The

---

<sup>513</sup> Koepnick, xv.

<sup>514</sup> Galindo in "Preview: Voces Del Desierto at MACLA".

<sup>515</sup> Ibid.

found objects, as they are amplified, work as sonic traces, where each personal object creates its instance of imagination as it also induces resonance to the everydayness of people's lives connected to the experience of migration. The objects resonate because they echo the vibrations of other matter, and, yet, they "render a nearby source's sound strange and animate what at first may appear mute and lifeless."<sup>516</sup> In a way, Galindo's objects explore a possible copresence between the object's second life, the voices that animates them and microphones that amplify them to create sonic events that set residues in motion and vibration. Through those material residues Galindo creates a process that rebounds, like I said earlier, between call and response, event and echo.

For Galindo, to compose music is, then, to recollect the inaudible traces and put together their physical and material inscriptions to translate and amplify their latent voices into something that could reach the human ear and modulate affect. These latent voices are those that are trapped in the desert, and to which Galindo tries to give them a materiality and a body to resonate. In that sense, Galindo's instruments are heterogenous in their singularity, and they work together to produce a musical voice that does not coincide completely with themselves, but rather produce divergent sounds that sing in their own voices. Galindo's pieces are not recycled art, either, as he claims that each of one is "one of a kind."<sup>517</sup> Some of them are, in fact, derived from previous designs that already exist in different cultures, making their heterogeneity a quality through which each sound cover a wide range of different tones and pitches. The instruments are not recycled art, because, as Galindo says, "they are meant to enable the invisible victims of immigration speak through their personal belongings."<sup>518</sup> Using their own narrative, these

---

<sup>516</sup> Koepnick, xv.

<sup>517</sup> Galindo, *Border Cantos*, 193.

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid.*.

instruments “tell us imaginary stories about places and people that may or may not still be alive.”<sup>519</sup> Other instruments for this project, came from the apparatus of division itself, like pieces of the wall that divides the two territories of Mexico and the US. A second life is given to these objects of division and aggression in which they have “the opportunity to speak in their own terms.”<sup>520</sup> The capacity for both smaller to bigger instruments to speak in their own terms exposes a complex assemblage of objects that do not entirely fuse with one another to produce sound, but rather work together in the singularity of each pitch and tone.

Galindo’s account about his process as one that, as I mentioned earlier, follows many traditions, so that, like in the pre-Columbian world, an intimate connection is built between an instrument and the material from which it was made. In that sense, nothing that was found was discarded, but rather recompose in an afterlife in which all the objects found were part of a “carefully crafted, complex landscape that comprises the border.”<sup>521</sup> By putting many traditions to work together, Galindo suggests that, for example, Mesoamerican instruments were “talismans between worlds, and the sound of each instrument was never separate from (...) its meaning in the world”<sup>522</sup>, so that, when the Aztecs were conquered and their traditions were merged with Spanish Catholicism, the idea of talisman and veneration of relics, became to signify both a *reliquiae*, that in Latin means “remains”, and what comes from the verb *relinquere*, that is “leaving behind”<sup>523</sup>.

Galindo’s syncretism allows instruments to perform beyond a sense of accomplishment that merely merges traditions and, instead it alludes to the recomposition, renaming, and reuses

---

<sup>519</sup> Ibid.

<sup>520</sup> Ibid.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid.

<sup>522</sup> Ibid

<sup>523</sup> Ibid.

of what “remains” as a strategy for voices to have a second life. Rather than referring to the voices lost in the desert, Galindo focuses his work on the residual object’s afterlife through a practice allows things to be restaged as other possible lives. Galindo, for instance, attributes this practice to an exploration of nonlinear forms of expression that can be seen both in the instruments themselves and the sounds they produce, as well as the musical scores that he constantly remakes.

Galindo equates this practice with the vision of *Rasquachismo*, a word in Nahuatl, that means a “nonintellectual, visceral response to the ‘lived reality’ of the underdog where ‘things are not thrown away but saved (...) into different contexts.’”<sup>524</sup> In this reserve in front of what can be disposable and thrown away, Galindo finds an opportunity to resignify the traces of people and transform them into musical objects that express their voices as those of their invisible owners. It is also a reserve from this progression of history, one that Galindo uses to give them a body to both resonate as to produce resonances outside of their own corporealities.

The residues found in the desert served as an initial point for Galindo’s collaborative project with American photographer Richard Misrach titled *Border Cantos*. As I suggested earlier, this collaboration redirects the objects found in the US-Mexico border both visually and sonically. By using Misrach's photographs as a visual counterpart, Galindo reanimates once again the discards of human migration through his unique musical compositions. This work creates echoes from the materiality of the desert itself and transforms them into sounds that are not just noises; they are echoes of singular stories, amplified through Galindo's instruments. The

---

<sup>524</sup> Ibid, 194.

material residues of the desert point to this acoustic and visual mapping of the borderlands, where the objects' intrinsic narratives are resonated and amplified.



Fig. 40. Guillermo Galindo & Richard Misrach. *Border Cantos*, 2016.

As the critic Josh Kun explains in the introduction to *Border Cantos*, Misrach has been photographing the landscapes of the American West since the 1970s, capturing its environmental and political shifts. Meanwhile, Galindo has been crafting music influenced by both US and Mexican avant-garde movements since the 1990s. In 2012, their artistic paths intersected as both sought to respond to the impacts of escalating border militarization<sup>525</sup>. Misrach aimed his lens at the Western landscape, capturing the miles of new steel border walls that were dramatically reshaping it. Simultaneously, Galindo was gathering the residues of these new walls to

---

<sup>525</sup> Kun, *Border*, 10.

reassemble them into musical instruments. The pair traveled the length of the border, bearing witness to one of North America's most militarized and surveilled regions.

