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Art and Anthropology: Work and Life
Edited by Matteo Guidi, Roger Sansi



visual ethnography

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Edited by Matteo Guidi, Roger Sansi

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Mangrané, *La Pensée Férale*

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Introduction

Art and anthropology, work and life.

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Roger Sansi, *Universitat de Barcelona, Spain*

Matteo Guidi, *ISIA Urbino, Italia*

Abstract

This special issue is a collection of articles, photo-essays and videos united by a common engagement in art and anthropology that takes multiple forms. Our intention is not to propose one more definition of these relations, but to start by acknowledging that they can take many forms, and these forms often depend upon the intricate trajectories and relations established between practitioners and forms of practice, forms of work and forms of life.

Roger Sansi

is Professor in Social Anthropology at Universitat de Barcelona, Spain. He has worked on Afro-Brazilian culture and religion, the concept of the fetish, and on contemporary art in Barcelona. His publications include the books *Fetishes and Monuments*, (Berghahn, 2007), *Sorcery in the Black Atlantic* (edited with L. Nicolau, Chicago UP 2011), *Art Anthropology and the Gift* (Bloomsbury 2015) and *The Anthropologist as Curator* (2019 Routledge)

Matteo Guidi

lives in Barcelona, is visual artist with a background in Anthropology. He teaches social science applied to contemporary art and design in ISIA Urbino, in the Perugia Academy of Fine Arts and in IED Barcelona. His publications include the books *Cucinare in massima sicurezza* (Stampa Alternativa 2013), *Phantom '77. Spanish Iconoclasm* (Gredits 2020), *Italia in miniatura. A journey between reality and fiction* (Corraini 2022), *Positioning Practices | Investigating the Italian Colonial Experience Between Memory and the Present* (Corraini 2024).

Keywords: Art, Anthropology, Work, Life.

This special issue is a collection of articles, photo-essays and videos united by a common engagement in art and anthropology that takes multiple forms. Many things have been said about the relations between both disciplines and forms of practice in the last decades by many authors, including the organizers of this special issue (Marcus & Myers 1995, Schneider & Wright 2005, 2010, 2013, Sansi 2014). Our intention here is not to propose one more definition of these relations, but to start by acknowledging that they can take many forms, and these forms often depend upon the intricate trajectories and relations established between practitioners and forms of practice, forms of work and forms of life. Starting with the relation between the editors, us: Roger Sansi is a professor in Anthropology at the University of Barcelona, Matteo Guidi is a visual artist and professor of social science applied to art and design at ISIA Urbino and the Perugia Academy of Fine Arts. Sansi met Guidi in Barcelona, and wrote about his work as an artist, but now we are working together editing a special issue, in what would be a form of academic work closer to Anthropology. But what is the limit, where does “art” end and where does “anthropology” start in our relation? Where does work end and where does friendship start? It is difficult to say, and perhaps less interesting that exploring the multiple forms in which they can be intertwined. In this special issue, we have worked from these loose ideas, precisely by intertwining work and life, art and anthropology, connecting and extending our relations with artists, anthropologists, and all the range of possible in between, approaching this special issue as a curatorial project (Sansi 2019a) that assembles people, images, objects, and concepts in multiple ways.

Starting with the image on the cover, where we see Matteo Guidi taking a photograph in a shop that sells stones in a West Bank refugee camp. In this image, subject and object merge, as do the artist with the anthropologist, because in fact the photograph of the two subjects posing in front of the stone blocks was meant to be documentation material, part of the field research for a new project, but in fact later it was printed and framed in large format and became part of the artistic process *The Artist and the Stone* (<https://theartistandthestone.net/>). The same project that in turn became the detonator of the professional bond and friendship between Guidi and Sansi, who wrote about that project (Sansi 2019b).

Michele Feder-Nadoff’s article, “The incommensurability of Making”, discusses the concept of “making” as open process. The author’s questioning of the meaning of making accompanied her from her formation as an art student at the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1970, to her more recent training as an anthropologist. But in this paper and in her anthropological work it appears mainly as the embodied process of apprenticeship with the master artisan, Maestro Jesús Pérez Ornelas (1924-2014) in his traditional coppersmith forge of Santa Clara del Cobre, Michoacán, Mexico. Maestro Jesús was not just the informant for the anthropologist, but the master to the apprentice who was rethinking her own practice and concepts through anthropology.

Pamela Cevallos in her paper “Imágenes Maleables” also works with artisans, in this case in Ecuador, who make replicas of pre-Hispanic pottery. Her interest and approach come from her double condition first as an artist and then as an anthropologist, who has done research on this community but has also helped them organize a museum and collaborative exhibitions. In that sense, Cevallos is less interested in making than in the conceptual problem of the replica, that lead Cevallos to develop a third role as a curator, bringing together her work as artist and anthropologist through the process of collaboration with the artisans.

Caterina Borelli as opposed to Feder-Nadoff and Cevallos, does not have a background as an artist, but is trained as an anthropologist. And her focus as

an anthropologist has not been art, or images, but she has worked with several photographers in different occasions the research of Borelli as an anthropologists and different photographers, Camila de Maffei, Felipe Romero Beltrán, and Lorenzo Vetturi, coalesced. This essay written by all four reflects on the relations between anthropology and photography through their common experience and exchange.

Susan Ossman is both an anthropologist as an artist. As a graduate student in anthropology, her artistic practice was not exactly encouraged (Ossman 2021), but as her career and life advanced she conceived a new kind of autoethnography, making art and ethnography equal partners. In this essay “Invitation”: Experimental Encounters in Pandemic Times” she presents the artistic Project she started in Paris after moving from California in a new apartment at the beginning of the COVID pandemic. “Invitation” was an art-exchange project in which she invited her friends scattered around the world to see her new apartment through the artworks she mailed to them. This was the first instance of “scattered subjects” a project that probed encounters, conceptions of the self and of the community in environments reshaped by the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions.

Lydian Nakashima Degarrod is also an anthropologist and practicing artist. The exhibition *Scattered Seeds of the Cotton Bolls*, that she presents here as a photo-essay. Is part of a series of ethnographic art projects during which she conducted research on Japanese migration to Latin America. This exhibition addresses the most personal side of the project. Originally it addressed the forced deportation of Japanese Peruvians from Peru to internment camps in the US during WWII, but the closing of borders of Peru and Chile during the Covid pandemic forced Nakashima to alter the project and focusing on her family, Japanese Peruvians forced to migrate to Chile during WW2. This photo essay diverts from her past writings (Degarrod 2012, 2016a, 2016b, 2021) in that it focuses on the artistic creation, and it is written primarily from her perspective as a visual artist.

Leone Contini’s essay unfolds through the empirical experience of the author, an artist with an anthropological background who has participated in several art residencies. He shows us how these can be re-read as a specific segment of an artist’s journey, in which ethnographic research intersects with artistic practices in the context of the residency itself. *All Roads Lead Elsewhere. Recursive Paths Between Art and Ethnography* aims at a critical and self-reflexive understanding of the anthropological and ethnographic approach to contemporary art. It becomes a reflection that starts from three autobiographical writings flanked by the author’s field experience - that of an artistic residency - or that we could define from a subjective dimension to bring them to a collective reflection within the current theoretical debate on the encounter between anthropology and the visual arts.

Marco Tortoioli Ricci’s contribution is quite different from the previous papers. He is a graphic designer and lecturer in design methodology at ISIA Urbino and at the Academy of Fine Arts in Perugia, who, although starting from a personal and participatory practice, leaves contemporary art to enter the field of design. “Quanti di Identità” presents an innovative approach based on an ethnographic methodology applied to design. It goes beyond traditional models of visual identity projects, introducing a fluid and participatory vision of design. It is from here that the article takes the law of Quantum Mechanics as its starting point, to advocate a plural and relational approach as well as a design method in graphic design based on ethnographic research processes and the elaboration of participatory and malleable narrative devices in relation to the reality of the context.

Alfonso Borragán is a practising artist with no formal training in anthropology. But he has been carrying out a long-term project about the absorption of stones in different cultures and historical periods, and this has taken his research towards anthropological methods but also theories of materiality and the body. In his report he presents for this special issue, he presents *Bucarolito*, a collective action carried out in Little Haiti, Miami, in which a group of ninety people ingested Miamian clay in the form of “Búcaros”, ceramic bases. During the 16th and 17th Century, the “Búcaros de Indias” were ingested by the royal family and aristocracy of Spain with healing purposes. The performance appears here as an activator that extends and entangles with the documentary and visual research on the búcaros.

Similarly to Borragán, the work of Daniel Steegman departs from art practice, but has encountered anthropology in the process of research. This photo essay, with texts by philosopher Juliana Fausto reflects upon “Feral thought”. The Foresta de Tijuca is a big forest integrated the urban area of Rio de Janeiro, created by design of the Emperor of Brazil through slave work in the 19th century. Feral dogs are one of the most common inhabitants of the Foresta de Tijuca nowadays, they may be wild, but they cannot become wolves. They can go feral, but they can’t undo their relation with humans so easily. “Nature” appears in Tijuca as a return from the margins of civilization, but a return that is related to civilization. Can we think about the transposition of the “savage though” of Lévi-Strauss to a “feral thought”? The images superpose the forest, with its tall dense trees, with the eyes of the feral dogs, looking back at us.

In her video installation *Eco*; Fiamma Montezemolo, investigates the traces of 9 art works that have been part of the two-decade old public art event called inSite at the US-Mexico border near Tijuana. The conclusions, as the author herself says, are inconclusive; and this led her to present this research in the form of a video rather than as an anthropological monograph. Montezemolo was trained as a professional anthropologist, but has her work evolved, her experimentation with artistic practice took preference over conventional forms of academic production like the research monograph. In her recently published autoantology, “Hidden in Plain Sight” (2024), the chapter corresponding to this research, chapter 4, appears blank.

The project that Mireia Sallarés presents here is part of an ongoing project trilogy that the artist has called the *Trilogy of Trash Concepts*, the result of prolonged research into life lived in relation to concepts such as truth, love and work. *Kao malo vode na dlanu* (*Like a little water in the palm of my hand*), a project about love in Serbia, is the second in this ongoing trilogy. The artist carried out four years of fieldwork, moving far and wide across the territory of the former Yugoslavia. Transforming the theme into methodology and form, i.e. investigating love with love in order to produce acts of love, has been the leitmotif that has accompanied the entire work, an openness to what cannot be theorized or organized, but which claims us. The result is a fictional film that stands as a method of speaking with care and respect to people who would not accept an interview in the usual documentary style.

Nuria Guell’s video essay is a clear example of how the documentation collected during the artistic process shapes both the process itself as well as the final result. *Una película de Dios* is the result of months of work in which the artist collaborated with eight underage girls from contexts of abuse and sexual exploitation in Mexico. In their encounters, the artist confronts Catholic education on the one hand and sexual abuse on the other, the subordinate status of women in relation to men, and the sexual roles and identities derived from the family in relation to the Catholic religion. The video essay reflects a structure divided into 5 chapters, one for each theme he touches on during his

encounters with the girls: The artist; The paintings; The girls; The mother, The father and The stepfathers; God.

Asking where does anthropology end and where does art start, is like asking where does truth end, and fiction starts; when does work end and does life start? Are we really looking for the limit or is it more interesting to address the multiple forms in which this relation can be enacted? Can we propose an open curatorial project in which the reader and the viewer itself can trace and add their own networks, their narratives, their lives?

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Articles

The incommensurability of making

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

What is the incommensurability of making? How and under what circumstances can craft production be seen as a practice of care, a kind of love? And, how does this inversion of careful and caring labor become a method of hope? These questions emerged through my mentor-apprenticeship as an artist-anthropologist with the master coppersmith artisan, Maestro Jesús Pérez Ornelas (1926-2014) and his sons in Santa Clara del Cobre, Michoacán, Mexico. Reflecting upon this fieldwork, this article approaches the concept of incommensurability topologically winding through defining making as a continuum of art and craft; proposing artisan agency-ing, crafting care, labor and love; to how making becomes a method of hope. The incommensurability of making is a model of production that matters beyond measure that resists neoliberalism and global capitalist markets despite operating within these structures. Incommensurability challenges homogenizing dominant concepts of value and confronts the positional problematics of interpretation, quantification and measurement of labor and productivity.

Michele Feder-Nadoff

is an artist-anthropologist whose practice and research centers on the meaning of making. In addition to her art, she conducted long-term apprenticeship-based ethnography with master coppersmiths in Santa Clara del Cobre, Michoacán, México, initiated in 1997 and was founding-director of the arts and culture non-profit, Cuentos Foundation, 1998-2009, Fulbright Scholar, 2010-2011, and received a PhD from El Colegio de Michoacán, 2017. Her seminar-labs train researchers in multimodal and collaborative methods. Recent publications include editor of *Performing Craft in Mexico: Artisans, Aesthetics and the Power of Translation*, 2022 and *An Anthropology of Making in Santa Clara del Cobre: Presence of Absence*, 2024.

Keywords: Making; Care; Incommensurability; Hope; Coppersmithing; Mexico; Craft; Material-culture; Michoacán; Apprenticeship

1 There are many studies in relationship to the term “incommensurability” however none have developed this concept in direct relationship to material culture, making or critical aesthetics as initiated in this article. That said, the essay by Povinelli (2001) has been helpful in confirming many of the socio-political aspects relevant to this article, although they do not quite come to the forward. See Pérez-Oramas (2018) on incommensurability in relationship to art and cultural difference in museum collections.

2 This does not mean to imply that there is no way to study and analyze things that are made, rather it means to put aesthetics together with the making process in their analysis. See Feder-Nadoff, 2024.

Preliminaries: an anthropology of making

The discussion of “craft” and its incommensurability¹ that follows is framed by and “with” an anthropology of making (Feder-Nadoff: 2024). To study “making” is to examine how we make lives, meanings, and worlds within worlds. This is how craft becomes anthropological, as well as philosophical. Like agency-ing, “making” focuses upon the processual, the iterative and transformative, rather than the end product or fixed goal, attribute or possession.² Making a life is always in flux as is making things.

The term “making” joins together art and craft. In my apprenticeship to Maestro Jesús Pérez Ornelas which will be described below, it became analytically necessary to dismiss the binaries of art and craft. In doing so it becomes possible to look at the activities and fields of production active across the spectrum and continuum of both. To elevate craft’s status from the domain of the “minor” arts, many scholars of Mexican craft, argue that craft should instead be assigned to the category of “art” or “fine arts.” In my research I have found this solution unhelpful as the binary between art and craft remains slippery and obfuscating. To formulate a more thorough analysis of craft and art, hand in hand with and as in/material and visual culture, I prefer to use the term “making.”

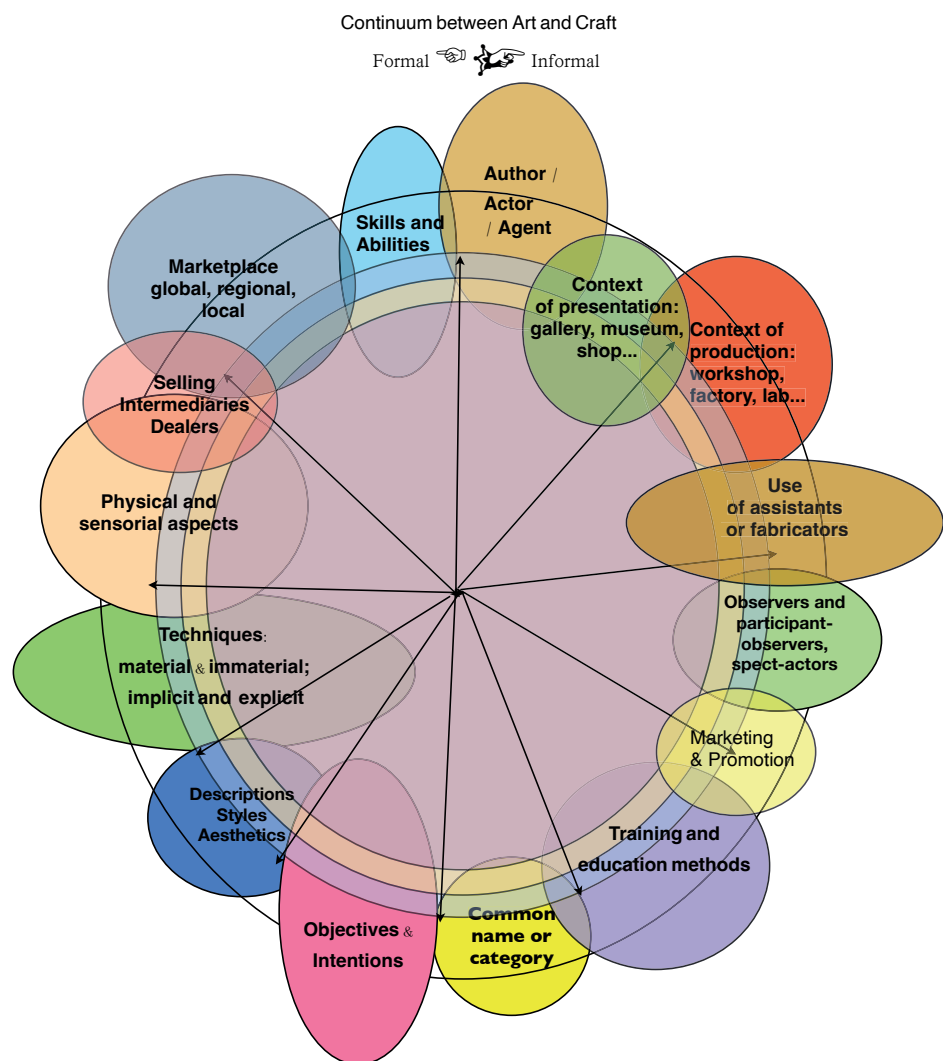


Figure 1 Diagram. Continuum between Art and Craft. M. 2017. Feder-Nadoff.

An anthropology of making also brings together the conceptual, material, sensorial, cognitive, physiological, neurological, affective and phenomenological aspects into conversation. This orientation demonstrates how the activities and fields applied to what is commonly thought of as art, on the one hand, and to what is generally presumed to be craft on the other, actually inhabit a continuum. This continuum, I argue, is performative and processual, encompassing both reproductive and representative performances of social and aesthetic agencies.³

The term making gives attention to the many different processual ways of knowing. As Marchand (2010), explains:

Making ...more accurately captures the processes and durational qualities of knowledge formation; and rather than being suggestive of hierarchical and methodological transfer, it fosters thinking about knowledge as a dialogical and constructive engagement between people, things and environment. (Marchand 2010)

As Barad (2003: 828) argues: “Practices of knowing and being are not isolatable, but rather they are mutually implicated. We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world. We know because we are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becomings.” To practice making is to learn to know yourself, the materials you work with and the world you are working in and taking part in creating. Making encompasses onto-epistemic processes. Making, then, as its study, demands correspondence. And none of this is possible without care.

Making is also a helpful term when discussing things made in Mexico because of the problematics of translation. In Mexico, as in most Latin American countries, the English word “craft” does not translate easily, nor accurately into Spanish. The problematics are not just linguistic and syntactic, but are also cultural.⁴ The most common, albeit problematic Spanish term is “*artesanía*,” literally meaning the things *artesanos*, artisans make. These terms came into use during the 1920s at a time when Mexico was forging a national identity and aesthetic, known as Mexicanidad.⁵ The term “*artesanía*,” just like popular art, folk art, or craft, depends upon hegemonic contrasts with art (*arte culto*) with a big A.⁶ This is another reason why the term “making” is useful in the following discussion of copper-smithing in Santa Clara del Cobre.

Yet, that said the problems of the incommensurability of translation between Spanish and English go deeper than this. To commensurate between these languages is more than syntactic, grammatical or linguistic. Translation here is social, cultural, historical, as well as political. Making as a term is a metalanguage which must be employed carefully, situationally, rather than generically as it too can homogenize, even colonize production and obfuscate labor. This article speaks with terminology meant to use as sifts, to sort out specifics of place, time and persons, but not to generalize. It aims to make visible the incommensurability of making as manifest in its care and labor.

Questions about the meaning of making first emerged for me as a young art student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1970s. Ever since then, these philosophical questions have haunted my artistic production and research as an artist and more recently, as a formally trained anthropologist. The topological discussion that follows maps out the incommensurability of making, a concept arrived at through my long-term fieldwork apprenticeship to the master artisan, Maestro Jesús Pérez Ornelas (1924-2014) in his traditional coppersmith forge of Santa Clara del Cobre, Michoacán, Mexico. A primary element of this experience was “care.”

3 Performance theory is usefully applied to an anthropology of making, following Victor Turner (1979: 465-466) who stressed that performance and its self-reflexivity, the “language through which a group communicates itself to itself” and to others, is not “confined to talking codes.” Despite that performance theory has been more generally applied to ritual or ritual-like events, theatre, carnival and other public spectacles, following Turner, performance can be theoretically applied to “gestures, music, dancing, graphic representation, painting, sculpture, and the fashioning of symbolic objects.”

4 See Feder-Nadoff 2022 on these problematics as addressed by multiple Mexican scholars and in the edition's introduction. Each contributor discusses the problematic translation and historical usage of these terms and critiques their many meanings and applications within and outside of Mexico

5 There are many scholars on the relationship between Mexican national identity (formation) and Mexicanidad. See Danley 2002; Feder-Nadoff 2022; Lopez 2006, 2010; Vaughan and Lewis, 2006; among many others.

6 See Mejía 2004; Feder-Nadoff 2022.

7 The artisan I first studied with was Maestro Maximo Velazquez Correa. See Feder-Nadoff (2024) for more details.

8 I was given the choice to live with a family, in an hotel, or in my own house.

To begin this discussion of care in making and its incommensurability, I next present Maestro Jesús and his trajectory combined with a brief description of my apprenticeship. This will be followed by a discussion of how care in making can be seen as a method of hope through its future-oriented aspirations and its speculativeness: its agency-ing. Through this focus upon care this article initiates a study of the incommensurability of making, about things that matter beyond measure.

Agency-ing of the artisans Santa Clara del Cobre and the things they make

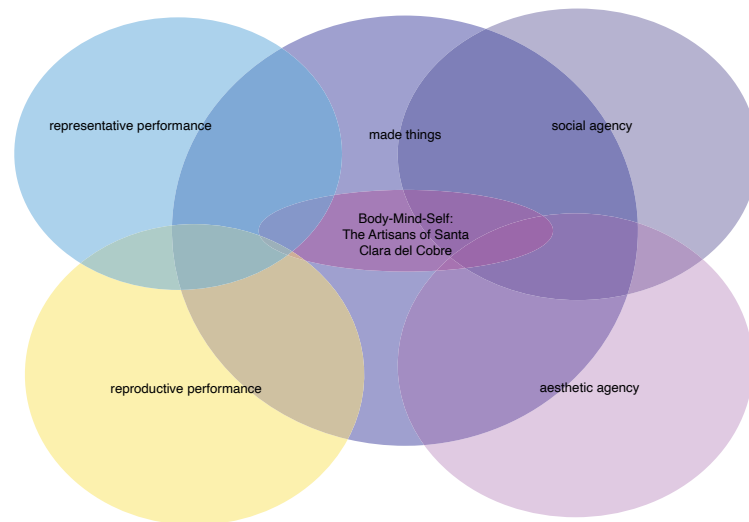


Figure 2 Diagram. Agency-ing of the Artisans of Santa Clara del Cobre and the copper things they make. 2017. M. Feder-Nadoff

Introducing Maestro Jesús, apprenticeship and caring

In 1997 I traveled to Santa Clara del Cobre for the first time to study with a master coppersmith in the town's technical school, Cecati 166.⁷ I happily chose to live with a family led by Jose Sagrario Pérez Pamatz (Pepe) and Olivia Lucas that included their two small daughters, Clara and Xochitl.⁸ As good fortune would have it, Pepe was a gifted artisan and the fourth son of Maestro Jesús Pérez Ornelas, whom in subsequent visits and extended stays became my mentor. After many years of informal ethnography and working on educational and cultural exchange projects within the larger community, between 2012 and 2017, I carried out my doctorate based in apprenticeship to Maestro Jesús' in his family forge and living in his artisan home.



Figure 3 José Sagrario Pérez Pamatz (Maestro Pérez's son) with his completed commissioned work inspired by the Fuente de las Tarascas in Morelia. Maestro Pérez told his son to photograph it before giving it to the client as "You don't make pieces like this everyday!" .M. Feder-Nadoff. 2013.

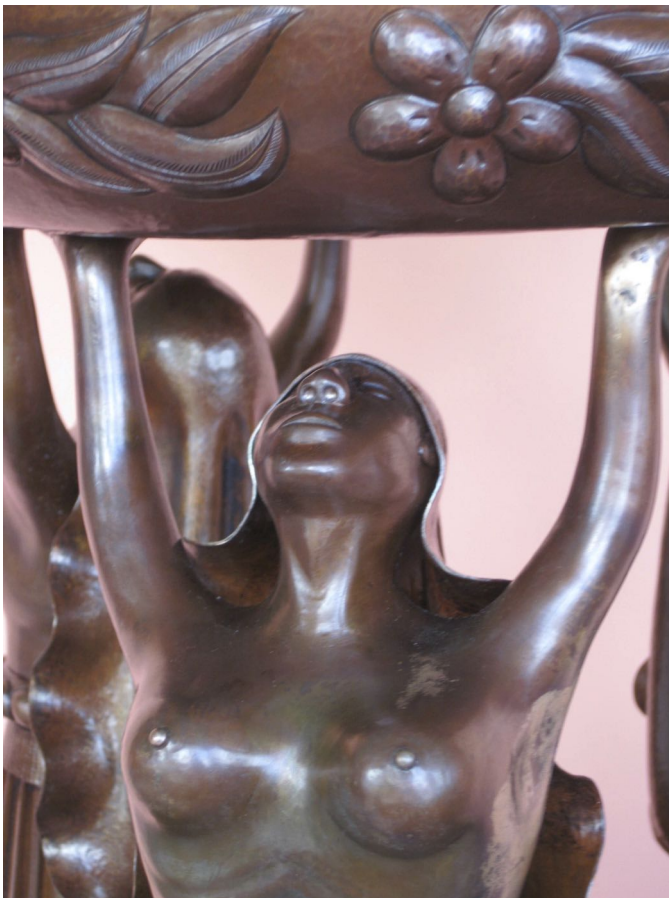


Figure 4 Detail, Fuente de las Tarascas piece as seen in figure 3. M. Feder-Nadoff. 2013.

9 See for example Venkatesan 2010 for a excellent example of artisans who do not enjoy nor want to be artisans, but are limited to this based upon ethnicity, caste and religion.

10 See Feder-Nadoff 2024: 325-355, Chapter on the Aesthetics of Abduction and Fragmentation.

11 When I first returned to Santa Clara to begin transnational community projects I was advised by Mexicans from Mexico City to say I was a Maestra, a teacher, not an artist, as in Mexico artists are often assumed to be of the privileged elite class. Diego Rivera for example trained in Europe, skipped the violence of the Mexican Revolution to return afterwards participating in the production of the Mexican aesthetic and cultural identity through his well-known murals and paintings. And it was Frida Kahlo's more elite class that gave worldwide attention to the beauty of Indigenous clothing, not an indigenous woman.

Maestro Jesús Pérez Ornelas was a respected village elder, a coppersmith artisan who ran his family forge with his sons according to the labor and aesthetic standards he controlled and ministered. Not all artisans in Santa Clara are able to attain this type of independence.⁹ Many work in much more factory like production lines for shops, other more successful artisans, or other industrial businesses, such as the many copper-laminators, and processing plants. His steady but modest income provided him the freedom to follow his vision and imagination, and to invest the time required to create his work with care. He also was a determined, curious and stubborn man, who did not put up with what he thought was nonsense. As he said he spoke his mind, often when truth should not be told. But he was beloved and considered a pillar of the Santa Clara community. His ethos was old school, not just for self, but for community. One's own success would also help others to aspire to theirs. This attitude effected how he approached my study in his forge and his ability and interest in forging a relationship with me over the years, of trust and even fatherly devotion and care.



Figure 5 Maestro Jesús Pérez Ornelas with his son Felix. Circa 1970. Photographer Unknown. Collection Family of J. Pérez Ornelas.

Many of Maestro Jesús' friends did not understand how he let a foreigner into his forge: an American artist and a woman. Mexico has a long history of colonization. And Santa Clara has its own more recent neocolonial experiences and other mis-appropriations of agency and power.¹⁰ There exist well-based feelings of distrust for the elite and this included the "artist-class."¹¹ But Maestro Jesús was secure in his talents and abilities. He also had his plans for what he might pass on to his children and to the world. He wanted his stories to trav-

el, as he had while living and his desire for connection outlasted him. Through the many years during which I carried out educational-cultural projects with members of the community and through actual visits to Chicago by several artisans, including Maestro Jesús, people in Santa Clara had come to know me well: they knew where and how I lived, who I was and trusted me. I did not just enter Santa Clara and my teacher's forge as a student pursuing a doctoral degree, to arrive and then to disappear. I had known five generations of this family and had been part of the community for many years, knew many people. We shared history and experiences by the time the doctoral period took place. In other words and in short, we cared for each other.

Maestro Jesús grew up in humble beginnings. Both of his parents were orphans. His childhood was not easy, nor the realities of life he had faced and overcame. Maestro Jesús always regretted not being able to go to school. He was needed to contribute to the family home and it is likely his father, a deeply religious man, was wary of the socialism present in the schools representing a secularist and anti-Catholic attitude. So not uncommonly for this time period and place, Maestro Jesús was illiterate. Well into his 30s, with a candle at his side at night after work in the forge he taught himself to read out of necessity and determination when he began traveling to Mexico City to sell his wares and to meet with clients and conduct business as the treasurer of Santa Clara's newly formed collective, named after Vasco de Quiroga, the region's first Spanish Bishop.

Although he was sent outside the home to apprentice with an uncle as is still customary, most of Maestro Jesús' early training as a coppersmith was gained working in his father's forge producing copper cauldrons, *cazos*. There he labored dawn to dusk along with his brothers and hired peons so intensely that by the end of the day he could not unclench his fist. When he discovered that he enjoyed and had a talent for making ornamental decorative vessels he left his father's workshop to establish his own. This rupture caused a painful breach between himself and his father for much of his life.

As a young man, newly married, he became known for the special expressive even surrealistic quality of his works. With this success, combined with his personable spirit, he established warm relationships with government officials and administrators, curators and collectors throughout Mexico. With these connections he worked together with other artisan leaders of Santa Clara del Cobre, prominent artisans in their own right, to promote their community and build projects of collective import. Shortly after his death, his wife, doña Sagrario, told me: "If Maestro Jesús had wanted to make a lot of money he could have; but, it wasn't important to him." She was content, as he had been, to be able to raise their 13 children, and he had left her the benefits of a small pension, the results of his 25 years of work as a teacher in the village craft school, La Casa del Artesano, which he had helped found in the mid-1970s.¹² Despite that in his family home he did not teach his daughters to work in the forge, in this school he taught many young women, such as Marta Mondragon Acosta¹³ and Lorena Paredes Rosales,¹⁴ who went on to become established artisans in Santa Clara. All of his former students shared a deep affection and respect towards this grand master. He had cared for them and they cared for him.

Aesthetic labor and style: reproduction and representation

Maestro Jesús' decorative copper vases, bowls, and centerpieces are recognized for their signature style of human, animal or bird-like heads encircling their diameters.¹⁵ Most especially, the repeated human heads suggest birthing images. As they emerge seeming to push out from the solidity of the vessel's copper walls they appear to be crowning. The repetition of heads form an unending gaze. Unlike Janus heads these are not poles, nor dualities that face each other.

12 See Pomar 2004 and Mendoza-Briones 2004 for a detailed history of this school and its founding.

13 See Mendoza-Briones 2004: 328-333 for a biographical interview and synopsis of Mondragón's career trajectory.

14 See Mendoza-Briones 2004: 330 for images of Paredes' copper work and brief discussion.

15 This section is adapted from Feder-Nadoff 2023.



Figure 6 Olla with heads. Maestro Jesús Pérez Ornelas. Hammered copper. M. Feder-Nadoff. Circa 2008.

These human, animal and bird-like heads have faces but no limbs. The human heads move ambiguously between face and mask, human and nonhuman beings and the birds seem to rest, hovering between heaven and earth. The birds have rounded chests and plump bodies sprouting wings and rest peacefully on tripod “feet” or rounded bases that ground them. Oft represented are owls symbolizing wisdom and wealth.



Figure 7 Doña Sagrario helping Maestro Pérez in the forge, acting as a living clamp to hold a small copper bird head in place as he shapes it with the hammer. M. Feder-Nadoff. 2012.



Figure 8 Small bird head as seen in figure 3. M. Feder-Nadoff. Circa 2013.

16 See Martínez 2013 on the “*cuiripu*,” the prehispanic Purhépecha conception of the “body.”



Figure 9 Three bird head piece as completed. Maestro J. Pérez Ornelas. Circa 2008. M. Feder-Nadoff.

Their heads rotate 270 degrees and their open wide eyes are so large they can see in almost complete darkness. Acute hunters, territorial and monogamous, owls camouflage themselves into tree boughs and trunk holes via their mottled muted colored feather patterns. They vigilantly protect their young and their mate and so must constantly survey their surroundings. As their artisan maker, these owls contradict gender-stereotyped binaries of “feminine” and “masculine” roles and activities (as imagined by humans). The care and delicacy given to create these copper vessels queer what Roberto Martínez González (2013) describes as the “masculine... realm of production and appropriation” and the feminine realm, “characterized by transformation and maintenance” as described in his study of Michoacán’s Indigenous peoples conceptions of the body and person.¹⁶

In Maestro Jesús’ forge the intense care invested in creating his copper pieces went well beyond the perfunctory. Their finish was extremely worked, polished and perfected. These are performances of reproduction that entailed an incommensurate investment of energy. Working and studying in the forge it became evident that men, as well as women, participate in the reproduction and transformation of their communities, as well as themselves, through the things they make with care. It is in this sense that I have come to see how reproduction was transgendered by the male artisans with whom I studied (Feder-Nadoff 2023). Through their smithing they performed as doulas giving birth to their selves, communities and copper vessels. This echoes Annette Weiner’s (1980) concepts of reproduction and regeneration, and her argument that both men and women must be considered as reproductive agents who participate in these social-cultural processes. Like women’s traditionally assigned role of “reproductive” work for family, the work of the artisan is also “reproductive.” Both demand a “maternal” nurturance, unquantifiable attention and care. This quotient of care is pure gift without reciprocity. This non-enumerative labor is a kind of love.

Like the work of the caregiver, mother, or father this is not commensurable labor. For a mother or father, care, as love cannot be measured. Like all nurturing activities given freely, artisanal reproductivity cannot be adequately measured as wage labor. This is not to suggest that this generous work go un-

paid, but rather to suggest, that perhaps it is this non-enumerative quotient of care that makes craft so desirable. Care is an element of craft's imaginary, its tropes, aura and generosity. In this light, care as love is a "gift" whose generosity is not intended to be reciprocated; but rather, as Weiner suggests, a gifting meant to endow relationships with an ongoingness that can exceed death (Weiner 1994).

¹⁷ See Gell 1998 on time and space in the oeuvre of an artist drawing upon Husserl and also Duchamp.



Figure 10 Last copper piece by Maestro J. Pérez Ornelas left unfinished on his work bench at the time of his death in 2014. M.Feder-Nadoff. 2014.

Weiner (1994, 394) critiques the temporal limitations of anthropology's traditional reciprocity model of the gift because some objects, such as the banana leaves stored by the women she studied in the Trobriand, resist reciprocity (Jolly 1998):

As cultural constructions some objects become symbolically dense -- so dense with cultural meaning and value that others have difficulty prying these treasures away from their owners. Such density accrues through an objects' association with its owners fame, ancestral histories, secrecy, sacredness, aesthetics and economic values. Thus objects that are especially dense circulate exceedingly slowly in comparison to less dense ones, which can be exchanged, sold, or traded with impunity. (Weiner 1994: 394)

Likewise, Maestro Jesús' coppersmithing extends time and space.¹⁷ Through his copper-works he responded to West Mexican folklore, popular culture, regional mythologies, metalworking history and technologies. His copper forms echo preHispanic West Mexican morphologies found in Nayarit, Colima, and Guanajuato ceramics, while also linking to commonplace utilitarian crafts and tourist items found in contemporary regional markets. His works are, in this sense, more-than artifactual commodities. Replacement value is not possible in the sale of his work, not just because they are one of a kind, but rather because their measure of worth is beyond measure. These works function within a value system that lies beyond the constituent factors implicit in a global marketplace, even while performing within it.

18 See Marchand 2016 on craft as problem-solving.

19 See Feder-Nadoff 2022, 2017.

The copper work of Maestro Jesús performs as a kind of future gifting, a performance of incommensurate value and care in the context of his community of Santa Clara del Cobre. Because they embody as well as create history. They perform as archives and repositories for the future. His copper work is a gift whose incommensurability lies in its ability to function not only in the present, but even more so in the future.

When my teacher died all his adult children held a meeting to decide what to do with his remaining unsold copper works. Although there were customers who wanted to buy them, the family decided they would not sell any of their father's remaining works as their value was incommensurable, could not be measured in economical terms, and played more into the future of the family than into its pragmatic present. This decision reflected their father's concept of vision, of thinking past the immediate present towards the long-distance, the future.