In *Border Cantos*, Galindo elaborates that his approach to music is about exploring potential resonances between the human and non-human, the organic and inorganic. His musical creations do not seek to establish a harmonious relationship between sounds and musical scores. Instead, he allows sound to form unexpected connections that could potentially create a sense of contingency, attachment, and ordinariness. The connection between intimacy and everyday life offers subtle insights into the lives once recognized or unrecognized in the desert.



Fig. 41. Guillermo Galindo and Richard Misrach. *Border Cantos*. New York: Aperture Foundation, 2016

Galindo's musical scores as seen in *Border Cantos*, create an alternative form of documentation and mapping that contests the migrant's residues as mere data. Instead, the collaboration between musical scores and photography allows for a transformation "Text data about the disappeared was converted into scientific formulas, Braille code, and guitar tablature, and superimposed onto Richard's photographs, creating musical patterns that merged with the elements present in the visual composition."<sup>526</sup> These scores frequently incorporate elements such as the fluid patterns created by the flight of birds, serving as metaphors for sound over time. The unrestricted path of bird flight informs the final score, where vertical bars symbolize the border wall, segmenting events into time divisions. The flight of the birds, much like the discarded items transformed into musical instruments and notations within the scores, trace a path that showcases the transient movement connecting sonic elements with textual ones. The flight also signifies the intensity created by sound within a relational space, emphasizing an intersection that is both distinct and simultaneously expansive, thereby opening to various sonic events.

---

<sup>526</sup> Ibid, 195.





Fig. 42. Guillermo Galindo. *Play staircase*. Courtesy of the artist.

Galindo's initial drive to gather and reinterpret the migrants' material remnants, as well as the wall's residues, may be seen as a compulsion to document. However, this collection and reinterpretation transcends the simple accumulation of sounds aiming to create a lasting phonographic archive, often associated with the Western economic and military dominance over other cultures. Galindo proposes a documentary method that reshapes the material and temporal parameters of latent voices and is associated with the paradoxical sonic movement of being both an ephemeral and a rebounding, materializing source. Instead of striving to preserve in the face of transience, Galindo provides these voices a new materiality for their expressions to leave a mark on the world.

Galindo thus places an emphasis on these residues as traces through which voices reverberate, not just to indicate an absence, but rather to allow them to emerge in another form, to resonate in a different body. To think with Galindo the sounds original source and their possible destination is to go beyond the impossible task of finding an origin of those sources, and focusing instead on how those origins are disoriented and how they reappear as latent voices that find channels of sound through which they can reverberate.

*Border Cantos* illustrates furthermore the ability of traces to be resignified both visually and sonically. As it is explained in the book, the U.S Customs and Border Patrol is very well known for its use of technologies for visual surveillance such as thermal imaging, retina scans, binocular outlooks, radar patrols, among others. Recently, however, this surveillance has turned into audio strategies of what Josh Kun calls “situational awareness” that refer to sound sensors and command center listening posts<sup>527</sup>. This type of surveillance suggests that there is a context that frames Misrach and Galindo’s work, whose practices respond to hegemonic traditions of listening and surveillance that they both transform.

For example, Galindo transforms the objects that Misrach photographs into musical instruments or sonically expressive figures, influencing both the visual and auditory perceptions of how the border wall is comprehended, documented, and regulated. However, in this context, the remnants left behind by migrants have received less attention. These remnants embody both the discarded items worthy of documentation and minimal residue of a life lived in its everydayness. Both categories of residues resist conventional documentation systems.

---

<sup>527</sup> Kun, *Border Cantos*, 143.

By breathing new life into these residues, Galindo not only acknowledges their resistance as residues and their fragmented nature as a counter to wholeness, but also the potential to craft compositions from what remains. Galindo suggests experimental strategies of recombination—material residues and their potential as musical instruments—as methods to structure and reroute both visual and auditory practices. To reroute, in this context, implies that what is described and exhibited carries in its residue a force that enables transformation at the moment of emergence. Consequently, what is depicted in the objects does not stay fixed into the past, but rather changes by whom activates and receives it.

Given that sound is a series of visual and material frictions—or vibrations—it doesn't merely highlight the sonic potential inherent in the migrants' remnants but also the fundamental unit of sound through which they resonate and transform, attaining a new form in which to resound or find its resonance. For Galindo, composing music entails creating an echo and redirecting sounds towards possible and unpredictable sonic events. The emphasis on the "event" of sound and its unpredictability suggests that his practice isn't solely about assembling these artifacts from the remaining objects, but also about how they are activated in the present moment of engagement.

To stimulate the vibrations that these instruments produce, Galindo uses tools like chopsticks, nails, hammers, and toy spoons, among others. He refers to these implements as "activators," used to stir the sound of the instrument, emanating from migrant artifacts, Border patrol ephemera, and scraps of wall and fence building materials<sup>528</sup>. This activation becomes evocative as it provokes both affects and thought. Galindo's instruments thus derives from

---

<sup>528</sup> Galindo, *Border*, 247.

objects that are not solely valued for their instrumental power or conventional use, but also for their connection to emotional worlds and, I would add, for their regenerative potential to construct possible experiences through sound. As such, the residues metamorphose into other forms of residues that, through their material interaction, become audible figures echoing within their scope of projection. This encompasses the acoustic potential to be heard elsewhere (like a gallery, a website, a concert hall, and so on) and to be received by other bodies in which they resonate, without attempting to possess them.

In *Border Cantos* all the objects are uniquely invoked to create music, with a common thread of their relationship to the border. The border is seen both as a federal architectural edifice and a surveillance-focused military site, juxtaposed against the intimate vulnerability of migrants risking their lives on their journey. In an attempt to construct an authentic history of these latent voices in the desert—voices typically tagged as "unknown" or marked by an "x" on the Humane Borders map signifying body remains (noted as RHR or recovered human remains for documentation purposes)—Galindo reanimates the vibrations of a backpack, a passport, a shoe, or a tuna can. In essence, these are residues brought to life again by other residues in the case of percussion instruments, or by breath in the case of wind instruments. The instruments become an unfolding echo chamber, resonating as both matter and relationality.