Maestro Jesús always strove to know more, about materials, the world, other people and himself. He oft repeated that he would never stop learning what it meant to be an artisan until the day he died. Although he strived for perfection in his copper work, he instructed me in understanding how my failings and errors served as prompts to continue solving the problem in the next piece. His artisanal production was not fixed, completed, but always incomplete, un-finished and in-progress. His practice was a craft of problem solving¹⁸ and as such, his ongoing drive to understand, to know and to be, propelled him forwards not backwards. Maestro Jesús' "now" was always in the future. The ongoingness perfecting of his work reflected his continual aspiration of achievement and realization. It is in this future-ing sense that we can begin to understand making as a method of hope. But this sense of hope is not enough as it skips over the underlying problematics of the contingencies of life in Santa Clara del Cobre and its incongruities. It also mitigates an understanding of the deeper more paradoxical nature of hope.

Contingencies and hope: Artisan Agency-ing

The problems of incongruity are manifest in the contingencies of Maestro Jesús life and in the lifeworld of many of the coppersmiths of Santa Clara in several ways. Firstly between the past and the future. Coppersmithing in Santa Clara draws upon a past, a treasure trove of techniques implemented and taught, passed on through practice generationally. Along with this artisan trade is its socio-political bundle of class subjugation, nation-state as well as global hegemonies.

Contingencies include the coincidences of our birth, the corresponding restraints placed on us based upon where we are born, to whom, what class and when and all the events that follow. Maestro Jesús was not "Spanish" nor "European" enough. But, neither was he "Indigenous" enough. Being Mestizo in Mexico is complicated and ambiguous.¹⁹ He was also a "campesino," a peasant farmer living in rural Mexico, whom as his son Napoleón explained to me, was the same as being an "indio" to the government. These are only the bare scaffolding of the larger structural situation that Maestro Jesús faced in his lifetime: events of the past that could easily propel a difficult future without much hope. How did they not? What made Maestro Jesús face the future with hope? It was not only his faith, his religious and moral faith in doing good and the merits of the afterlife. It had something to do with his coppersmithing, his attitude towards his trade, his class and his community, family and towards life more generally. And given these contingencies where did Maestro Jesús' ambition - vision as he called it - come from? And how was he able to maintain this? How was he able to be so generous? to me and others, students and visitors? to allow me into his sphere of influence, into the world of his copper forge? to invest so much heart, so much devotion and care into his work? and to his community?

Contingencies of life also include old age. In Maestro Jesús' final years his techniques and abilities changed, as they had all along his career. But in his diminished strength his sons stepped in and the pieces were often created in collaboration. This had occurred before as it is traditional and common to join in together to create works. In fact there are steps in the process that require cooperative labor. Yet, this collaboration implies, augments additional layers of care to the finished works created within that studio workshop. The caring of education, training and discipline he had invested in his sons, came back to him in the form of their expertise and abilities to step in and work together with him.

20 Stewart 1996, 6 as cited by Feder-Nadoff 2021: 197; 2017: 443.

This highlights another aspect of Maestro Jesús' artisan practice as a method of hope that required an incommensurable quotient of care. Agency was exercised not by him alone, but by being together with his sons in what I prefer to call "agency-ing." Agency-ing changes the static possessive, individualistic nature of agency and relates to *agencement* (Feder-Nadoff 2017: 442-441). *Agencement* is an active term like agency-ing that emphasizes the processual instead of focusing on agency as a fixed thing or possession. In Spanish the French term *agencement* can be translated as *agenciamiento*, the condition or state of being agentive. The noun is turned into a continuous tense, grammatically speaking a present participle. This aptly applies to artisan agency and succinctly describes Maestro Jesús' manner of working. For him, making was like culture: It was "not an end, or a blueprint for thinking or acting, but a constant beginning again--a search, an argument, an unfinished longing."²⁰

Karen Barad (2003: 826) insists that agency is more a "a matter of intra-acting" than something possessed. As she explains:

[Agency] is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. Agency cannot be designated as an attribute of 'subjects' or 'objects' (as they do not preexist as such). Agency is not an attribute whatsoever- it is 'doing'/'being' in its intra-activity. Agency is the enactment of iterative changes to particular practices through the dynamics of intra-activity (Barad 2003: 826).

Barad's approach to the interactivity of agency and its agency-ing rather than its "noun-ness" moves it *nearer* to the translation of Deleuze and Guattari's 'agencement,' translated into English as 'assemblage' (Manning 2016; Massumi, 1986). Converting agency to agencement also becomes more inclusive of the collective, collaborative: an assemblage of human and non-human, of place and person inter-constituting and intra-transforming. This positions it more appropriately in relationship to studies of making.

Similarly, Erin Manning and Brian Massumi emphasize the term "agencement" borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari, to turn agency to agency-ing. Agency-ing expresses more accurately the connection between assemblage and bricolage, and the agency of the bricoleur, as described by Lévi-Strauss, who we can see as the artisan. Assemblage also corresponds to surrealism and the positive possibilities and ironic insights provided by contingencies and serendipity (Feder-Nadoff 2017: 252n12). Agency-ing and agencement change the perception of agency as a closed process and safeguards any links to power in more aggressive terms, i.e. of control and domination. Erin Manning (2016) explains that by focusing on agencement rather than agency we shake "the powerful foundation of neurotypicality, a mode of existence that profoundly devalues accounts of experience that cannot be reduced to the volition-intentionality-agency triad." This also allows for "new modes of existence" that are "as yet uncharted" to be invented (Manning 2016).

21 See Sansi 2014; Sansi and Strathern 2016 for more discussions on the trajectories of art/material culture and social relations.

From this perspective, skill too, becomes un-moored, made active, processual, and performative, and so too, the fixedness of mastery, as we have seen in the changes Maestro faced in old age. For these reasons I posit a mastery of un-mastery. En-skilling is ongoing and requires care (Feder-Nadoff 2024; 2017). Agency-ing transforms the contingencies described above, of failure, imperfection, vulnerability, and class into possibilities. This in part is making's incommensurability.

Mary Zournazi (2002: 12) places life's contingencies into relationship with hope explaining that if "life is a series of encounters and chance meetings, events and social relations, then hope lies across all of this."²¹ Hope, Zournazi (ibid) argues, "is also about a spirit of dialogue" that can open up "a space to keep spontaneity and freedom alive." Maestro Jesús exercised this dialogue in his role as artisan educator in the village school, in his home-forge and with apprentices like myself. But he also excessed this spirit of dialogue through the copper vessels he produced. The copper vessels Maestro Jesús created also opened up this space and freedom, a relational affective space, made even more present in his last copper works that were less than perfect, more bumpy and raw. These qualities also elicit attachment, a kind of caring in viewers (Author, 2017: 252). This was Maestro Jesús' power of *correspondence* that also manifests his artisanal intelligence. His inversion of care as a method of hope inspired care in others through the mediums of incommensurability.

Making as a method of hope

Artisan knowledge, explains Tim Ingold, (Dormer 1994; Adamson 2007), grows "from the crucible of practical and observational engagements with the beings and things around" us. Ingold (2013: 7) argues that as anthropologists, we need to learn from artisans and practice knowledge as an "art of inquiry" that follows "the fluxes and flows of ... materials" and corresponds with the people, places, and things around us.

These materials think in us, as we think through them. You try things out and see what happens. Thus the act of inquiry moves forward in real time, along with the lives of those who are touched by it, and with the world to which both it and they belong. Far from answering to their plans and predictions, it joins with them in their hopes and dreams. (Ingold 2013: 7)

As Ingold (2013: 7) states, this means "to adopt what anthropologist Hi-rokazu Miyazaki (2004) calls the method of hope."

To practice this method is not to describe the world, or to represent it, but to open up our perception to what is going on there so that we, in turn, can respond to it...to set up a relation with the world that I henceforth call correspondence. (Ingold 2013: 7).

This means that hope resides in the inquiry produced by the artisan's engagement with materials and their exploration of their potentials, and in the potential for engagement with these things by subsequent viewers. These activities of correspondence, as described above, comprise methods of hope.

Hirokazu Miyazaki's (2004) proposal for hope as "a common operative in all knowledge formation" coincides with the forward thinking and doing of Maestro Jesús in Santa Clara del Cobre.

Miyazaki's developed his approach to hope through ethnographic field-work with the Fijians of Suvavou, Fiji. In *The Method of Hope: Anthropology, Philosophy, and Fijian Knowledge*, (2004), Miyazaki (ibid) proposes hope as "a method of knowledge deployed across a wide spectrum of knowledge practices, as well as political situations."

To develop this analytical framework and to understand the problematic nature of “hope” he primarily turned to Walter Benjamin (2007), Richard Rorty (1999) and Ernst Bloch (1986). Miyazaki was particularly inspired by Bloch’s (1986) concept of the “Noch-Nicht,” the what has “not-yet” come, via the Japanese anthropologist and cultural theorist Naoki Kasuga who conducted extensive ethnographic and historical research in Fiji, the same site of Miyazaki’s research. Kasuga (1999) found that the Fijians persistently maintained “faith in their land as the ultimate source of everything good even when land continually fails to fulfill this faith” (Miyazaki 2004, 9). Kasuga (1999, 386 as cited by Miyazaki 2004, 9) incorporated Bloch’s concept of the Noch-Nicht in his ethnographic analysis of the Fijian’s experiences and rituals:

Fijians persistent attachment to land is a daily reminder of what has “not-yet” come, to borrow Ernst Bloch’s phrase (*Noch-Nicht*) and of its immanent arrival. In the midst of disappointment, [the attachment to land] once again allows them to discover that reality is still in a state of not-yet. This cycle in turn sustains Fijians’ persistent attachment to land. (Kasuga 1999: 386; translated and as cited by Miyazaki 2004: 9)

Bloch developed the concept of Noch-Nicht to address the temporal incongruities of philosophy’s contemplative retrospection and the actuality and agency of a person’s activities and experience: their “now.” Philosophy’s contemplative knowledge is always retrospective, argued Bloch in *The Principle of Hope* (1986) and this is incongruous to the prospective activity of hope. Bloch (1986,18) explains:

Contemplative knowledge [such as philosophy] can only refer by definition to What Has Become [...it] presupposes a closed world that has already become...Future of the genuine, processively, open kind is therefore sealed off from and alien to any mere contemplation” (Bloch 1986: 8 as cited by Miyazaki 2004:13)

To resolve this impasse and to “turn philosophy toward the future and to what has ‘not-yet’ become” Bloch substitutes hope for contemplative thought (Miyazaki 2004: 15). Hope and thought itself become anticipatory, and as some others approach it, socially progressive (Zournazi 2002). These approaches to hope resist utopian thinking or the cruel optimism as articulated by Lauren Berlant (2011). Echoing this is Rorty’s (1999) interpretation of John Dewey’s pragmatism “as a proposal to replace knowledge with hope.”

Miyazaki, (2004: 5) invites us to conceptualize hope as a way to generate hope. As he writes: “The conceptualization of hope as a method invites one to hope.” These reorientations bringing hope and knowledge together when applied to coppersmithing expand how we can look at the “now” of making as inquiry and a gestation of hope.

Miyazaki’s larger aims were also to carve out a “new kind of anthropological engagement with philosophy” and “to bring into view the [latent] place of hope in academic knowledge” (Miyazaki, 2004: 2, 3, 24). Similarly this essay engages philosophically and anthropologically with crafted objects, craft practice and its study. Miyazaki’s interdisciplinary quest resonates with my own onto-epistemological questions regarding the meaning of making that emerged for me decades ago as a young artist when I first began turning to philosophy to understand my practice.²² These onto-epistemic questions have persisted and thinking about craft as care and a method of hope as presented herewith is part of this longterm research. Answers have come from within my life-long artistic practice and through my mentor-apprenticeship to Maestro Jesús.

22 As a young art student I began with Martin Heidegger’s oft-cited treatise, *Poetry, Language and Thought*.

Barad (2003: 828) stresses that being and knowing are intertwined: “The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and non-human, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse.” In the very same manner, to isolate the experiences of making from contemplative thought, only conforms to this classical divide. The temporal incongruities of hope and philosophy are resolved when both are considered activities in constant flux, incorporated and emerging within places and between persons and things. Thinking, then becomes another kind of making and like craft, can be seen as a method of hope. One invests care in something or someone with hopes of the future. This views making prospectively, rather than retrospectively, as actions completed and locked into the past. Hope impels.

Care, as hope and love, in making, is non-enumerative. Thinking of making in this way resists capitalist values and conceptions of work and labor. Care is generative and reproductive. In this sense, care is related to Hannah Arendt’s concepts of natality and new beginnings. Care also draws from Weiner, Tronto and Fischer. Weiner (1980: 71) explains that all societies need to “reproduce and regenerate certain elements of value in order for the society to continue” and that although reproduction and regeneration overlap, they are distinct. Reproduction, Weiner theorized, “is concerned with the cultural attention and meaning given to acts of forming, producing, or creating something new,” while-as “regeneration refers to the cultural attention and meaning given to renewal, revival, rebirth or re-creation of entities previously reproduced.”

Weiner’s theories grew out of her fieldwork the Trobriand Islands challenged previous kinship studies as conducted by Malinowski (Jolly 1998). Women were excluded from these studies until Weiner observed them and included women in her fieldwork observations. Weiner (1979: 328) argued that women had been ignored and limited to their biological reproductive roles by these male anthropologists and other researchers because of their preexisting ethnocentric gender biases. Limiting women to only “reproductive agents (and usually nothing more)” also treated men as “non-reproductive agents (and everything else).” Following Bourdieu’s look at more long term consequences of the gift and a reconsideration of the role of temporality in ritual, Weiner could be said to have been applying hope as a method. Her approach emphasizing the long-term multi-generational relations that could be established by future oriented ritual is not far from Miyazaki’s concept of hope as a method.

To delve into this further we might return once again to Weiner’s concept of social reproduction and regeneration, bearing in mind my description above of Maestro Jesús’ heads emerging from the vessel walls. These images and concepts of reproduction and regeneration can be brought into concert with Hannah Arendt’s (2018 [1958]: 246) concept of “natality:” the capacity of all human beings to create new beginnings, as she explains

[The] life span of man running towards death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin or destruction if it were not the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something anew, a faculty inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, although they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin.” (Arendt 2018 [1958]: 246)

When copper-works are produced within the commercial, more factory-like forge production steps are turned into itineraries divided among many artisans to be repeated with defined ends and means. These steps are translated: measured into quantitative economic values. Re-production is capitalized. But in Maestro Jesús’ forge production is less clear-cut. For, Maestro Jesús each piece is a new beginning. As he and his son oft replied when asked what they

were making: “I will see how it comes out!” Their reply indicates a precipitousness of experience, a setting into motion: an openness to the experience of the making as a type of adventure. The artisans I studied with thrust themselves into the future. Like the vessel heads they emerged. Contemplated in this light the incommensurability of making is how making becomes a prospective project, a method of hope.

Deepening this discussion brings us back back again to care and to Maestro Jesús’ altruistic attitude and comportment towards his community, Santa Clara del Cobre. His ambition and vision as an artisan was brought into action not only for his own career and family, but also for his community and towards students, such as myself. With this we turn to look closer at care and to what care as hope might also mean to us as anthropologists and researchers.

Care and anthropology

Bernice Fisher and Joan Tronto (1991: 40) defined care as “a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.” María Puig de la Bellacasa (2012: 198) explains that this definition of care overly emphasizes the individual, the acting self rather than the collective. Bellacasa Puig de la Bellacasa (2012) insists that care is intrinsically relational and intersubjective, inter-worldling. And for Puig de la Bellacasa, as other feminist scholars, care is part and parcel of being a citizen of the world, of being a collective artisan or scholar rather than a lone genius or an indifferent anthropologist or unengaged ethnographer.

Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2012) discusses the work of Donna Haraway and her expression to “think-with.” Her description of Haraway’s ethos echoes with the view of the art historian Janet Brody Esser, a mentor and colleague who stressed that footnotes, endnotes, quotations and citations form a kind of genealogy that traces our connections and thinking, linking it with others who came before or our contemporaries.²³ Similarly Puig de la Bellacasa, (2012: 202) discusses Haraway’s heavy use of quotations (not unlike my own!) as a “way of writing [that] gives credit for many of the ideas, notions or affects nourishing her thinking to fellow researchers and students, but also friends, human and non-human, affinity/activist groups, whether inside or outside academic or ‘intellectual’ realms.”

I would add here that ethnography and anthropology are also forms of “thinking-with” other people, and “learning-with” them as we also study about them. This is not a romantic vision of a happy tension-less world where everybody gets along and things are all ok. As Puig de la Bellacasa (2012, 199) writes:

A feminist inspired vision of caring cannot be grounded in the longing for a smooth harmonious world, but in vital ethico-affective everyday practical *doings* that engage with the inescapable troubles of interdependent existences. Grounded on a conception of care as an ontological requirement of relational worlds. (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012: 199)

This active care is a kind of “carrying”, similar to the Spanish term “*carguero*,” the descriptive noun used for the person who is responsible for a specific community role, usually religious, such as, for a particular ritual procession or feast. Care also bears an important relationship to epistemology, to the ways we know and learn. This mindfulness not only applies to understanding more fully the onto-epistemics enacted in the life of the coppersmith artisan Maestro Jesús, but also apply to our own responsibilities as ethnographers and researchers. Puig de la Bellacasa asks what could “the *doings* of thick and

23 Dr. Esser gave me this advice while I was completing my dissertation.

non-moralistic ways of caring ... mean for practices of thinking and knowing ?” To answer this query, Puig de la Bellacasa (2012: 203) brings together care and love, with knowledge-making, while warning us to not forget conflict, injustice, the realities of life lived in an imperfect and challenging world:

Care in knowledge making has something of a ‘labour of love’ (Kittay: 1999; Feder: 2002). Love is ... involved in compelling us to think with (and for) what we care about. But appealing to love is particularly tricky [...] it is important to insist that knowledge-making based on care, love and attachment is not incompatible with conflict; that care should not be reduced to smoothing out of differences, nor love enjoined to the moral order that justifies any aims (hooks: 2000). (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012: 203)

Acknowledging the imperfections and dissonances in relationships of caring and knowing-with brings us back to to care in making as a method of hope. To develop this performative, processual and active approach to hope I return once more to Miyazaki (2004) whose goal was “to shift hope as a *subject* to hope as a *method*” not just of action, but of thinking.

Miyazaki’s (2004: 5) approach to hope follows Bloch, Benjamin and Rorty whose philosophical works conceived of hope “as a method of radical temporal reorientation of knowledge.” Miyazaki’s (2004) engages with Bloch and other philosophers on a much more granular level than is possible in this essay and admittedly I am simplifying his argument here, hopefully in a manner that does not distort nor detract. As Miyazaki (2004: 9) explains “thinking through hope as a method allows us to begin to confront the most fundamental problem [of] what knowledge is for.” Based upon his research in Fijian ritual, as introduced earlier, Miyazaki (2004: 10-11) realized that in every step “ritual participants maintained a forward-looking orientation” and that from the “ritual participants point of view, the maintenance of a prospective perspective was at the heart of [their] ritual performance.”

Miyazaki learned that he could not just look at the effects, or results of the ritual as evidenced in the past, to understand the nature and meaning of the participants experience, or the ritual itself. He had to think with the future, to what these ritual participants were performing was actually a method of hope, renewed each year despite the outcomes. As we will see further below, making is similar to ritual. Like making generally, ritual, is processual and transformative, intentional and aspirational. Its study also bears with it temporal incongruities and problematics.

Miyazaki resolved the incongruities of the ritual’s actual effects in the past upon the devotion of the participants in the present, by looking at Ernst Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope*. The question was not only about the ethnography and its interpretation, it also was a question about the nature of the analytic methods of the researcher. But the blind-spotting was not just caused by the perspective of himself as an ethnographer, glancing backwards rather than forward. His blindspot also was created by forming a conclusion based upon effects. As Miyazaki writes he “later [would] come to understand, [that] any analysis that foresees its own end point loses its open-ended-ness.” For Miyazaki, (2004: 13) Bloch’s “philosophy is a proposal for hope as a method of knowledge.” Bloch had taken up the perplexing challenge of philosophy’s usefulness and credibility when it came to thinking about the nature of hope. The retrospective nature of contemplation posed a problem to Bloch, as it did to Miyazaki in his ethnography around ritual. Contemplation is backwards looking while hope is forwards looking. Contemplation looks at a closed-off world, a world completed rather than open to possibilities. Maestro Jesús opened up his life to possibilities. His making was a method of hope.

Incommensurability and the Noch-Nicht

Hope was realized in his production as an artisan, his care, curiosity, joy of experiencing and knowing the world, of meeting new people, of having “a vision” as he oft would say. To him ambition was having open eyes. For Maestro Jesús to not forge a *cazo*, a traditional copper cauldron each day, day in day, day out, sunrise to sunset, but rather to begin to invent and explore new forms and shapes, new kinds of vessels was his method of hope. To carry this out he employed great care; this was his making as a method of hope. His was making to follow the unknown, the “not-yet”, the “Noch-Nicht” in Bloch’s terms. As Miyazaki (2004: 69) writes: “Bloch situates hope in the realm of the not-yet and hence focuses on its radically indeterminate nature. For Bloch, indeterminacy is the necessary precondition for hope.”

The thoughts of Alphonso Lingis (2002: 23-24) as expressed in an interview with Zournazi return us to our earlier themes and discussion of reproduction, natality, and care, explaining how these are intrinsic to hope:

[H]ope is hope against evidence. Hope arises in a break with the past. There is a kind of cut and the past is let go of. There is a difference between simple expectation and hope [...] Expectation is based on the pattern you see in the past [...] hope is a kind of birth...it doesn't come out of what went before, it comes out *in spite of* what went before. Abruptly there's a break and there's an upsurge of hope, something turned to the future. Like the birth of something new. (Lingis 2002: 23-24)

Lingis (2002: 25-26) proffers other insights highlighting joy as integral to the method of hope as expressed in the life of my teacher, Maestro Jesús. His discussion of hope offers us lessons to live by and also pertains to how we conduct research:

One should believe one's joy more than one's prudence, or any cautious and fearful state of mind...what we make contact with in joy 'beyond the received values' is not something ideal, but reality itself. Joy makes us cherish reality more than any concept of what is ideal. (Lingis 2002: 25-26)

By the way of conclusion, it is useful to return here once again to Zournazi (2002) to think about hope as “a certain generosity and gratefulness that we all need in life.” We can only wish that “if life is a series of encounters and chance meetings, events and social relations, then hope lies across all of these.” In reality, this is the ambition we share as anthropologists and as makers.

Postscript:

This essay initiating a study of the incommensurability of making was largely written shortly upon my father, Dr. Joesph Feder's passing, February 6, 2024. As the biblical Joseph, my father was a dreamer. But he was also a scientist and a Rabbi, a Biblical and Talmudic Scholar who drew upon substances and materials to understand the world we live in and to create new possibilities and solutions. In this way, his life held in common the methods of hope embraced by my master teacher in Santa Clara del Cobre, Maestro Jesús whom I became to identify as another father, and I to him became an additional daughter. The urgency to write this essay was to dedicate this to my father, not so much to his memory, but to his future, to what his legacy might become. In this spilling forth, grief itself was turned into hope and my love for my father continues as his love towards me and his faith in my work. In my last discussions with my father, we talked about memories. I told him that although some were very fond ones, I never want to go back to live in the past, I only want to be in the present. My father corrected me, saying: “No, what you need to do is to live in the future.”

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Imágenes maleables: experimentar el museo con la comunidad de La Pila

Visual Ethnography

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Resumen

This article presents a collaborative curatorial project carried out with the community of La Pila, Ecuador, renowned for its tradition in crafting pre-Hispanic pottery replicas. These artisanal practices, historically stigmatized due to their association with the trafficking of cultural goods, represent a form of appropriation of the past that challenges dominant heritage frameworks and nationalist discourses. From my dual role as an artist and anthropologist, I interpret the replica as a space of tension and as both a political and epistemological strategy. By questioning institutional collecting practices, this approach values artisanal experiences and knowledge.

The article focuses on the update of the Museo Histórico y Artesanal La Pila, conceived as a collective creation process that explores the relationships between the community and archaeological heritage through the memories of the craft. Using a methodology that combines ethnographic research with contemporary artistic practices, I reflect on curatorial practice as a mediatory space and examine the role of images in reconfiguring fieldwork.

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Palabras clave: réplica, curaduría, colaboración, arte, Ecuador

Keywords: replica, curatorship, collaboration, art, Ecuador

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1 El proyecto titulado “Advertencias para coleccionar” fue beneficiario de una Beca de Creación del Premio Nuevo Mariano Aguilera 2017, auspiciado por el Municipio de Quito a través del Centro de Arte Contemporáneo de esa ciudad.

2 El proyecto “Memorias en movimiento” fue beneficiario de las Líneas de Fomento del Instituto Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural del Ecuador (INPC) enfocadas en repositorios de la memoria, convocatoria 2023.

Introducción

Este texto se basa en mi experiencia con la comunidad de La Pila, como artista y antropóloga, que ubica su línea de investigación entre la crítica institucional y la vida social de los objetos. Desde este lugar, he discutido la relación entre patrimonios y comunidades adoptando una perspectiva muy específica: el potencial de la réplica como proceso hermenéutico y como estrategia política, que desborda nociones occidentales de originalidad y autenticidad. En la parroquia de La Pila, ubicada en la costa, en el cantón Montecristi de la provincia de Manabí, desde mediados del siglo XX, surgió un oficio artesanal de réplicas en barro y piedra de objetos prehispánicos que persiste. Desde una perspectiva patrimonialista, este oficio ha sido estigmatizado al vincularlo a la compleja cadena del tráfico de bienes culturales. Sin embargo, y a pesar de las adversidades, en La Pila esta labor ha sido un espacio de resistencia basada en saberes heredados y aprendidos, que implican observación y estudio, práctica constante y creatividad.

En este texto abordaré un proyecto reciente para actualizar los contenidos del Museo Histórico y Artesanal La Pila, inaugurado en junio de 2018 como resultado de un proyecto artístico que realicé con la comunidad, con apoyo del Gobierno Autónomo Descentralizado (GAD) La Pila, que destinó un espacio permanente¹. La actualización se llevó a cabo entre agosto de 2023 y mayo de 2024, gracias a un financiamiento obtenido mediante una convocatoria pública². En este texto no pretendo comparar la versión inicial del museo en 2018 con la actualización de 2024, pues son momentos muy distintos. Aunque el lugar y algunos actores se mantienen, las experiencias y mi mirada sobre la práctica han cambiado, lo que dificulta una conciencia exacta del proceso.

A lo largo del tiempo, he ocupado diferentes posiciones que se entrelazan y confunden. Como artista, etnógrafa y colaboradora, me he visto interpelada por una realidad que supera las formulaciones metodológicas o teóricas. Mi rol está lleno de opacidades y ambigüedad. Desde esta perspectiva, se desvanece la idea de un camino lineal de “progreso” o mejora en las condiciones, vínculos y alcances de estos últimos seis años. Aunque puedo constatar logros del trabajo colectivo, es necesario reflexionar sobre las contingencias de la colaboración. En este sentido, intentaré distanciarme del discurso de las “buenas intenciones y el bien común” para explorar la participación como un “hacerse y deshacerse los unos a los otros” (Sansi 2016: 72).

Para abordar las intersecciones entre arte y antropología desde la perspectiva de las “tensiones productivas” (Andrade y Elhaik 2018), me propongo alejarme de las dicotomías arte/artesanía y original/réplica, explorando en su lugar los flujos de valor y circulación. Me interesa reflexionar sobre el campo como un espacio construido (Marcus 2013), el trabajo de campo como un trabajo-con-imágenes (Andrade y Elhaik 2018), y la práctica curatorial como un proceso de mediación (Sansi 2020) que marca el tono de la colaboración y las estrategias experimentales y expositivas. Así, a través de las narrativas que se articulan alrededor del Museo Histórico y Artesanal La Pila analizaré ¿cómo las prácticas colaborativas y la curaduría expandida, a través del uso crítico de las imágenes, permiten resignificar el patrimonio arqueológico y reimaginar el rol del museo en el contexto de La Pila?

Pensar con imágenes

Según Andrade y Elhaik (2018), el trabajo de campo no se limita a la representación, sino que implica un trabajo-con-imágenes. En lugar de enfocarse solo en describir objetos y prácticas, este enfoque considera que las imágenes no son ilustraciones de la realidad, sino que participan activamente en la producción de conocimiento. Elhaik (2020), siguiendo a Deleuze, ve las imágenes como vehículos de pensamiento, que nos permiten imaginar lo “impensable” desde las estructuras de pensamiento habituales. Las imágenes no solo reflejan ideas preconcebidas (lo “dogmático”), sino que también nos invitan a cuestionar y deshacer las formas tradicionales de ver y pensar (lo “crítico”). Aquí, la

curaduría y el montaje no son solo actos de organización visual, sino que abren nuevos espacios para el pensamiento y la creación (Elhaik y Marcus 2020: 24).

Debido a mi formación inicial en artes, pensar con imágenes ha sido la forma en que he experimentado el trabajo de campo etnográfico. En el 2013 empecé una investigación sobre la historia de los museos nacionales en Ecuador que me condujo a La Pila. A mediados del siglo XX esta comunidad encontró una opción de subsistencia económica a partir del “boom” de coleccionismo público y privado que se materializó en el Museo Nacional de Quito (1969) y en el Museo Antropológico de Guayaquil (1974), ambos proyectos liderados por el Banco Central del Ecuador (BCE). Así, el deseo de las capitales y sus élites por poseer objetos arqueológicos que dieran forma a un discurso glorioso de nación impulsó a muchas comunidades a “huaquear”. Excavar la tierra con las manos y un machete, encomendándose a la suerte, para venderlos al Estado o a quién quisiera pagarlos, para poder sobrevivir. El oficio artesanal se origina en medio de esta gran demanda por objetos, como una capacidad para descifrar las aficiones coleccionistas y crear conexiones entre el pasado y el presente.

En otros textos me he referido a mi aproximación etnográfica y artística a los archivos burocráticos del BCE, conformado por actas de adquisición y documentos contables, que implicaron una serie de estrategias para desarchivar la información de una gestión pública, visibilizar las redes económicas y mostrar las contingencias del valor, inspiradas en la línea de crítica institucional (Cevallos 2020, 2018). Las nociones de historia abierta y de montaje del pensamiento benjaminiano (Navarro 2012) resultaron claves en las primeras recontextualizaciones de los archivos del Estado en la comunidad. Una de estas estrategias que utilicé, y que ha persistido, fue compilar y relocalizar esta información en la comunidad. Para La Pila, estos archivos eran evidencias tangibles de memorias familiares de subsistencia que evidenciaban una historia paralela del coleccionismo.

En 2016, imaginé un “Museo de la Huaquería” como una exhibición del archivo del BCE en La Pila, diseñada para detonar conversaciones sobre las historias de huaqueros, intermediarios y artesanos. En ese momento, me interesaba desarrollar metodologías específicas basadas en propuestas como las de los para-sitios (Marcus 2013). La instalación se colocó en un espacio turístico del GAD La Pila, decorado con réplicas arqueológicas, y funcionó para activar conversaciones a partir de los actores identificados en los documentos. Dos semanas después de esta instalación efímera, en abril de 2016, la provincia de Manabí sufrió un terremoto. Recibí fotos del espacio donde habíamos expuesto el archivo y todos los objetos estaban rotos. Esa imagen se grabó en mí como un recordatorio de la fragilidad de las iniciativas comunitarias. A finales de 2017, comencé un proyecto para una exposición sobre las memorias de La Pila que retomaría la investigación sobre la huaquería. En diálogo con la comunidad y las autoridades, esta exposición se transformó en un proyecto para un museo permanente y de sitio, ya que se encontraría alrededor de un pozo prehispánico.

Antes de que existiera el museo y mientras se gestaban las primeras ideas, realicé un objeto-instalación para organizar mis conceptos, titulado *Diorama del Museo Nacional de la Huaquería* (Imagen 1). Este objeto era una maqueta del espacio que el GAD había destinado para el museo, pero la recreé como si estuviera en proceso de construcción, aunque ya era una edificación terminada. Bajo un césped sintético con animales de plástico, había una caja que sostenía el pozo de piedras con agua, sustratos de tierra y fragmentos de réplicas, sobre una estructura con ruedas. Este diorama proyectaba tanto el espacio físico como los cimientos, reales y simbólicos, sobre los que se levantaría el museo comunitario. Al combinar elementos claramente artificiales con aparentes fragmentos arqueológicos, buscaba abrir reflexiones sobre la fabricación de las narrativas históricas y las dudas que me generaba este proceso, ¿en qué medida este museo podría distanciarse radicalmente del régimen del patrimonio?



Imagen 1 Diorama del Museo Nacional de la Huaquería, Pamela Cevallos. Fotografía de la autora, 2018.

Colaboración, implicación y expansión curatorial

El proceso detrás de la creación del museo lo he detallado previamente (en prensa). Aquí, resaltaré que fue mi primera experiencia de curaduría colaborativa en la que me interesaba trabajar desde la tensión ética/estética (Bishop 2006), por un lado, estableciendo espacio para la participación y las decisiones colectivas, pero también pensando al museo como un “resultado artístico”. El museo, inaugurado en junio de 2018, se conformó de donaciones de obras de artesanos y material documental que había recopilado, manteniendo el espíritu del primer *para-sitio* como un espacio destinado a la activación de memorias, pero también al reconocimiento social (Imagen 2). Una vez establecido, era crucial comprender sus efectos en la comunidad y su empoderamiento del proyecto. Durante los primeros meses, el museo se activó a través de visitas guiadas enfocadas en las memorias orales.



Imagen 2 Inauguración del Museo Histórico y Artesanal La Pila. Fotografía de José Jarrín, 2018.

No obstante, la pregunta sobre la autonomía del proyecto más allá de mi intervención inicial como artista reveló un nivel limitado de implicación comunitaria (Del Río y Collados, 2013). Entre los factores que contribuyeron a esta situación, destacó la falta de interés del Gobierno Autónomo Descentralizado (GAD) de La Pila por apoyar procesos culturales. En 2019, un cambio en las autoridades locales implicó una disminución en el interés por un proyecto gestado en la administración anterior.

A principios de 2020, junto con el artesano Javier Rivera con quien mantenía un diálogo frecuente, nos propusimos crear un programa educativo para el museo. Sin embargo, la pandemia de COVID-19 interrumpió el desarrollo del proyecto, lo que llevó al cierre parcial del museo hasta 2021. La crisis del turismo y la falta de recursos públicos afectaron profundamente a la comunidad, y muchos artesanos abandonaron temporal o definitivamente su oficio.

Durante este tiempo, gestioné apoyo en instituciones y mediante convocatorias públicas para reactivar el trabajo artesanal. En agosto de 2021, arranqué un proyecto educativo mediante talleres intergeneracionales de modelado en barro, impartidos por artesanos y dirigidos a jóvenes, niñas y niños de la comunidad. Este fue un momento clave y decisivo pues la participación inicial de Daniel Mezones, Genaro López, Guillermo Quijije, Javier Rivera y la artesana Consuelo Mezones, permitió anclar el sentido del proceso en sus conocimientos y la importancia cultural que ellos otorgaban a su práctica. Para ellos, este proceso fue una motivación alimentada por el reconocimiento social de las familias de los niños y niñas que se fueron vinculando al proyecto. Mediante financiamientos públicos³, pudimos dar continuidad a este esfuerzo en 2022 y 2023, fomentando la colaboración entre los participantes que construyeron sus propias metodologías educativas. Este proceso condujo a la creación de la Asociación para el Rescate de la Alfarería Ancestral La Pila, con ocho participantes en total, pues se habían sumado al proceso los artesanos Eddy Véliz, Ángel Gómez y la joven gestora cultural Gema Quijije. Con esta asociación realizamos un proyecto artístico que se exhibió en Quito y Manta en 2023⁴.

Este trabajo colectivo organizado, con canales de comunicación establecidos y con objetivos comunes creó las condiciones para pensar una actualización del museo, que se encontraba muy deteriorado por la falta de mantenimiento. El proyecto fue conceptualizado con Gema Quijije, a quien involucré como coordinadora en los dos proyectos anteriores. Graduada en turismo, Gema fue la primera persona en La Pila que conocí que estaba investigando sobre su comunidad, particularmente en relación con las artesanías. Juntas diseñamos la metodología del proyecto, basándonos en nuestras experiencias previas, la improvisación y los espacios de inventiva que surgieron de la confianza mutua (Estalella y Sánchez, 2020). Durante los diez meses que duró el proyecto, mantuvimos una comunicación continua por teléfono y WhatsApp, pues solamente pude viajar a La Pila en dos ocasiones. A diferencia de la experiencia en 2018, esta vez la responsabilidad del museo y la gestión de los recursos recayó directamente en el equipo local, lo que representó un cambio significativo en la dirección del proyecto. Este equipo, liderado por Gema y con Javier Rivera como coordinador, se expandió a quince artesanos que participaron como talleristas y artistas⁵.

La metodología se basó en una investigación histórica que incluyó entrevistas y la recopilación de archivos locales. Contamos con el apoyo del artista e historiador quiteño Óscar Enríquez en este proceso. Los artesanos tuvieron un doble papel en la transmisión de conocimientos mediante los talleres que impartieron durante dos meses y mediante la creación de obras específicas para el nuevo museo. El objetivo no era ilustrar conceptos preconcebidos, sino que cada obra reflejara una perspectiva única sobre la historia de la comunidad, invitando a una reflexión colectiva y a una acción compartida (Rappaport, 2018). En este proceso, las imágenes generadas se convirtieron en agentes activos para la reconfiguración de la memoria de La Pila. A continuación, me enfocaré en las contribuciones que realizaron los participantes del proyecto a

3 Los talleres intergeneracionales fueron posibles mediante el auspicio del Centro Interamericano de Artesanías y Artes Populares CIDAP en 2021 y de la Línea de Fomento del Instituto Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural INPC, en la subcategoría de investigación en 2022.

4 El proyecto artístico RUMOR fue financiado por la Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador y se presentó por primera vez en Quito en abril de 2023.

5 Los artesanos que se sumaron al proyecto fueron: Ángel Gómez, Antonio Quijije, Ana Mercedes García, Santiago Gómez, Guillermo Quijije, Consuelo Mezones, Daniel Mezones, Ervin Bailón, Verónica Mero, Ramón Mesones, Eddie Véliz, Genaro López, Andrés López, Richard Santana y Pedro Rivera. El registro en video y fotografía estuvo a cargo de Jhosselyn Molina y Jorge Meza.

partir de sus relaciones con el patrimonio y la memoria, observando los procesos y las tensiones inherentes a este proyecto colaborativo.

El vínculo latente

La comunidad de La Pila tiene una conexión importante con el pasado prehispánico que excede nociones de etnicidad. Es una población que no se identifica como indígena o como pueblo originario, pero que, sin embargo, apela constantemente a su relación con “los antiguos”. Para contextos similares como la población de Agua Blanca, se ha analizado cómo las prácticas y discursos de las poblaciones rebasan las geografías oficiales de raza inscritas en las narrativas nacionales, que han construido a la provincia de Manabí como un espacio mestizo (Smith 2016). A pesar de que el Estado no reconozca a las poblaciones de esta zona en su continuidad con los pobladores prehispánicos, existen numerosas expresiones de un vínculo latente.

La Pila toma su nombre de un pozo prehispánico que, hasta la actualidad, proporciona agua salobre para usos cotidianos y recreacionales, al que se refieren como la pila, la pileta o el pozo. Las versiones más difundidas sobre la historia del poblamiento del lugar mencionan que a mediados del siglo XIX un cazador de Montecristi llamado Santiago Muentes llegó a este lugar buscando a su ganado perdido y lo encontró bebiendo agua de un pantano. Muentes promovió entre sus conocidos la idea de poblar estos territorios y lo bautizaron como Chive por la gran cantidad de chivos que existían. Estos primeros pobladores abrieron un hoyo de donde emanaba el ojo de agua encontrando una construcción de piedra y vestigios antiguos atribuidos a la cultura Manteña (600 d.C -1530 d.C).

Recuerdo la impresión que me causó el pozo cuando visité por primera vez La Pila en 2015. Del agua oscura salían burbujas, era un espacio enigmático y cargado de energías. La responsable de turismo del GAD de esa época me mostró un archivo de fotografías digitales del interior del pozo durante una limpieza a inicios de los años 2000. Se podían observar objetos cerámicos, de piedra y de oro entre las rocas que recubrían una estructura cónica de aproximadamente 8 metros de profundidad.

El 30 de noviembre de 2023, por gestiones del GAD La Pila con apoyo de Gema, se realizó una nueva limpieza del pozo prehispánico, a cargo del cuerpo de bomberos de Montecristi y con asesoría técnica del Instituto Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural (INPC). Se extrajo el agua con bombas para ingresar al pozo y recoger en baldes los vestigios del fondo, aplicando una limpieza superficial que mejorara la calidad del agua. Los objetos se colocaban en mesas bajo una carpa, mientras las autoridades locales, artesanos y vecinos observaban con curiosidad, pasando los objetos de mano en mano. El arqueólogo Gerardo Castro, del Instituto de Investigaciones de Hojas Jaboncillo del INPC, organizaba los objetos por tipologías. Gerardo explicaba que estos pozos naturales en Manabí revelaban una antigua tecnología hidráulica. Mostraba artefactos de piedra, basalto, cuarzo y concha usados en la pesca, y cerámica con animales marinos y rostros de los ancestros manteños, señalando que estos elementos se colocaban para construir un vínculo con las fuerzas de la naturaleza, manteniendo el agua a través de las ofrendas. Concebía la limpieza como parte de la renovación de ese vínculo.

Para el proyecto del museo, Javier Rivera realizó un mural sobre el pozo (Imagen 3). Su obra en cemento pintado tiene una altura de dos metros y es una representación del interior del pozo. Javier buscaba que los visitantes que llegan al museo puedan conocer la construcción antigua y su laboriosidad. La imagen se construyó como un collage vertical de fotografías de la limpieza del pozo, ilustraciones de un libro de arqueología sobre simbologías manteñas y fotografías de casas antiguas de la zona. La composición muestra al pozo como el cimiento de un poblamiento y aunque la estructura se percibe sólida y pesada, también se ve inestable. Las casas ubicadas en los extremos superiores están haciendo equilibrio como una balanza anclada al ojo de agua. Hay un



Imagen 3 Mural de Javier Rivera sobre el pozo prehispánico. Foto de Jhosselyn Molina, 2024.

La obra de Javier se nutre de los relatos de la comunidad, en los que la pileta ocupa un lugar central, manifestado en una leyenda que he escuchado desde mi primera visita: “si alguien se lleva los objetos del interior, el agua deja de subir”. El día de la limpieza, esta creencia se puso en práctica cuando, al finalizar, los objetos se devolvieron al pozo.

La comunidad de La Pila mantiene una relación activa con su pasado prehispánico, experimentando a la alfarería de réplicas como prácticas que resignifican conocimientos. Durante la reapertura del museo, se destacó la participación de Daniel Mezones, artesano con más de 40 años de experiencia y asistente técnico en la reserva arqueológica del Museo Antropológico de Arte Contemporáneo (MAAC) en Guayaquil, quien es una figura respetada tanto en la comunidad como entre investigadores. Para la exposición, Daniel realizó una réplica de una botella silbato prehispánica de la colección nacional. No se limitó a exhibir la pieza, sino que explicó su funcionamiento al llenarla con

agua de la pileta y soplar aire, haciendo que un potente sonido resonara en el espacio, demostrando cómo, en manos de la comunidad, estos objetos cobran vida (Imagen 4). Estas prácticas conectan lo humano y lo no humano, así, el pozo y el agua no solo permitieron la existencia de la comunidad, sino que son una fuerza y una presencia material que enmarca sus preguntas vitales (Ballesteros 2019).



Imagen 4 Daniel Mezones y Richard Santana haciendo sonar botellas silbato con el agua de la pileta. Fotografía de Jhosselyn Molina, 2024.

Historias del coleccionismo desde la ruralidad

Aunque he destacado el fuerte sentido de pertenencia de la comunidad de La Pila con su pasado prehispánico, su relación con este patrimonio ha estado marcada por la desposesión. Desde el siglo XIX, la provincia de Manabí fue objeto de interés arqueológico por parte de exploradores europeos y norteamericanos, quienes extrajeron numerosos objetos para museos y colecciones privadas. Sin embargo, a mediados del siglo XX, el coleccionismo adquirió nuevos matices con la creación de museos nacionales en Quito y Guayaquil, bajo la gestión del Banco Central del Ecuador (BCE). Ante la falta de oportunidades económicas, muchas comunidades rurales, incluida La Pila, recurrieron

a la excavación y venta de objetos arqueológicos como fuente de ingresos. Así, la huaquería —nombre dado a la excavación informal e ilícita en los Andes— se convirtió en una práctica que, de manera indirecta, fue fomentada por el Estado, empujando a las comunidades a desprenderse de su patrimonio para sobrevivir. La paradoja en La Pila es clara: aunque sus habitantes valoran e identifican el pasado prehispánico como parte de su identidad, también lo han visto como un recurso comercializable.

El museo necesitaba mostrar una perspectiva local sobre la huaquería, una práctica estigmatizada por las élites patrimoniales y reducida a la noción de saqueo. Gema conceptualizó la obra como la representación de un huaquero que se encuentra con su propio retrato en la tierra y el encargado de ejecutarla fue Genaro López, presidente de la asociación, quien consideraba que era un tema que requería ser tratado con seriedad. La obra de Genaro muestra a tres personajes, que en realidad son la misma persona en distintos momentos (Imagen 5). El huaquero es un hombre de cabello largo, con sombrero de paja y vestimenta campesina, donde destaca un taparrabo pintado de blanco, al igual que el sombrero. El resto del cuerpo y el paisaje están en tonos oscuros, con una pátina de tierra para dar la impresión de envejecimiento. Los tres personajes tienen expresión de cansancio y excavan con un pico, pero obtienen resultados diferentes: uno ha encontrado pequeñas piezas y sellos comunes de la zona; otro, en una excavación más profunda, ha hallado “enanitos”, como se conocen a las figuras manteñas en miniatura, (representados en su escala real que es incluso más grande que las figuras); y un tercero ha descubierto una tumba llena de objetos valiosos, pintados en rojo y blanco.

Genaro explicó que su intención era mostrar la huaquería como un oficio sujeto al azar, del que dependieron muchas familias de La Pila. Ante la precariedad de oficios tradicionales como la agricultura y la ganadería, el hallazgo y comercialización de objetos antiguos se convirtió en una fuente de subsistencia, especialmente durante las décadas de 1960 y 1970. A diferencia del distanciamiento que impone la arqueología y del arqueólogo como “profanador autorizado de tumbas”, esta escena presenta a los descendientes manteños reconociendo los restos de sus antepasados. El uso del color negro, típico de la cultura manteña, refuerza esta conexión al unir personajes y objetos.



Imagen 5 Obra sobre la huaquería de Genaro López. Fotografía de Jhosselyn Molina, 2024.

Si bien la obra de Genaro aborda la experiencia subjetiva de la huaquería, era fundamental situar esta práctica en el contexto del coleccionismo institucional y sus impactos en la vida comunitaria. En la versión del museo de

Las obras de Antonio Quijiye y José Mesones se basan en réplicas de objetos que encontré en museos nacionales e internacionales, cuya procedencia señala a La Pila. En este caso, la réplica se concibe como un regreso, activado por su recontextualización y los saberes artesanales (Cevallos, 2023). Por su parte, la obra de Ramón Mesones (Imagen 6) y la mía (Imagen 7) toman como referencia la Enciclopedia Salvat de Arte Ecuatoriano, publicada en 1978. Esta enciclopedia registra los principales objetos coleccionados por el BCE y los reclasifica como “arte”. Para los artesanos, este libro ha sido un referente desde los años ochenta, y muchos conservan fotocopias de sus páginas como modelos para sus creaciones. La obra de Ramón se basa en una pieza manteña de la enciclopedia, intervenida con un mapa de los sitios arqueológicos en los alrededores de La Pila, subrayando la omnipresencia de lo prehispánico en el territorio. Mi obra, realizada en 2021, forma parte de una serie fotográfica que tensiona la autoridad del saber, proponiendo que las réplicas sostienen la originalidad que proclama la historia del arte.



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Imagen 7 Obra "Historia del arte ecuatoriano" de Pamela Cevallos, fotografía, 2021.

El montaje de esta sección se configura como un archivo expandido, que abre caminos para una mirada crítica sobre la historia del coleccionismo contada desde la ruralidad (Imagen 8). La historia de La Pila muestra cómo las prácticas de huaquería, estigmatizadas por el discurso patrimonial dominante, son reconfiguradas desde una epistemología local, atravesada por estrategias de subsistencia y mecanismos de reapropiación de lo que ha sido arrebatado por el coleccionismo transnacional. Pues, es a través de estas réplicas que podemos acceder a una información perdida, almacenada u oculta. Las obras de los artesanos desafían la autoridad del archivo oficial, recontextualizando los objetos desde experiencias particulares. Siguiendo la reflexión de Rufer sobre los museos comunitarios en contextos poscoloniales (2018), este museo no se limita a reproducir las historias impuestas por el Estado-nación, sino que busca

construir lo que él describe como “conexiones subversivas” con los discursos patrimoniales dominantes. Sin duda, este espacio comunitario resulta fundamental para “alterar el relato de lo mismo, sembrar la duda, y construir el suplemento dialógico de la narrativa fuerte del estado-nación” (Rufer 2018: 164).



Imagen 8 El día de la reapertura del museo, Gema Quijije realizando una mediación en la sección del museo dedicada al coleccionismo. Fotografía de Jhosselyn Molina, 2024.

Reinventando la tradición

En la década de 1960, como efecto directo del auge del coleccionismo y las condiciones económicas de pobreza y marginalidad en la ruralidad, surgió un oficio artesanal dedicado a la creación de réplicas de objetos arqueológicos que se comercializaban en las capitales. Al principio, el objetivo era imitar los objetos “originales”, lo que hizo que el oficio estuviera marcado por prejuicios que desestimaban su valor como forma de creación y conocimiento. Uno de los objetivos planteados por Gema para el proyecto era reconocer a los primeros artesanos. Entre los textos que había compilado sobre este tema, había un relato de los años ochenta que mencionaba a los pioneros. Sin embargo, Gema no estaba de acuerdo con esta información, para ella algunas personas que eran solo comerciantes se atribuían los créditos de los inicios del oficio.

En La Pila, la autoría suele ser una zona gris. Por ejemplo, durante el proceso de conformación del museo en 2018, se invitó a los artesanos a donar piezas para el museo, pero algunas personas de la comunidad optaron por comprar piezas y donarlas a su propio nombre para constatar su participación. Los autores de las piezas no parecían molestarse, ya que habían sido pagados por su trabajo. Por otro lado, muchos artesanos evitan atribuirse la autoría como mecanismo de supervivencia en caso de que sus piezas sean comercializadas con otros fines en el “mercado gris” de antigüedades, llamado así para referir a su particular entrelazamiento de lo legal y lo ilícito en el tráfico de bienes culturales. En este contexto, se han asumido las estrategias del desvanecimiento de la autoría y la procedencia mediante una extensa cadena de intermediarios (Yates 2015).

Gema consideraba necesario entrevistar a personas que pudieran testificar sobre los inicios del oficio. Visitamos a la mujer más anciana de la comu-

nidad, Amanda Gómez, de 102 años. Gema le preguntó quién fue el primero en hacer las artesanías, y ella respondió en voz muy baja: “Colón”. Para Gema, este testimonio era crucial porque Colón Quijije era su abuelo paterno, quien había fallecido pocos años antes. Guillermo Quijije, hijo mayor de Colón, fue el encargado de realizar un retrato en barro de su padre⁶. Su obra, realizada en su estilo característico de escena cotidianas, muestra al artesano pionero en su mesa de trabajo, modelando figuras antropomorfas con cuños, como llaman a los moldes cerámicos en La Pila (Imagen 9). Los primeros artesanos emplearon los moldes prehispánicos que ellos mismo hallaron excavando en la zona, manteniendo así la continuidad de las técnicas ancestrales. Es decir, la reproductibilidad ya formaba parte de estos objetos, que se transformaron en matrices para nuevos usos y versiones.

En la obra, destaca la expresión de Colón, con las cejas levantadas y la frente arrugada. ¿Está sorprendido por su descubrimiento? ¿Intrigado por el funcionamiento de los cuños? ¿O acaso ha desvelado el secreto de su propia invención? En esta imagen, Colón no es solo un replicador; se presenta como autor y descubridor. Estas prácticas de replicación, aunque parecería que recrean con fidelidad los referentes prehispánicos, dejan mucho espacio para la innovación (Brulotte 2012: 129). Y es precisamente por esto que, como afirma Jesse Lerner (2001) para el caso de Brígido Lara, ceramista mexicano de réplicas precolombinas, haya “una especie de justicia poética en el hecho de que un artesano campesino con educación primaria parece haber engañado no solo a docenas de coleccionistas, sino también a algunos de los principales arqueólogos y conservadores del mundo” (Lerner 2001). En Ecuador, tanto las colecciones públicas y sobre todo las colecciones privadas, poseen objetos fabricados en La Pila durante este periodo.

⁶ En el proyecto RUMOR realizado en 2023, Guillermo realizó una primera versión de esta obra como un homenaje a la persona que le enseñó el oficio. No obstante, existen varias diferencias importantes en la resolución, como el gesto dado al personaje.



Imagen 9 Obra sobre el primer artesano de La Pila realizada por Guillermo Quijije. Fotografía de Jhosselyn Molina, 2024.

Desde esta misma intención por destacar los nombres olvidados de quienes iniciaron el oficio, con Gema nos preguntamos por el papel de las mujeres artesanas quienes también habían sido parte fundamental de los comienzos y que inclusive en la actualidad son invisibilizadas en un contexto machista. Dedicamos una de las vitrinas a exhibir obras realizadas por mujeres, obras que representaban imágenes prehispánicas femeninas y obras realizadas específicamente como un homenaje a las primeras artesanas: Paula Gómez, Marcela Calle, Zoraida Lucas, Flora Lucas y Zeida Quijije, entre otras más. Le dedicamos un lugar especial a Consuelo Mezones, artesana que había apoyado en todos los proyectos desde 2018 y que falleció en enero de 2024 después de una larga enfermedad. Su hija Verónica Mero asumió el lugar de su madre en el proyecto y realizó su primera réplica de una mujer manteña.

El sustrato principal del museo son las historias familiares en las que se reconocen los modos de transmitir los conocimientos. Cuando los más jóvenes lo visitan, a menudo buscan las obras de sus parientes. Por eso, desde la curaduría, junto con Gema y Javier, decidimos exhibir los trabajos realizados por treinta niños y niñas en los talleres impartidos por artesanos entre noviembre de 2023 y febrero de 2024. Además de valorar el proceso educativo en el que se ha cimentado el proyecto del museo, la inclusión de las coloridas piezas evocaba una relación con la continuidad de la práctica. La “tradición inventada” en La Pila (Hobsbawm 2002) conlleva setenta años de aprendizajes de generaciones que han buscado construir conexiones con un pasado como forma digna de subsistencia. En el museo, la memoria sobre este oficio da cuenta de ese aprendizaje constante y silencioso, a la vez que se intuye un futuro.

Disputar lo público

En esta última sección me interesa plantear una reflexión más amplia sobre cómo entendemos las comunidades no como entidades homogéneas, sino como espacios de tensiones y diferencias internas. La comunidad de La Pila, al igual que muchas otras, alberga profundos conflictos políticos y sociales que influyen en las decisiones estéticas y curatoriales del museo. Esta complejidad nos permite pensar en las disputas, más allá del aparente consenso.

Por ejemplo, la propuesta de crear murales en los exteriores del museo surgió de Gema y Javier. En 2022, ambos impartieron talleres de pintura a jóvenes de la comunidad, que culminaron con la creación de cuatro murales en las fachadas del museo, auspiciados por el GAD. Tres de ellos representaban réplicas arqueológicas, y uno, realizado por Gema y Javier, trataba sobre la pileta ancestral. Sin embargo, con la llegada de nuevas autoridades locales en mayo de 2023, los murales fueron borrados, no por sus mensajes o su estado, sino por estar asociados a la gestión anterior. La política y los intereses personales prevalecieron sobre los procesos educativos y el esfuerzo invertido.

Para la adecuación de 2024, se crearon tres nuevos murales como parte del recorrido del museo. En el centro, un mural de Pedro Rivera con el escudo y un fragmento del himno de La Pila; a la derecha, un mural de Javier que mostraba el interior de la pileta ancestral; y a la izquierda, un mural diseñado por Ana Mercedes García, una niña de la comunidad, realizado con el apoyo de Javier, que representaba las artesanías de la parroquia. Javier decidió hacer estos murales en relieve, utilizando mortero de cemento, una técnica común en La Pila para trabajos a gran escala. Este relieve añadía detalles únicos a las obras, como la textura de las piedras y los objetos arqueológicos del pozo prehispánico, invitando al tacto y conectando con lo que yace bajo el agua. Además, esta técnica implicaba una postura estratégica: borrar estos murales sería más difícil, y si los políticos de turno intentaban hacerlo, les costaría más. En uno de los murales, Javier incluyó una pequeña placa de cemento con nuestros nombres, sin los apellidos por la laboriosidad de la técnica, a manera de créditos y constancia tangible del trabajo realizado en un contexto donde a menudo se minimizan los aportes comunitarios.

Al definir los contenidos del museo junto con Gema, coincidimos en que un enfoque importante sería representar la conformación de la comuna en 1938, fruto de organización y luchas violentas que lograron el reconocimiento político de este territorio por parte del Estado central. Gema imaginaba una obra que retratara la lucha social: una vasija o recipiente del que surgieran brazos con puños en alto, simbolizando movimiento y resistencia. Esta obra nunca se concretó, evidenciando las limitaciones de la mediación curatorial. El artesano encargado se excusó tarde de no poder realizarla, pero éramos conscientes de que su decisión estaba influenciada por rivalidades políticas ajenas al proyecto.

Una de las decisiones museográficas en la que no llegamos a un acuerdo con Gema fue sobre el color de las paredes interiores del museo. En la versión de 2018 el color seleccionado fue el mismo que se había utilizado en las paredes exteriores del GAD. Era un tono anaranjado pastel que le daba una sensación de calidez instantánea al espacio. La decisión del color se dio, en parte, por razones de economía pues ya existía la pintura y solamente habría que contratar la mano de obra. Además, para mí, este color reforzaba una estética popular y una cromática que se utiliza frecuentemente en las casas de la zona. Era también una manera de hacer un quiebre con las estéticas de los espacios tradicionales de exhibición, que se observa en los museos nacionales en Manabí y que acarrea la idea modernista del cubo blanco.

Para las adecuaciones de 2024, el deterioro de las paredes por la humedad del terreno obligó a una intervención para remover la pintura y tratar las superficies. Gema decidió que el museo se pintara de blanco. Al preguntarle, mencionó que quería que las obras destacaran más que el color del espacio y que, dadas las condiciones de humedad, el blanco sería más económico y fácil de mantener. Esta elección también reflejaba una estrategia práctica ante las limitaciones y la falta de apoyo del GAD. Conversé con Genaro, quien expresó su preferencia por el color blanco por considerarlo más elegante, en contraste con su desagrado por el color previo.

Una semana antes de la reapertura del museo, Gema me llamó contrariada. Pedro, quien estaba encargado del mural con el emblema de la parroquia, había usado pernos demasiado grandes para fijar el mural de cemento a la pared, dañando el muro interior y las fotografías de archivo que formaban parte de la exhibición. Gema estaba indignada, y yo compartía su frustración; todo el trabajo y el cuidado puesto en la museografía y en el tratamiento de las paredes había sido arruinado por uno de los propios participantes del proyecto. Aunque Gema intentó reparar el daño, el resultado seguía siendo evidente. Oscar, quien asistió a la reapertura, me comentó que le impactó ver esa pared, ya que, para él, era una huella de lo contingente de ese proceso colectivo.

Así, anverso y reverso del muro sintetizaban las aspiraciones y los conflictos comunitarios. Por un lado, hacia el espacio público, se leía un fragmento del himno de La Pila escrito en los años noventa por el líder comunitario Pedro Lucas que hablaba de lucha y unidad: “Somos hijos de este gran pueblo / Con historia de brazos pujantes / Labradores de esperanza y de sueños / Que vivimos del sol calcinante”; acompañado de la imagen del escudo, a manera de un pergamino doblado, que mostraba la pileta y un árbol, las manos de un artesano decorando una vasija de barro, el mapa del lugar y el agua. Al interior del museo, se observaban unos agujeros que perforaban los archivos comunitarios. Tal vez cuando Gema pensaba en el color blanco para el muro, también intuía estas situaciones. El color blanco de las paredes era una forma sencilla de dar mantenimiento, de reparar, de sostener a los procesos y de hacerlo con dignidad.

Para la fachada del museo que da a la calle, colocamos dos fotografías en adhesivo microperforado en las ventanas. Había seleccionado imágenes de manos sosteniendo piezas arqueológicas y modelando barro, pero a Gema no le convenció mi elección. Me dijo que era poco llamativa y pidió usar la imagen de la maqueta que hice en 2018 (Imagen 10). Aunque tenía dudas sobre lo que



Imagen 10 Fachada del museo hacia la calle mientras se instalaban los adhesivos en las ventanas. Foto de Gema Quijije, 2024.

Pensar con réplicas

En Latinoamérica, los museos comunitarios se han convertido en espacios significativos de acción y disputa por la memoria, que desbordan las narrativas nacionales y tradicionales del patrimonio, acercándose a los acervos desde nuevas perspectivas (Cánepa, Cevallos y Rozental, 2024: 88). El Museo Histórico y Artesanal La Pila al mirar las historias locales cuestiona las dinámicas del coleccionismo y la construcción de los museos nacionales, iluminando el lado “incómodo” e invisibilizado de estos procesos. En términos de Rufer, los museos comunitarios no son “formas regionales” de leer la historia que adquiere sentido solo en su contexto;

Es exactamente al revés: adquieren relevancia porque su contexto desnuda el poder de los enunciados generales por los cuales están altamente mediados, y muestra la naturaleza política de los relatos naturalizados en el centro auto percibido como “núcleo” de la nación (Rufer 2014: 132-133).

Las prácticas sociales alrededor de la réplica generan una tensión con el régimen del patrimonio y el saber autorizado, ya que abren nuevas formas de acceso al conocimiento que trascienden las visiones occidentales sobre la propiedad y la conservación, explorando, por ejemplo, lo sensorial y lo experiencial (Edwards, Gosden y Phillips, 2006). Así, el potencial de las réplicas tiene que ver con ese diálogo de ida y vuelta que establecen con el patrimonio, y con la manera en que su movimiento y multiplicación produce y regenera formas colectivas de pertenencia (Rozental, 2014). Desde su contexto rural, el museo no se limita a ser un espacio de representación, sino que se convierte en un proceso colectivo de investigación y reflexión.

El hablar sobre huaquería y réplicas desde las experiencias comunitarias, es reconocer a estas prácticas como formas de conocimiento que resisten a unas condiciones de adversidad. Las imágenes maleables que se crean en La Pila reactivan y reconstruyen continuamente las ideas sobre el pasado prehispánico y sobre el oficio alfarero (de los antiguos y los actuales). Más allá del objeto-souvenir, la práctica articula varios sentidos de la vida cotidiana y la

percepción del presente, como lo demuestra la conexión con el pozo manteño que emana agua salobre. Este elemento no solo refleja una historia viva que sobrepasa las representaciones culturales milenarias, sino que también suple necesidades vitales en un lugar donde el Estado no ha garantizado servicios básicos. Así, el pasado prehispánico se convierte en un anclaje que excede las lógicas identitarias y étnicas.

Como artista y etnógrafa, pensar con imágenes, en colaboración con “trabajadores de imágenes”, ha expandido el campo como un espacio de creación y encuentro entre intereses comunitarios e individuales. La imagen-réplica permite asumir posiciones ambiguas y permeables, habitando las tensiones y opacidades del proceso creativo, la curaduría y la investigación. Este enfoque desestabiliza las fronteras tradicionales entre el arte y la antropología al abrir la posibilidad de una práctica más flexible y dialógica, donde las imágenes se convierten en agentes activos de la negociación entre las múltiples perspectivas presentes en el proyecto.

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Three photographers and an anthropologist:

thoughts on collaboration

Visual Ethnography

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Felipe Romero Beltrán, *Independent photographer*

Lorenzo Vitturi, *Independent photographer*

Abstract

This eight-handed article delves into the interdisciplinary collaboration between anthropology and photography, showcasing how these two fields can mutually enrich each other. The authors are one anthropologist who gradually recognises the potential of photography as an epistemological tool that can enhance anthropological research and three photographers who here illustrate the integration of anthropological insights – theoretical and methodological - into their photographic work. By exploring the dynamic relationship between visual and anthropological practices, we argue that such interdisciplinary collaborations can lead to innovative methodologies and deeper understandings of cultural phenomena. This synergy challenges traditional disciplinary boundaries and opens new avenues for research and artistic expression, ultimately fostering a more holistic approach to understanding and representing complex social realities.

Keywords: Anthropology; Collaboration; Interdisciplinarity; Ethnography; Methodology; Photography.

The authors

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Camilla de Maffei (Cles, 1981) is a photographer and teacher who works between Milan and Barcelona, where she founded the photography school El Observatorio. Specialised in the Balkan area, she has concentrated her personal production in Bosnia Herzegovina, Romania and Albania, where, using the exploration of a specific place as a starting point, she has explored and questioned the relationship between territory and landscape (geopolitical, cultural, social). Her projects have been exhibited in galleries and festivals such as Fotografia Europea (Reggio Emilia), Les Boutographies Festival (Montpellier), Manuel Rive-

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ra Ortiz Foundation (Arles), Sa Nostra Foundation (Palma de Mallorca), Palazzo Massari (Ferrara), The Half King Gallery (New York).

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Felipe Romero Beltrán (Bogotá, 1992) is a Colombian photographer currently based in Paris. His artistic endeavours are deeply rooted in exploring social issues, with a particular focus on the tension that arises from the introduction of new narratives within the realm of documentary photography. Beltrán's practice is characterised by its commitment to long-term projects, accompanied by meticulous research that enriches the depth and context of his work. Beltrán has a PhD in Photography from the Complutense University of Madrid. His academic pursuits reflect his commitment to the craft and serve as a foundation for the conceptual approach that permeates his photographic projects.

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Lorenzo Vitturi (Venice, 1980) works in photography, sculpture, installation and performance. His work starts from specific geographical locations and encounters with local communities and explores informal economies and the merging of different cultures, focusing on the movement of objects and people through temporary sets and ephemeral sculptures in the studio and on location, using both organic and fabricated materials. Lorenzo Vitturi has exhibited widely in solo and group shows at MAST Foundation (Bologna), Centre Photographique Rouen Normandie, FOAM Museum (Amsterdam), The Photographers' Gallery and Barbican Centre (London), MAXXI (Rome), Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris), Palazzo Reale and La Triennale (Milan), BOZAR Brussels, and K11 Art Museum (Shanghai).

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Abstract

This article delves into the interdisciplinary collaboration between anthropology and photography, showcasing how these two fields can mutually enrich each other. The authors are one anthropologist who gradually recognises the potential of photography as an epistemological tool that can enhance anthropological research and three photographers who here illustrate the integration of anthropological insights – theoretical and methodological - into their photographic work. By exploring the dynamic relationship between visual and anthropological practices, we argue that such interdisciplinary collaborations can lead to innovative methodologies and deeper understandings of cultural phenomena. This synergy challenges traditional disciplinary boundaries and opens new avenues for research and artistic expression, ultimately fostering a more holistic approach to understanding and representing complex social realities.

Keywords: Anthropology; Collaboration; Interdisciplinarity; Ethnography; Methodology; Photography.

Introduction, by Caterina Borelli

In light of this journal's focus, I believe it is important to begin by clarifying that I do not identify as a visual anthropologist. While I have occasionally used photographs as visual notes during fieldwork or included images in my writings – a common practice in anthropology – the visual has never been central to my work. It has not served as a primary object of ethnographic inquiry, a method for gathering information from participants, or a final research outcome. At least, this was the case until my recent collaborations with the artists whose work is presented in the following pages began to reshape my relationship with visual media.

Looking back, I may have harboured a certain degree of envy toward visual anthropology. Compared to my solitary, text-based ethnographic work, it seemed more interactive, dynamic, and, in a sense, more fun. That was part of my motivation for undertaking *The Visible Mountain* project (2010-2011)¹ in Sarajevo with Camilla de Maffei, a talented photographer and my best friend. We approached the project as equals – neither me as *her* anthropologist nor her as *my* photographer² – each contributing to the work with our distinct perspectives. Yet, after that, and despite the success of the project, I continued to treat my interest in the arts and photography as a personal passion, separate from my academic work.

The following two collaborations came about more serendipitously. A few years ago, my old school friend, Lorenzo Vitturi, reached out for advice and bibliographical suggestions for his ongoing project *Caminantes* (2017-present)³. Shortly thereafter, I met Felipe Romero through Camilla, and following a brief conversation, I was invited to contribute a text for his forthcoming book *Dialect* (2023)⁴. These interactions gradually shifted my perspective on photography—not merely as something to be looked at (though, as Stuart Hall taught us, cultural consumption is never entirely passive)⁵ but as a tool – epistemological rather than expressive – that I could employ in my research, some new nourishment to my own way of thinking and doing, a practice that could disclose new avenues of anthropological inquiry for me⁶.

This article is not strictly about visual anthropology – meaning the visual *in* anthropology – but rather about the broader relationship between the visual *and* anthropology, which seems somewhat different: the focus is not on the role of visual materials within anthropological research but on the interaction and cross-fertilisation between the two disciplines.

In recent months, this collaboration process has accelerated. I have published an article analysing my friends' work from an anthropological perspective (Borelli 2024), we have presented our work together at academic lectures and workshops, and I am currently involved in separate projects with Camilla and Lorenzo (see Vitturi et al. 2025). The invitation to contribute to this special issue has solidified these collaborations, uniting us into a cohesive working group.

What follows are the photographers' takes on our ongoing conversation and interdisciplinary mash-up. Their contributions reflect how anthropology and ethnography have integrated into their artistic processes. These texts are personal in tone and perhaps less academic in structure, offering records of research practices from individuals with different intellectual backgrounds. Despite this stylistic variation, they serve as valuable examples of the productive merging of the arts and anthropology. We invite you to embrace the narrative freedom within these pages as part of this ongoing exploration.

Delta, by Camilla De Maffei

Since 2009, my work has focused on the Balkan region. My projects begin by exploring a specific place, from which I delve into the relationship between territory and landscape. Here, I define "territory" as a geographic space with distinct characteristics and "landscape" as the social and relational constructions that emerge from it. In Bosnia Herzegovina, in collaboration with

1 For information on *The Visible Mountain* project, please refer to <https://camillademaffei.com/portfolio_page/the-visible-mountain/>.

2 A more detailed description of our work together can be found in the catalogue for the Allers-Retours Festival, which took place at the Albert Kahn Musée et Jardin Départementaux in Paris in 2013; see Borelli (2014).

3 See <<http://www.lorenzo-vitturi.com/caminantes/>>.

4 See <<https://feliperomero-beltran.com/Dialect>>.

5 For his theory on encoding and decoding in mass communication, where decoding refers to the process by which audiences interpret or decode the messages embedded in media texts, an activity that requires active engagement and interpretation, see Hall (1980).

6 It is not the purpose of this article to delve into how photographic practice can influence anthropological thought. That is a subject matter that I just started approaching myself, and I am still looking for a structured insight to offer. Nonetheless, I got some precious hints at the recent EASA conference in Barcelona, where I co-organised with Amanda Bernal a panel titled *Undoing and Redoing Anthropology with Photography: Dialogues, collaborations, hybridisations* (see <https://nomadit.co.uk/conference/easa2024/p/14728#>). Among the many inspiring contributions we received, Clara Beccaro's work on analogue photography as an analytical method to study state violence and Alice Cazenave's film-developing practice as an ethnography of polluted areas instantiated the kind of reflection we wished to stimulate pretty well.

7 My previous collaboration with the anthropologist Caterina Borelli (project *The Visible Mountain*) has contaminated my methodology. Her notebook provided me with important references to develop the photographic language underlying the project. Today, the free appropriation of ethnographic practice has become a fundamental ingredient of my creative process.

the anthropologist Caterina Borelli, we explored the woods of Mount Trebević, a symbol of the city of Sarajevo, observing the landscape through the lenses of memory and trauma. In Romania, examining the Danube Delta - a complex natural and human geography - allowed me to analyse how the landscape shapes identity. Meanwhile, my work in Albania investigated the connection between architecture, power, and memory, depicted through a detailed portrayal of the rural and urban landscape.

From 2014 to 2021, I worked on *Delta*, a project that involved five years of fieldwork in the Danube Delta, the largest river estuary in Europe. This expanse of reeds, sand, and marshes covers about 3500 square kilometres along the Romanian-Ukrainian border at the easternmost point of the European Union. This region, inhabited by around 12,000 people, is both monumental and isolated. The few villages in the area are connected only by waterways, with no roads linking them. With virtually no basic infrastructure, they plunge into darkness as soon as the sun sets. Whoever manages to leave does not return. Those who remain live among abandoned houses in a symbiotic relationship with the labyrinthine landscape, where the maze-like network of channels and lakes restricts movement. Attracted by the intensity of the delta's geography, I undertook my first trip there in 2014.

Whenever I embark on a new project, I aim to discard the methods I used previously, letting the specific needs of each narrative guide my visual approach. Although it is impossible to start completely fresh, I allow the story to determine the type of images I create, the intention behind them, and how they should be composed. I like to force my relationship with photographic language to build new ways of expressing myself, telling stories and representing different things each time. That is why I never set time limits for myself. Long-term involvement has become a key ingredient in my practice because I firmly believe that time educates the eyes. Even in Delta's case, I started working without knowing when I would finish. Between 2014 and 2018, I made nine trips, basing myself in the two largest villages in the region, Sulina and Chilia Veche. These villages are only accessible by boat, and I reached them by taking public transport from Tulcea, the last Romanian city before the delta.

My initial two-week trip in October 2014 was filled with a strong sense of loss. I had set myself the task of exploring a vast and challenging natural territory to navigate without a boat, a precise itinerary and practically any contact in the area. To impose a structure on my daily explorations, I, therefore, resorted to the technique of drifting: I took long solitary walks, moving randomly between the vegetation and the mangy clearings of land around the village and, as I moved from one place to another, I photographed what I found (see fig. 1), writing down my observations in a notebook. As I faced the challenges of fieldwork alone, I instinctively adopted certain elements of ethnographic practice⁷. From the outset, I maintained a diary where I recorded my observations, descriptive notes, excerpts from interviews, and personal reflections. However, my interactions with the locals were sporadic, and my few conversations with them led nowhere. The questions about Europe and its borders, which had initially sparked my interest in the area, seemed irrelevant or misunderstood by the people I spoke with. The entire delta felt dormant to me, its inhabitants sunk into the void of the landscape.