Galindo's approach thus complicates the documentation of traces that are usually classified as either official proof or elements of the disproportionate surveillance along the border. The instruments and the musical compositions, with their potential for unexpected sonic events carrying vibrations ready to be activated by whoever touches them, take on a sonic dimension. Their unique timbre responds to the "unknown" label of the residues, creating a distinct resonance that conveys their embedded stories.

Galindo suggests, then, to go beyond the x on the map and to produce, instead, a mirroring towards the past that fragments and refracts the possibility that these residue's origins, their lost bodies, remains as an "x" of what they "were". Such fragmentation is, on the other hand, a gesture to hold in resonance the bodies that arrived, or not, to the other side. That is, to maintain those remains as echoes that create amplified ruptures, that disorient the origin of the sonic source and that, even if we know or not, makes their reverberation possible.

Galindo's musical objects, more than being static artifacts, they are moved and animated by who touches and listens to them. The musical language that Galindo presents exposes not only the underlying systems of power and commodity inherent in official data investigation related to colonialism but also critiques the industry bolstering the Border Wall between Mexico and the US. This industry fuels the exaggerated laws of frontier security and surveillance as well as the strict politics of detention and deportation.

To amplify the material residues remaining in the problematic space of the border is not merely an attempt to propose a counter-archive to this type of official documentation and surveillance. Nor does it reflect a nostalgic perspective towards the lost bodies. Instead, Galindo's work serves to uncover means of sonic production and interpretation that enable these stories to resonate as visual and sonic narratives. These narratives, in turn, allow for these stories to be restaged in narratives whose latent voices shift their meanings and, paradoxically, gives them a materiality to manifest an alternative relational connection.

In *Border Cantos*, Galindo introduces a process where the migrant's minimal residues pave the way for an alternative method of informing and understanding. It could be said that Galindo reinterprets some aspects of the "document" – traditionally viewed as a "medium to show, inform, or to know." This approach transcends the textual as an unequivocal proof of data,

introducing the possibility of sound as a transformative means of informing. In this sense, the instruments Galindo uses become active agents where a sonic event transpires, re-staging unexpected reactivations. These sonic instruments are simultaneously specific and elusive; they produce sound at a precise pitch and tone, but this sound also takes on unexpected turns through improvisation.

Earlier, I suggested that for Galindo, composing music is akin to creating echoes and redirecting the residues of the real to unpredictable sonic events. This process emphasizes the objects' afterlife - things once intimate, marked with a singularity left behind as a point of reactivation. Reactivating these residues through sonic artifacts then allows each object to resonate in its unique way, allowing it to travel and exist elsewhere. In this context, sound, through its reverberation as an echo, can be manifested as a temporal unfolding, what Michel Chion describes as "a living process, an energy in action."<sup>529</sup> In Galindo's work, the echo amplifies a reactivation and refraction of sound that underscores the material nature of sound resonating in other bodies. It's not merely the repetition of a voice whose origin is unknown and absent, but rather an afterlife of traces that, through reproduction in each instrument, expand into multiple narratives and difficult to contain into one only.

Sound, as the result of a series of material frictions and vibrations moving from one object to another, highlights a temporal dynamic embodied by the echo. Sound typically manifests as a form of displacement, a shift from one surface to another, and the echo enhances this temporality. When transmitted through Galindo's musical instruments, the echo not only amplifies repetition but also magnifies the passage of sound, transforming it into a type of

---

<sup>529</sup> Chion, 65.

performance. In this manner, the echo aligns with what Brandon LaBelle describes as the "vector of sound" - it staggers and supplements it with a further set of sound events that ultimately permeate a given space<sup>530</sup>. The echo brings back the "original" event in a reconfigured form, restoring to sound its status as a spatial object: it transforms into a sculpture that can be physically engaged with and activated by breath or minor objects, generating a material and dimensional reverberation from its presence. Therefore, the echo, as a deferred repetition, disrupts the linear relationship between an origin and its destiny, between past and present. Instead, it broadens the sonic event to the point where the event occupies its own space.

The latent voices in the desert become forms of knowledge in a experience of everydayness. Through Galindo's musical artifacts, these voices express themselves on their own terms, as the artist suggests, as the objects are also their own thing. These voices bestow a second life onto the object when they encounter the musician's breath or the listener's ears. Traveling as echoes, these voices embody what LaBelle describes as the precarious, temporal, and detouring behavior of sonority<sup>531</sup>. They adopt the reproducibility of sound and its continual transfiguration, enabling amplification. These voices vibrate across multiple frequencies and intensities while being expanded and amplified. Rather than being passive, forgotten sounds trapped within the vast desert, they are active combinations that incite interaction, that expand as they reverberate through other breaths, other residues, other hands.

These voices emerge as forces of detours and deferrals. Thus, if sound stems from a series of material frictions and vibrations originating from a specific object and proliferating beyond the initial source, Galindo's residual objects embody the relation between the bodies that

---

<sup>530</sup> LaBelle, *Acoustic* xix,

<sup>531</sup> *Ibid.*

where in the desert and their physical remnants. The sonic objects displace the bodies past existence and potential emergence as residues, signifying a movement from there to here, where residues travel as sonic traces that intensify moments of rupture but also creating restless resonances. In their displacement, these residual objects make tremble our own sense of place and gives life to a continual and, yet, ephemeral, sense of becoming.