Analysing the wealth of images and notes accumulated in that first exploration helped to dispel my initial disappointment. While the photographs did not reveal what I had hoped, they brought something more significant to light: the psychological weight of the landscape, that is, the strong physical and emotional conditioning that the immense natural ecosystem of the delta exerts on those who inhabit it, even if only temporarily - like me. This idea — captured in my fieldnotes on some key concepts, such as the dichotomy between the mainland and Balta (a local nickname for the delta, which means swamp, quicksand), between a sense of direction and bewilderment, full and empty, remoteness and proximity — prompted me to reformulate the initial

questions, which were too open and abstract. What does it mean to inhabit an area with the geographical characteristics of the delta? What kind of relationship do the inhabitants form with their environment? How does this affect their moods and habits, their desires, and the physical and mental boundaries they navigate daily?

These more focused questions helped me establish meaningful dialogues with the inhabitants during my subsequent trips. To build more contacts, I sought help from Christi, a local man in Sulina who worked as a painter and occasional tour guide. Christi became my fixer for the rest of my trips, translating conversations, introducing me to people and facilitating my movements through the area. To better understand the inhabitants' relationship with their surroundings, I asked people from different backgrounds and age groups to draw a map of the delta from memory. The results were extraordinarily diverse and varied according to the level of interaction each person had with the labyrinth of waterways. For instance, the fishermen, who moved around a lot due to their work, drew elaborate maps with precise routes, lakes, and creeks, while women, who were often confined to the mainland, sketched only their short daily routes—leaving the rest of the page blank. This emptiness was a key revelation: despite the delta's vastness, many inhabitants' lived space was minimal, and their lives revolved around those tiny spaces of meaning.

Translating these new insights into images required me to immerse myself fully in the delta's natural depths. Every day, I ventured deeper into the canals and marshes, drawing my own maps to trace my daily itineraries and writing notes to document my struggle to visually represent the immense labyrinth that surrounded me. These obsessive efforts to capture the landscape's complexity led me to new, fundamental questions: How do you represent a labyrinth? And what does it mean to live within one? Mythology offered me a useful framework. Theoretical inspiration such as Borges' *The House of Asterion*⁸ and the hero's journey, as analysed by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*⁹, added another narrative layer to my ethnographic accounts and guided me in developing the final aesthetics of the project and its narrative structure. Reflecting on the mythological labyrinth, I began to see the partial, fragmented view that had obsessed me as the correct way to represent this space. Vision is necessarily limited, crushed, and never complete in a labyrinth. This realisation shaped the final aesthetic of the project. I decided to discard the open, horizontal landscapes I had taken earlier in favour of vertical, repetitive, suffocating images that conveyed the dense, claustrophobic vegetation of the delta. (see fig. 2). During my final year of fieldwork (2018/2019), I focused on creating a comprehensive portrait of the vegetation in all seasons based on these coordinates. The delta's geography transformed into a psychological and archetypal territory, a space that transcended its physicality and became a symbol of universal human experiences. In this narrative, the delta's inhabitants took on mythological roles—Minotaurs and oracles guarding the secrets of endurance and survival (see fig. 3). Ultimately, I was left with the existential question: Will we, like Theseus, escape the labyrinth? Or shall we dwell within it? Is it even possible to escape from oneself?

In *Delta*, I resorted to ethnographic notes for the first time without knowing exactly how to use them. Their potential gradually revealed itself to me along the way. Every time I faced the extensive visual archive produced during my explorations, I used the notes to orient myself, initially in a spontaneous way, and then with increasing awareness. The reading of these writings, in fact, provided me with valuable criteria to rework the lived experience, identify key concepts, formulate new questions, and recognize the narrative threads that slowly emerged from the relationships woven with the territory and its inhabitants. On a photographic level, the notes directly influenced the editing process, helping me decide which images to include and which to discard. This experience has undoubtedly had a profound impact on my creative practice, which now places central importance on the relationship between image and

8 Contained in *The Aleph* (1949), which I read in Italian as *L'Aleph* (1998). Milano: Adelphi.

9 First published in 1949, I own the Italian translation *L'eroe dai mille volti* (2016), which was published by Lindau in Torino.

10 By modular perspective, we mean an approach to the case study organised in different blocks, each associated with a different language, such as here text, dance, photography, and video.

text. The final photographic narration, consisting of around 200 images, is in constant dialogue with the text, including excerpts from my field notes and the hand-drawn maps (see de Maffei 2022). Photography and notes operate on an equal footing, weaving a story based on their relationship. Where photography is too opaque, the word steps in—not as a simple caption but as a means of adding new layers of meaning and filling the narrative gaps.

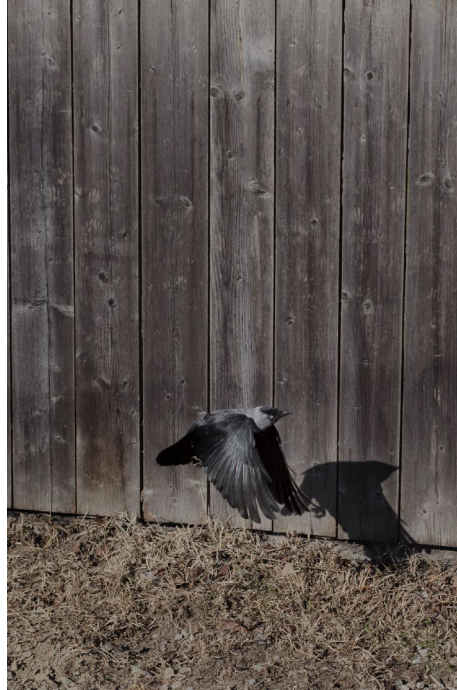


Figure 1 *Delta*. © Camilla de Maffei, 2022.



Figure 2 *Delta*. © Camilla de Maffei, 2022.



11 Abdoulaye Ndgue, Monir El Komairi, Hamza Gharnili, Zakaria Mourachid, Habib Houari, Mohamed Reda, Mohamed El Azzaoui, Simo Rifi, Younes Braiki, Abdel Mounaim, Hamza Chabouni, Youssef Elhafidi, Bilal Siasse, Aziz Chinni, Soufiane Nafge, Bader Zbira.

Figure 3 *Delta*. © Camilla de Maffei, 2022.

***Dialect*, by Felipe Romero Beltrán**

Any attempt to enunciate documentary practice must inevitably contend with photography's influence on the social sphere. In that sense, and with the aim of expanding a possible spectrum of photography, I will outline the main issues that shaped the creation of the *Dialect* project (2020-2023), which investigates, from a modular perspective¹⁰, the experiences of a group of young migrants from Morocco living in the city of Seville, Spain.

Before discussing the project itself, it's important to understand the context of the so-called "migration crisis," which has, over recent decades, led to the mass movement of population from the Global South to Western Europe through different routes outside legal statutes. Each European state enforces its own immigration laws regulating and controlling people's entry into its territory. Spain, due to its geographical proximity to Africa, experiences particular tensions with the irregularised migration of unaccompanied minors through the Strait of Gibraltar. The state implements custody and control in reception centres, which are semi-detention facilities for minor migrants in this condition. *Dialect* is a work that addresses the time - up to three years - that young migrants must wait to obtain official documentation.

That said, the construction of the project framework grew from my personal involvement - given my own status as a migrant - in a social integration workshop, where I shared my experience as a Colombian in Spain. It was in this context that I met a group of Moroccan boys who came by boat from Tangier without documentation and looking to build a life¹¹. My presence, mediated at the same time by a photographic camera, seemed to be a good excuse to start a conversation, mainly non-verbal (the boys did not speak Spanish at that time), in which photography became a space of exchange. Over time, this turned into a regular engagement with the boys in both the workshops and the reception centre where they lived (see fig. 4).

The photographs in *Dialect* were taken over three years, the same amount of time the boys spent waiting for their documentation to legally reside in Spain. The dynamic was established as the months went by, mainly around what happened in their daily lives, marked by a wait that at times seemed endless, and in that interlude, the photographic practice was a hobby. The first part of the project was more of an accompaniment, with me op-

erating the camera for them and letting them take control of how they saw themselves, how they wanted to present themselves in the image, and, above all, what the role of each one was in the group. In a second moment, my work as a photographer began to take on more relevance in the constitution of the project, asking them to recount their journey to Seville. Those recollections, when verbalised, produced mental images that the boys later staged in a kind of re-enactment, blending documentary photography with an element of performance (see fig. 5).

The dynamics of the project started diversifying, not only at the level of taking photographs but also when it came to the expanding spectrum of photographic possibilities. On the one hand, there are images of everyday life, portraits agreed upon with the boys, and staging of memories of the trip to Seville. On the other hand, we took on exercises in reading the immigration law, conversations about my own identity as a Colombian in Spain, and the creation of trap music as a springboard of ideas to imagine a future. This cultivation of hybrid practices made the project possible in its entirety, in which the photographic fact was never isolated but, on the contrary, was an active part of the logic already mentioned.

It is important to point out that every artistic exercise, or at least its attempt, exerts a type of tear on reality that produces a wound. That wound is almost always uncomfortable but, in my opinion, necessary for the project to come alive; otherwise, it would be a perfectly manufactured but inert product. In *Dialect*, the wound is the inherent imbalance between what I photograph and what the boys want to do in front of the camera. For this reason, the tension is always insurmountable, which is evident in the images themselves, where, at times, the boys seem to have control, to impose themselves while, at other times, my photographic gesture imposes itself. On a personal note, if the project has succeeded in something, it would be in finding a possible space in that tension, a closeness from an apparently simple relationship, and within that wound, in constituting a visuality far from the avalanche of images of those bodies, which, like mine, have been presented countless times in photographic images. Hence, the effort, perhaps exacerbated, to bring different perspectives to the work.

The book that resulted from the project (Romero Beltrán 2023) is conceived as a response: it is the device that has enabled the global materialisation of the project, an answer to the concerns generated by the work. It is divided into several chapters. It opens up with stills from *Recital* (2020), an audio-visual exercise where three of the boys read the first pages of the Spanish immigration law, followed then by the photographic series composed of 54 images, and concludes with *Instruction* (2022-2024), another audio-visual work about the movements involved in crossing the border. Finally, six essays accompany the visual material, each offering a different perspective on the project: in *Dead-Alive*, Youssef Elhafidi tells his experience from Tangier to Seville; Juan Bockamp's *Stepanov Notation for the piece Instruction* contains a possible dance notation for the audio-visual piece; Ricardo Quesada's *Notes for the calculation the thrust force of a vessel* provides a hypothesis that attempts to determine how much weight a boat can support without collapsing (see fig. 6); in *Dialect and interlude*, Albert Corbí offers a reflection on the conceptual logic that overlies the project; Zakaria Mourachid's *Story of Boy X* is a fiction about a Moroccan boy in Seville; finally, Caterina Borelli, in *Admission Test in Three Acts*, with a reflection from the anthropological field, offers a perspective of the bureaucratic concepts that enable, and at the same time, sentence the lives of migrants in this condition of waithood. This last text, central to understanding the complexity of the political and social situation of the case, lingers on what the image cannot articulate in an attempt, by different means, to make the law - cause and consequence of this framework - speak or at least explain itself in its complexity.

In conclusion, and insisting on this last text, a contribution from anthropology became necessary, not only to expose the conditions in the law-body relationship of the case but also to try to arrive where the image does not get or better, where it is not helpful for the image to get, since photographic practice becomes increasingly necessary in its silence, in its lack of communication, ultimately, in the effort to exceed any verbal categorisation that would make it sterile.



Figure 4 The making of *Dialect*, © Felipe Romero Beltrán, 2023



Figure 5 *Dialect*, © Felipe Romero Beltrán, 2023

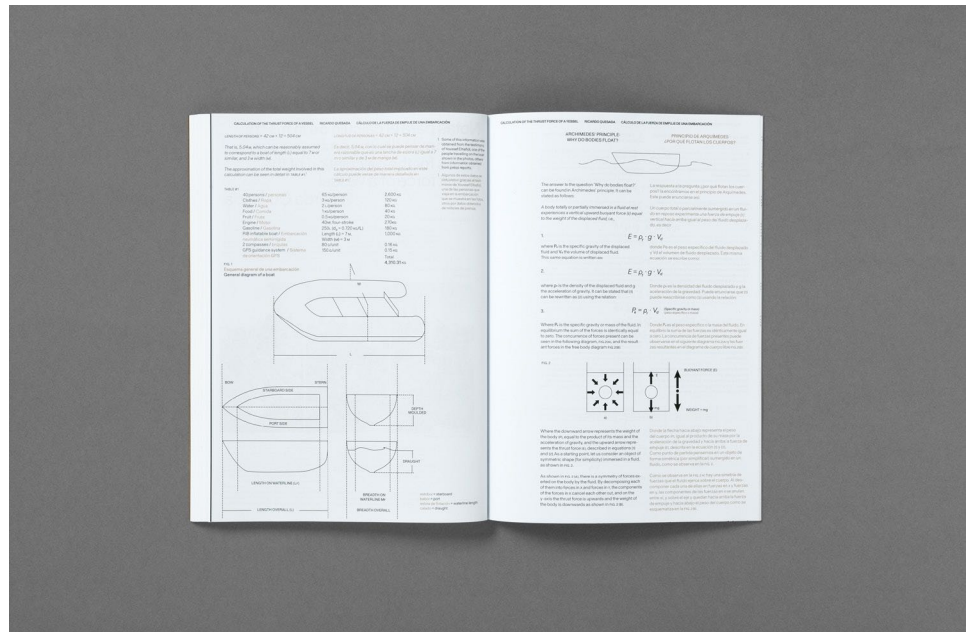


Figure 6 Ricardo Quesada's text in *Dialect*, © Felipe Romero Beltrán, 2023

Road to *Caminantes*, Lorenzo Vitturi

I first became interested in anthropology when I was nineteen, in 1999, and eager to pursue a degree in visual anthropology at the University of Perugia. At the time, I was already interested in the interaction between photographic storytelling and anthropology. Unfortunately, the professor I had hoped to study with left for a four-year field research project in Nepal, and I found myself in the communication sciences program instead. My university career was short-lived, as I decided to dedicate myself mainly to studying and practising the visual arts, but that youthful interest in anthropology remained.

Over the years, I have developed a multidisciplinary artistic language that merges the visual dimension of photography with the material dimension of sculpture and installation in a single creative process. My work often takes the form of visual-material narratives presented to the public in the form of books or travelling exhibitions. These exhibitions display photographs - both editions and one-offs - and incorporate interventions in the space with installations of different scales, both ephemeral and permanent.

My primary themes of interest are the transformation of urban settings and phenomena of cultural hybridisation. Concerning research in the urban dimension, I am particularly interested in those urban micro-realities in which there is a conflict between economic development and local communities. I am interested in describing the effects of gentrification and touristification processes on historic centres. I think this interest originates from my Venetian roots and having experienced first-hand the erosion of local communities negatively conditioned by the effects of short-sighted economic development that fails to see beyond mere profit. Similarly, the issue of the encounter of different cultures, which has led me to explore various forms of syncretism, is motivated by my Italian-Peruvian-German origins. My family background has always pushed me, by personal inclination, to be interested in stories of mixing, hybridisation and conflicts triggered by the meeting/clash of different cultures. Over time, both themes have become the main subjects of my research.

In terms of methodology, rather than opting for photojournalism or documentary photography, I decided to combine photographic language - also used in all its liquidity and variety - with other artistic disciplines such as sculpture, collage and installation (see fig. 7). This choice was influenced by my previous work experience in film set design, a field that naturally combines

different art forms, and by my belief that conveying the complexity of the contemporary world and its continuous transformations requires a more layered language to scan the stratification of meanings in the urban landscape as a sort of “surgical scalpel”, capable of selecting the most significant fragments and then recomposing them in a multisensory and synesthetic mosaic.

The “fragments” are simultaneously material and visual; their selection is crucial to the entire process. It can happen fortuitously during my pilgrimages: I choose these fragments – objects and images – for their aesthetic appeal, cultural significance, or even for their symbolic meaning as witnesses to a particular story. I am particularly drawn to all those objects carrying the memory of encounters between different worlds. I tend to prefer ordinary objects that, while often overlooked, carry hidden, unexpected meanings when examined closely.

In my most recent works, collaboration with local communities has become increasingly important. The process often begins with the collection of materials, which I do alone, but later evolves into a collaborative relationship through the creation of what I call “four-handed” artefacts (see fig. 8). These relational moments allow me not only to learn about the artisanal traditions of the place and to discover the stories of that particular community but also to build a personal rapport with the subject over time.

From a theoretical standpoint, I felt the need for intellectual tools to engage more consciously with my subjects and the cultures I encounter to support artistic action. And this is where anthropology reappears. I remember the reading of Clifford’s *The Predicament of Culture* as enlightening, confirming my aversion to the concept of cultural purity. From this book, whose title is interestingly translated in Italian as “Pure fruits go crazy”¹², I understood the importance of questioning authenticity in my work. Edward Said’s *Orientalism*¹³ helped me recognise the potential dangers of the photographic gaze and its tendency to distort the representation of other cultures through a dominant, external lens. These readings have sustained my practice and reinforced my desire to approach my subjects with an animistic, non-hierarchical view, uninterested in logical classification but attentive to the stories behind everything.

My projects usually require several years of gestation, research and development, and the artist’s book format is the one that has allowed me to translate these long processes – which potentially tend towards a continuous and endless transformation – into a finished, shareable form, accessible to a broader audience beyond the contemporary art world. My first two publications, *Dalston Anatomy* (Vitturi 2014) and *Money Must be Made* (Vitturi 2017), reflect this approach. The *Caminantes* project, still ongoing, represents a further integration of anthropology into my practice, but this time in a more deliberate, less unconscious way. This shift is mainly due to my collaboration with Caterina Borelli, who has provided theoretical tools and reading suggestions to address some of the issues that emerged in the project. Notably, even if dealing with a strictly personal story, *Caminantes* touches on the problematic relationship between the “old continent” and the “new world”, involving instances of (neo)colonialism, ethnic and racial tensions, power imbalances, and land exploitation.

The project draws on my family history. In the 1960s, my Venetian father crossed the Atlantic to Peru, where he established a Murano glass factory and met my mother. That trip made possible not only the meeting between my parents but also the bringing together of two very distant worlds, culturally and socially. Fifty years later, I decided to retrace my father’s journey: I crossed the Atlantic carrying 100 kg of raw glass (*cotisso*), went from Lima to the Amazon across the Peruvian coastal desert, the Andes, and the Selva (Amazon rainforest), before returning to Venice to complete the route. The transformation of the matter and elements collected and assembled along the way, the ephemeral interventions in the environment and on my body, the activation of collaborations with local artisans, and the play of continuous mixing of the materials have allowed a process of “interweaving of the

¹² *I frutti puri impazziscono. Etnografia, letteratura e arte nel secolo XX* (1999). Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

¹³ I read its Italian translation *Orientalismo. L'immagine europea dell'Oriente* (2013). Milano: Feltrinelli.

incompatible". Through this project, I have created a sort of "internal map" that brings together seemingly irreconcilable times and places (see fig. 9). In *Cam-inantes*, I combine purely artistic processes with methodologies and themes from anthropology, including the extensive use of interviews, field research, and a focus on the ritualistic dimension.

The point of arrival of my work is not anthropological research itself; I have no academic ambitions nor intend to reach conclusions on a theoretical level. My goal always remains to create visual art projects that communicate with the viewer on both an emotional and narrative level. In this sense, anthropology serves as a tool that allows me, as an author, to move more intentionally, giving greater depth and context to my poetic research. It functions as a sort of travel lantern, illuminating my path while allowing me to maintain a free but focused gaze.



Figure 7 *Dalston Anatomy*, © Lorenzo Vitturi, 2013



Figure 8 *Aventurine, transformations and other stories*, © Lorenzo Vitturi, 2022



Figure 8 *Caminantes*, © Lorenzo Vitturi, ongoing

Conclusions, by Caterina Borelli

Drawing definitive conclusions from a process that, for us, is still unfolding is a challenging task. As Tim Ingold (2018) suggests, research – true to its original meaning of *searching again* – is a continually evolving path, always open-ended and potentially never fully concluded. That is especially true in interdisciplinary collaborations. Objectives, theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and ethical concerns from different fields may sometimes overlap, as discussed in the previous pages, but seldom align perfectly. New possibilities

for researching otherwise may grow and branch out in those gaps. However, conflicts may arise, too, and balancing the specific needs of each discipline while maintaining their autonomy can be challenging. I mean that when I speak of the visual *and* anthropology as distinct from (not opposed to) the visual *in* anthropology: in the former, dialogues unfold between equals, with neither placed in an ancillary position, in line with what Pink (2003:185) advocated for when referring to a potential broader field of interdisciplinary visual research. With these premises, such dialogues are not always smooth, as each field constantly takes a chance of being questioned by the other in its tenets and ways of doing. Soliloquy is more straightforward but also risks becoming more sterile in the long run.

In this article, we have attempted to offer a glimpse into the transformative potential of interdisciplinary collaboration, particularly between photography and anthropology. These partnerships have enabled a deeper exploration of cultural and social landscapes, offering perspectives that would have been unattainable through a single-disciplinary approach. Our first claim is that interdisciplinary work reveals the potential of cross-fertilisation between visual and anthropological practices, leading to innovative ways of understanding and representing complex cultural phenomena. This synergy transcends the boundaries of both fields, creating space for new methodologies and perspectives.

Anthropology has undoubtedly enriched photographic practice by providing depth and contextual understanding that might otherwise be lacking. However, the reverse - how photography contributes to anthropology - is a question of significant importance that requires further exploration. While it's clear that the exchange of ideas, methods, and tools can boost any discipline, how does photography specifically impact anthropological practice? Through the case studies presented here, it becomes evident that beyond its ability to express what cannot be said in words, photography offers an embodied, sensory perspective that complements text-based, rational analysis. It captures textures, emotions, and atmospheres that are often difficult to convey through words alone. For example, in the *Delta* project, photography immerses the viewer in the psychological weight of the landscape, deepening our understanding of how the environment shapes identities and world visions. In *Dialect*, the tension of waiting, stuntedness, and frustration, but also hope and pride is conveyed through a few powerful gestures and gazes, amplified by the stark backdrop of bare walls. Meanwhile, *Caminantes* builds a new syncretic universe of meanings that fuses personal and historical dimensions, weaving the artist's story into real scenarios.

Photographic practices bring a heightened responsiveness to the senses, affording a new centrality to the aesthetic qualities of social phenomena. However, this contribution must be reframed in terms of both "the senses" and "aesthetic" (Bull et al., 2006). As understood here, the former are social and historical constructs, while the latter refers to 'the *disposition to sense acutely*' (ibid: 6), not a mere judgment of beauty. In the projects we examined, the way images are staged and built and materials juxtaposed demonstrates that photography is not just about surface perception but about culturally and politically shaped processes of knowing. In *Delta*, photography's engagement with the intricate landscape and its inhabitants reveals the hidden psychological dimensions of isolation, offering anthropology a method to explore emotional responses to geography. In *Dialect*, photography re-enacts personal memories and creates a performative space where the subjects' lived experiences of migration and waiting are visualised, vocalised and embodied, adding layers to theoretical discussions on displacement. In *Caminantes*, the merging of photography, sculpture and installation captures the complex historical and postcolonial relationships between land, identity, and migration, reframing theoretical debates on cultural hybridity.

If we move beyond logocentrism (Bargna 2012), we will discover how these works bring habitat (as in *Delta*), body (*Dialect*) and materiality (*Caminantes*) to the thought. They capture the nuanced interactions between people and their surroundings, offering a more holistic and textured understanding of the subjects. In this context, photography becomes an epistemological instrument for exploring and understanding the world, though not as in a documentary action that provides visual evidence. What is at stake has more to do with the realm of affect and the dynamic relation between objectivity and subjectivity (Edwards 2015). It is about how sensory experiences – not limited to sight – are crucial to grasping the rich textures of social worlds (Stoller 1989).

Through the lens of anthropology, photography gains a new contextual dimension, offering what, paraphrasing Geertz (1973), we could name *thick depictions* of cultural and social dynamics. These depictions materialise in gestures, objects, and landscapes, filled with meaning and symbolism – sometimes inherent to the reality portrayed (*Delta, Dialect*), and sometimes created by the artist's hand, as in *Caminantes*. By capturing fragments of lived spaces, photography introduces new sensory layers to anthropological research. It allows for an exploration of how subjects experience their environments - whether through the oppressive geography of the delta, the liminal spaces inhabited by migrant youth, or the syncretic blending of cultures in postcolonial contexts. The density of meaning reached by these images and the emotional and psychological insights they convey could hardly be obtained through text alone. At the same time, the thickness of these insights requires words to decode them, which explains why these projects still rely on text at some point.

The three works discussed here were initially conceived as independent endeavours, with anthropology playing only a peripheral role. Yet, they provide fertile ground for anthropological analysis. One can easily envision the depth of insight that could emerge if the two disciplines collaborated from the outset, united by shared research goals. The interplay between anthropology and photography holds tremendous potential, creating a feedback loop that can mutually enrich both fields. By working together, these disciplines have the capacity to generate a virtuous cycle of innovation and understanding. However, developing a fully integrated methodology remains an important challenge to address.

While we may have raised more questions than answers, our aim was never to provide closure but to suggest the possibilities of these interdisciplinary collaborations. Our efforts – methodological in *Delta*, argumentative in *Dialect*, and theoretical in *Caminantes* – demonstrate that when photography and anthropology are combined, they can produce new methodologies and ways of understanding cultural and social phenomena. These projects show how photography can serve as a critical epistemological instrument that engages with the social and emotional layers of human experience, offering anthropology symbolically thick, emotionally rich depictions that challenge traditional text-based representations. This synergy opens new avenues for both fields, suggesting exciting possibilities for future research and artistic expression.

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“Invitation”:

Experimental Encounters in Pandemic Times

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

“Invitation” was the first of three experiment/artworks that make up “Scattered Subjects,” a program that probed subjectivity in environments reshaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. The article explains how working under lockdown conditions led me to expand the repertoire for studying one on one exchanges using ethno-artistic means. It describes how I imagined “keeping in touch” with individuals confined to their homes around the world by sending them artworks by post that reflected my Parisian living room. Sharing my environment in this “hand to hand” as a way of literally keeping in touch, I then asked them to photograph the artwork in their own environments. I posted the photographs to a dedicated website in a variety of formats that intimated a totality, or single process but never visualized it. Examining these responses, the never-fully-there artwork, some “invitations” that never reached their destinations and others I was able to revisit face-to-face after pandemic restrictions eased led to new ways of thinking about space, migration and the potential art for exploring distanced exchanges more generally. It also led to considering processes of subject-making.

Keywords: Art, Experiment, Collaboration, Pandemic, subjectivity

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*“...the smallest unit of society is not one person but two”
Berthold Brecht (1992, 197)*

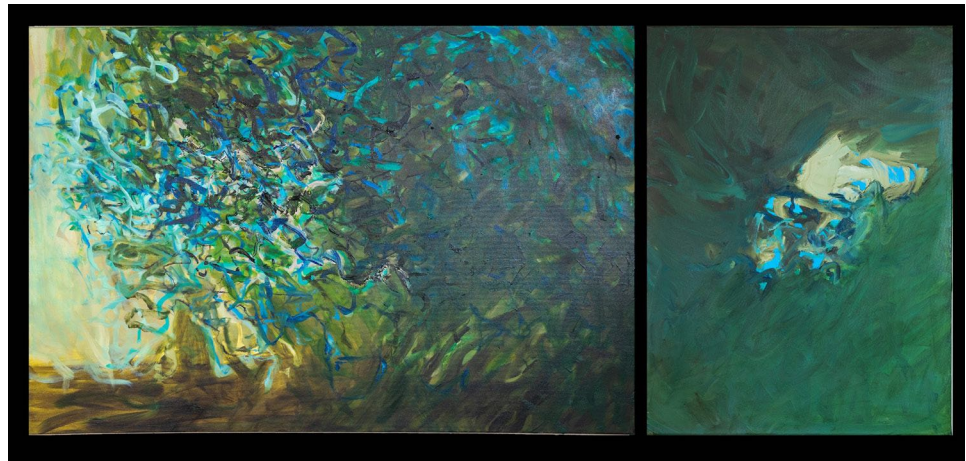


Figure 1 Remainders, 2019, Oil on canvas. Susan Osman

As 2019 ended I was finishing a series of paintings about one-on-one encounters. Each piece was formed of two panels; on the left, a large canvas presenting an abstract rendering of an exchange of touch, words or glances: tentative, loud, or tender. To its right, a second, smaller canvas registering the impact, aftermath of the exchange. Following the left to right reading of Western scripts, each diptych conveyed a minimal narrative whose movement was underscored by the titles of each work: “Remainders”, “Erasure|”, “Afterglow.” A plot but not quite a story: rather, a hovering between lived experience and concept that emerged in a process of sensuous generalization.

Unlike artworks I've made to explore events or biographies, this series of paintings generalise and abstracts from myriad encounters recoded in fieldnotes, photographs and memories. (Ossman 2021) They emerged from study of these diverse sources, which are variously able to register the many aspects of encounters and the traces they leave in the mind or heart. (Ossman 1998; 2002) Making the paintings was not so different than the work of classifying, interpreting and conceptualizing that turns reams of fieldnotes and recordings into analytic texts. At the same time, I found in the shadow of my notes aspects of encounters that I would never be able to put into in words, however expressive. As many others have noted, media such as painting can be a choice to explore what is difficult or impossible to record in a photograph or video or to write. (Cox et al 2016) These are particularly flexible when exploring affective, haptic and emotional aspects of meetings; for rendering the echoes of an encounter that endure or resurface after months or even years. Sometimes these revenants reappear in bodily postures or attitudes, at others in dreams, hopes or resentments. How might one best engage and represent them? The diptych format reduces the many waves and durations of a meeting but suggests a before and after. The expressionist, gestural style used seemed to me to be consonant with Brecht's assertion that encounters are fundamental while also conveying how encounters and their aftermaths are shaped by currents of environments that they also affect. These dynamic, even sometimes slow or subtle streams offer images that are nothing at all like the great playwright's notion of a society that might be built up of one-on-one units. Here, encounters are not even among persons or persona, but instead, reflections on types of situations: an embrace, a harsh word spoken, a joke, and their aftermaths that rippled, cut or echoed. Discrete shapes and lines are imbricated in fluid environments that reach beyond the frame. Meetings produce currents or

sparks that shape and are shaped by a dynamic environment that expands across both canvases. Aftermaths that occur “later,” not at any specific hour or historical moment.

1 There were however countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa where no particular rules were instituted.

To paint, I needed to extract myself from the ambient maelstrom of the very worlds I examined on the canvas. I worked between the home office and backyard studio of my California ranch house. (Ossman 2021)

Then came COVID-19.

Suddenly, the busy world I fled to work in solitude was silenced. The kinds of face to face, body to body encounters that I had been exploring ceased or took on new intensities within the “bubbles” formed by families or house mates. With the start of lockdowns, going to the supermarket became a dangerous adventure for the confined majority. Meanwhile, newly singled-out “essential workers” sped down empty boulevards to deliver food or huddled around COVID victims streaming into emergency rooms. As contagion threatened and states tried to separate body from body through ever-changing forms of sequestration, a seismic shift occurred in people’s relationship the environment, others and themselves.¹ Confined we were transported as the familiar ground of life as usual moved beneath our feet. Locked-in, we were estranged from habits and expectations as well as others. It was as though we had entered an artwork that shifted our perspective on ordinary things we took for granted. Or, like the whole world had suddenly experienced the displacement and estrangement that anthropology has made into a research method. “Life before the pandemic” took the position of “home” in classical ethnographic fieldwork parlance. (Clifford 1998; Marcus 2012, 433) Under those changed circumstances, what could actual artist or anthropologists make, do or be? What kinds of movement or imaginative *décalage* could generate art or motivate ethnographic estrangement when the taken for granted habits and imaginations were so perturbed?

It seemed I was destined to answer these questions by maintaining a quite usual way of working for an anthropologist/artist: by making moves that shifted me from one strange world of lockdown to another. In June 2020 I braved the empty LAX international terminal and landed in Charles de Gaulle airport wearing layers of plastic and a face shield. I traveled in Paris to meet my new-born grandson. But in August a pandemic-delayed mammogram revealed a tumor: I had breast cancer. A summer vacation became a temporary migration as I settled into an apartment in the 18th arrondissement for a year of treatment.

Moving to a second country while the world shifted under everyone’s feet; fighting a disease that spread from within even as the threat of the virus persisted from without; the dual life of the ethnographer/artist seemed to be my lot. But how might one make sense of displaced displacements? What kinds of estrangement and distance might be possible in such a topsy-turvy situation? As I was spatially pushed from “lockdown” to “confinement,” and imaginatively moved from fear of contagion to a more immediate fear of dangers proliferating within my body, it was a familiar dynamic that offered a strange stability and pushed me in new directions. It was the habit of working through estrangement with its letting go of expectations and the process of making things otherwise that provided a sense of balance. And, which encouraged me to probe what was possible under these altered conditions.

Perhaps paradoxically, I decided to engage actual others using all means at my disposal. How could encounters could be generated. that traversed and

challenged the ambient digital worlds? What elements of the “présentiel” (face to face- co-present) might linger or be imagined? How might one not only figuratively, but literally, “keep in touch” ? These questions led me to return to work on encounters with “Invitation,” the first in a series of three projects I called “Scattered Subjects” (<https://www.scatteredsubjects.com>.) In what follows I explain how that project picked up on my pre-pandemic preoccupations but this time focused on particular encounters with others that were not generalized but gathered in a hybrid artwork that, like the people themselves, could never be assembled in any one place.

Designing “Invitations”



Figure 1 The Livingroom, rue Marcadet. Susan Osman.

When I first moved into my new Parisian apartment, it felt more like a zoom-set than a home. On the screen where I worked and where most social life occurred, the living space was resumed as the back of a sofa, the lower corner of a painting on the wall, or a chair and coffee table. I would have enjoyed the opportunity to share a broader view of my new home with my interlocutors. But many people sought the opposite: using “screens” to present themselves online as cut-outs speaking in front an idyllic mountain landscapes, famous paintings or designer furniture. I felt no qualms about showing the actual place where I lived and worked in the blur of public and private that confinement produced. Sharing spaces, repeated encounters make a house a home. In my newly furnished apartment, I was more than ready to welcome visitors, even if only electronically.

It was surely this desire that others get to know my place that led me to take photographs of the salon, bedroom, kitchen and even the tiny bathroom and email them to people close to me. Still, while the images offered knowledge of my circumstances, sharing them electronically also intensified my awareness of the physical distance between myself and others. It did not produce an encounter. The photos could not bring even friends living on the other side of town into the picture of my hands-on life.

As a serial migrant who has settled in the US and France and Morocco and the UK multiple times, I was used to distanced relationships and the how they are readjusted with migration. (Ossman 2013). Those previous migratory experiences likely heightened my sense of what made pandemic so solitude so absolute. When someone moves to a new country, they know webs of relationships will be rewoven. But there are usually new people to knit into one's life, new meetings to be had. During the pandemic, the possibility of friendships, ordinary appointments or even greeting neighbors in the hallway were curtailed. When contact was necessary, exchanges were masked and perfunctory. In Paris, I was extremely privileged, economically, but also in other ways. I'd previously lived many years in the city. I knew the language. I had many friends. As a citizen I was able to secure excellent medical treatment thanks to the national health system. Still, thrust into the strange world of pandemic confinement, connecting to the immediate environment was nothing like I'd experienced before.

I was lucky to regularly get together with my son, his partner and their two children, who lived nearby. In the ambient silence, the buzzer that signaled their arrival at the entrance of the building made the entire apartment vibrate. I could hear each creak of the old lift that climbed five stories to the fifth floor and brought them to the door of my flat. When they stepped into the rooms the very walls of the desolate spaces I'd photographed were set in motion. It was as though I could feel and observe the kinds of brushstrokes I'd painted a few months earlier moving the air. Simple actions like closing a door or playing with a rubber ball sent sound waves bounding off the walls, filling the rooms with vibrations. As one or another person moved, their figure shifted the perspectives that shaped the living space for me, now an engaged observer.² (Damish 1987; Strathern 2002) My granddaughter pirouettes during on-line dance classes redefined and colored the studio/office, as though marking it with a performative "punctum." (Barthes 1980; Ossman 2021, 1071) Her presence focused and defined the space in ways that persisted after she departed.

Each visit was framed by hours or days of solitude. Yet, the memory of each resonated in my greater awareness of how the gold curtains, grey settee and view from my window. Each participated in a shared experience that contributed to making this space a home while also simultaneously making an evolving "us" and shaping "me." Alone, I hardly felt separate from my surroundings. When someone visited, I realized perhaps for the first time how sensing the same breeze and light coming in through a window was as essential a part of an interaction as exchanged looks, words or emotions. The apartment was not simply a "stage" for a particular performance nor was it just a background or milieu however dynamic, akin to those I'd painted earlier that year. The particulars of a shared place at a certain time of day, the way sounds echoed and the time it took to navigate the narrow corridor from the kitchen to the dining table in the living room; these contributed to making the apartment a home.

Visitor's gazes, gestures and touch coordinated in subtle patterns of call and response with the light coming from the window as well as with me. I thought back to pre-pandemic debates about extended epistemology and blended, disseminated subjects. (Alisson and Ossman 2014; Biehl and Locke, 2017; Blomberg 2018; Strathern). But now, I would not examine subjectivity from different theoretical perspectives, eras, or from diverse cultural viewpoints. Instead, I would devise a pandemic-appropriate call and response that would seek out palpable ways of bringing people together to open new ways of getting at processes of subject formation: for humans and for artworks. If it is in encounters with others that subjects are formed, how might one explore not only barriers but possibilities for being together in spite of everything?

2 Making noise was one of the few possible ways for people to express themselves collectively during strict lockdowns, for instance, to cheer hospital workers. For an ethnographic study focused on sound during pandemic Vietnam see Schwenkel, 2025 in press.

3 For a discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic, touch and debates about Western modernity and visions see Giordano and Welsch 2022.

Clearly this would require action, not just observation, however participative, collaborative or empathetic. An approach that was creative of the conditions and processes for experiment was necessary. Luckily, I could look back at a long line of such projects across art and anthropology. I could draw on my own previous experience using one-on-one exchanges to shape artworks and collaborative programs. (Ossman 2018; 2021).

Developing a patterned, dynamic and productive way of delimiting “the field” amidst the myriad movements of the world is a challenge under any circumstances (Faubion and Marcus 2009). What was possible in this restricted and unprecedented situation? What was *promising* and exciting in that grim era? What freedoms could be had or forged? (Foucault 1987). I had discovered the importance of shared sensations that could not be pictured in photographs. This led me to think about the expression, “to keep in touch.” Could I imagine a way to be “in touch” at a distance?³ How might I do this in ways that allowed the environments each person inhabited to participate and evolve with our exchanges?

As a forever, and fated, anthropologist, what I sought was to think beyond what is “given.” In this case, so much as unstable, changing, in flux. One thing that persisted before during and since the pandemic was the common-sense face-to-face/digital divide. I did not reject any technology as I contemplated possibilities for palpable encounters, instead, I thought about the affordances of electronic, digital exchanges as part of a broader range of media.

Not only historians but still living generations of people like me maintained global connections long before the emergence of the “World Wide Web.” As I child I was taught to compose letters, invitations and greeting cards in careful cursive script. Even when I bought a typewriter then a computer as a graduate student, I printed out letters to send by affordable, if sometimes sluggish postal services. I’d observed how illiterate people in countries like Morocco, where I began fieldwork in the late 1980’s, turned to public scribes or even to me to “keep in touch” with relations living in another town or abroad. I often felt nostalgia for the days I would eagerly await the postman and the thrill when he handed me a personal letter. Already at that moment I could, anticipate reading a particular friend’s handwriting.

These memories were part of what sparked the idea of making an artwork/letter to convey something of my living situation to people I knew. But it was also the situation in 2020 that led me to decide to make the postal service as a collaborator in my new project. Along with the internet, delivery services of all kinds were increasingly part of daily life in the decades leading to the pandemic. Mail was not always regular, but still relatively reliable. And it was international. I could work with the post office to send something palpable to people. I would conceive artworks that would reflect my home as I experienced it and sought to share it.

I would imagine welcoming a family member, friend or colleague to my home by fashioning a custom-made artwork that reflected the spaces I wished to invite them into. I would send it off by post. I had made work intended for individuals before, in a project called Lifeworks (Allison and Ossman 2014). But that work had involved substantial face to face exchanges and only one individual for extended periods of time. For “Invitation,” I would entertain various people for shorter periods, one after another. And, significantly, I would ask for something in exchange. The RSVP of the email in which I requested someone’s participation was specific: I requested a photograph of the artwork taken in the place where they lived. I wanted them to share their environment with me, in a kind of reciprocal invitation.

I was interested in encounters as they made relationships, a places, selves and broader worlds. So in the email I sent to a rather random list of family, friends and colleagues to ask them to participate in the project I also made sure to let them know that their photographs would be collated with others and shared anonymously on the “Scattered Subjects” website.⁴ Each Invitation and return photograph would thus be simultaneously unique and part of an evolving, overarching artistic/ experiential process. Together the photographs would create a collage that could never be puzzled together.⁵

Today, I realize that this never-together artwork related to my migration and previous migrations in ways I did not at that time. It recalls the impossible dream that many serial migrants have of bringing their far-flung family and friends together in a single place for just one day or occasion (Ossman 2013, 6). “Invitation” was no nightmare, but a kind of reality check provided by the forced staying in place of the pandemic. At the same time, it suggested a different and evolving geography by which people we encounter over the years and in different places come together, beyond copresence, beyond congregating, beyond communities or collectives. The completed artworks in the homes of individuals and the online never all there artwork on the website help to envision a social world that is composed of subjects composed through complex encounters, composed by the call and response I will now describe in more detail.

Made for You

In the September 2020, I sent 33 emails to people on five continents to ask them participate in the “Invitation” project. I received 30 responses, 28 of them with the snail-mail addresses I needed to precede. In anticipation of receiving the photos, I used a prefab web design platform to create *scattered-subjects.com*. Working digitally much as one might paint on a pre-stretched canvas or scribble in a notebook purchased at a stationary shop, I used the site to explain and sketch out the project.

A foray to the outdoor delivery desk of the local art store began the process of making the Invitations. I bought paper that matched the changing colors of sky I viewed from my fifth-floor window, charcoal and pens, gouache and brushes and carbon paper that would rub off on recipients’ fingers. I had thread left over from hemming the curtains and tubes of gouache. I gathered scissors, markers and a needle. I then set out these materials on the coffee table where my friends might have set their cup of tea and sugar spoon and got to work.

4 I later learned some people close to me were offended for being left off the list. May this be a formal apology. The list was intended to include people with whom I have a variety of relationships, since those were the subject of the work.

5 I designate the full artwork as “Invitation” while capitalizing each particular piece that composed it to distinguish between the two aspects of the project and also the “invitations” we extend to others as part of daily life.

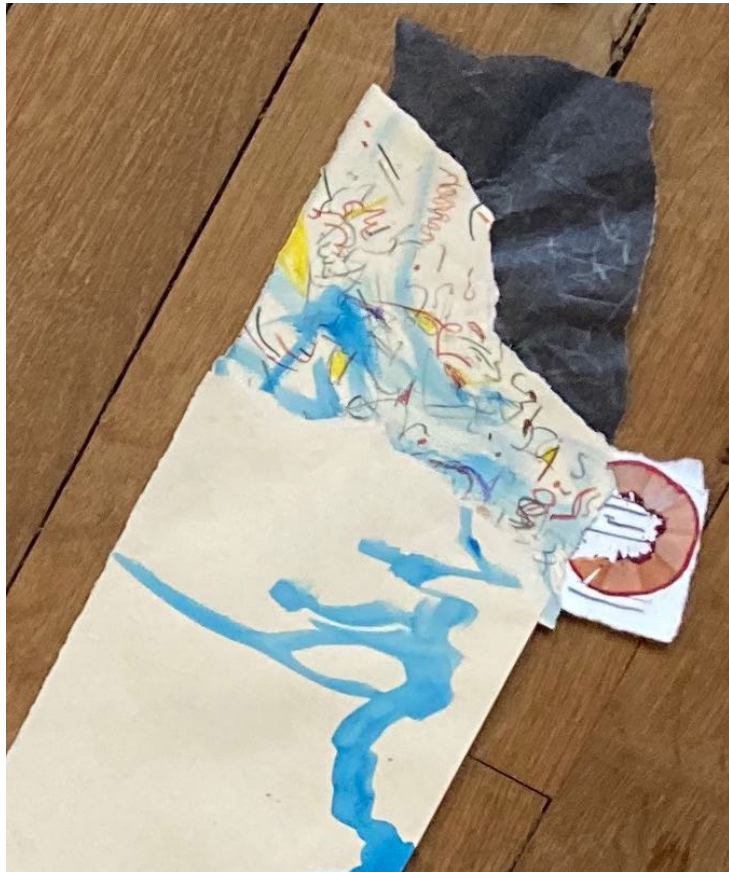


Figure 3 Making. Susan Osman.

Each Invitation was conceived as a self-sufficient artwork for a particular friend, family member or colleague. Participants in the project played no part in making the works or deciding their subject matter. I was not in touch with them while I was compositing their Invitation. As I started each piece, I thought of what I knew of the recipient's tastes and habits, personality and appearance. These thoughts influenced the lithe forms or scale of geometric forms I fashioned to make the collages. I imagined how the recipient might respond to them. For instance, I added extra thread for a friend who sews. I adjusted the line or shapes to correspond to my perception of someone's style or tastes. The colors and materials reflected the hues and changing light in my living room. But they do not depict, instead, they register the action of my hand with the intent to produce a distanced encounter that yet involved the place I inhabited. What I shared was not a picture as much as an instance of my own action on and with what I could make of my environment *for them* at that time, under those conditions. It was an imagined yet palpable request to visit me, share a cup of tea, and partake of the view from the fifth-floor window.

The artworks were conceived to fit into A4 envelopes, but few are rectangular. The diverse shapes seemed to me to animate the sense of touch, both visually and palpably. Opening the envelope, the recipient would feel the irregular or pointy edges in their hands. Asymmetrical shapes might encourage a variety of placements in their environment. Perhaps the forms of some of the pieces even managed to intimate a breeze that touched my cheek and then my friend's. The pieces also included thick rubs of un-fixed charcoal or carbon paper intended to rub off on the hands of anyone who touched them. There was a performative aspect to these works that the person who received them could enhance.

The Invitation in figure 5 is an example of how some of the pieces were not just palpable but could also be considered drawing implements. Carbon paper is the main support, which was guaranteed to smudge the hands of its recipient. Small bits of white paper marked with my fingerprints demonstrate how my hands were also marked as I composed the collage, creating a distanced and time-lapsed similitude between me and the other person.



Figure 4 an Invitation. Susan Osman.

As I wrapped and stitched this piece I imagined the twists and turns of a would-be conversation with a multi-lingual intellectual. The letters/scratches suggest both the feeling of something moving against one's skin and some barely audible verbal exchange. I recall being especially attentive as I painted the splotches of color on the triangular pieces of paper rolled back from the carbon-paper "insides" then drew dots in different colors through which I sewed with thread from my curtains to pull the work together. As I "wrote" in pseudo-letters in a non-language no one understands I thought about my friend's literary skills, but also of the way the piece was a kind of letter.

It is only in retrospect that I notice how this piece reprises the diptych form of the paintings I made in California. The two sides of the beige paper are essential to the shape, but here there is no larger or smaller expanse of paper to suggest a "before" and "after" as some event followed by a shadow which is smaller, suggesting its dependence on the initial encounter. Instead, the rolled-up edges of the paper triangles on one side respond to the finger-printed white bits of paper tucked into the fold on the other side. An action of uncovering or discovering, perhaps a coordinated action that engages both me and the viewer, particularly the recipient who has also been made into a support for the artwork to draw on is intimated, but its timing is left open.



Figure 5 an Invitation. Susan Osman.

A second example is also reminiscent of the pre-pandemic diptychs. In this case, involving a kind of imitation, copying and mimesis. On the left, I etched into the carbon paper to create a spiral, on the right, the spiral is cut into the paper. As I worked, I was thinking about the way ideas or knowledge pass from one person to another: the person was one of the many teachers I've had over the years. I thought about how processes of mimesis are not just copies but add to what is passed on. Was that what I was doing by making this object?

In this example, in contrast to the previous one, there is a suggestion of movement from left to right, a direction and time-sense that is given by the bands that connect the two spheres. Both spheres are covered with “almost writing.” A vellum band painted in yellow with orange highlights creates a warm connection between the circles. A second ivory paper wraps behind the circle on the right, as though to register what the second subject took from the connection made by the bright golden strip of paper. The use of carbon paper is less calculated to smear the recipient's fingers than to intimate processes of imprinting. These processes are essential not only to a learning, but to the subject matter my teacher and friend imparted to me, which was in the realm of communications, media and meditations.

When I completed each piece, I photographed it for my records, placed it in an envelope and addressed it. I walked to the Post Office down the street and entered a grey building with blue and gold décor: colors that recalled those in my living room and the artwork I was about to send off. Standing in a socially distanced queue to buy a stamp at the self-serve machine I noticed at a woman beside me dressed in pajamas. Noticing the paint-flecked yoga pants I had on beneath my raincoat, I reflected on how the one-kilometer circle around their homes where people were allowed to circulate during strict confinements had created a new frame for “personal space.” These musings would lead me to a second “Scattered Subjects” project in which I conceived a self-portrait as walking tour within that one-kilometer frame. But in the meantime, I was engaged in making further Invitations and waiting to receive responses.

After exiting the post office and placing envelope in the letter box to send it on a trip I could not take myself, I returned home to wait, anticipating

the arrival of pictures of previously sent-off artworks in my email inbox. It took three months to complete all the Invitations, so I was still making artworks for some people while receiving photographs from others. Throughout that time the project contributed to my personal world and well-being even as I hoped it might do so for my interlocutors. It gave rhythm to my life like shared lunches, coffee breaks or dinners might punctuate one's usual social calendar. It created a pleasant buzz in the background of my solitude.

As I began to receive photographs, I realized that to simply post the rich responses I received on a single page would not be nearly adequate. I set up five different pages that present the photographs and texts in different ways. One page had information on the process and protocol to explain the protocol. "Making" visually documents the process I describe above. "Sending" is about taking the letters to the post office, and those that only made it to their destination after the pandemic. "Receiving" features the photos sent to me, along with many of the associated texts. "Assembling" allows visitors to the website to move these same images into different configurations.

Thus, "Invitation" picked up on practices of call and response I had previously developed for collaborative projects like "On the Line" and "The Moving Matters Traveling Workshop." (Ossman 2021) However, for those programs we met in groups, congregating in the same spaces was an essential aspect of how the programs were designed. In contrast, "Invitation" proceeded through one-on-one encounters, one after another. These were not discussed or blended. They were only associated by me: I did not create an interconnected network but placed myself at the center of a wheel with many spokes. Collaboration was both intimate and anonymous; rather like what happens for fieldwork, one on one relationships are collated. Except unlike the paintings, I made that generalized from these social and =sensor encounters, "Invitation" appears in public through the responses I received.

I turn now to some of the responses I received, and which can be viewed alongside others on the website.

Responses

In the emails accompanying the photographs many people apologized for taking time to get back to me. They didn't just want to place the artwork anywhere: they needed to reflect about where to place the piece. The care they gave to the representation of the artwork in their homes or gardens or in collages they created was touching for me as well as extremely rich for the outcome of the collective, evolving collage.

A couple of friends framed their works. One wrote that framing the piece recognized and set it off as an artwork that could be conserved and enjoyed for a long time. While he had touched the messy carbon paper to open the envelop, once framed, his Invitation could only act on others' eyes. Like the collective artwork his piece was displayed to anyone, but the hand-to-hand exchange remained ours.

Several correspondents told me in their return email that they chose to place the pieces so they would see them often. One friend wrote that she wanted to have a clear view of it as she went about her daily activities. Another chose to hang his from the fixture in his dining room; "I like this placement. I will see it every morning when I go to breakfast. It will dangle in possibility," he wrote. Like him, many other participants embraced the tridimensional qualities of the pieces that to me spoke of the air that we experience at a given moment in a space together. In fact, several people said they hug their pieces where they could "dangle." A few dangled over windows.

The experience of lock-down seems to have encouraged attention to windows. During the pandemic confinements, most of us spent inordinate periods of time at home, indoors, looking out. Perhaps my own attention to the window in my living room was communicated. Several collaborators pinned or taped their Invitation to the pane or frame of a window. One joined a colorful

array of scarves to frame view of a view of a Chicago backyard, a kind of larger collage that suggested life and happiness within and dimness without. Another forms an “x” across a windowpane looking out to a picture-perfect green hill of an Australian farm, as though to mark the world beyond the home as a no-go zone.



Figure 6 an Invitation looking out the window. Susan Osman.

Some placements of the small artworks seemed calculated to reference commonalities between myself and the collaborator. For instance, a family member placed the piece I sent in the mail at the center of a painting I had given her many years before. She said the placement of the photograph underscored the long history of our relationship and the story of my activity as an artist as a part of that story. A professor hung hers in front of an overflowing bookshelf. An artist and anthropologist composed a beautiful photo-collage of items one might use to make a piece such as the one it pictured. An artist with whom I often explore exhibitions and talk about our latest projects situated my small work amidst her own, larger artwork that echoed its shapes and colors, establishing a kind of dialogue between the two works. The artworks similarity and the way they could touching one another added to the delayed communication between us. “The fragment needed to be photographed with this art and not alone. I tried the fragment with different parts of the design and decided on this one. It made me think of the two of us having a conversation,” she reiterated in writing.



Figure 7 Art on art. Susan Osman.

One respondent brought other people into what I'd imagined as a one-on-one exchange. In one of the most arresting images I received was from a mother and grandmother and nurse. She pictured her collage in the center of a table with the hands of her husband, children and grandchildren circled around it. The hands of two adults and one child are photographs pasted on top of the photograph to make the family circle whole. They lived a different state and could not be visited during pandemic times. We thus view both the whole family circle and its absence during that long stay at home period.



Figure 8 The family circle. Susan Osman.

Other images include no people, but other living beings. A friend's dog looks down quizzically at the artwork. A tiny home school class convened during COVID viewed a friend's piece as a "dinosaur" or a "robot" or a "monster". Several people imagined their works as birds:

"Is this a bird sitting in my kitchen or a top viewed from above with its strings tangling? Is the center my solar plexus with movement and a bit of chaos? In any case it is a marker of our friendship and a place I see every day almost all the day."

A poem spoke in the voice of the bird-like artwork, or the voice of freedom as flight so many felt during lockdown

Let me soar
on wings I adore
you.
Let me fly

Past the rage in the sky
don't ignore
me.

I'm a winged
thing inside
cannot hide
I implore,
see -

here I go,
you don't know,
beneath wings
I still sing
you.

Reading these lines I recalled making "Winged Thing;" how I'd created a pile of different colors and textures on a corner of the coffee table. I carefully separated these from another pile: sheaves of carbon paper. I wanted their gray/blue residue to rub off on the recipient's fingers, but not the clean pages I used to shape and then draw and write on the "Invitations."

I imagined this friend in my mind's eye, at the same time of day as it was in Paris, not asleep in bed as she surely was in her time zone. I closed my eyes and felt the ocean breeze I knew flowed in through her window. It was as though, for a moment, it flowed into the room where I sat on the floor, pencil in hand. I took up a brush, dipped it in water and then in gold gouache. I sought to convey a bold, airborne spirit. Or perhaps the work suggested a writer's quill, a nod to the friend's profession. Or both. The recipient's voice came to me as I snipped at the paper. But it was impossible to imagine the beautiful poem I would receive in response. The "Winged Thing" speaks to both of us equally, responding with a winged sense of freedom to my more domesticated desire to share tea in my living room.

A friend in France also wrote lyrically to help me understand what I was doing with this project. She placed her piece in her garden and wrote of how the artwork had "fallen from the sky" inspiring her to make a bouquet.

Ce bouquet vibrant de couleurs & de matières mêlées, hymne à la renaissance cyclique confortante, du Lila aux feuilles-cœur percées de la lumière du matin, bouquet inspirée de ta pièce tombée du ciel, joyau postal de turquoise mêlé de bleu-blanc-gris orangé tourbillonnant dont

le fil jaune de Susan, précieux fil d'Ariane, nous invite à sortir de notre vie confinée.

6 For films of this see

This vibrant bouquet of color and myriad mixed materials, a hymn to the comforting cyclical rebirth, from lilac to heart-shaped leaves pierced by morning light, a bouquet inspired by your piece that fell from the sky, a turquoise postal jewel of mixed with orangish blue-white-grey that Susan's yellow thread, precious string of Ariane, uses to invite us to leave our confined life.

Again I was lead beyond the confines of homes and walls and beyond the "contract" of the experiment. My friend writes as though in anticipation that the text will be read by others than me, writing about me as well as to me. Her attention to my work with "yellow thread" is surprisingly like the response of another friend who responded from Berlin:

This fragment seems like a collage in process, a puzzle-piece waiting for its place in a larger design, or an assemblage not (yet), perhaps fully assembled, lines and colors and shapes and threads in suspension, waiting for a more cohesive or readable pattern.

The yellow thread is particularly suggestive, because thread, which is already "assembled" (made) or twisted from cotton fibers or (for example) silk spinning or whatever fibers, is also potential, in the sense of waiting-to-be-woven or -sewn..... beyond the original "offering". It is a promise, a gift, a challenge, a waiting-to-be-created creation, even a surprise....

Directed to think of threads, I recalled Roger Sansi's cogent observation that artists are "Moving further than relationship aesthetics, one could say that in these practices, artists are not just generic mediators in an art event, but they are proposing an actual intervention in the thread of social life." (Sansi, 2015, 13) In that time when ties were severed or stretched as thinly as the atoms that create across air waves or fiber optic cable, responses like those seemed to transform my summons into gifts. Unlike those Marcel Mauss famously theorized as imbricated in custom and hierarchy, the gifts I received in addition to the photograph I requested were not only freely given and imagined but helped me to understand what I was doing. (Mauss 2006). They responded to my experiment as well as to my offering and contributed to the larger artwork in ways I had not predicted.

When I sent off the last Invitation I was already beginning a self-portrait composed of twelve individual hybrid stations that offered a Covid-friendly walking tour of me. (Kapchan, 2025) It would be followed by "One and Many," a 24-foot-long collage painting composed of 100 individual artworks that transformed from an individual to a collective artwork to celebrated the end of COVID restrictions in Riverside, California in March 2022.⁶ Thus, the program of hybrid pandemic experiments ended, but like the effects of pandemic on the world, there were delayed effects for my projects, particularly "Invitation."

Delayed Responses

Three of the envelopes I mailed in the fall of 2020 were returned to me: "address unknown". I'd miswritten one address and on the second try it reached its destination. The two others proved to be more problematic. I sent them a second time. Again, they came back to me. This time one of them had hand-scribbled notes on it that indicated that both had been sent to the USA instead of the UAE.



Figure 9 An envelope returned a second time in Spring 2021. Susan Osman.

When it became possible to travel in the summer of 2021, I learned that one of the recipients would spend the summer in Southern France. I took a train to deliver her artwork. The second piece followed me to California and then to Abu Dhabi, where I moved in August 2022. A day trip to Dubai was an occasion to finally deliver it. In both instances, I had the opportunity to watch as my friends opened their envelopes. I was with them as they turned their Invitation this way and that, leading them to speculate on where they might photograph it before our conversations moved on to other topics.

When correspondents were distant, untouchable, the reflection of the object in a photograph seemed to take on weight, a substitute for copresence, certainly, but also a framed and objectified object that I contemplated and examined carefully as one might an artwork in a museum. During lockdowns I had abundant quiet time to enjoy, contemplate and savor each image and each word I received in response to what I'd sent off. But for these delayed pieces, the Invitation was only one aspect of our long-awaited reunions. Face to face meetings were by nature less concentrated on the shared task at hand. Contrasting these delivery dates to other instances, the dozen meetings with participants when I have had the opportunity to review Invitations since 2021 is instructive in this regard, for I could observe how the concentration and intensity of the rare exchange in pandemic days lived on in.



Figure 10 Revisiting an Invitation. Susan Osman.

When I'm welcomed to the home of someone who received an Invitation, I'm usually taken directly to the place where the artwork hangs. More people have framed or otherwise made the placement more permanent: others have left the work in the place where they photographed it. A friend who had moved house took his out of a small wooden box to show it to me. A writer kept hers between the pages of a notebook, whose pages she parted to reveal the piece. In each instance, like the earlier example of some people framing their part of the never together collage, the care with which people preserved their Invitation conveyed respect, enthusiasm and gratitude. It was as though they sought to remember and commemorate our encounters.

Looking at a piece together, often in the place where it appeared in the photographs I received earlier, was quite a different experience than watching someone receive what I had made. Viewing the artworks after the full exchange/encounter of the project was completed included that encounter as a part of the new meeting, which rather than obscuring that previous process of exchange demonstrated how meaningful it had been. To call the artworks we gazed at "conversation pieces" as a practical or analytic gesture as one might in a standard gallery show would greatly diminish them. (Cantarella 2015: Kertzer 2013) The shared history of our encounters during the pandemic and its hand-to-hand transmission added to what we could now experience as an extraordinary face to face meeting. It created a situation more like the dynamic multi-sensorial, affective and emotional encounters and aftermaths I'd been painting just before Covid-19 lockdowns than an object to be viewed and discussed. Looking anew at the work I'd made during the lockdown times; I thought of my granddaughter's pirouettes in my silent Parisian apartment; the Invitation punctuated and recomposed the space we were now able to share.

Seeing each individual artwork with people who had responded to it with photographs and texts that lived on in other formats, online, was a reconnection to and a memory of the shared experience of distance and delayed encounter that I had with that individual. Post pandemic reunions focused

on the individual “meetings.” They made individual pieces into reminders of how any spark of brightness appeared so very vivid in those gloomy, silent, pandemic times.

The simple fact of being able to view a piece in a living room or study brought a sense of closure and joy. We had survived. Since participation in “Invitation” was anonymous, I was alone in knowing that one of the friends who took part in the project had not been so fortunate. For me each on-site or webs-site visit has become a silent commemoration of him.

Conclusion

“Invitation” was and is sometimes or simultaneously an act of art, way of world making and a humanistic experiment, born of displacement in solitude. (Sommer 2014). It leaped toward ways of thinking and making that speak not simply to pandemic conditions, but to aspects of encounters and making contemporary social life more generally. Confinement and the way it shifted the ground under everyone’s feet while keeping them in place was surely a condition for imagining such a program, as perhaps me on doubleness that multiplied that strangeness. Yet, the project picked up on forms of collaborative art making, ethnographic project design and experimental humanities that like the hybrid, distanced, on and off-line worlds we live in pre-dated the pandemic, and persist today.

Today, I might muse about the “return” migration of all the people temporarily displaced in their own homes. I will surely continue to contemplate how the spaces of encounters enter their making and our being. And I might even envisage a similar project reworked to test the protocol under current conditions. But mostly, looking back to when the world was stuck in place, I marvel at how forms of experiment, design and art making in collaboration that have been so marginal to art and scholarship, treated as “social work” distinct from pure research or a “beautiful excesses” added to one’s “real work” proved so productive in times of emergency when so many other ways of grasping and acting on the world failed. In our times of continued emergency and uncertainty, it seems to me that it is time to recognize that such work can not only become more central, more valorized, but recognized as the only kind of work that may be productive in the states of exception we are living.

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All Roads Lead Elsewhere

Recursive Paths Between Art and Ethnography

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

The widespread practice of “being in residence” requires artists to temporarily reside and work in a specific location - the “art residency” - for varying periods of time, and it currently represents an important step in contemporary artistic production. This essay does not aim to map the heterogeneous features of artistic residencies, or residency programs as they are often called. Rather, it focuses on a specific segment where ethnographic research intersects with artistic practices within the context of the residency itself.

This essay is structured around three autobiographical writings, as related to residencies attended by the author, an artist with a background in anthropology. Its aim is to articulate, within the ongoing theoretical debate, a self-reflexive discourse through these case studies, from the perspective of their subjective, positional terrain.

Keywords: artist residency, fieldwork, ethnography, art, positionality

Biography

Leone Contini is an artist whose practice is informed by a background in cultural anthropology. He works as an independent researcher, exploring various expressive media, including audiovisual narratives, installations, photography, and drawing - along with hybrid media such as lecture-performance, which integrates discursive, analytical, and self-reflexive elements within artistic languages. He practices forms of ethnographic writing, both within and outside academic contexts, and engages in pedagogy by leading workshops or exploring other interdisciplinary approaches. He has participated in numerous artist residencies and has exhibited or held interventions at various international art venues.

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1 Participating in a residency has become an almost obligatory step for artists and, in major art exhibitions in recent years, a large number of works have been produced under circumstances resembling an almost anthropological experience of being elsewhere (while in residence). Residencies vary widely in their identity profiles and “missions”, making it essential to consider specific cases. To understand the significance of residencies, one only needs to type “artist in residence” into Google: hundreds of calls for applications are available online.

2 “Fieldwork would put theory on the test, it would *ground* interpretation” (Clifford 1997: 53) could be rephrased as: the residence (the fieldwork) would put aesthetics on the test, it would *ground* representation.

3 9 “I reopen the frontier, suggesting that the modern division of art and ethnography into distinct institutions has restricted the former’s analytic power and the latter’s subversive vocation”. (Clifford 1988: 12).

4 I use this term to intentionally blur the border between creative/artistic and ethnographic practices.

5 The expression “Ethnographic turn”, was coined by Alex Coles in *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn* (Coles 2000). About the literature that thrived at this interdisciplinary intersection see the volume *Between Art and Anthropology* (Schneider and Wright 2010).

6 Within the conceptual framework of relational aesthetics as systematized by Nicolas Bourriaud, any social or relational poesis, such as a parade, party, or dinner, can be considered an art medium, as long as it occurs within an artistic discourse and practice.

Introduction

Artist residencies are programs that offer artists the opportunity to reside in a specific location for periods ranging from a few weeks to several months, providing them with space and often resources to support their practice. Artists often perceive their enrollment in a residency program as an opportunity to focus on creative work without distractions, or to get distracted from a routine condition in order to explore new artistic languages. These quite contradictory expectations toward the residency hint at the vastness of the topic and the internal heterogeneity of this clouded nebula so to say, which is rapidly expanding as the practice of producing art while-being-elsewhere becomes an increasingly crucial factor in the polycentric and globalized nature of contemporary art¹ - not to mention the significant role played by residencies in promoting artists’ professional empowerment by establishing new ties and connections. Several theoretical reflections from diverse perspectives have addressed this polymorphic domain (Elfving, Kokko, and Gielen 2019; Mendrek, Sumi, Zasada 2023), which, however, remains more a realm of practice than theory, thus largely unthematized.

At the core of this essay is the quite specific yet highly implicative fact that the practice of being-in-residency often produces field-experience and thus, *de facto*, un-codified forms of ethnographic work. This hybrid practice emerges as an essential step in contemporary art creation/production, as if the elsewhere and its quasi-field were to root a practice in search of new legitimacies.

The “use” of the field as a foundational ground that establishes and legitimizes ethnographic practices has been extensively investigated by James Clifford² through recursive, self-critical dissections of various disciplinary “habits”. Clifford emphasizes the continuity between ethnography and art, particularly in the context of surrealism, criticizing the drift between the two for diminishing the analytical grip of art and the revolutionary potential of ethnography³. His reflection, which mainly originates from an anthropological perspective, could be tweaked to investigate the intersection between aesthetics and ethnography from the point of view of the art-ecosystem, specifically from the quasi-field of the residency, which I argue grounds “the new quasi-anthropological paradigm” in the arts, to quote Al Foster in *The Artist as Ethnographer?* (Foster 1995: 303). Indeed, the intersection between art and anthropology can be articulated by reframing the residency-based productions - or *poiesis*⁴ - within the so-called “ethnographic turn” of contemporary art⁵ (Coles 2000), which is itself part of a broader social turn described by Bishop as an “expanded field of post-studio practices” which “goes under a variety of names: socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, interventionist art, participatory art, collaborative art, contextual art and (most recently) social practice” (Bishop 2012: 1). Al Foster’s warning about “the danger, for the artist as ethnographer, of ‘ideological patronage’” (Foster 1995: 303) remains relevant to this polymorphic constellation, which encompasses (and likely transcends) Nicolas Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics⁶ (Bourriaud 1998).

It is at this very crossroads - where art and community intertwine and where the artistic outcome can easily be declined in relational, political terms - that the residency emerges as a mass-activator, for a multitude of artists in the last two decades, of quasi-ethnographic practices. The residency is, in fact, a *place* where they live, work, and re-configure their methodologies, practices and poetics by engaging with a socio-anthropological pre-existence and, often, with its *ought to be*, since “the site of artistic transformation is the site of political transformation, and, more, [...] this site is always located *elsewhere*, in the field of the other” (Foster 1995: 302). By stretching Foster’s statement, we can argue that the locus of the residency program is the codification/institutionalization of this very site. After all, the idea that art can trigger a social change is the openly stated mission of many residencies.

As the practice of being-in-residence has become one of the most dynamic means of artistic production, an army of *artists as ethnographers* has set out, burdened with a controversial baggage, from the center of the art system toward a (perceived) periphery - whether abroad in the so-called Global South or in marginalized neighborhoods (or both). The posture of these creative (*poietic*) travelers and residents - no matter how positioned they are - in the elsewhere of the residency is *de facto* ethnographic and their path is therefore fraught with traps that they, unlike anthropologists, are rarely familiar with, being mainly focused on the creative process and its outcomes. They often overlook (though less so, by now) the long-standing ethnographic self-reflexive ruminations, which have led to the deconstruction of the methodological apparatus of the discipline, as well as the literature produced within the art ecosystem itself concerning, for instance, the patronization of those perceived as voiceless or weak (Foster 1995; Foster 1996), or the fact that the outcome of their research is often valued elsewhere, once they return to their art bubble, something that resonates with the *betrayal* of the field, a paradox that anthropologists, unlike artists, have thoroughly problematized⁷.

To navigate these impasses, some residencies promote more or less codified/structured interactions between artists and various local actors, including activists and community organizations (as in the following case studies). These collaborations create a *medium* for establishing a self-reflexive and care-based cultural ecosystem around the artist, where new languages, meanings, and (possibly) social forms can develop – thereby avoiding Foster’s aporia. Specific literature, sometimes commissioned by the residencies themselves, has begun investigating these entanglements from the artists’ perspective⁸. But again, in what terms is this temporary medium (a mixture of different elements and agencies) generative and meaningful? And for whom? What, beyond the best intentions and outcomes, remains for the community after the artists have left?

These questions are crucial, since hyper-mobility and the related practice to temporarily reside elsewhere seems to be, despite the recent pandemic and current geopolitical instability, the ongoing precondition for artistic production within a fast expanding polycentric art system.

This essay does not aim to analyze the role of residencies from a global perspective, nor to describe the spectrum of their diverse features and goals, but rather to articulate a self-reflexive discourse through specific case studies related to my personal experience as an artist⁹. Over the years, I have attended dozens of residency programs, ranging from established ones like Delfina Foundation in London or Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart to very locally engaged ones and “occasional” residencies that have existed only within specific frameworks, such as European projects (Contini 2023) or shorter, less structured initiatives. Intuitively, the residencies that are apical in the art system are not necessarily the most suitable for shedding light on the overlaps between art and ethnography. On the contrary, in my experience as an artist-in-residence, the peripheral ones are a far more fertile ground for observing the unfolding entanglement of art and ethnography, and its inherent contradictions.

As mentioned, this essay does not aim to depict a genealogy of art residencies or to map out their anatomy. My perspective on the phenomenon is mainly informed by my long-standing personal involvement in this paradoxical “field” as a social actor, so to speak, from the very perspective of my hybrid profile, which has allowed me to constantly observe myself while in residence. This has led to the creation, over the years, of a substantial meta-archive documenting, both in written and audiovisual forms, not only the creative process but also the bare act of *being there*.

Regarding the three case studies, the archival material primarily consists of field notes or diaries, which have been subsequently re-articulated into more structured textual material¹⁰. Indeed, this archive has undergone a

7 See the prologue of *L'etnografo imperfetto. Esperienza e cognizione in antropologia* by Leonardo Piasere (Piasere 2002) where “The Ethnographer” by Jorge Luis Borges sets the very limits of the discourse about the discipline’s entitlement.

8 In *On Care. A Journey into the Relational Nature of Artists’ Residencies* is investigated the “episodic” nature of the “space of residency”, marked by the “polarized nature of the artist-host encounter” (Mendrek, Sumi, Zasada 2023: 7).

9 Whose practice is however informed by an anthropological background.

10 Such as exhibition sheets, artistic portfolios or more reflexive texts published in the context of residency-related publications or catalogues.

continuous process of re-editing or re-writing, as well as ethical and theoretical re-thinking, over the years. This writing represents the latest step to date in this ongoing process.

At the core of this retrospective recursion is an attempt to delineate the margins and conditions of legitimacy inherent in the act of being in residence. Thus, the focus here is on questioning the artist's entitlement - in other words, my own entitlement - meaning that any possible answer is necessarily positioned and subjective, as well as temporary and subject to further possible articulation.

Ruminations on my way to Saida

Notes and retrospective reflections - ruminated over 12 years - on a day trip to Sidon, while I was based in Beirut for a residency program at Zico House, in 2012.

11 The song *Emilia Paranoica*, from the Italian band CCCP, released in the album *Compagni, cittadini, fratelli, partigiani* (1985).

12 To quote *Rozzemilia*, a song from the same band published in 1987 in the album *Socialismo e barbarie*.

13 I vividly remember my translator pointing out that the term used was actually the one for the face of animals. She was very perturbed by this expression when used in conjunction with "bloody".

From my notebook: "On the bus to Sidon [...] I have just left behind the cosmopolitan bubble of the Beirutian art world [...] Half an hour in the traffic jam of the Hezbollah suburbs [...] Finally the coast. Darting to the south! [...] Spring is exploding all at once in endless burgeonings".

During the two-hour journey, I likely lost my way in a wide range of expectations. At least this is what I can piece together retrospectively by scrutinizing my notes from back then, among them "Tyre and Sidon are on fire", which is the refrain of an Italian punk song¹¹ from the '80s, when Lebanon was, in fact, burning in the civil war. In Italy, at that time, the retreat of emancipatory ideologies led to a mixture of despair and hedonism. This punk band was undoubtedly able to intercept the *Zeitgeist* of a post-ideological era, celebrating and somehow commodifying nihilism, in this case against the backdrop of a televised war. The lyrics of the song narrate a psychiatric/drugs story (possibly autobiographical), set in the existential solitude of the "sated and desperate"¹² Po Valley in the '80s, echoed by a very real yet distant and virtual collective drama, the Lebanese war. Later in the song, the lyrics state: "Bombers on Beirut, bombers on Beirut", followed by a sharp scream, which tells nothing about that war and something about "us". The Sidon-related refrain was, nevertheless, the only thing I knew about this place I was about to reach, 12 years ago. Ironically, I lately realized that my quotation was wrong, since the lyrics were far more ambivalent and unclear. The real strophe is, in fact, imperative: "Burn down Tyre and Sidon", the uncanny evocation of a Biblical-sounding curse, or just some punkish/impressionistic kaleidoscope.