## Conclusions

Patricio Guzmán's 2010 film, *Nostalgia for The Light*, portrays the Atacama Desert in Chile, where the intense sun preserves human remains through various eras. These range from Pre-Columbian mummies and 19th-century explorers and miners to the victims of the 1973 Chilean military coup, who were subsequently "disappeared" by the army. Paralleling this reality, astronomers search the most ancient and distant galaxies from this very location. Meanwhile, at the foot of these mountains, women - the surviving relatives of the disappeared - relentlessly search for the remains of their loved ones, even after many years.

The film ends with a table full of marbles, each one appearing to contain a universe of possibilities - a flower, a diagram, another galaxy, or air bubbles resembling planets. As Guzmán's voiceover suggests, each marble represents a miniature universe that we could each carry in our pockets. Guzmán cinematographic camera opens the sky to our eyes. He contrasts the galactic exploration undertaken by local observatories, taking advantage of the area's altitude and clear skies, with the ongoing excavation by the mothers and wives of the remains of the victims from the desert sands that were tortured during Pinochet's dictatorship.

The film powerfully asserts that the infinitesimal - a grain of sand, a dust particle, the delayed arrival of starlight - serves as free-floating letters in the cosmos. From these letters one could form words, and from those words one can form poems. Guzmán's film emerges from these minute particles, instilling the moving images with stardust. This minor, and yet, ever-present dust merges with a contrasting exploration of the immeasurably large universe, represented by celestial bodies, and distant planets through a telescope and the close examination of a shoe, a skull, or a bone through a magnifying glass. The film's visual journey is one of looking through, inviting us to perceive memory in the gravitational pull of its force.

In this dissertation, through the analysis of contemporary Latin American and Latinx literary and artistic works by Mario Bellatín, Graciela Iturbide, Oscar Muñoz, Cecilia Vicuña, Valeria Luiselli, and Guillermo Galindo, I've elucidated how memory can take shape beyond the constraints of commodification and instrumentalization that are fundamental to neoliberal and neocolonial projects. These projects strive to forge an idea of collective memory, framing history as monumental. I argue that by meticulously analyzing the tension between materiality and immateriality and the residues of the world, we can conceive alternative ways in which memory can be manifested. These material residues, which arise from dust, grains of sand, singular stories, seemingly insignificant objects, and prosthetic artifacts, among others, decipher the constructs of political violence, memory, and visibility. Conversely, they pose a challenge to the restrictive political regime of the finite—dominated by the state under dictatorships, armed conflicts, and neoliberal initiatives.

The materiality of these residues allows an exploration of what transcends and resists the politics of finitude. This resistance is what I refer to as the immaterial aspect within them—that is, the potential to perceive these residues as something other than what their history has confined them to. In addition, they manifest as mobile, fleeting, and fragile things that appear and reappear in different places, mediums, and times.

Dominant regimes typically advocate for radical finitude, meaning that when bodies disappear, they're expected to be forgotten as part of their project of removal from memory. This has been the case for a vast number of people across Latin America's dense history of political violence. Nonetheless, the works that I analyze in this dissertation offer an alternative originating from the unassuming realm of small things in the world. For instance, if the concept of the finite unfolds within the expanse of the infinitely large, these artists and writers operate from the space

of the smaller, the delayed, the fragile, and the precarious. As such, they etch a mode of creation that operates on a different plane, one that traverses the binary oppositions in organic and inorganic matter, writing and erasure, memory and oblivion, to touch upon an exteriority.

Just as Guzman's cinematographic camera does, these artists and writers uncover a distinct scale at which an alternate form of memory can emerge through literary and artistic creation. Specifically, they pay attention to the materiality that make up their works, the mixtures they produce in line with the fragile and ephemeral duration from which we are constituted. These works construct a departure point that challenges the state from which these materialities were perceived as threats to dominant discourses.

The material residues that are central to this dissertation also embody the traces of the universe and the sensible surfaces they expand across. This expansion exemplifies countless forms of resistance: bodies, in their fragility yet their materiality, keep appearing and disappearing, they continue to materialize and fade away. From these minor materialities, these residues find expression in what is unstable, partially inexpressible, and incalculable. They manifest at the threshold of their own materiality and their potential for transformation.

Through the works of artists and writers in this dissertation I showed how their restless artistic creations serve as a conduit for memory-making process able to redefine our worldly traces and introducing a temporal discontinuity. They explode the temporal fabric that shapes us all, carving fissures and openings in a present that strives to preserve stability and sharpness. While the state aims for an all-encompassing fixity, the realms of art and literature are able to provoke unpredictable and delayed endings. Approaching their forms and formlessness within their works, these artists and writers work under an unruly, undomesticated and somewhat indecipherable view that can allow for spaces of resistance.

Their works open the possibility of conceiving sensible surfaces that collapse established hierarchical structures rooted in traditional reading codes. Instead, they inscribe horizontal imprints upon these surfaces and broaden our understanding of history. Such perspective allows for the blurred, the extraordinary, to materialize in these surfaces and, in their processes of inscription and continual transformation, reimagine alternative meanings.

Perhaps, it is within this context that the material residues highlighted in the works of these artists and writers are thrown into the future, rather than being anchored in the past. Their transient quality, in opposition to complete preservation, challenges the nostalgic return to original past, to verified truths. As this dissertation argues, it's necessary for these residues to continue moving, shifting, mutating, and becoming something else. This state of becoming reveals the inherent immateriality in their material compositions and allows for transformative changes, thus renewing life forms on the edge, in the hazy shoreline, or in the ephemerality of a vapor trail.

If we can keep the universe in our pocket, Guzmán seems to suggest, we can attend to the marbles, the grains of sand, the luminous dust of light and stars, the calcium that we all share as the infinite within the finite that is able to break it open. Nonetheless, these minor things also warn us about the impossibility to completely possess them and the urge for them to remain as residues. The universe that survives is not a progression, but a new unity in a different order, a simultaneous fissure and opening, a detachment from the finite. In this transgression of what is fixed, these residues enable an uprooting movement, and they endure in their impermanence and instability.

These residues resistant quality allows them to re-emerge as immaterial traces and suggest the existence of critical uses that are permeable, indeterminate, and yet never

homogenous. In short, what sprouts from the rubble, from what has been destroyed and decomposed, something else has been fermented and regenerated beneath the surface. From here these materialites reemerge and land in alternative surfaces. Thus, rather than being static remnants of the past, these residues embody a continuous process of reanimation and rebirth. I thus conceived these active residues as active forms of life that attend to an acute memory-making processes from the form and formlessness that composes us all, that can be shared from the deepest end of our pockets and the fabric of our bones.

## Bibliography

- Abbas, Ackbar. "On Fascination: Walter Benjamin's Images." *New German Critique*, N.48 (1989), pp. 43-62. Printed.
- Acosta, María del Rosario, "Memory and Fragility: Art's Resistance to Oblivion (Three Colombian Cases)," *New Centennial Review* 14, no. 1 (2014): 88. Printed.
- Alcalá, Rosa. *Spit Temple: The Selected Performances of Cecilia Vicuña*. Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Press, 2021. Printed.
- Appadurai, Arjun. "The capacity to aspire: culture and the terms of recognition". *Culture and public action*, eds V Rao & M Walton, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2004. pp.59-84. Printed.
- Asselin, Olivier, Johanne Lamoureux, and Christine Ross. *Precarious Visualities*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008. Web. 15 Oct. 2022.
- Bataille, Georges. "Georges Bataille / El Bajo Materialismo y La Gnosis." *Artillera Inmanente*, <https://artilleriainmanente.noblogs.org/?p=157>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Erotism : Death & Sensuality*. 1st City lights ed. City Lights Books 1986-1962. Printed
- Berwick, Isabel. 2017. "Novelist Valeria Luiselli on Nationality, Migration, and Trump." *Financial Times*, October 13.
- Blanchot, Maurice. "The Two Versions of the Imaginary." *The Space of Literature*. University of Nebraska Press, 1982. Printed

- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1981. Printed.
- Bellatín, Mario. *Obras reunidas 2*. Barcelona: Alfaguara, 2013. Printed.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn. London: New Left Books, 1973. Printed.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “Little History of Photography,” in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2 (1927-1934), ed. Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999. Printed.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990. Printed.
- Bennet, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. Verso Books, 2012.
- Brizuela, Natalia. “Stardust: Notes on Carbon Life, and Becoming Gray in Oscar Muñoz”, in *Oscar Muñoz: Invisibilia*. Hirmer Publishers, Germany, 2022. Printed.
- Brown, Bill. “Thing Theory”. *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (1), (2001). Pgs 1-22. Printed.
- Bruno, Guiliania. *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. Printed.
- Burgin, Victor. *The end of Art: Criticism and Postmodernity*. London: Macmillan Education, 1986.
- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life : The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso 2004.

Bryan-Wilson, Julia. *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017. Printed.

Cabrera, Delfina. "Confined Weathers: Graciela Iturbide and Mario Bellatin's *The Bathroom of Frida Kahlo/Demerol without Expiration Date*", in *Weathering: Ecologies of Exposure*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 17 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020), pp. 295–309

Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. Edited by Claudia Gorbman. Columbia University Press, 2019.

Codebó, Marco. 2007. "The Dossier Novel: (Post)Modern Fiction and the Discourse of the Archive." *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 3, no. 1. [escholarship.org/uc/item/0289g0dx](https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0289g0dx).

Cortázar, Julio. "*Ventanas a lo insólito*." *Papeles inesperados*. México: Alfaguara, 2009. Printed.

Cortés-Rocca, Paola. "La insoportable levedad del yo. Iturbide y Bellatin en *El baño de Frida Kahlo*" *Filología* XLIV (2012): 121-138. Printed.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Política de lo residual. Sobre *Magnetizado* y los *Diarios del odio*." *El hilo de la fábula*, vol. 19, num 22 (2021). Printed.

\_\_\_\_\_. "La imagen dentro de sí. Sobre tres obras de Oscar Muñoz". In *Caiana. Revista de Historia del Arte y Cultura Visual del Centro Argentino de Investigadores de Arte (CAIA)*. Nº 7, 2015. Pp 149-155. Printed.



\_\_\_\_\_. Cecilia Palmeiro. “Operación Araña. Performance and Feminist Avant-Garde.” *Performance in the Wake/Cuerpas ante lo político*. Special issue of *Liminalities. A Journal of Performance Studies*. Issue 18.3. (Fall 2022). Pages 1-17.

Dahó, Marta. “La línea y la sombra” in *Graciela Iturbide*. Madrid: Fundación MAPFRE, 2009.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Revolution and Ritual: The Photographs of Sara Castrejón, Graciela Iturbide, and Tatiana Parcero*. Los Angeles, Scripps College in association with Getty Publications, 2017.

Derrida, Jacques. “Plato’s Pharmacy.” Barbara Johnson (ed.) *Dissemination*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Force and Signification,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Work of Mourning*. University of Chicago Press, 2001.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the New international*. Routledge, 1994.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. Printed.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*. University of Chicago Press, 2016. Printed.

Didi-Huberman, Georges. “De Semejanza a Semejanza.” *Instantes Y Azares. Escrituras Nietzscheanas* 11 (2012). Printed.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Survival of the Fireflies*. Translated by Lia Swope Mitchell, University of Minnesota Press, 2018. Printed.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Cuando las imágenes tocan lo real,” *Arts Coming/ Contemporary Art Editions*, 8 de septiembre, 2015. Printed.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Eye of History: When Images Take Positions*. Toronto: RIC Books, 2018. Printed.