M. picks me up at the Sidon/Saida bus station. It's nice to see him here; we know each other from Florence, where he has lived for years having married a family friend. Today, they celebrate the baptism of their daughter, which is why I'm here. His family home is on a hilltop overlooking the city, in the Catholic settlement of Maghdouche. As we climb through steep olive orchards and narrow streets, the expectation of otherness melts into a feeling of familiarity. This place reminds me of Italy, especially my mother's town in Sicily.

We arrive home a bit late, joining the ongoing lunch on a shady patio, crowded with relatives.

The light mood is similar to our family gatherings, as is the food and how people look, well-dressed for a special occasion. After lunch, we walk to the lookout, from which I can see the whole valley to the sea. With the help of my friend, I gradually learn to distinguish different urban textures: "Where you see those houses built in a hurry", he points out, "is the Palestinian refugee camp". It's clearly defined by a perimeter wall, as if it were a separate body encapsulated into the city fabric. All the entrances of the camp are controlled by the Lebanese army. Several tanks are parked in the shade of trees just a few meters away from us, watching over the valley, facing the settlement with their machine guns.

Behind the camp, but very close to it, are the bigger, solid buildings of Saida, a predominantly Sunni city, whose outskirts are, however, Christian (where we are now), while the southern hills are Shiite. “During the war there was a lot of shooting around here”. Just by looking at the direction imprinted by the explosions - old scars on the asphalt - my friend can distinguish where the shells were shot from. “This is an RPG; it was shot from that direction, likely from the camp”. I’m surprised by his accuracy, especially since he was a child during the war.

I realize that this territory is disseminated with marks that could be re-deciphered at any moment, potentially reactivating conflicting memories, so far dormant in the induced amnesia of pacified Lebanon. The more my eyes get used to reading this landscape, the more I grow eager to learn the recent history of Saida, its ethnic and religious entanglements, and the very details of its conflicting dynamics. Then, suddenly, I am struck by a blatant obviousness that had been invisible until that moment: I’m overwhelming my friend with endless reflections and questions.

I have (temporarily) moved to Beirut as an artist-in-residence - possibly as an artist-as-ethnographer-in-residence (which makes my posture even more controversial), and it seems like I can’t refrain from extracting some knowledge out of this day trip.

Finally, I’m happy to give up my mindset, to make my visual skills useful for once: after all, I’m here for a baptism, we are running late, and I promised my friends that I would film the ceremony.

I like to imagine that, on my way back to Beirut, both my punk-induced fantasies and my voracious appetite for knowledge gave way to a sense of satisfied exhaustion, as after an intense day with family or friends – just what this journey within the journey actually was, at the end of the day.

Kolonial Haus, Semper fidelis

Notes while in residence at Kronika, in the southern Polish town of Bytom, 2014

Kronika’s building is a daring Art Nouveau experiment, eccentric even when compared with the most exuberant houses of Rynek Square, where it is located. It belonged to the Cohn family, which provided the citizens of Beuthen, as Bytom was called back then, with the possibility to travel without leaving their town. Here at Kolonial Haus, their shop and home, they sold spices and other food products from overseas. This happened about a century ago when this corner of Poland was part of the German Empire.

Like many other old buildings in town, the facade of Kronika is decorated with bas-reliefs: a naked putto is playing with planet Earth while another is writing something – perhaps a *récit de voyage* or some notes on faraway geographies. A third putto carries a big jar, likely containing some precious ingredient from the colonies, for the Beuthenians. This playful, naked innocence is associated with the symbols of an opulent, peaceful world: a final putto holds a cornucopia. On a nearby building, another bas-relief depicts a woman adorned with a garland of roses, while a little bear pours honey from a jar. At the center of the composition, between swirls and curls, is inscribed “1910”.

The original sin of Europe, right before the disaster of 1914, was perhaps this light-hearted forgetfulness, the blissful lie in which Beuthen was also trapped, with its spicy Kolonial Haus. The *Belle Époque* was indeed beautiful, but only for a small fraction of humankind, while the majority lived under the yoke of European colonialism. These food pioneers and their customers were embedded in the same social and economic structure that looted overseas, yet they are not retrospectively held accountable for the policies decided by their autocratic Kaiser. After all, as the century marches fast towards the Great War, this golden age is about to end, and the same dreadful weapons used to loot Africa are now turned back upon Europe, craving the lives of millions more.

Semper Fidelis.

The Kresovian Center, located in the heart of Bytom, is a cultural association dedicated to preserving the cultural heritage of Eastern Poles who fled their homes at the end of WW2. After 70 years, this community still mourns their lost motherland.

A text in huge letters, near a piano, dominates the wall of the common room, where social and recreational activities take place and which also functions as a dining hall at lunchtime: “Semper Fidelis”, Always Loyal. Right beneath it is the skyline of what was once the Polish city of Lwow (now the Ukrainian city of Lviv) and the silhouette of a lion, the city’s symbol and the animal after which the city is named, regardless of the language. Loyal to our roots, but also to our traumas. The grandmother of the director - a warm yet intimidating lady - was, in her words, burned alive by the Ukrainian nationalists. Pride, fear, and rage flash simultaneously in her eyes as she recounts the terrible events of her childhood.

I was told that traditional Eastern Polish food might be served here, and I’m eager to learn about the very recipes, if they exist, that can fill the gap of loss and bridge this exiled community through its trauma. Sometimes, food works like a vessel, able to travel through space and time, reconnecting people to what they left behind, elsewhere. Is there any dish that is served nowhere in Bytom but here? Yes, indeed. It’s called *gołąbki z kartofli*, a potato-based dough wrapped inside a cabbage leaf. In Poland, *gołąbki* is very common, but their stuffing is typically made of meat mixed with kasha or rice (*gołąbki z mięsem i kaszą*, *gołąbki z mięsem i ryżem*). The Kresovian version, however, is prepared without meat, remaining strictly loyal to a very simple rural recipe, they tell me, capable of turning scarcity into a tasty meal. I’m surprised by how accessible this identity-food is, but soon after, I scale back my enthusiasm: *gołąbki* isn’t available anymore, having been pre-ordered days in advance, and there’s a long line and a long wait. Sadly, it seems like this is not food for everyone.

The bitter lunch.

A few days after I’m back in the Kresovian centre, where I’m going to eat, *gołąbki* or not. I sit down and, with the help of R., I start decoding some of the many “signs” hanging on the wall in front of us. I’m struck by a poster featuring Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt at Yalta; they are laughing like old friends. The American president is in the middle, playing his saxophone. Above them is a text: “Never-ending story”. A betrayed community ripped away from its motherland and bartered at the table of the new masters of the world. They are with no doubts laughing at the Kresovians. On a wooden cross hanging nearby is written “11th July 1943”. It’s a commemoration of the Kisielin massacre, perpetrated by Ukrainian nationalists against the Polish population.

Posters, plaques, and cockades relate to endless grim events, deportations, and massacres, of which I was totally ignorant until now. Memory seems to be a bitter duty here, a seed to be cultivated as a life mission.

I’m told that *gołąbki* is overbooked again, and I’m ready to give up when an old lady tells the Director that she will offer me hers. Maybe *gołąbki* can only “proceed” via intimate connections, such as a personal gift to a stranger. The recipe is indeed a revelation, ingrained with history and pathos, but also delicious, likely the best food I have so far had in Poland. Texture, complexity, and tastiness cohabit with sobriety, where scarcity is the mother of invention. For example, potatoes took the place of meat inside the roll, but the way they are processed makes the outcome far more interesting than the recipe it substitutes. The potatoes are not simply mashed but finely sliced or grated, and stale bread and onions are added to the dough to counter its gumminess while adding flavor. The dressing is based either on sweet onions or a simple yet delicious mushroom sauce. The dish is a humble, organoleptic perfection, and a masterpiece of texture. But there is much more wrapped in the cabbage, something that cannot be reduced to the mere sum of its components, or to the many skills required to execute the perfect recipe.

A man is eating his *gołąbki* alone at the other corner of the room. A ray of sunlight filters through the curtains, illuminating his back, the fresh tablecloth in front of him, and a velvet flower, leaving his face hidden in a cone of shadow. There is something undetectable in the silence of his lonely, concentrated meal.

I ask the cook for more information about the recipe, and she sits with us at the table. Her testimony soon shifts from *gołąbki* to the war times. The Banderas bandits - as she calls them - made several attempts to kill her father. They escaped from the village at night, through a wood full of corpses - she was five years old. They survived the ordeal and finally settled in Upper Silesia. Meanwhile, the war ended. But later, in the 1950s, the persecutors came again, here in Bytom. They were looking for her father. Once, through the curtains, she saw two men in front of the house, and pretended nobody was at home. "Are they still here?" I ask. "Yes, they are everywhere. I can still recognize their bloody mugs¹³ around..."

Suddenly, we are all whispering: the lady, my translator, and me. I start doubting the truthfulness of her tale. Is she trapped in a life-long post-traumatic madness? Or maybe the madness belongs to the actual, historical facts. "Now they are old, these beasts... it was many years ago, maybe they are dead by now".

We all remain silent. The noise of the street enters the salon, deadened, as if from a great distance.

Is *gołąbki z kartofli* a patrimony in danger that should be saved, or a haunted recipe that a traumatized community doesn't let flow away into the past where it belongs? How should I position myself toward this heritage? How did I end up here, turned into the medium for the escape of the *gołąb*, "dove" in English, from the cage of this community that incessantly remembers? This is what I asked myself back then and later when I wrote and re-wrote this text, respectively in 2016 and 2021. But ironically, the dove has never flown away from the Kresovian center of Bytom, at least not through my words. In fact, this text was never published, likely because of the controversial political positioning of this community, especially in the tough conjuncture of recent years, when the far-right wing in power in Poland has had a heavy hand in cultural policies, causing both art institutions and universities to keep a low profile, avoiding potentially controversial topics. At the same time, pro-Ukrainian sentiments have grown high since 2014, with the beginning of the war in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea. However, the Kresovians, despite their conservatism and hyper-nationalism, didn't fit into this either, being vehemently anti-Ukrainian.

After returning to Italy in 2014, I wrote these few notes: "Food Liturgies. If *pampuszki* [a sort of *gnocchi*] is the elusive spirit of a lost recipe, *gołąbki* is an immanent ghost, constantly nourished in the protected environment of the Kresovian center. The perfection of *pampuszki* is forever lost, but its oblivion is creative, being a simulacrum in constant metamorphosis, living with different features in the memory of two sisters [this recipe relates to another family of Eastern Poles based in Gliwice, having nothing to do with Kresovian center]. The absence of these eastern *gnocchi* is therefore generative, while the presence of *gołąbki* is a trap in the flow of time: the cabbage roll from the Borderland (*Kresy*) is a sensual ghost, propelled by the liturgical procedure of the recipe into the future, while its face is turned toward the past, like Benjamin angel¹⁴".

Ten years after, I wonder if the time has finally come for this uncanny yet beautiful dove to take flight, or if perhaps the elderly people who mediated its existence across time through the embodied knowledge of the recipe are no longer among us. In this case, disruptive political interferences have preserved this food from being exposed, despite the irresponsible enthusiasm of an Italian artist-in-residence, accustomed to the valorization of the myriad

14 The angel is Angelus Novus (New Angel), a 1920 monoprint by Paul Klee, which inspired Walter Benjamin's "angel of history".

15 “La *bibliothèque coloniale* a schématisé les traditions africaines comme étant caractérisées par une temporalité immobile, refractaire à la marche de l’Histoire et du progrès”. (Sarr 2016: 31)

16 Among the studies on the construction of the iconography of mass tourism, see Simonicca’s work in *Antropologia del turismo. strategia di ricerca e contesti etnografici* (*Anthropology of Tourism: Research Strategies and Ethnographic Contexts*), especially the chapter on Southeast Asia and Bali (Simonicca 1997), as well as James Clifford’s chapter *Palenque Log* in *Routes* (Clifford 1997).

Italian regional and sub-regional recipes through the pervasiveness of D.O.P. (Protected Designation of Origin). The dove has perhaps finally receded into the past, and if it ever emerges from my hard drive, it will do so as a mere tale, as imagination, like *pampuszki*. Chefs seeking inspiration will not take the dove away from the somewhat morbid, yet intimate and close-knit environments of this exiled community to the starred restaurants of Katowice, Krakow or Warsaw. Finally, rest in peace, dove of Bytom, dreaming of Lwow.

White Man Tomato

While in residence in rural areas of Tambacounda, Senegal.

After an exhausting 8-hour journey on the road from Dakar to Tambacounda, we finally arrive in the village. We are housed in large bungalows, whose organic shapes echo local traditional building features such as straw roofs and earthy appearances. My place is spacious and equipped with all the basic comforts that I would expect as an artist-in-residence, such as running water, fresh linen, and a nice bed. My door opens to a spacious courtyard, where we are served delicious Senegalese food. The soundtrack of nature completes the idyll, with a symphony of chants, brays, bleats, and trills, especially at dawn. This intimate sense of interconnection with a primal nature is echoed and enhanced by the morphology of the compound itself, a continuous architectural space where indoor and outdoor, private and collective areas are harmoniously integrated.

But the seamless flow of this holistic structure suddenly comes to an end where the fence begins. Beyond the enclosure is the real village, where water is extracted from wells, electricity is a rarity, and huts are cramped. The only passage between the two worlds is a gate, which I soon realize is always locked at night.

The polarized structure of this place reflects unconfessed expectations: unlike us, they don’t belong to modernity; they have lived here since the dawn of time in an immutable simplicity, in a state of harmony with Nature and its elements¹⁵. Once written down (and thus objectified), this impressionistic picture reveals itself as the very distortion that has shaped, for centuries, the European gaze on many non-European societies - and continues to do so. Nevertheless, the genealogy of primitivism has mutated over time, changing its shell like a hermit crab and transitioning into our consumerist society, for instance, through the aesthetic-iconographic and ideological apparatus of global tourism¹⁶.

Is this beautiful place, designed by a brilliant Japanese architect, a sort of retreat for artists in burnout? A resort for “artsy” vacations, where one can rejuvenate and extract new creative energies from? The idyll of the African village as something primal and outside of modernity is a mystification, but we are comfortable with it, especially if we need a break from our hectic urban lifestyles.

However, beyond this thick fog of projections, reality exists, and so does history, and here the people keep track of it carefully, in the form of handwritten annals, which they constantly update. This is how I learn about the recent past of the village, despite anachronistic Western expectations: it was founded in the late 1940s by displaced people, originally from another region of Senegal. At the outbreak of World War I, they had fled to Gambia, then under British rule, to avoid conscription into the French army. I stumble on the annals by chance, while searching for native seeds, which in my imagination were passed down from one generation to the next - a fantasy that now seems almost ironic: the search for ancient seeds in a newborn village, founded by displaced people who eventually settled at the crossroads of geopolitical disasters such as an industrial European war and colonization. They used to be shepherds, and it is only when they arrived here that they became farmers, compelled to cultivate an American variety of peanut introduced by the French (at the expense of the local one, which nearly disappeared), along with corn.

I gradually realize that vegetable gardens are even more recent, having been introduced as part of a broader strategy to improve public health. As I am told, such policies originated in the post-independence era as part of a wider food security plan, implementing diversified food production under the guidelines of agronomic science.

As the reveries of timeless authenticity finally dissolve, colonial domination gradually appears to me as a living ghost, whose force is still able to affect society. Even my presence here as an artist-in-residence is somehow haunted: the white face of the former oppressor¹⁷ can be resuscitated in my features at any moment; every “posture” I take is structurally trapped within a predefined, uneven power relation. This ethical embarrassment is unavoidable, even in longer engagements (such as more extended residencies) and when the difference in living standards is not so evident. However, in this sort of “instant-residency”, it becomes unbearable.

This is how sudden perplexity begins to trigger me from the opposite corner of my mind: I’m so tightly wrapped in this analytical and self-reflexive *habitus* that I tend to downplay and overlook the agency of these people, constantly reducing their social existence to a mere side effect of colonialism. If colonial perpetration stands out as the prime and only mover of this society¹⁸, then all my interactions in the village are co-opted by the force of previous violence.

One day, on my way back to the compound, I see a vegetable hanging from a fence. It is very familiar to me; I know it as *patola*, a cucurbit commonly cultivated in Italy by Bangladeshi farmers. However, I am surprised by the local denomination in the Pulaar language: *tomate tubaco*, which means “white man tomato”. I imagine that the seeds of this South Asian variety were likely introduced here from colonized *Indochine* (as it was called), as with many other vegetables that spread along the colonial networks - once again, the white agency beneath and above everything. But the presence of *patola* in the village becomes a *deus ex machina* that overturns this ontological trap. I realize that, unlike in Asia where the fruit is eaten young and green, people here wait until it is overripe, turning a vivid orange-red. At this stage, the vegetable is no longer edible, but the seeds are now wrapped in a red jelly, sweet and full of nutrients. People have learned how to collect it and have started using it as a substitute for tomatoes. For some reason unknown to me this tomato-substitute was associated with the white colonizer in what is likely a very local and vernacular denomination. We can imagine that this denomination emphasized a significant difference between “our” tomato, the “original” one, and this more recently imported “alien” variety. However, as the community’s well-being improved, the more practical canned tomato paste prevailed, and the cultivation of *tomate tubaco* was eventually abandoned. And the cucurbit grew wild. Every year, during the rainy season, its seeds sprout and grow, perfectly comfortable in the new environment. Only one woman still collects the red pulp; she lives at the margins of the village, and her house is surrounded by a thriving vegetable garden with varieties significantly different from the standardized ones cultivated in the State/NGO-planned gardens. She shows me the pulp, preserved in a glass jar, sealed under a coat of seed oil; it looks delicious. I am eager to know more about her: why her okra is so different in shape from the standardized variety, why, unlike all the other farmers, she is still growing the giant calabash, and how she dries and brews *bissap* flowers. However, art residencies are perhaps too brief for meticulous and analytical research. It is our last day here; we will soon enjoy the cosmopolitan Dakar lifestyle, on our way back to Europe.

My serendipitous encounter with the white-man-tomato opens endless questions that will never be answered. A failure in the research process, ingrained in the framework of this pseudo-ethnographic experience under the art-residency umbrella, too short to ripen into any type of codified anthropological knowledge. However, the local use of this vegetable and its possibly

¹⁷ I imagine my face being perceived like the hideous face of the other, “la face hideuse de l’autre”, a quotation from Aimé Césaire in *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Présence Africaine, 1955) (Sarr 2016: 35).

¹⁸ Where modernity is a “force de destruction et de déshumanisation” (Sarr 2016: 35).

humorous denomination defines a sort of interstitial space where people's creativity has turned the sterile, toxic ground of the colonial legacy into a lush garden, and likely into delicious recipes that I had the chance neither to try nor to document and thereby "expose". And perhaps that is all for the better.

Conclusions?

As previously mentioned, these writings are autobiographical, offering a glimpse into a small fraction of the many residencies I have journeyed through over the past decade. Their recursive nature, which has unfolded over several years, has led to the gradual emergence, on the narrative surface, of key nodes embedded in the quasi-ethnographic practice of being in residency - a state of being that has become almost ritualistic in the landscape of artistic creation.

In some ways, the conclusions of this essay have already been hinted at in each field-based chapter. However, the question of whether we can speak of "conclusions" in the context of such mixed-disciplinary and process-based research remains open. This complexity is, moreover, compounded by the multifaceted nature of these hybrid outcomes, unfolding over time for diverse audiences, in various forms: artistic statements, portfolios, captions, exhibition sheets, and publications that intersect both the art world and academic fields, often at the boundary between art and anthropology - but also, as we shall see, installations often involving audiovisual material, found objects, sketches and drawings, and far more hybrid formats such as lecture-performance and community based interventions.

At the core of the three case studies is the aporia ingrained in every quasi-ethnographic artistic production, which leads to long-term reflections on the legitimacy itself of being-somewhere-else for a limited period, while engaging in the construction of meanings, relationships and forms, being acutely aware that the outcome of this work will be evaluated elsewhere, in the art world's ganglia, regardless of its local construction and significance.

These contradictions have been explored in existing literature, also from the perspective of the social actors (Mendrek, Sumi, Zasada 2023). My reflexive ruminations, which are also part of this debate (Contini, 2023), are indeed primarily grounded in a subjective terrain, which defines the horizon of their meaning.

Positional dilemmas are in fact, by definition, subjective: this essay focuses on my experience of being elsewhere, at the very site where field-based art is produced in residency programs - a specific segment of the broader, blurred constellation of ethnographic, social, and engaged art. Here the foundation of the legitimacy of representation was undermined by aporetic contradictions, inherent in my posture and background.

The three field-retrospections from Bytom, Saida and Tambacounda were textually re-constructed to put on stage such a failure, a condition of aphasia, and a perplexity concerning representation. The tale of these artistic or ethnographic failures marks a limit to what can be "extracted" from the elsewhere of the residency, a positional act that is also an act of will. A bit like the choice of Fred Murdock¹⁹, whose appearances and perhaps substantialities I have always imagined as quite similar to mine.

Non-disposable material

Self-reflexivity is well-known in anthropology, but less so in the art world, where artists are often used to defending their work assertively against critics. More precisely, while criticism is acknowledged during one's formative years, it often gives way to a more self-assured stance later in an artist's career. This is partly due to the voracious rapidity of art consumption, which leaves little room for meta-discourse and reflective doubt. It also relates to the enduring myth of artistic talent and the aura surrounding art, where an "irresolute creator" could look quite oxymoronic if not clumsy, and openly expressing doubts could be detrimental to an artist's public image²⁰. Perhaps

19 Fred Murdock is, in the quotation of Luis Borges by Piasere in the prologue of *The Imperfect Ethnographer*, the paradoxical figure of the "perfect" ethnographer, who renounces the ethnographic endeavor itself (Piasere 2002: V, VI).

there is a structural contradiction between reflexivity and the act of public display (on which aesthetic consumption is based), as display is intrinsically assertive. Although relational aesthetics and social art have shifted the focus from outcome to process, these aporias remain unresolved.

On the other hand, we can dare to imagine that an artist's assertiveness is (also) rooted into more intrinsic conditions of the creative process, and is therefore far more substantial, since it is not a mere reaction to a pre-defined set.

And here comes into play the "great absent" of this essay, written by an artist: the *poietic* act and its direct consequence, the so-called "artistic creation", which remains self-assertive by its very nature, whether it is often labeled as "outcome" and subjected to various attempts to rescale its bold presence and genealogy by grinding it down through the millstones of relational aesthetics, social art, community-based art etc.

The positional perplexity that is emerging from the three case studies might be a temporary conclusion of this essay. However there is something missing here, as previously mentioned, which is no surprise if "Ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial-committed and incomplete" (Clifford 1986: 7).

These retrospections describe something unfolding here and now: they reflect myself as I am today, they are my response to a positional/theoretical impasse. Despite the fact that the source of these texts is in the past, referring to specific experiences to which they are undoubtedly tied, they also fully belong to my present. However, unlike this textual, ductile material, which has been re-processed (and re-appropriated) over the years, the artistic outcomes of the creative process as it unfolded during my residencies in Lebanon, Poland and Senegal are haunted, so to speak, by a stiff, non-disposable ghost - something whose existence cannot be dismissed, yet is no longer fully available to me, as its fruition or consumption has already occurred.

This is how the *poietic* outcome was intentionally removed from the ethnographic tale, as there was space neither to re-examine what I "threw" into the world back then, nor to re-position it - much less to defend it. I cannot re-draw a drawing, just as I cannot re-enact a performative or relational art intervention, unless as a mere simulacrum. Of course the interpretation of art works can develop over time, but their sensory and material features, along with the social/relational conditions of their public becoming, are locked in the otherness of the past, but also in the constantly mutating memories of the audience and participants - memories that by definition do not belong to the author. An artwork - whether or not it is object-based - can be forgotten and can be reactivated after oblivion, but it cannot be undone. Also, its placement in space and time is often specific: that (hypothetical) picture was taken in that exact place, on that particular day, and it was later printed and made public on the occasion of a specific event, an exhibition hosted in that venue, where the bodies of the audience consumed it with their senses while interacting with each other. If this is true for an object-based work²¹ (like a picture), it is even more so for an ephemeral and/or "relational" intervention.

Even though the following images are among the heterogeneous artistic outcomes of these three residency-based experiences, they should not be considered as didactic supplements to the written text. They correspond to distinct, specific phases of research, production and public fruition (exhibition, publication, lecture-performance, etc.). In other words, these images are traces of something I no longer possess, having already been consumed, living in the memory of the audience - or lying in their oblivion.

I leave the conclusion of this essay to these non-disposable fragments, and their otherness.

Scattered Traces

This final paragraph aims to acknowledge and describe part of the outcomes from the above-mentioned field-based experiences: images of

20 For insights into how value is assigned to artworks in the contemporary art world, see *Mercanti d'aura* by Alessandro Dal Lago and Serena Giordano (Dal Lago, Giordano, 2006).

21 Nevertheless, according to Bourriaud, every art fruition is intrinsically relational (Bourriaud 1998).

various kinds (documentary, artistic, or significant within the context of fieldwork research) are paired with discursive captions to provide institutional context, along with details of location and dates, and, when relevant, a brief description. Additionally, each image or series of images, along with its caption, is paired with “explanatory” texts, primarily drawn (or inferred) from previous artistic portfolios, notes, exhibition leaflets, and other communication materials, to remain as faithful as possible to my original intentions and the way the works were presented and narrated at the time. These texts will not engage in further reflection but will instead preserve the works as traces of something that has already happened, free from additional ruminations.



Figure 1 This photograph, shot by Italian artist Maria Pecchioli, is a playful documentation of Leone Contini’s installation “Trans-Orient Buffet, Inc.”, presented (and consumed) during the exhibition “#1/Under Construction – Open Residency”, hosted at Frigoriferi Milanesi in 2012, which marked the culmination of a dual residency: in Beirut at Zico House (in partnership with 98weeks), and then in Milan at the venue that hosted the exhibition. The authors involved in the residency were Fares Chalabi, a Lebanese philosopher; Valerio Del Baglivo, an Italian curator; and Leone Contini, an Italian artist. The three, along with friends and colleagues, are here posing over the remnants of Contini’s banquet.

“Trans-Orient Buffet, Inc.” (Image 1) is an artistic installation that, together with a wall-glued print representing wild flora growing in an urban context (Images 2), seeks to recombine fragments of a multi-sited fieldwork experience in two fundamentally different contexts, which, paradoxically, share some common traits. In both Beirut and Milan, the artist focuses on marginal areas of the urban fabric that, for different reasons, represent a condition of liminality, on the edge of imposing urban redevelopment and gentrification policies. The wild vegetation in areas of Beirut that have not yet been rebuilt resonates with the informal activities on the outskirts of Milan’s urban territory, where a spontaneous market flourishes every week, with food products informally brought into Italy from Morocco, Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine via private cars, buses, *marshutka* or *microbus*.

In this space of transition and temporary, extra-geographical interactions, the artist conducts intensive, daily fieldwork throughout his residency in Milan, which involves eating delicious but unregulated - potentially harmful - food from informal markets.

The aim of the final public banquet is to celebrate, as part of a potential future common culinary heritage, the food that manages to enter Italy by slipping through the cracks of EU regulations. It also aims to celebrate the seemingly neglected spaces of the informal markets where this food is traded, on the outskirts of the city, where the peripheral urban areas are finally inhabited - temporarily but intensively - and weekly transformed into community spaces. In this context, the printed image of the Beirutian *friche* (Images 2), pasted on the wall facing the banquet to create an immersive installation, takes on an additional and more universal meaning, where liminal spaces become tears in the hyper-controlled urban fabric, providing ground to root spaces of freedom and self-organization.

However, a subtle danger looms over the convivial scene, while the audience is enjoying the suspension of protection grids, chaotically eating food and drinking wine of uncontrolled origins, with the vivid Beirutian green weeds in the background (Images 2). Nevertheless, there is no trust - nor fun - without some degree of risk. The burden of this risk, which had already become a contentious matter between the artist and the host institution for weeks - as the banquet breaks all regulations regarding public food serving - is now finally being negotiated together with the audience. In the end, all the food is devoured.

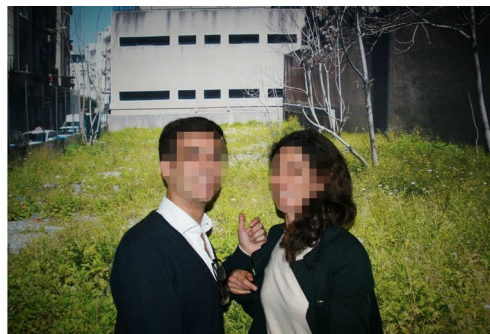
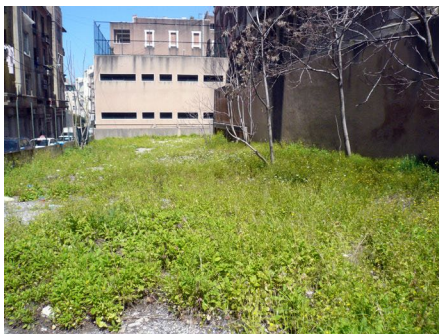


Figure 2 The image on the left is a photograph taken in Beirut as a visual field note during a residency in 2012. Once in Milan, this image was printed and became part of Leone Contini's installation and lecture performance "Trans-Orient Buffet, Inc." (Image 1), hosted at Frigoriferi Milanesi later that year (image on the right). This was within the context of the final exhibition marking the end of a dual residency: first in Beirut at Zico House (in partnership with 98weeks), and then in Milan, at the venue that hosted the exhibition. The same image was published in the catalogue "#1 Under Construction" in 2013.

The picture celebrates wild flora reclaiming the ruins left by human-made disasters - in this case, the Lebanese civil war - but it also responds to the urgent call from Beirut's local art and activist scene, with which the artist was in close contact throughout the residency and which, during this time, has been steadily manifesting its opposition to ongoing gentrification policies. In this context, an un-rebuilt lot in the highly valuable city-center area stands as a paradoxical space of freedom and resistance against real estate companies and urban renewal policies.

However, while in transit from one context to another, this image keeps changing meaning, highlighting how mutable and fragile its interpretive frame can be. Among these shifting factors is the way the audience appropriates it, as in this case, with two visitors posing in front of it as a photo booth background during the opening in Milan. Despite this playfulness possibly appearing as a misuse of such a charged image, it nonetheless reframes this unexpected urban landscape into something desirable, twisting its narrative from a place of neglect into a space of rebirth and generative resistance.

* See the article ToscoCina by Contini, Leone, in *Le relazioni oltre le immagini. Approcci teorici e pratiche dell'arte pubblica*, edited by Cecilia Guida and Roberto Pinto.

** See the chapter about Contini's project in the catalogue *Politics of Food*, edited by Aaron Cezar and Dani Burrows.



Figure 3 Visual notes related to architectural elements in the city of Bytom, in Upper Silesia, Poland, where the residency program Kronika, attended by Contini in 2014, is based.

These and similar drawings were kept in an envelope labeled “The Witnesses of Bytom.”

They were displayed during a lecture-performance at the Foundation Imago Mundi in Krakow, marking the conclusion of the residency in Bytom.

The use of drawing seeks to re-center the research process around a sensory dimension - both the one implied in the act of drawing itself and the one inherent in the mutual gaze exchanged between the artist and the inanimate characters that adorn the buildings of Bytom, silent witnesses to the city's historical dramas.

The city was, in fact, once part of the German Empire, and these *Jugendstil* sculptures belong to that era: from above, they witnessed the vanishing of the original inhabitants of this mining city (first the German Jews, and later the Germans who became refugees at the end of World War II) and its anthropological transformation, with the arrival of Polish refugees from the east (among them the Kresovians) and others from different parts of Poland as part of internal labor migrations. Finally, they observe the decline of the mining activities and the uncertain present and future of Bytom. But they also see an unexpected presence - a foreigner who doesn't belong - wandering through the city, returning their gaze.

These drawings should be considered in terms of process and duration, as acts of prolonged observation and listening. The aim of this “preparatory” practice is, in fact, to construct an emotional, often serendipitous bond with the place and its inhabitants, thereby enabling the reactivation of forgotten and marginalized narratives.

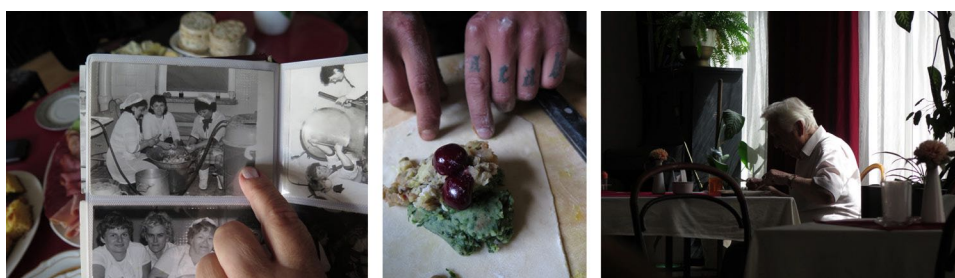


Figure 4 Images taken by artist Leone Contini during a residency at Kronika, in the Polish city of Bytom, Upper Silesia, in 2014.

First image on the left: youth memories unfold when a family album, showing work activities in a socialist canteen, is opened for the first time in many years for a visiting foreign artist; a traditional Polish meal can be seen in the background. This picture was used for communication purposes and later integrated into a lecture-performance. The central image documents the collective dumpling-based intervention “Uncontrolled Denominations,” which took place at the squatter Wolne Tory (meaning “free railway” in Polish). “Uncontrolled Denominations” is a format conceived by Contini during a long-term community-based project in Tuscany involving the local Chinese community*, and later enacted in various locations and residencies, including Delfina Foundation** in London.

The third image, taken at the Kresovian Center, shows a man whose identity is hidden in shadow as he eats a very specific dish - more about this is discussed in this essay. This image has never been used or published until now.

During the fieldwork in Bytom and nearby villages, food is “used” as a litmus test to reveal the many social identities that unfold throughout the research process, from the refugee communities of World War II, for whom sharing old recipes is perhaps both an attempt at healing and a promise to never forget the trauma, to young anarchists, who, in line with their radical antispecism, are proudly vegan, and for whom food is a political act. But food is also entangled with the private memories of a collectivist past: the work in the factory’s canteen, the legendary miners’ extra meat rations, the *diabełki* (literally “little devils”), a sausage-tomato dish prepared for the pioneer camps - and loved by children.

Contini’s research on food is, however, also *poietic* and generative, leading to numerous convivial actions initiated in very diverse contexts.

One intervention involves a sort of food-border-crossing, together with the staff of Kronika and some of the activists of Wolne Tory - which are notably progressive - to access the hyper-protected spaces of the *Kresovian* Center and engage with a community known for being politically conservative and closed in on itself.

Another project activates unexpected social interactions by using the production budget to invite random people to a Vietnamese banquet in a restaurant that usually serves generic, simplified Asian food, created to intercept a vague expectation of exoticism while pleasing the Polish palate. The owner of the restaurant is now asked to prepare food that he would be proud to prepare and enjoy eating, without censoring flavors like fish sauce or coriander. The outcome is a culinary triumph of recipes and ingredients unfamiliar to most guests - and an opportunity for them to learn about the Vietnamese presence in contemporary Polish society.

A further initiative consists of a self-organized, self-funded vegan dumping cooking class, organized by the activists of Wolne Tory and Contini; it is a playful workshop where participants learn and teach simultaneously, kneading and stuffing together while sharing techniques from different culinary backgrounds - and, of course, ideas.

In Bytom, Contini’s research unfolds at the intersection of relational aesthetics and ethnographic work, where food emerges as a crucial medium, enabling the creation of alternative narratives while activating new forms of sociability.



Figure 5 Documentation of a seed swap organized by artist Leone Contini with farmers and activists in rural areas near Tambacounda, Senegal, during a residency program in 2018. The image was later used for social media communications on the occasion of the final public presentation held a few days later in Dakar.

Among the swapped seeds is a variety of gourd cultivated and reproduced year after year by Faluca, as he wishes to be called, an elderly Tuscan farmer, a neighbor and a collaborator of the artist. This variety, which Faluca claims has Moroccan origins, is a type of *Lagenaria* once known as *zucca da pesce* (fish gourd), used as recently as the 1950s by fishermen as a container for their catch. His long-standing effort to keep this lineage alive is significant, as today the *zucca* is often nothing more than a relic displayed in local museums of rural folklore - its worm-eaten, lignified shell containing seeds that have lost their germinability, not having been regenerated for many years.

Despite all this, Faluca's garden could still be seen as an offshoot of heritage conservation, since his reproduction of the gourd is ideologically situated within the foundational framework of patrimony - turning a gourd into *our* gourd, a paradoxical living relic able to confer identity. Nevertheless, his lifelong commitment to the fish gourd has made a substantial difference, having ensured its survival and finally allowing it to once again move across geographies (in Contini's pocket), escaping the Tuscan bottleneck and conservation traps, likely to interbreed with varieties in Tambacounda, changing its denomination and uses anew.