Deleuze, G. y Guattari, F. “Percepto, afecto y concepto”. In *¿Qué es la filosofía?* (pp. 164-201). Barcelona: Anagrama, 1993. Printed.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The logic of sense / Gilles Deleuze ; translated by Mark Lester with Charles Stivale; edited by Constantin V. Boundas* Columbia University Press New York 1990. Printed.

de La Peña, Maria Teresa Miaja. “La Adivinanza. Sentido Y Pervivencia.” *Biblioteca Virtual Miguel De Cervantes*, Biblioteca Virtual Miguel De Cervantes,  
[https://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/la-adivinanza-sentido-y-pervivencia-0/html/01e4e064-82b2-11df-acc7-002185ce6064\\_2.html](https://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/la-adivinanza-sentido-y-pervivencia-0/html/01e4e064-82b2-11df-acc7-002185ce6064_2.html).

Doane, Mary-Ann. “The indexical and the concept of medium specificity.” *Differences* 18, 128 – 152, 2007. Printed.

Enwezor, Okwui. “Photography between History and the Monument,” in *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*. New York: ICP and Steidl Publishers, 2008. Printed.

Erlmann, Veit. “Resonance.” *Keywords in Sound*, edited by David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2015, pp. 175–82. Printed.

- Fajardo Hill, Cecilia and Giunta, Andrea. *Radical Women: Latin American Art 1960–1985*, exh. cat. Los Angeles: Hammer Museum and Delmonico Books, 2017. Printed.
- Farge, Arlette. *The Allure of the Archives*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. Printed.
- Flusser, Vilém and Nancy Ann Roth. *Gestures*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014. Printed.
- Freud, Sigmund, and James Strachey. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. New York: Avon Books, 1965. Printed.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “A Note Upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad.’” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 19:225-232, 1925. Printed
- Folgarait, Leonard. *Seeing Mexico Photographed: The Work of Horne, Casasola, Modotti and Álvarez Bravo*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008.
- Fontcuberta, Joan. “Lightness of The Shadow, Praise of the Stain: Some Footnotes on Oscar Muñoz”, in *Oscar Muñoz: Invisibilia*. Hirmer Publishers, Germany, 2022. Printed.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, London: Tavistock, 1970. Printed.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. New York: Harper & Row, 1976. Printed.
- Galindo, Guillermo. “Sonic Borders” in *Border Cantos*. Aperture, 2016. Printed
- \_\_\_\_\_. Misrach, Richard. *Border Cantos*. New York: Aperture Foundation, 2016.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “La Música Es Editar.” *LA CAMPANA*, 16 Aug. 2018, [lacampana.us/2018/08/16/la-musica-es-editar/](http://lacampana.us/2018/08/16/la-musica-es-editar/). Accessed 15 June 2022.

- \_\_\_\_\_. "Preview: Voces Del Desierto at MACLA." *SanJose.com*,  
www.sanjose.com/2012/03/12/preview\_voces\_del\_desierto\_at\_macla/. Accessed 18 June  
2022.
- Gallo, Rubén. *Mexican Modernity: The Avant-Garde and The Technological Revolution*  
Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 2005. Printed.
- Garramuño, Florencia. *Mundos en común: Ensayos sobre la inespecificidad en el arte*. Buenos  
Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2015. Printed.
- Guerrero, Javier. *Tecnologías del cuerpo: exhibicionismo y visualidad en América Latina*,  
Frankfurt a. M., Madrid: Vervuert Verlagsgesellschaft, 2014. Printed.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Escribir después de morir: el archivo y el más allá*. Editorial Metales Pesados,  
2022.
- Glantz, Margo. "Frida Kahlo Diseminación y amplificación." *Revista de la Universidad de*  
*México*, Núm. 104, 2012. Printed.
- González, Horacio. *The Latin American Photobook*. New York: Aperture, 2010. Printed.
- González Gutiérrez, María Gabriela. *Hacer visible lo invisible. Estructuras y funciones de la*  
*adivinanza mexicana tradicional*, México, Benemérita Universidad de Puebla- Plaza y  
Valdés Editores, 1999.
- Gresh, Kristen. *Graciela Iturbide's Mexico*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2019. Printed.
- Graham, Amanda Jane. "Assisted Breathing: Developing Embodied Exposure in Oscar Muñoz's  
'Aliento,'" *Latin American Perspectives* 39, no. 3 (2012): 71. Printed.
- Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe*, no. 26: 1–14. Printed.

- Herzog, Hans-Michael, "Oscar Muñoz" (interview), in *Cantos/Cuentos Colombianos: Arte Colombiano Contemporáneo*, ed. Hans-Michael Herzog. Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Daros-Latinamerica, 2004.
- Hindy, Emily. "La petrocultura y Frida Kahlo: De la biopolítica al energopoder," in *Las dos Fridas y Demerol sin fecha de caducidad* de Mario Bellatin," in *Mario Bellatin y las formas de la escritura*, edited by Héctor Jaimes. Editorial A Contracorriente, distributed by the U of North Carolina P.
- Huyssen, Andreas. *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford University Press, 2003. Printed.
- Iovino, María. *Oscar Muñoz, Volverse aire*. Bogotá, Colombia: Ediciones Eco, 2003. Printed.
- Iturbide, Graciela, and Mario Bellatin. *El baño de Frida Kahlo/Demerol, sin fecha de caducidad*. Ciudad de México: Galería López Quiroga/Editorial RM, 2008. Printed.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Eyes to Fly With: Portraits, Self-portraits, and Other Photographs*. The University of Texas Press, 2006.
- Kattenbelt, Chiel. "Intermediality in Theater and Performance: Definitions, Perceptions and Medial Relationships." *Culture, Languages and Representation*, vol VI, 2008, pp. 19-29. Printed.
- Koepnick, Lutz. *Resonant Matter: Sound Art and the Promise of Hospitality*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.
- Krauss, Rosalind E. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press. 1986. Printed.

- Kristeva, Julia. « La reliance, ou de l'érotisme maternel », *Revue française de psychanalyse*, vol. 75, no. 5, 2011, pp. 1559-1570. LaBelle, Brandon. *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life*. New York: Continuum, 2010. Printed.
- Laddaga, Reinaldo. *Espectáculos de realidad. Ensayo sobre la narrativa latinoamericana de las últimas dos décadas*. Buenos Aires: Beatriz Viterbo, 2008. Printed.
- Lippard, Lucy. "Weaving the Common Thread" in *Precarious/Quipoem*. Middletown, Connecticut, USA: Wesleyan University Press, 1997. Printed.
- López, Miguel A. "Cecilia Vicuña, una retrospectiva para los ojos que no ven" in *Veroír el fracaso iluminado*. Bogotá, Colombia. Banco de la República, 2022.
- Lorey, Isabell, et al. *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*. Verso, 2015.
- Ludmer, Josefina. "Literaturas postautónomas." *Ciberletras* 17 (2007).  
<http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ciberletras/v17/ludmer.htm>
- Luiselli, Valeria. *Lost Children Archive*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019. Printed.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2016. "Openings: Dickens + MP3 ÷ Cervantes – Wikipedia = 21st-century novel." *Financial Times*, April 1.
- Lutz, Tom. *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1999. Printed.
- Machiavello, Carla. "Resistir/Existir: El ensamblaje como estrategia de resistencia en las *palabrarmas* de Cecilia Vicuña". *Meridional. Revista Chilena de Estudios Latinoamericanos*. Issue 9. mayo-octubre 2017, 55-89

Malabou, Catherine. *Plasticity: The Promise of Explosion*. Edinburgh University Press, 2022.  
Printed.

Malagón-Kurka, María Margarita. “Dos lenguajes contrastantes en el arte colombiano: nueva figuración e indexicalidad, en el contexto de la problemática sociopolítica de las décadas de 1960 y 1980,” *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, no.31 (December 2008): 16-33. Printed.

Mariniello, Silvestra. “Cambiar la tabla de operación. El medium intermedial.” *Acta Poética* 30.2 (2009): 61-85. Printed.

Masiello, Francine, Mignolo, Walter D., Silverblatt, Irene and Saldívar-Hull, Sonia. *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis*, New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2001. Printed.

Mbembe, Achille (2001), *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Printed.

Méndez-Ramírez, Hugo. “Cryptic Weaving” in *Precarious/Quipoem*. Middletown, Connecticut, USA: Wesleyan University Press, 1997. Printed.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. “The Right to Look.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2011, pp. 473-496.  
Printed.

\_\_\_\_\_. *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Routledge, 1999. Printed.

Mitchell, W J. T. *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, 1994. Printed.

Monsiváis, Carlos “De todas las Fridas posibles,” en Gabriela Olmos (coordinadora), *Frida Kahlo*. Un homenaje, Artes de México-Fideicomiso Museo Dolores Olmedo, México, 2004. Printed.

Montaldo, Graciela. “How to be Primitive in a Technological Era.” *Technology, literature, and digital culture in Latin America: mediatized sensibilities in a globalized era*. Matthew Bush and Tania Gentic, Editors. New York: Routledge, 2016. Printed.

Montero Román, Valentina; “Telling Stories That Never End: Valeria Luiselli, the Refugee Crisis at the US-Mexico Border, and the Big, Ambitious Archival Novel”. *Genre* 1 July 2021; 54 (2): 167–193

Moraña, Mabel. “*Nosotros, Los Bárbaros*”: *Tres Narradores Mexicanos En El Siglo XXI*. Ciudad de México, Bonilla Artigas Editores, 2021.

Muñoz, Oscar. *Aliento*, Colección de Arte del Banco de la República, Bogotá, Colombia, 1995.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Lacrimarios*, Colección de Arte del Banco de la República, Bogotá, Colombia, 2000.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Cortinas de baño*. Colección de Arte del Banco de la República, Bogotá, Colombia, 1994.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Interiores*. Colección de Arte del Banco de la República, Bogotá, Colombia, 2000.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Listening*, C. Mandell (trans.), New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. Printed.



Nouzeilles, Gabriela. "Arquitectura del fotolibro: escritura e imagen." *Otra Travessia 1* (2017): 127-144.

\_\_\_\_\_. Eduardo Cadava; with contributions by Joan Fontcuberta, Valeria González, Thomas Keenan, Mauricio Lissovsky, John Mraz. *The Itinerant Languages of Photography*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Art Museum, 2013.

Ochoa Gautier, Ana María. *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth Century Colombia*. Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2014

Olea Héctor and Ramírez Mari Carmen. *Inverted Utopias : Avant-Garde Art in Latin America : [Exhibition June 20 - September 12 2004 the Museum of Fine Arts Houston] : [Catalogue]*. Yale University Press; Museum of Fine Arts 2004.

Osborne, Peter. "The Damage: Photography and the Aesthetics of Fragility". *Photography and the Contemporary Cultural Condition*. Routledge, 2018. Printed.

Palmer Albers, Kate. *The Night Albums: Visibility and the Ephemeral Photograp*. Universtiy of California Press, 2021.

Panozo, Claudia. "Memoria y materialidad como índice de resistencia: Sabor a mí de Cecilia Vicuña." *Revista de Teoría del Arte*. No. 12 (December 2005). 151-169. Printed.

Parr, Martin; Badger, Gary. *The Photobook: A History, vol I*. Phaidon Press, 2004. Printed.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Photobook: a history, vol III*. Phaidon Press, 2014. Printed.

Paz-Soldán, Edmundo. "Mario Bellatín's Writing Machines." *Technology, literature, and digital culture in Latin America: Mediatized sensibilities in a globalized era*. Matthew Bush and Tania Gentic, Editors. New York: Routledge, 2016. Printed.