In addition to this "Tuscan" escaped *zucca*, Contini brings to Senegal seeds of *pugua* and *cucuzza*, two varieties currently cultivated in Tuscany for culinary use. All three are *Lagenaria* and commonly referred to as gourds in English. *Pugua* seeds had been reproduced in the garden adjacent to that of the elderly Tuscan custodian, Faluca, by a farmer from the rural areas of Wenzhou, China. This gourd closely resembles the Sicilian *cucuzza*, which was cultivated by the artist's grandmother in the hills of Galluzzo (Florence) in the 1980s.

All three of these varieties (Tuscan-Moroccan, Sino-Tuscan, and Tuscan-Sicilian - to play with denominations) tell stories of global mobility, adaptation, hybridization - none of them claiming a definitive or authoritative identity.

The complexity of this vegetal medium, sourced from the artist's neighborhood, reflects his attempt to navigate positional perplexity, that arises

from being projected as a foreign body into a social context for too short a time - where his presence is distinctly marked by his privileged position. These cucurbit seeds, coming from a sort of “permanent fieldwork” closely intertwined with the artist’s everyday life, represent the need to integrate this “episodic ethnography” into a broader research flow rooted in long-term commitment.

Once brought to Senegal, these “proximity seeds” not only contradict the “habits” and modes of production of the art industry but also offer a proposition for how a quasi-ethnographic practice can be legitimate. Furthermore and more concretely, they represent a possible common ground for fostering generative interactions with local farmers and activists, whose profound botanical knowledge is complemented by their willingness to engage in research on different agricultural practices.



Figure 6 Four pages from a notebook that is part of Contini’s installation titled “The White-Man-Tomato and Other Tales”, created within the framework of the artistic research and exchange project “Seeds For Future Memories”, a collaboration between the artist residencies Thread in Sinthian, Senegal (in rural areas near the city of Tambacounda), and Villa Romana in Florence, Italy, in 2018. The installation, exhibited at both ACUD Galerie in Berlin and Villa Romana in Florence in 2019, includes field notes, sketches, seeds, and other plant material sourced from various geographies at both ends of the journey.

The choice of narrative-drawings reflects the need to “stage” the positional complexity of the residency experience, recounting its awkwardness in a sort of public confession of the many inadequacies of the artist-as-ethnographer, ironically identified with the white-man-tomato - a human-vegetable figure, laden with assumptions that are progressively deconstructed by local knowledge. Once the bias of imposing narratives is neutralized, this knowledge is finally recognized and celebrated through this comic-like medium, making its way to the audience.

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Quanti di Identità.

Sulla ragione e funzione del Metodo applicato alla progettazione di Sistemi di Identità.

Visual Ethnography

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This article starts with a provocation, to consider the theme of visual identity applied to places and communities as a discontinuous and granular matter, which cannot be recounted according to univocal and simplifying narrative processes. Hence the title *Quanti di Identità* (Quantum of Identities), where the parallel with quantum physics refers precisely to the need to develop working methodologies based on design ethnography. Here we call them Design Actions, carried out in the field that are able to bring out those quantum of identity that would otherwise be undetectable, through the interaction and direct involvement of the users to whom the project is addressed. We consider this field of research as the basis of the Design Methodology course at ISIA Urbino and that through the work developed by groups of students in an extracurricular space to which we have given the name RUMORE-ISIA U. Here, experimental projects are applied in the field, the results of which are compiled into guide manuals, the images accompanying the text of which convey the substance, achieving results that allow us to have a visual, editorial, methodological and qualitative data on the validity of the theses from which we start and which are illustrated below.

Keywords

Design, Visual, Ethnography, Identity, Methodology, Quantum, Actions, Education, Unexpected

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1 Marc Holt (a cura di), *Munich '72 The Visual Output of Otl Aicher's Dept. XI*, Marc Holt publisher, 2019

2 GUATTARI Felix, *La Rivoluzione molecolare*, Einaudi, Saggi, 1978

Una diversa idea di progetto dell'identità visiva.

In questo articolo illustreremo un diverso approccio al tema del progetto dell'identità visiva applicato a luoghi e comunità, secondo un approccio etnografico. Accanto all'esposizione dei riferimenti e delle ragioni per cui considerare una diversa pratica progettuale, illustreremo anche la necessità di sviluppare nuovi percorsi della didattica del design nelle nostre scuole dell'alta formazione in Italia. Perché questo titolo quindi? Perché parlare di *Quanti di Identità*?

È utile riandare brevemente al 1900 quando Max Plank, matematico e fisico tedesco, premio Nobel per la fisica nel 1918, teorizza come la radiazione emessa da quello che definisce come corpo nero non fosse continua ma 'quantizzata' ovvero emessa in quantità discrete di energia dette 'quanti di energia'. Le implicazioni della sua teorizzazione diverranno chiare più tardi con l'analisi dell'effetto fotoelettrico di Einstein, grazie alla quale introduce il concetto di natura corpuscolare della luce. Lungi dal volersi addentrare nell'esposizione di un campo della fisica su cui ancora oggi si scontrano opinioni e studi contrastanti, quello che qui ci interessa è l'essenza di una rivoluzione scientifica che ha cambiato radicalmente il nostro modo di intendere la natura costitutiva del mondo in cui viviamo. Una materia che si considerava continua, si scopre essere composta di particelle distinte fra loro. Prendere a prestito, se pure in modo semplicistico, questa scoperta rivoluzionaria nel campo della fisica, è un paradosso che ci aiuta a interpretare un diverso punto di vista da cui analizzare il concetto di identità nel campo del progetto; una materia che per leggi di mercato siamo portati a considerare come 'continua' e che come tale è spesso soggetta a processi di semplificazione attraverso progetti di branding. Ci si pone l'obiettivo di definire come entità omogenee e coerenti le identità visive di grandi sistemi urbani come Berlino, Porto, Amsterdam, senza considerare la complessità di questi che possiamo intendere invece come ecosistemi complessi, le cui componenti etniche, culturali, sociali, economiche, sono innumerevoli e richiedono sistemi rappresentativi in grado di non appiattirne i valori.

L'ipotesi di ricerca che qui esponiamo intende invece il progetto dell'identità come relazione tra 'quanti di identità' distinti tra loro, evocabili solo tramite azioni progettuali di tipo etnografico intese principalmente come strumento di indagine e emersione di una forma di conoscenza altrimenti nascosta. Quando parliamo di 'quanti di identità' intendiamo ogni forma di unità di conoscenza (testuale, mediale, grafica, sonora, ecc) che scaturisca dalla partecipazione e dalle interazioni degli utenti coinvolti in azioni progettuali (design actions) di tipo partecipato. Parte sostanziale del lavoro del designer, secondo questa ipotesi, risiede quindi nel 'disegnare' parallelamente le relazioni in chiave semantica che collegano i singoli 'quanti' e consentire agli utenti di determinare la figura di insieme e le percezioni che ne deriveranno. Ne consegue che l'idea stessa di identità visiva a cui qui ci riferiamo sarà necessariamente intesa come generativa, variabile e dinamica proprio in relazione a come il bagaglio culturale e di contesto degli utilizzatori finali potrà mutarne la possibile interpretazione.

Siamo abituati a considerare i progetti sull'identità (visiva) come sistemi organizzati e monolitici, la cui efficacia risiede nell'essere logici, organici, continui nel determinare a priori ogni possibilità di comunicazione che il sistema stesso offre. Se ci riferiamo a uno dei casi emblematici e di studio, ovvero il progetto di immagine coordinata per i giochi olimpici di Monaco 1972¹, concepito da Otl Aicher e sviluppato grazie al coordinamento di un numerosissimo gruppo di lavoro composto in buona parte da suoi ex studenti della Hfg di Ulm, l'organizzazione del progetto secondo una griglia-sistema di tipo gerarchico appare evidente e, nel caso specifico, estremamente efficace. Sembra che Aicher avesse sviluppato addirittura una sorta di mania ossessiva per l'e-

servizio del controllo su ogni artefatto progettato e che avesse specificato da contratto che niente avrebbe potuto essere stampato se non prodotto dal suo gruppo di lavoro. È sintomatico di questo modo di intendere il progetto di identità anche il tempo dedicato al ‘cantiere’ di progetto. A Otl Aicher viene illustrato l’obiettivo progettuale nel 1966, esattamente nel momento in cui la nazionale tedesca veniva sconfitta dal gol fantasma nell’unico mondiale vinto dall’Inghilterra. Ben 6 anni di lavoro per una architettura del progetto di immagine coordinata che rimarrà uno degli esempi più corposi e paradigmatici in questo ambito specifico del design. Questo lascia intendere che il quadro politico e di governance che faceva da sfondo al lavoro si dava per scontato non sarebbe mutato, nonostante si vivessero anni, dal punto di vista sociale di profonda trasformazione. Oggi viviamo in tempi diversi. Se dovessimo riportare quella specifica condizione al momento in cui viviamo, tale possibilità di sistematizzazione sarebbe difficile da preservare, il medesimo intento progettuale dovrebbe saper affrontare un livello di interazioni con il mondo esterno decisamente più alto, la ‘democratizzazione’ del mondo digitale richiederebbe una azione di presidio e capacità di risposta a istanze in continua mutazione da rendere molto più complesso il lavoro della ipotetica cabina di regia. Come rispondere quindi a questa profonda mutazione di contesto? Come rendere il processo progettuale capace di includere tra le sue variabili anche le complesse articolazioni identitarie richieste dai pubblici a cui ci riferiamo oggi?

È proprio in virtù di tali riflessioni che il modo in cui qui considereremo il tema del design applicato a progetti di identità si rivolge allo studio e al possibile sviluppo di una metodologia di progetto di questa che può essere considerata a buona ragione una delle componenti fondamentali del progetto di comunicazione visiva. È secondo questo punto di vista che torna centrale il parallelismo utilizzato nell’articolo con la fisica dei ‘quantì’. Intendiamo qui per l’appunto valorizzarne l’opportuna granulosità, le discontinuità, le articolazioni complesse, le contraddizioni e gli strumenti e i ‘modi’ che possiamo predisporre per poter governare uno scenario di questo tipo. Una riflessione sulla natura ‘quantica’ del progetto di identità, nasce ovviamente da una visione ‘politica’ del design, e quindi richiede la presa a prestito del portato del pensiero e dalla visione antisistema proposta da pensatori illustri del ‘900 come Felix Guattari, promotore nel 1977 della sua *Rivoluzione Molecolare*²: «Penso sia illusorio scommettere su una trasformazione progressiva della società, mentre credo che i tentativi microscopici, comunità, comitati di quartiere, organizzazione di asili in facoltà...rivestano un ruolo assolutamente fondamentale».

Da qui nasce la consapevolezza che applicare il concetto di identità a un’impresa o un prodotto non può essere la stessa cosa che considerarlo per un luogo, una città, una strada o una comunità. Il ruolo che nei due casi svolge il progetto di identità è per così dire, opposto. Nel primo caso, come citato sopra per il caso Monaco ‘72, il nostro progetto mira a dare coerenza a un insieme di informazioni e valori ‘dati’. L’obiettivo che ne consegue sta nel renderli noti e portarli a un pubblico più ampio possibile.

Nel secondo caso il nostro obiettivo progettuale è duplice perché mentre censisce i tratti identitari esistenti e avvia il lavoro per la loro organizzazione, insieme avvia azioni progettuali ‘sul campo’ che hanno l’obiettivo di scoprire tratti identitari ‘potenziali’, la cui natura nell’evoluzione del sistema di identità sarà di offrire leve che favoriscano l’inclusione, la partecipazione e la rideterminazione di quella stessa identità in modo che la stessa sia destinata ad evolvere autogenerandosi.

A tal fine dovremo approfondire e analizzare, anche da un punto di vista teorico, alcuni degli strumenti che ci troveremo ad usare pensando che il design muta dall’essere inteso come esclusivo strumento di problem solving e diviene processo complesso di attivazione di variabili progettuali molteplici e, per precisa volontà non sempre prevedibili: la centralità di una specifica Design Methodology, la pratica di ricerca sviluppata grazie a un approccio di tipo et-

3 Potter, Norman, 2002 *What is a designer? Things, Places, Messages*. Hyphen Press, London.

4 Storico e critico inglese di architettura, formatosi alla Architectural Association di Londra, vanta una lunga storia di docenza tra cui la sua cattedra, dal 1972, alla Columbia University.

5 Frampton, Kenneth, 1974 *Apophysis Ulm: Curriculum And Critical Theory*, In The MIT Press, No 3, 17-36. Ed., Oppositions New York.

nografico, il valore del dato ottenibile grazie all'intuizione nel fruitore generata dalla dimensione artistica e iperbolica del progetto, il progetto stesso inteso come struttura narrativa oltre che visiva. Appare chiaro come per procedere in questa direzione il ruolo che richiedono analisi e preparazione del contesto come dei committenti e degli stakeholder coinvolti siano fasi pre-progettuali determinanti.

Virtù e limiti di un approccio metodologico al progetto.

Perché porsi il tema di una possibile diversa metodologia del design comprensiva in questa ipotesi di un approccio etnografico diviene quindi centrale?

Da un punto di vista generale noi parliamo del Metodo e di Metodologia riferendoci all'organizzazione di atti pianificati per fasi successive orientati al raggiungimento di uno scopo o un fine. Definizione piuttosto generale che si rispecchia nelle formulazioni classificatorie dei più diffusi testi scientifici, ma che non ne fornisce un contorno più definito e pertinente alla materia che tratteremo.

Di fatto di Metodologia si è cominciato a parlare al di fuori dell'ambito che le è più proprio della filosofia e dell'indagine scientifica, quando attività 'tecniche' fino a quel momento riconducibili al fare artistico quando non proprio a quello artigianale si sono affacciate a un mondo trasformato dalla produzione industriale in serie e per mercati di massa.

È utile tornare a guardare retrospettivamente i casi più significativi di quella stagione nell'affermazione della centralità del Metodo come base della pratica progettuale. In particolare è utile fare riferimento a una delle figure chiave in questi termini, al testo seminale *What is a designer?*³ di Norman Potter in cui troviamo riassunti gli snodi di una stagione, la prima metà del secolo scorso, che ha mutato profondamente l'idea stessa di conoscenza necessaria alla base del processo progettuale che ancora oggi pratichiamo.

Come appena citato occorre tornare alla pratica metodologica introdotta a Ulm e legata al metodo computazionale elaborato alla comparsa delle prime macchine di calcolo matematico al servizio del progetto. È quella che in campo matematico e scientifico viene definita pratica euristica, ovvero il poter seguire ipotesi formulate grazie ad un'intuizione, quindi legate a prassi anche non formali e che si intende poi verificare scientificamente in seguito.

Kenneth Frampton⁴ in suo scritto⁵ sul contributo lasciato dalla Hfg di Ulm, ricorda come insegnare in quella scuola fosse una pratica che, basandosi sui presupposti di standardizzazione e produzione di massa su cui si fondava il principio di esistenza stessa della scuola, investigava la possibilità di sviluppare un approccio scientifico e un metodo 'obiettivo' per l'accumulazione e l'organizzazione di dati al fine di stimolare e favorire 'design solutions'.

Lo stesso Maldonado afferma nel ricordare la transizione avviata in quel periodo nella scuola, "The mainspring of all of our curiosity, our reading, and our theoretical work was our determination to find a solid methodological basis for the work of design" (Maldonado, 1991, p. 222). Maldonado, da quando diviene direttore stabilisce un cambio radicale di direzione nel determinare la centralità del Metodo nel processo progettuale. In particolare, in opposizione alla precedente gestione della scuola sotto la guida di Max Bill che si focalizzava espressamente sulla componente artistica della creazione, Maldonado introduce la componente della multidisciplinarietà e della collaborazione come strumenti peculiari del processo progettuale, sia per quanto riguarda la sua natura di processo dedicato alla ricerca e all'indagine che di strumento per la formulazione finale di soluzioni progettuali innovative e adatte ad essere riprodotte in serie e a basso costo. È da questo momento che comincia a introdurre tra le materie di insegnamento anche la statistica, l'economia, la

sociologia, la matematica, la semiologia, ecc. Una maturazione delle coscienze intorno alla cultura del progetto che pervade anche molta della esperienza della formazione in quegli anni. Viene pubblicato alla fine degli anni '60 il testo fondamentale *Design Methods*⁶ di John Christopher Jones che traccia un primo ridisegno del processo del design al servizio della produzione industriale; negli stessi anni, precisamente nel 1968 le riflessioni di David Warren Piper durante l'occupazione del Hornsey College of Art di Londra lo condurranno alla sintesi teorica offerta dai suoi testi circa il ripensamento dei metodi della didattica nell'insegnamento delle materie artistiche; lo stesso Norman Potter si rese protagonista di una vera rivoluzione del metodo di gestione dell'alta formazione nel campo del design con il progetto di co-fondazione della Construction School, un programma sperimentale sviluppato al 'West of England College of Art' di Bristol nell'ambito del quale sviluppò un approccio non convenzionale allo studio nel quale gli studenti si rendessero protagonisti del loro percorso formativo e responsabili direttamente della stessa gestione del corso. Un lungo periodo di militanza nel campo dell'educazione che Potter ricorderà come una lunghissima lotta contro il peso della formazione tradizionale inglese nel campo del design. Per altri versi l'architetto visionario Buckminster Fuller, oltreoceano, aveva avviato le sue speculazioni sulla rivoluzione globale che il design avrebbe potuto regalare alla necessità di sopravvivenza dell'uomo in tutte le sue forme.

Accanto a una presa di coscienza del metodo come strumento di organizzazione e pianificazione tramite il quale rendere una prassi certa e trasmissibile i cui frutti possano essere misurabili e pianificabili, si è andata affermando, anche grazie ai movimenti studenteschi che hanno caratterizzato quel periodo, nei decenni '60-'70-'80 del '900 l'idea di una metodologia intesa come strumento in grado di aprire il processo progettuale. L'azione artistica si è fatta strumento militante, di affermazione e messa in discussione di una identità prima di tutto sociale e politica votata alla ridiscussione e prefigurazione di modelli che potessero includere il bene intangibile della cultura tra le componenti fondamentali di organizzazione delle comunità. Da qui la necessità di ampliare, ridefinire le tradizionali aree di azione a partire da quelle fasi dedicate all'indagine e alla ricerca, alla partecipazione, al coinvolgimento dell'utente come parte attiva nella determinazione finale del prodotto artistico.

In anni recenti si è assistito a un ulteriore spostamento in avanti circa il modo in cui il metodo può essere interpretato, sia che si guardi ad esso in termini di pratica sia che lo si intenda come oggetto di vera progettazione a sua volta.

Ci riferiamo in particolare a processi progettuali, come detto aperti e partecipati, che guardano a fattori come sostenibilità, inclusione di genere, neocolonialismi, nuova cittadinanza e che fanno del metodo uno strumento di vera e propria sceneggiatura, nella quale le componenti di documentazione, raccolta, racconto sono centrali almeno quanto i possibili risultati finali.

Le necessità da cui muove questo cambio di paradigma si riferiscono alla sempre maggiore necessità di legare il design della comunicazione visiva al contesto in cui si applica e alla capacità di poter diventare strumento di rappresentazione e racconto di scenari complessi in permanente mutazione.

L'azione progettuale secondo la Design Ethnography

Come approfondimento circa il reale contenuto del metodo a supporto della pratica progettuale che ci proponiamo di seguire, è da considerare il contributo che possiamo trarre da uno studio condotto dal designer e ricercatore Nicolas Nova che ridefinisce il significato della Design Ethnography riconsiderandola dall'angolazione specifica del design.

La pubblicazione *Beyond Design Ethnography*⁷, indaga il crescente interesse sviluppatosi negli ultimi 30 anni da parte della comunità dei designer

6 Jones, John Christopher, *Design Methods*. 1992 John Wiley & Sons, New York, (seconda edizione)

7 Nova, Nicolas, 2015 *Beyond Design Ethnography: How designers practice ethnographic research*. HEAD Genève.

8 Midal, Alexandra, 2019 *Design by accident, For a new history of Design*. Sternberg Press.

9 Mareis, Claudia & Paim, Nina, 2021 *Design Struggles, Intersecting Histories, Pedagogies, and Perspectives*. Swiss Design network, Valiz Amsterdam.

10 In *Beyond Design Ethnography*, Op. Cit., p.17

nelle pratiche di ricerca sul campo mutate del metodo etnografico e lo fa conducendo una ampia indagine fatta di interviste e analisi di casi di studio per tracciare un profilo compiuto di come il metodo applicato alla pratica progettuale sia profondamente cambiato. Proprio per tale motivo si parla oggi di Design Ethnography, ovvero di pratiche di indagine, osservazione e traduzione concepite come pratica progettuale.

Punto di partenza fondamentale della proposta teorica proposta da Nova è definire come fondamentale e indissolubile il rapporto tra design e contesto. Avvio di questa analisi è una rilettura della storia del design in cui i grandi eventi che l'hanno caratterizzata siano però riconsiderati in modo chiaro secondo questa relazione. Nova prende a supporto il lavoro di Alexandra Midal, professoressa e ricercatrice presso la 'University of Art and Design di Ginevra, svolge una intensa attività di curatela per esibizioni riguardanti la sua materia. Il suo libro, *Design by accident*⁸, fornisce un contributo storico totalmente diverso dai tradizionali. Abituati ad essere concentrati sullo studio delle opere e degli autori, siamo di fronte a un racconto che parte da un diverso punto di vista, ovvero l'interconnessione dei saperi con cui il design si interfaccia e dei contesti sociali e politici da cui spesso si genera. La sua trattazione rivede secondo questo punto di vista le fasi cruciali della storia del design moderno e contemporaneo, mettendo in luce come il rapporto con la storia sociale, politica ed economica sia elemento costitutivo fondamentale per comprendere compiutamente il mutare dei linguaggi e delle finalità del progetto. Questa istanza di revisione negli intenti dei percorsi di studio e insegnamento del design è al centro di una recente pubblicazione curata da Claudia Mareis e Nina Paim, *Design Struggles*⁹ nella quale grazie a un lavoro di curatela capace di coinvolgere un grande numero di voci, afferma la necessità di de-centralizzare il punto di vista da cui la maggior parte degli studi partono, considerando un approccio che nel libro è definito 'designing otherwise'. La definizione è presa da un articolo di Arturo Escobar scritto nel 2007, *Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise* (pp. 179-210), nel quale afferma "how decoloniality crosses borders of thought to craft another space for the production of knowledge. Thinking otherwise is another way of thinking that runs counter to the great modernist narratives. It locates its own inquiry in the very borders of systems of thought and reaches towards the possibility of non-Eurocentric models of thinking".

In sostanza siamo di fronte a un processo di revisione rispetto ai tradizionali punti di vista con cui guardare, oltre che ai processi educativi, anche agli obiettivi e agli ambiti di applicazione del design della comunicazione, che pongano al centro aspetti che il mercato o gli obiettivi di 'vendita' abitualmente non considerano. Parliamo di una centralità nel considerare aspetti quali le identità culturali in transizione, gli obiettivi di inclusività, di genere e di sostenibilità planetaria che rendono necessaria una stessa diversa idea di autorialità, rispetto alla definizione di artefatto della comunicazione. Questa evidenza è per altro sottolineata dalla ricerca di Alain Fideli allievo di Moholy Nagy e storico del design. Da una sua pubblicazione del 2006 ci viene chiarito come in tutta la storia del design l'obiettivo di progetto passi dal disegno dell'oggetto al disegno della relazione dell'attore: «In a presentation before the European Academy of Design in 2005, he argued that the focal point of every design model produced since 1850 had evolved from the object to the process to the actor»¹⁰.

Nel lavoro di ricerca svolto da Alain Fideli studiando i modelli progettuali dal rinascimento fino ad oggi emerge chiaramente come il focus di progetto sia passato da una interpretazione degli obiettivi in chiave puramente estetica, a una metodologica e tecnica in epoca moderna fino all'identificazione di una chiave che possiamo definire contemporanea, concentrata finalmente su obiettivi del progetto che considerino come centrali valori psicologici e sociali:

«This evolution clearly shows a progressive shift from aesthetic understandings and analysis of design (from the Renaissance to the early Modern movement) to a methodological-technical one (around the 1950s) to a contemporary model centered on psychological and social values (from the 1990s onwards)».

Nel riconoscere questo cambiamento, la chiave fondamentale sta nel dare la corretta interpretazione al termine 'attore' al centro del processo progettuale. La sua accezione, secondo questo punto di vista, va intesa in senso ampio e inclusivo, ponendo sul medesimo piano il ricercatore, il designer o il gruppo di designer, i tecnici, ma allo stesso tempo riferendosi ai pubblici e alle comunità di potenziali utilizzatori e, secondo le correnti di studio più recenti, anche il pluriverse e il non-human. Va ricordato per altro che le istanze su una de-centralizzazione della figura dell'autore erano state ampiamente trattate da Roland Barthes con il suo *La morte dell'autore*¹¹ già alla fine del '68, scritto critico che da quel momento conferisce all'opera letteraria (ma possiamo estendere ad altri ambiti il concetto di opera) carattere di struttura aperta e dialogica.

Alla luce di quanto esposto se la definizione originaria di Design Ethnography in origine deriva dallo studio delle interazioni uomo-macchina che alcune delle società più importanti, già dalla fine degli anni 60, hanno condotto sulla persona come fulcro del design concepito intorno all'uomo (Human Computer Interaction HCI), per concepire interfacce sempre più umanizzate e maggiormente 'usabili', oggi la definizione trova nuovi, necessari e più ampi ambiti di applicazione. In particolare ci interessa come la pratica di lavoro e di indagine sul campo, a diretto contatto con i possibili destinatari di una azione progettuale, si riferisca in modo puntuale a quell'area del progetto dell'identità. Una pratica di studio che ovviamente parte da una serie ampia di casi che hanno sviluppato negli anni approcci di studio e professionali simili e che più genericamente in Europa e nel resto del mondo viene indicato come Critical Design.

In realtà questa è una semplificazione che corre il rischio di creare confusione. Se è vero che nella definizione che Dunne and Ruby¹² ne danno, il Critical Design include tutte quelle 'Design Actions' che si propongono la sfida di ridiscutere e rivedere status quo, preconetti, conflitti sociali e discriminatori circa il ruolo che prodotto e servizi giocano nella vita di tutti i giorni, è altrettanto importante sottolineare che il progetto dell'identità così come qui lo intendiamo non necessariamente assume carattere speculativo e 'antagonista'.

Sicuramente intendiamo però come obiettivo progettuale il portare alla luce aspetti della natura identitaria di un luogo o di una comunità o di una istituzione, che siano insoliti e sconosciuti, far emergere insomma il carattere più nascosto e per questo sorprendente del nostro oggetto progettuale perché ne risaltino i tratti non semplificabili in un più semplice e sedimentato processo di branding. In particolare tale considerazione parte dall'idea che la materia stessa di cui è composto il concetto di identità non possa essere univoca, ma come già accennato, composta di 'quantità', momenti semantici separati nel tempo, nei linguaggi, nelle esperienze prodotte che al designer chiede una attività, oltre che creativa, di studio, presidio e costante riconnessione.

Il farlo include azioni e pratiche che la Design Ethnography definisce e descrive perché svolte direttamente nel mondo reale a contatto con la società e le persone. Vediamo quindi nel paragrafo che segue quale natura avrà il nostro progetto di identità e su quali caratteristiche vogliamo basarlo.

Quantità di identità

Torniamo quindi al concetto che provocatoriamente abbiamo definito 'Quantità di Identità'. È questo il campo di ricerca offerto negli anni agli studenti del corso di Metodologia del Progetto di cui sono titolare all'ISIA di Urbino.

¹¹ Barthes, Roland, 1988 *Il bruciato della lingua, Saggi critici IV*. Einaudi.

¹² Antony Dunne e Fiona Raby, oltre a svolgere la propria pratica professionale nello studio che porta il loro nome sono professori del corso in Design and Social Inquiry alla New School di New York. Per il contributo teorico e culturale prodotto negli anni sia nella professione che nella pratica di insegnamento, sono considerati interpreti chiave della riflessione internazionale sul Critical Design.

13 Benjamin, Walter, 2011
*Il Narratore, Considerazioni
sull'opera di Nikolaj Leskov.*
Einaudi.

Proprio a partire dalla natura 'quantizzata', pulviscolare dell'identità a cui ci siamo riferiti in apertura di questo articolo, diventa questo un obiettivo di studio, di ricerca e di apprendimento che pone agli studenti l'obiettivo di sviluppare metodologie sperimentali in chiave etnografica per lo sviluppo di progetti di gruppo in grado di produrre riflessioni grafiche e di contenuto sull'identità, non altrimenti ottenibili. Il nostro riferirci al Metodo qui andrà inteso quindi secondo un duplice aspetto, da un lato ripensare gli obiettivi e modi della didattica del design includendo accanto agli apprendimenti più strettamente disciplinari le istanze sopra esposte, dall'altro ripensare la pratica progettuale in ottica di futura collocazione professionale degli studenti, ponendo alla base di questa parte della ricerca la ridefinizione dell'insieme delle competenze loro necessarie.

Il tema della Design Methodology, della sua elaborazione e applicazione, si intende quindi come tessuto connettivo di diversi momenti di indagine, meta-progettuali e progettuali altrimenti non collegabili. Come detto, non interpretiamo il Metodo come una materia di esclusiva pertinenza scientifica e quindi prassi da memorizzare e applicare automaticamente. Per altro andando all'origine del significato del termine, dallo studio della sua etimologia e del senso più antico con cui questa parola viene impiegata, il Metodo (*Il Modo della Ricerca*, come lo definiva già Aristotele) è insieme uno strumento di indagine, prefigurazione e azione. La definizione di un metodo non è quindi univoca, ma nasce dalla formulazione di un'ipotesi progettuale che si verifica attraverso la pratica e la sua continua riformulazione.

Ciò che adesso ci interessa sviluppare è proprio la dualità tecnico-narrativa del metodo progettuale applicato al tema dell'Identità. Cosa significa più precisamente?

Per tentare di spiegarlo torniamo alla nostra provocazione con il mondo dei quanti, della ricerca scientifica e in particolare di quella applicata alla Fisica.

Teoria della Relatività o dei Quanti?

Come si sa in Fisica sono considerate leggi rivoluzionarie e fondamentali la Teoria della relatività di Einstein e le leggi sulla Meccanica dei Quanti teorizzate da Max Plack all'inizio del '900. Benissimo, se non fosse che le due leggi asseriscono verità scientifiche assolutamente discordanti. La prima asserisce che lo spazio è una materia continua e fluida che si piega e si addensa in prossimità di corpi celesti e in virtù della sua viscosità determina un diverso scorrere del tempo. La seconda asserisce invece che la natura più intima della materia è granulare e discontinua, ma soprattutto che non siamo in grado di vederla (scientificamente) se non grazie all'interazione che stabilisce quando due corpi fisici si scontrano. Insomma riusciamo a rilevare l'esistenza più intima delle particelle che compongono la materia di cui siamo fatti solo se quelle particelle le mandiamo a sbattere contro una superficie opportunamente predisposta bombardandole con altre particelle. In altre parole, estremizzando potremmo dire che la realtà è fatta solo di relazioni, sta a noi scoprirle e saperle raccontare.

Queste due opposte verità sono la materia da gestire nei nostri progetti sull'identità. Infatti dovremo da un lato supportare il nostro processo progettuale con un lavoro di accumulazione dei dati (Harvesting) e delle informazioni che potremo ottenere solo tramite misurazioni sul campo, come visto prima, applicando i principi di indagine tipici della Design Ethnography. Dall'altro, allo stesso tempo, siamo chiamati ad alimentare e motivare la componente intuitiva e letteraria del nostro progetto in modo da farlo tendere a quella dimensione del 'meraviglioso' a cui fa riferimento Benjamin nel suo saggio *Il Narratore*¹³ (pp. 24-25) e di cui parleremo ancora tra poco.

Le prime azioni le chiamiamo 'Design Acts' e vanno intese come azioni sul campo progettate non per comunicare o esporre, quanto per provocare

azioni di risposta del pubblico e fornire una base di conoscenza altrimenti non ottenibile. Le Design Actions hanno la funzione di analizzare la materia discontinua di cui è fatta l'identità di un luogo, ovvero quelli che abbiamo chiamato 'Quanti di Identità' (o in generale di qualsiasi contesto dato), far generare i dati e le informazioni da raccogliere esattamente come il ricercatore in fisica tenta di far generare i salti quantici.

Simultaneamente, su un altro piano il nostro lavoro intende mettere a disposizione degli utenti e quindi nutrirsi di una speculazione eminentemente artistica, destinata a ridefinire il limite del conosciuto e a favorire la partecipazione degli utenti su un piano di partecipazione emotiva e letteraria.

Secondo la provocazione offerta con il parallelo alla sperimentazione della fisica dei quanti, sappiamo da un lato che misurare quelli che provocatorialmente nel titolo di questo documento ho chiamato 'Quanti di Identità' e che nel nostro mondo sono rappresentati dalle percezioni rilevabili nelle persone coinvolte nel progetto stesso, è possibile solo tramite azioni progettuali svolte direttamente sul campo (Design Acts). Più precisamente riferendosi a qualsiasi contesto a cui stiamo applicando il nostro lavoro di progettazione, queste devono generare una rottura e una interazione, produrre in altre parole quei salti quantici, cambi di percorso, stacchi percettivi, che ci permettano di rendere misurabile un dato e un percepito altrimenti intangibile.

Dall'altro sappiamo che alla stessa esperienza di partecipazione a cui abbiamo chiamato i nostri utenti, va offerta una visione e uno stacco percettivo tali da recuperare una attenzione e una coscienza altrimenti spesso sopite¹⁴.

Accanto al lavoro di 'bombardamento' sviluppato tramite le Design Actions, come accennato, consideriamo come altro asse fondamentale del nostro focus di lavoro la componente più letteraria e artistica, quella che in altre parole affida al tema della narrazione e del 'meraviglioso' la funzione più propriamente iperbolica del progetto, quella componente che ha l'obiettivo di riposizionare le capacità di percezione del pubblico formandolo nel considerare come dato possibile parte del proprio mondo reale, anche l'inatteso, l'estremamente sperimentale, il paradosso e il non conosciuto. Qui si tratta di una materia fluida e magmatica di difficile sistematizzazione ma che alcuni personaggi possono aiutarci a mettere a fuoco. Primo fra tutti riprendendo un passaggio dal già citato *Il Narratore* di Walter Benjamin che analizza la ragione profonda e il valore della narrazione: «L'esperienza che passa di bocca in bocca è la fonte da cui hanno attinto tutti i narratori. E fra quelli che hanno messo per iscritto le loro storie, i più grandi sono proprio quelli la cui scrittura si distingue meno dalla voce degli infiniti narratori anonimi». Il punto che Benjamin mette in evidenza qui, nel riferirsi al lavoro letterario di Leskov, è proprio, azzardando un parallelo, sul ruolo del progettista analista e sulla capacità che deve avere in alcuni casi di fare un passo indietro e lasciare spazio alla materia del racconto che esce dall'interazione con il pubblico e il contesto. E ancora: «Tutto ciò rinvia alla natura della vera narrazione. Apertamente o meno essa implica un utile, un vantaggio. [...] in ogni caso il narratore è persona di consiglio per chi lo ascolta. [...] Il consiglio infatti non è tanto la risposta a una domanda quanto la proposta relativa alla continuazione di una storia (in svolgimento). Per riceverlo bisognerebbe essere in grado di raccontarla. [...] Il consiglio incorporato nel tessuto della vita vissuta, è saggezza. L'arte di narrare volge al tramonto perché viene meno il lato epico della verità». Qui entra in gioco la componente etica con cui intendiamo il progetto, ovvero il lascito che il nostro operato consegna agli utilizzatori anche futuri. Benjamin parla apertamente di utilità del narrare come esito dell'esperienza vissuta dal narratore. Narrazione ed esperienza, applicate al nostro caso di studio e secondo la nostra tesi, sono quindi legate quali ingredienti fondamentali di ogni progetto che intenda esplorare il tema dell'identità.

Questo ancora non ci basta per definire però il valore e il potenziale immaginifico frutto dell'intuizione e di una frattura di ciò che consideriamo senso

¹⁴ Dorflès, Gillo, 2006 *L'intervallo perduto*. Skira editore.

15 Dorflès, Gillo, 2006 *L'intervallo perduto*. Skira editore.

16 Benjamin, Walter, 2000 *L'opera d'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica*. Einaudi.

compiuto. Il narrare presuppone lo stretto legame con l'esperienza vissuta, ma il raggiungimento di un livello di relazione più alto con il nostro contesto ha bisogno della conquista di capacità aggiuntive. Per conoscerle e poterle codificare ci viene in aiuto Gillo Dorflès con il suo saggio *L'intervallo Perduto*¹⁵, in cui introduce il tema dell'intervallo appunto come stacco percettivo, pausa, vuoto interstiziale, come lo si voglia definire, shock necessario alla giusta percezione dell'opera d'arte: «Se ci mettiamo a riflettere sulle leggi generali della percezione, vediamo che diventando abituali, le azioni diventano meccaniche. Ad evitare questa meccanizzazione delle nostre percezioni e per ridare vita e sapore alle stesse, l'uomo fa ricorso all'arte». E Dorflès va oltre la definizione di 'aura' data sempre da Benjamin nel suo *L'opera d'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica*¹⁶, in cui il fascino si lega indissolubilmente all'unicità dell'opera. Dorflès parla invece di uno stacco percettivo che riguarda il concetto più esteso di opera d'arte includendo in esso anche la produzione di massa e il design industriale. Dorflès si riferisce piuttosto all'inevitabile produzione di immagini da cui siamo invasi oggi e che non lascia più spazio ai momenti di vuoto e pausa così utili a mettere in moto la nostra capacità di leggere e 'sentire' l'opera che abbiamo dinanzi.