- Pendell, Dave. *The Language of Birds: Some notes on Chance and Divination*. USA: Three Hands Press, 2021.
- Phoenix Art Museum, and Blanton Museum of Art. *Oscar Muñoz: Invisibilia*. Hirmer Publishers, Germany, 2022. Printed.
- Preciado, Paul B. "Architecture as a Practice of Biopolitical Disobedience." *Log 25*, (2012):121-134. Printed.
- Prieto, Julio. "El concepto de intermedialidad: una reflexión histórico-crítica." *Pasavento: revista de estudios hispánicos*. No. 1, vol 5, 2017. Pg. 7-18. Printed.
- Prieto Acevedo, Carlos. "23-¿Cómo El Sonido Hace Espacio Para Que Otras Cosas Lleguen?" *CC Catálogo Contemporáneo*, cc-catalogo.org/en/listas-de-lectura/c%C3%B3mo-el-sonido-hace-espacio-para-que-otras-cosas-lleguen. Accessed 19 June 2022.
- \_\_\_\_\_. CTM Berlin. *Critical Constellations of the Audio-Machine in Mexico: Ruins and Reconstructions of a Sonic History*. Berlin, CTM, 2017.
- Ramírez, Mari Carmen. "Oscar Muñoz." In *Re-Aligning Vision: Alternative Currents in South American Drawing*, 178-179. Exh. cat., Austin, TX: Archeer M. Huntington Art Gallery / University of Texas at Austin, 1997.
- Roca, José. *Oscar Muñoz: Protografías* (Bogotá: Museo de Arte del Banco de la República, 2011), 13-38. Printed.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Phantasmagoria: Specters of Absence*. New York: Independent Curators International, 2007. Printed.

- \_\_\_\_\_. Suárez, Sylvia. *Transpolítico: Arte en Colombia 1992-2012*. Barcelona: Lunwerg, 2012. Printed.
- Schafer R. Murray. *The Soundscape : Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Destiny Books 1994.
- Shellhorse, Adam Joseph. "The Verbivocovisual Revolution: Anti-Literature, Affect, Politics, and World Literature in Augusto de Campos." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 20 no. 1, 2020, p. 147-184. *Project MUSE* [muse.jhu.edu/article/758056](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/758056).
- Silverman, Kaja. *The Miracle of Analogy: Or the History of Photography, Part I*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005. Printed.
- Sterne, Jonathan. *The Sound Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2012. Printed.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*. , 2003. Printed.
- Steintrager, James A. and Chow, Rey. "Sound Objects: An Introduction". *Sound Objects*, edited by James A. Steintrager and Rey Chow, New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2018, pp. 1-20. Printed.
- Steingo, Gavin and Sykes, Jim. "Introduction: Remapping Sound Studies in the Global South". *Remapping Sound Studies*, edited by Gavin Steingo and Jim Sykes, New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2019. Printed.
- Stuelke, Patricia; Writing Refugee Crisis in the Age of Amazon: *Lost Children Archive's* Reenactment Play. *Genre* 1 April 2021; 54 (1): 43–66.
- Tagg, John. *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. New York: Macmillan, 1988. Printed.

Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2003.

Townsend, Sarah J. "His Master's Voice? A Hemispheric History of Phonographic Fictions." *Revista Hispánica Moderna* 70, no. 2 (2017): 197–216.

Uslenghi, Alejandra. "The Image-Thought" in *Oscar Muñoz: Invisibilia*. Hirmer Publishers, Germany, 2022. Printed.

Vicuña, Cecilia. "Arte Precario"; "Entering". *Precarious/Quipoem*. Middletown, Connecticut, USA: Wesleyan University Press, 1997. Printed.

\_\_\_\_\_. de Zegher M. Catherine. "Ouvrage: Knot a Not, Notes as Knots". *Precarious/Quipoem*. Middletown, Connecticut, USA: Wesleyan University Press, 1997. Printed.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Cecilia Vicuña: Palabra E Hilo / Word & Thread (1996)." *Www.lettras.mysite.com*, [www.lettras.mysite.com/vicuna2.htm](http://www.lettras.mysite.com/vicuna2.htm). Accessed 4 June 2022.

\_\_\_\_\_. Borzutzky Daniel. "No, no and no: The Art of Cecilia Vicuña". *New and Selected Poetry of Cecilia Vicuña*. Berkeley, California, USA: Kesley Street Press, 2018. Printed.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Cecilia Vicuña: Listening with the Fingers on Disclaimer." *Disclaimer.org.au*, [disclaimer.org.au/contents/cecilia-vicuna](http://disclaimer.org.au/contents/cecilia-vicuna). Accessed 3 Feb 2022.

\_\_\_\_\_. Rothenberg, Jerome. "Poems and Poetics: Cecilia Vicuña: Word & Thread." *Poems and Poetics*, 3 May 2011, [poemsandpoetics.blogspot.com/2011/05/cecilia-vicuna-word-thread.html](http://poemsandpoetics.blogspot.com/2011/05/cecilia-vicuna-word-thread.html).

\_\_\_\_\_. Hernandez, Arlette. “The Traveling Word: Cecilia Vicuña on AmaZONE Palabrarmas: Magazine: Moma.” *The Museum of Modern Art*, <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/731>. Accessed 20 Jan 2023.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Metafísica del textil”. *Tramemos*, Boletín del Centro Argentino de Artistas del Tapiz, 11 (31), Buenos Aires, 1989.

Weinberger, Elliot. “Cecilia Vicuña: A Little Liter”. *28 Poliester*, 1990.

Yoshida, Atsuhiko. “Epic | Literary Genre.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2019, [www.britannica.com/art/epic](http://www.britannica.com/art/epic).

---