Passaggio fondamentale nel suo saggio è il non intendere questo vuoto interstiziale come la esclusiva distanza tra spettatore e opera, quanto interpretarlo come componente fondativa dell'opera stessa; la capacità ovvero dell'autore di concepire la propria opera come accogliente dell'interpretazione e del contributo di chi la fruisce. Parlando di vuoti ovviamente non ci si può non riferire alle 'asimmetrie' offerte dagli haiku giapponesi, tra gli altri esempi, ma Dorflès offre una proposta ancora più centrata ed analitica perché mette in correlazione il tema della pausa percettiva con la tecnica compositiva utile alla composizione dell'opera stessa. Dorflès prende a prestito una parola russa usata per la prima volta dai formalisti russi (1916-1926), corrente letteraria che basò la sua tecnica compositiva sull'*ostranenie*. La traduzione più vicina che potremmo darle in italiano è straniamento, ma nel saggio si insiste sul valore di unicità della parola russa che indica nello specifico «l'accentuazione da parte dello scrittore (autore, designer, artista...) d'un qualsivoglia elemento nel testo di un'opera d'arte, allo scopo di suscitare la percezione non secondo le solite associazioni, ma come qualcosa di insolito mai incontrato prima».

Nella composizione letteraria e quindi nella scrittura di un testo, la chiave compositiva va allo slittamento di senso che acquisisce l'uso di un termine al di fuori del suo normale contesto percettivo tanto da renderlo immediatamente 'poetico'. Non un caso isolato ma l'esito di una riforma dell'approccio alle arti visive, alla poesia, alla composizione musicale e all'editoria che negli anni ci ha offerto importanti riferimenti. Non si può non citare il tema di vuoto introdotto da J. Cage nelle sue composizioni o da Giuseppe Chiari nei suoi brani *Suonare la Città* o *Suonare il giornale*. Ancora va fatto riferimento alla tecnica letteraria del cut-up usato da autori che hanno usato tecniche combinatorie e randomiche come William Burroughs e Nanni Balestrini, in cui la tecnica di giustapposizione di interi brani di testo presi da altri autori e ricollocati all'interno della propria stesura crea un fondamentale stacco percettivo. Lo stesso si può dire della poesia visiva di Lamberto Pignotti e della sua giustapposizione orizzontale prendendo a prestito frammenti dai testi dei media pubblicitari.

Alla luce dei casi esposti, appare chiaro per gli studenti il tipo di influenza in chiave metodologica e semantica, abbia avuto il mondo dell'arte da un lato e dell'indagine scientifica dall'altro (sociologica, antropologica ed economica su tutte) per consentire loro di avere sufficienti leve storiche per determinare il grado di sperimentazione dei progetti che viene chiesto loro di sviluppare. Il modo in cui lo abbiamo realizzato, proponendo alla direzione didattica un progetto mirato, si è basato sul portare la didattica fuori dalle mura scolastiche, aprendo uno spazio extra didattico cittadino a cui è stato dato il nome RUMORE-ISIA U e affidando agli studenti il compito di

organizzare e gestire un programma di didattica sperimentale autogestito, con l'obiettivo di esplorare forme di educazione non formale al design della comunicazione capaci di coinvolgere la comunità territoriale in cui la scuola e il nuovo spazio operano. I gruppi di studenti sono chiamati allo sviluppo di progetti a cui si richiede lo sviluppo di una metodologia di lavoro caratteristica e sperimentale da sviluppare e rappresentare nella forma di un manuale (cartaceo, digitale, ambientale) che consenta a pubblici futuri di poter replicare la medesima esperienza e fornire ai potenziali utilizzatori gli strumenti di valutazione monitoraggio degli effetti.

Come abbiamo probabilmente inteso, l'esito dei due piani di lavoro da portare avanti parallelamente, da un lato produce dati altrimenti non ottenibili creando una piattaforma di conoscenza originale, dall'altro sviluppa un quadro semantico caratteristico che sarà necessario allo sviluppo della tessitura visivo-verbale che diverrà cifra caratteristica del progetto finale. Ciò che deve essere chiaro come vero obiettivo di ricerca è lo sviluppo di una coscienza del progettista che deve sapere e volere progettare già a partire da quegli strumenti di raccolta e condivisione delle informazioni ottenibili dal lavoro sul campo e che vanno intese già come prime fasi di comunicazione aperta.

Una nota conclusiva sulle immagini.

Le immagini a corredo di questo articolo sono tratte da progetti sviluppati dagli studenti nel corso 2023-24 all'interno dello spazio RUMORE-ISIA U. La scelta nasce dalla volontà di creare, attraverso il breve apparato visivo, una narrazione che non segue necessariamente il testo ma che ne costituisce di fatto l'esito sperimentale. Le immagini proposte sono tratte dalla riproduzione fotografica di due dei cinque manuali di progetto realizzati dagli studenti del corso. I progetti in questione, come indicato nelle didascalie alle immagini hanno rispettivamente il titolo di *Brickbat* e *Radio Spugna*. Il presupposto da cui agli studenti è stato chiesto di lavorare nasceva dalla proposta di un tema legato all'interpretazione del concetto di Miseria nel mondo contemporaneo, *Miserabilia* lo abbiamo chiamato. Gli studenti erano chiamati in primo luogo a svolgere una ricerca dedicata a fornire una interpretazione al tema e successivamente a sviluppare un progetto autonomo in chiave sperimentale e applicata allo spazio RUMORE con il fine di produrre un contenuto originale descritto da un elaborato finale in forma di manuale, un titolo editoriale (cartaceo e/o digitale) che riassume obiettivi del gruppo, pubblico da coinvolgere, risultati attesi, le linee guida della metodologia di lavoro sviluppata e indicazioni tecniche puntuali relative a tutti gli apparati strumentali progettati e realizzati durante lo sviluppo del progetto.

Nel primo caso gli studenti che hanno lavorato al progetto *Brickbat* si sono dedicati a una analisi, in chiave sperimentale e artistica, del senso di miseria connesso al concetto dell'abitare, partendo dalla propria condizione di studenti residenti in una città diversa dalla propria, ma estendendo poi l'analisi stessa alle diverse forme di Miseria che il concetto di abitazione dello spazio sta vivendo nel mondo. In questo senso, facendo diventare lo spazio RUMORE, un laboratorio in cui sperimentare forme diverse di occupazione e abitazione. Nello sviluppo delle azioni progettuali e grazie ai primi risultati ottenuti, gli studenti hanno poi deciso di portare in altri spazi lo stesso metodo di lavoro sperimentando successivamente forme alternative di 'abitazione' portate negli spazi di un cinema d'essai cittadino prima e in spazi aperti informali, immersi nella natura poi. Nella trattazione il manuale racconta e raccoglie il risultato delle percezioni generate negli utenti coinvolti dalle azioni proposte, costituendo di fatto una 'letteratura' alternativa e imprevedibile sul senso dell'abitare oggi se paragonata ad un mondo in cui proprio il significato del termine 'residenza' sta cambiando profondamente, e forse in modo irreversibile, in ragione delle tante forme di crisi mondiale che stiamo vivendo.

Il secondo progetto, Radio Spugna, è invece partito da una diversa idea di Miseria, quella di una didattica dell'alta formazione in Italia (e in particolare quella dedicata alla formazione nel campo del progetto) che lascia gli studenti, al termine del proprio percorso di studi, ancora privi di molte conoscenze fondamentali per affrontare il mondo della propria occupazione professionale e capaci di esercitare i propri diritti e difendere il concetto di equità nel riconoscimento del proprio lavoro. Il gruppo di studenti ha quindi lavorato al progetto di una radio indipendente che potesse trasmettere in modo 'leggero' e nomade, così riferendosi ai primi casi di radio indipendente nati in Italia negli anni '70 del secolo scorso. Il progetto di leggerezza dell'apparato Radio ha pervaso tutte le componenti progettuali che gli studenti hanno affrontato, dal disegno di un tavolo pieghevole e trasportabile, vera sede della Radio, alla scrittura del codice, essenziale e leggero, della pagina web (<https://progetti-isiau.net/radiospugna/>) che ha ospitato il palinsesto delle trasmissioni e raccolto commenti e impressioni del pubblico che progressivamente si è guadagnata. Nello sviluppare un vero piano editoriale di contenuti, gli studenti hanno ospitato speaker internazionali, docenti universitari, studenti di altre scuole, artisti e designer, economisti, insomma figure che grazie a contributi autonomi hanno fornito un vero servizio informativo, informale e parallelo, utile agli utenti raggiunti per avere una forma di conoscenza sul valore della formazione nel campo del progetto altrimenti non ottenibile.

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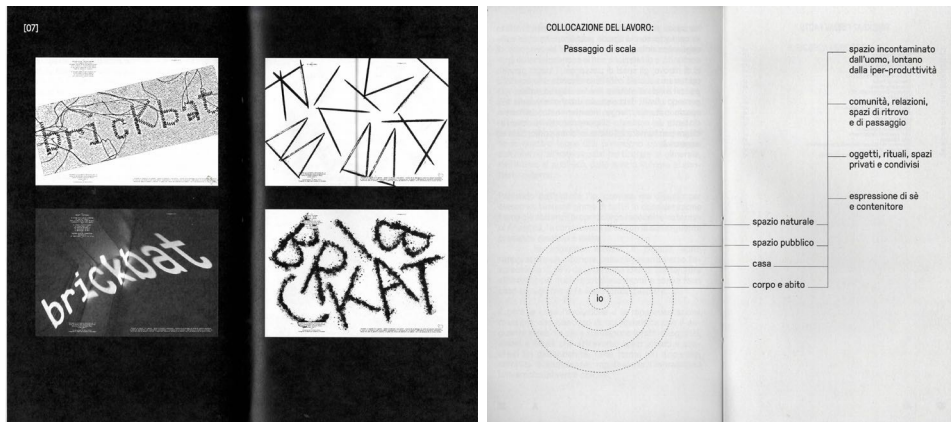


Figure 1 Urbino, Italia, Foto di Beatrice Vincenti e Brickbat, 2023

Brickbat, un progetto sull'abitare e immaginare nuovi spazi.

Estratti dal manuale di progetto.

Progetto di Francesca Barizza, Corinne Carlin, Tobia Farinati, Maria Giulia Leonardi, Alice Teodorani



Figure 2 Urbino, Italia, Foto di Beatrice Vincenti e Brickbat, 2023

Brickbat, un progetto sull'abitare e immaginare nuovi spazi.

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Figure 3 Urbino, Italia, Foto di Beatrice Vincenti e Brickbat, 2023
Brickbat, un progetto sull'abitare e immaginare nuovi spazi.
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Progetto di Francesca Barizza, Corinne Carlin, Tobia Farinati, Maria Giulia Leonardi,
Alice Teodorani



Figure 4 Urbino, Italia, Foto di Beatrice Vincenti e Brickbat, 2023
Brickbat, un progetto sull'abitare e immaginare nuovi spazi.
 Estratti dal manuale di progetto.
 Progetto di Francesca Barizza, Corinne Carlin, Tobia Farinati, Maria Giulia Leonardi,
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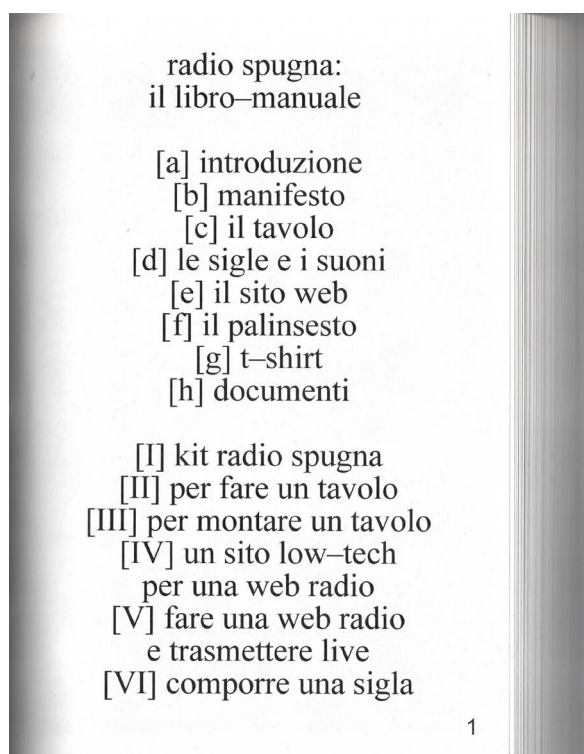


Figure 5 Urbino, Italia, Foto di Collettivo Radio Spugna, 2023
Radiospugna, Spazio sonoro poroso e precario.
 Estratti dal manuale di progetto.
 Progetto di Roberta Antinolfi, Nicolai Vrenna Martini, Non Merlini, Agnese Pozzobon,
 Martina Valente

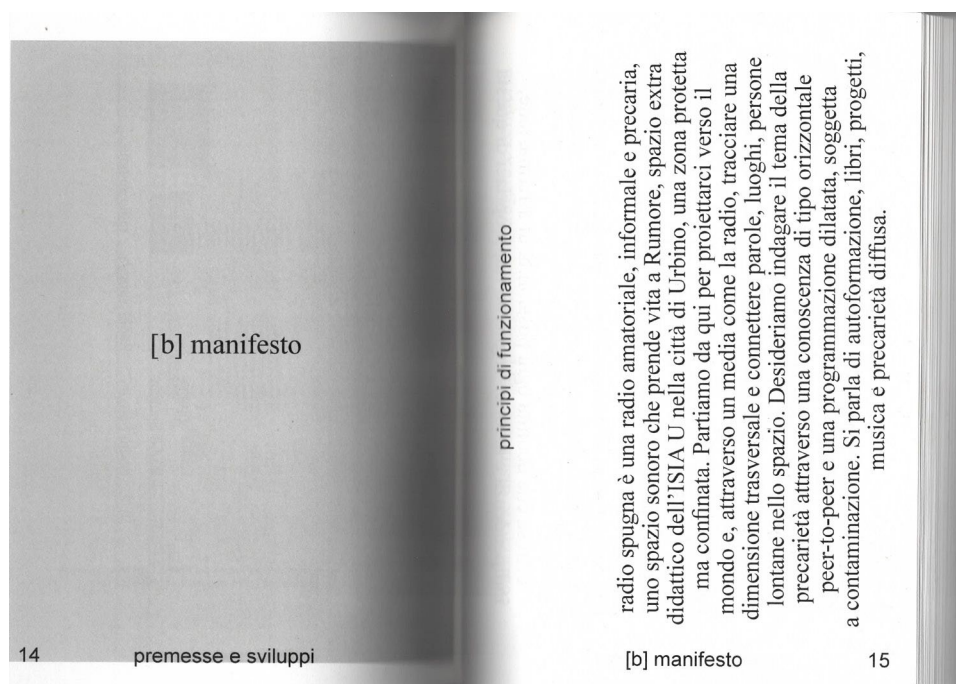
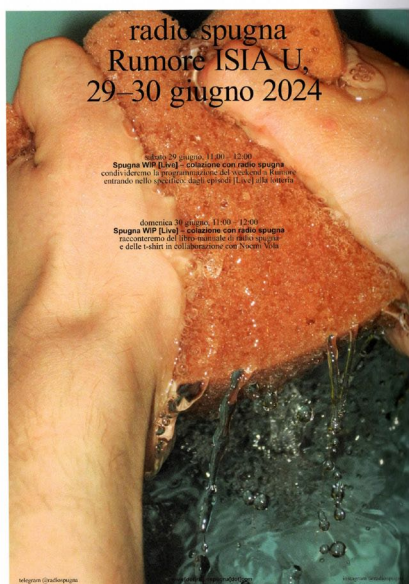


Figure 5 Urbino, Italia, Foto di Collettivo Radio Spugna, 2023
Radiospugna, Spazio sonoro poroso e precario.
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Figure 6 Urbino, Italia, Foto di Collettivo Radio Spugna, 2023
Radiospugna, Spazio sonoro poroso e precario.
 Estratti dal manuale di progetto.
 Progetto di Roberta Antinolfi, Nicolai Vrenna Martini, Non Merlini, Agnese Pozzobon, Martina Valente



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Figure 7 Urbino, Italia, Foto di Collettivo Radio Spugna, 2023
Radiospugna, Spazio sonoro poroso e precario.
 Estratti dal manuale di progetto.
 Progetto di Roberta Antinolfi, Nicolai Vrenna Martini, Non Merlini, Agnese Pozzobon, Martina Valente

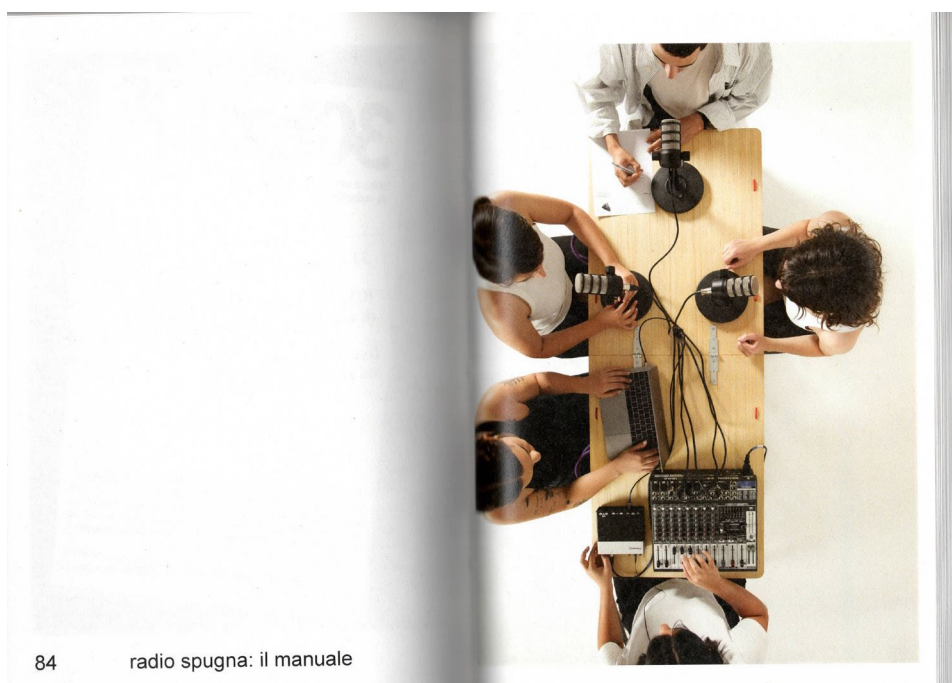


Figure 8 Urbino, Italia, Foto di Collettivo Radio Spugna, 2023
Radiospugna, Spazio sonoro poroso e precario.
 Estratti dal manuale di progetto.
 Progetto di Roberta Antinolfi, Nicolai Vrenna Martini, Non Merlini, Agnese Pozzobon, Martina Valente

Photo-essays

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Creating an art installation of family memories of displacement and forced migration

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

This photo-essay presents the creation of the artworks for the installation *Scattered Seeds of the Cotton Bolls* about my Japanese family's displacement and forced migration during WWII, as a series of activities in which memories, reflections, emotions, images, desires for healing and connecting with others, and beauty emerged and interacted in the context of the Covid pandemic. The creative process was multidirectional, as the activities and my physical contact with the materials concatenated with other activities during which the creation of the artwork took effect.

The author

Lydia Nakashima Degarrod is an exhibiting visual artist and cultural anthropologist (Ph.D. University of California, Los Angeles). She has exhibited in numerous galleries and museums in the United States and Latin America and received international awards for her work. She has conducted research on Chilean exiles, Japanese migrants in Latin America, and dream narratives and beliefs among the indigenous Mapuche of Chile and among US residents. She teaches at the California College of Arts and serves as co-Chair of the Centre for Aesthetics and Politics.

Keywords: Artmaking, Forced Migration, Japanese Latin American, Fiber Art, Healing.

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Introduction

This photo-essay presents the creation of the artworks for the installation *Scattered Seeds of the Cotton Bolls* about my Japanese family's displacement and forced migration during WWII as a series of activities during which memories, reflections, emotions, images, desires for healing and connecting with others, and beauty emerged and interacted with each other in the context of the Covid pandemic. The creative process was not unidirectional, as the activities and my physical contact with the materials concatenated with other activities during which the creation of the artwork took effect.

Artmaking requires access to the imagination for the creation of ideas (Moss, 2024) as well as technique, experience and a deep engagement with the materials. In this photo-essay I present a series of performative acts that allowed me to engage with my imagination and emotions. Among them the selection of fibers and techniques used for manufacturing and stitching the handmade papers, the selection of images to evoke specific historic and personal moments, and the engagement and connection with the material used. The effects of the isolation imposed by the Covid pandemic and a desire for healing were heightened in most of these activities. The creative process was not unidirectional, as the activities and my physical contact with the materials concatenated with other activities during which the creation of the artwork took effect.

This project is part of a series of ethnographic art projects during which I conducted research on Japanese migration to Latin America. *Scattered Seeds of the Cotton Bolls* is the most personal. It focuses on the forced migrations of my Japanese family in Latin America. Originally it had a different scope as it addressed the forced deportation of Japanese Peruvians from Peru to internment camps in the US during WWII, but the closing of borders of Peru and Chile during the Covid pandemic forced me to alter the project.

As an exhibiting visual artist and trained cultural anthropologist, I have written about the numerous interdisciplinary projects I have created in which I combined artmaking and ethnographic work. Among them I have addressed the role of artmaking in the creation of ethnographic knowledge (Degarrod, 2021, 2016a), the development of empathy in collaborative artmaking (Degarrod, 2016b), and art exhibitions as a form of public ethnography (Degarrod, 2013). In writing these interdisciplinary projects I wrote from the position of an ethnographer examining her artmaking and its impact on the ethnographic work. This photo essay diverts from my past writings in that it focuses on the artistic creation, and it is written primarily from my perspective as a visual artist.

Scattered Seeds of the Cotton Bolls consisted of 75 flowers, made of handmade paper constructed out of mulberry and *yerba buena* fibers. In each flower petal I printed images that refer to memories of my family of WWII events that altered their lives by destroying their homes and forcing their migration to countries where they had difficulties in establishing a home and a sense of belonging. These flowers, a tribute to my Japanese family, hang from simulate barbed wire stems from the ceiling in a space of 10x15x10 feet. A major portion of the work was done during my tenure as Artist in Residence at the Kala Institute (March 2021-July 2021) in Berkeley, California. *Scattered Seeds of the Cotton Bolls* has been exhibited at the Monterey Museum of Art, California (9/9/2021-1/1/2022), Burlington Art Center, Vermont (February 9-May 9 2024) and Edge on Square, San Francisco, California (June 29-February 2025).

In this photo essay, I follow the creation of the installation from the conception of its design to the creation of the art objects to its the final display.

The order of the photo-essay is as follows. Section 1 describes the use of my imagination in engaging in conversations with my deceased parents to find the design for the installation. Sections 2, 3 and 4 describe how the choices of fibers, and the use of specific techniques in the making of paper allows for moments of symbolically healing the past and reflecting on issues of identity, as well as connecting with the outside world. Section 5 explains the use of specific stitching techniques for imagining forms of connecting and soothing emotional wounds from the past. Section 6 shows the creation of a flower associated with the bombing of Hiroshima, and section 7 shows flowers associated with the incarceration of Japanese Peruvians in camps in the US. The last section shows images of the installation.

The Covid pandemic was an important component in the creation of these artworks. The feeling for healing expressed in the creation of the artworks was heightened by the context of illness and death, as well as the desire to connect with the world and was influenced by the social isolation created by the shelter in place order.

1.Designing the installation: My family as an imaginary audience

The design of the installation was inspired by my desire to pay a tribute to my family's wondrous journeys from Japan to Latin America. I came up with the idea of flowers as I engaged in an imaginary dialogue with my deceased parents. I asked myself: What would they like? How would they react if they came to see the exhibit? As an artist, I was engaged in the type of self-scrutiny that informs decisions about new work. The artist is normally engaged directly or figuratively with an artist community who plays a role in judging one's work and gives some kind of guidance, but in this case, it was primarily my deceased family who inspired the artworks. I felt that flowers would be accepted by all of them. I designed an installation formed by flowers in which each flower would be a vessel to carry the fragments of family memories.



Figure 1 My family. Artwork and photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021.

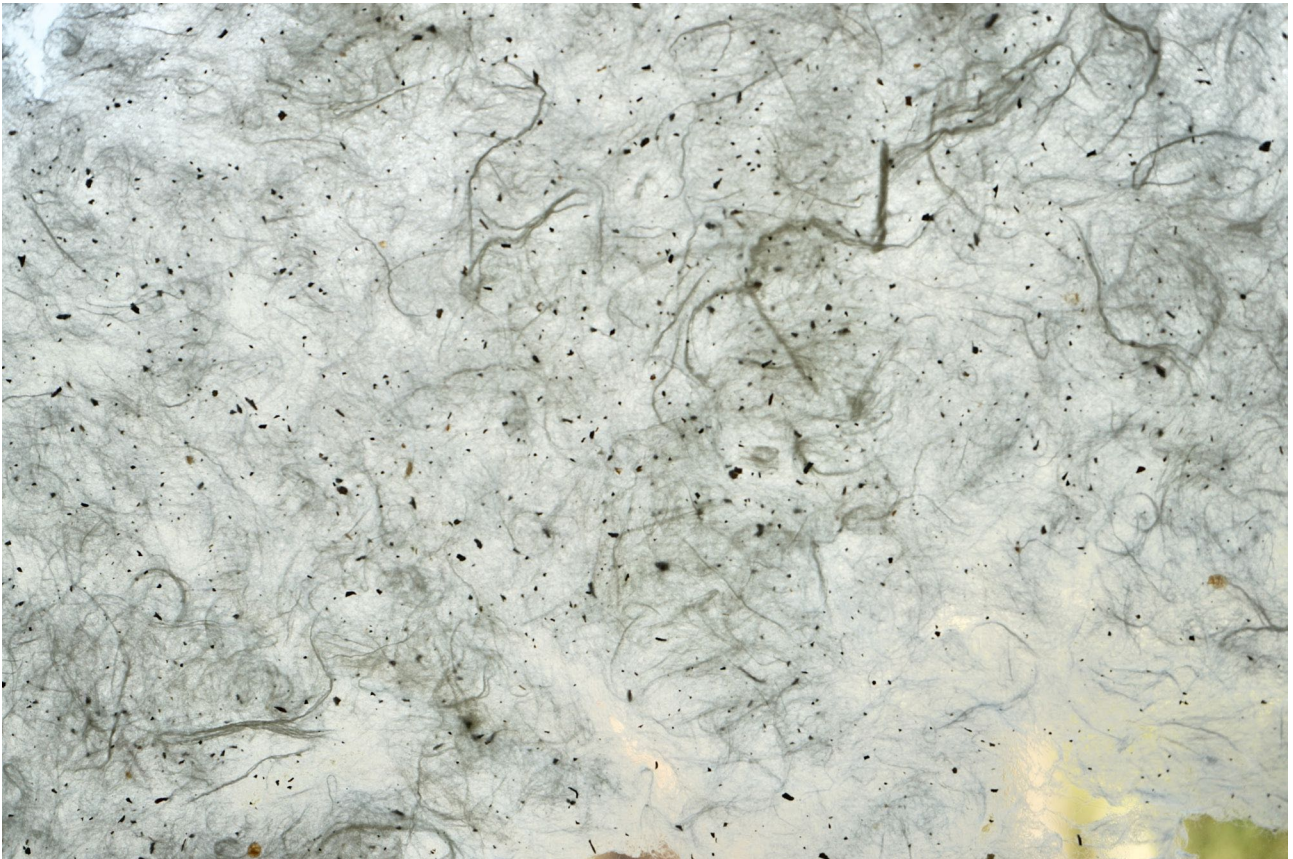


Figure 2 Pulp of Mulberry fiber and yerba buena. Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021.

2.Crafting the Papers: Weaving memories and emotions

I selected two types of fiber to make the papers: mulberry, a fiber used to make *washi*, a Japanese paper, and *yerba buena*, an herb used in Latin America to soothe physical pain. I have used this fiber mix previously to express a symbolic healing of the suffering I observed among other *nikei* (people of Japanese descent) who became settlers in Latin America. As I cooked the bark of mulberry with the *yerba buena*, I listened to the news on the radio. The journalist described the rows of ambulances with dead bodies parked in front of hospitals in New York city. I ground the cooked fibers and herbs in a blender making a loud noise that I feared the blender would break. As I poured the mixture of fibers on a vat of water. I saw the slender fibers dancing in the water.

I thought of my deceased father, and I imagined him asking me why I was adding *yerba buena* to make the papers. Why don't you make a pure *washi* paper, just with mulberry? Why are you soiling the paper? Each time I imagined myself responding to my dad: "I want to heal our wounds, dad!" I looked at the stack of sheets of papers, and although wasn't white like *washi*, but something different, something that had speckles of yellow and brown throughout the surface.

I recalled my father's feelings of alienation living in Chile, a country where there were few Asians, and a country that he couldn't understand, a country to which he was forced to escape the deportation of Japanese Peruvians during WWII, and his feelings of disappointment about how the war had derailed his plans of going to Japan to study. I thought about my own conflicted identity as a Japanese Chilean, somebody of mixed heritage and ancestry. I thought that because of my Asian appearance, nobody saw my Latin American self and this forced me to try to be simply an Asian. I felt that by integrating the

yerba buena, I was acknowledging the hidden part of myself and at the same time healing my family's feelings of displacement. Every time those questions came to me, I dipped my fingers in the vat of water, and I felt the herbs uniting and creating something different.

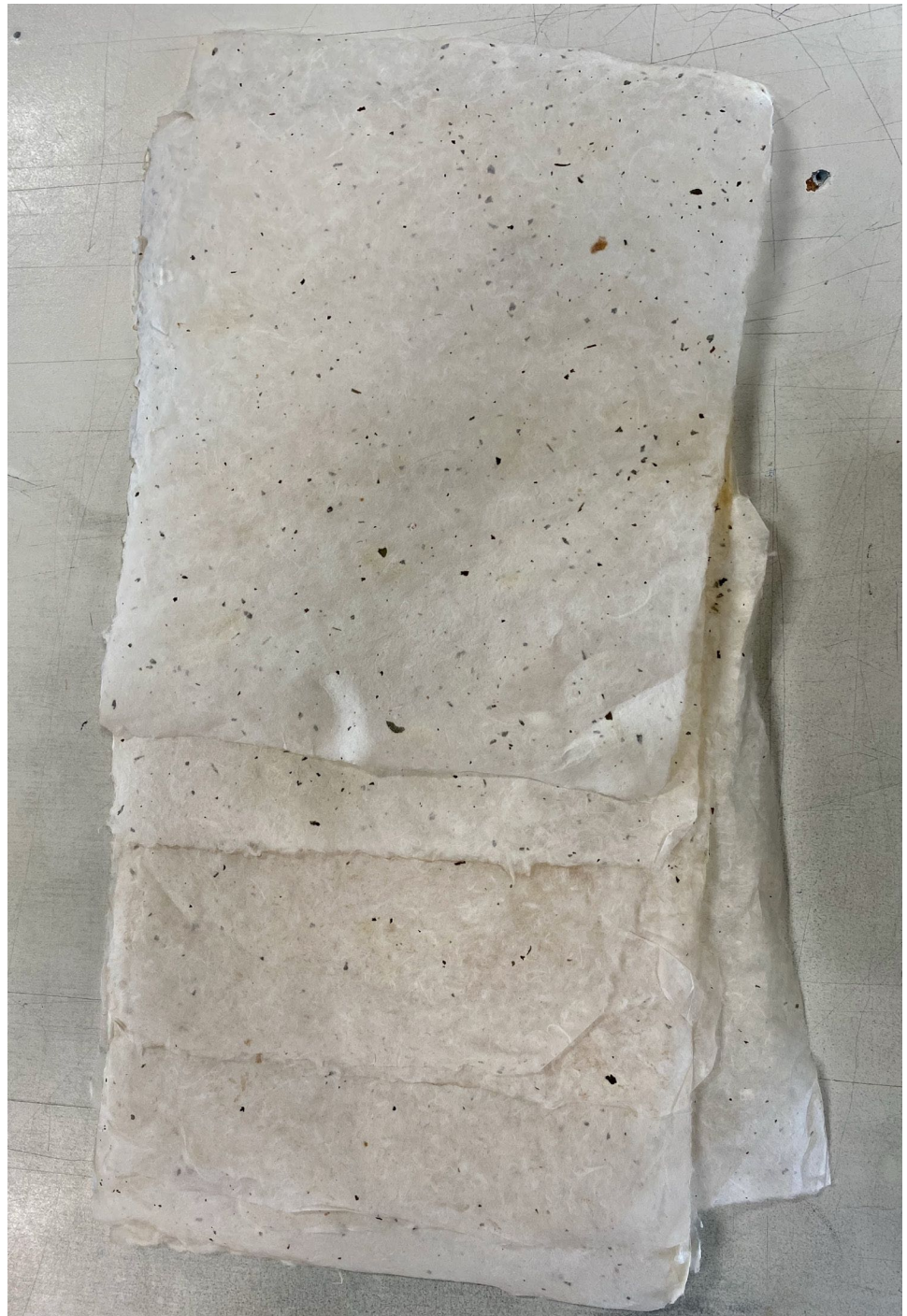


Figure 3 Handmade papers. Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021.

3. Using Japanese style of papermaking: Connecting with the outside world

I chose the Japanese method of creating the papers, although is harder than the Western style, to honor my Japanese ancestors. This method requires that one holds the bamboo screen and a wooden frame with two hands and dips into the water with the pulp several times until the screen has been covered with an even layer of pulp. I engaged in this series of precise movements each filling the screen with layers of pulp. First, I dipped the screen with the frame in the vat of water where the crushed fibers floated in, and quickly I scooped the pulp on the screen in precise movements and watched how each movement lined up a layer of pulp on the screen until it looked like a solid sheet. Next, I lifted the screen with the pulp feeling the pull of the water as if the vat was resisting the creation of the paper. Each time the movement became better. I piled the sheets of pulp on a table separated by a sheet of felt. It was a rhythmic activity which made me feel as if I was in tune with and in unison with the outside world. I was no longer separated from the world while I was sheltering in place because of the pandemic.

4. Creating the flowers



Figure 4 Image Transfer on handmade paper of Japanese Peruvians deported from Peru to camps in the US. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021.

5. Printing Memories, Stitching Emotions and Feelings of Healing

Using the paper lithograph method I printed on the handmade papers images from photos associated with my family memories of forced migration. I selected photos from different sources to convey the presence of Japanese migrants in Latin America, the bombing of Hiroshima, the neighborhood where Japanese Peruvians lived, the deportation of Japanese Peruvians, and maps and photos of the Crystal City camp where most of the Peruvian Japanese were incarcerated during WWII.

I created several flowers associated with my father's experience in Peru and the deportation of Peruvian Japanese to the US. Each of the petals of the flowers told fragments of memories.

I selected a photo of the neighborhood in Lima where my father grew up in one of the largest and oldest communities of Japanese people living in Latin America. I transferred the image using dark blue etching ink on a piece of handmade paper. I cut the paper in a petal form, and I embroidered it using red French knots to denote the feelings of hate that Japanese people must have felt in Lima in the months before their deportation to the United States when mobs of people attacked their neighborhoods and set up their buildings on fire. Piercing the paper with the needle to create the knots, I felt that in the physical act of puncturing the paper I created a rhythm that matched with my heart beats as I imagined these people's fear. I felt much sadness for my father. I imagined him before the war, young and carefree walking on those streets



Figure 5 Image transfer of my father's neighborhood in Lima on a sheet of handmade paper. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021.

not knowing how his life would change so dramatically. I felt a desire to create a physical link with those memories. Using Sachiko, the Japanese method of stitching and mending torn clothing, I stitched the sidewalks creating a blue carpet made by the short stitch lines. I created a surface where I imagined my father would walk freely on in the street.



Figure 6 Petal of one flower with image transfer of my father's neighborhood in Lima. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021



Figure 7 Flower showing my father's neighborhood in Lima and the deportation of Japanese Peruvians. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021



Figure 8 Flower in installation. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021



Figure 9 Flower showing the bombing of Hiroshima. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021

6. Bombing of Hiroshima

On August 6, 1945, at 8:14 am, an atomic bomb dropped by the US exploded over Hiroshima killing over 8,000 people. Among those killed were members of my Japanese family. For my parents, it was a devastating event that radically altered their lives. My parents, whose ancestral homes were in the city of Hiroshima, had been waiting for the end of the war so they could return to Japan and reunite with their families in Hiroshima and pursue their different dreams. Instead, their lives as sojourners ended dramatically that day, my father in Peru, and my mother in Chile, both realized that their stay in Latin America would be permanent.

The creation of several flowers addressing this event led to my recalling and addressing many aspects of my own upbringing in Chile and the difficulties that my parents had in living in a country so different than from Japan.

I used red to depict the burning and violence of the bombing and war, and black and white for the ashes.



Figure 10 Petal showing the last building standing after the bombing of Hiroshima. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021

I selected images that directly referred to the actual bombing and its effect on the city: pictures of the explosion created by the bomb, the building in Hiroshima which miraculously survived the bombing, and the map of the trajectories of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The act of stitching, using French knots and Sashiko, marked a desire to dialogue with the past.



Figure 11 Petal showing the explosion of the bomb in Hiroshima. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021

7.The Incarceration of Japanese Americans during WWII

I dedicated several flowers to portray the incarceration of people of Japanese descent during WWII using photos of the different camps as well as maps with the layout of the buildings. As with the rest of the flowers the stitching provided a venue in which to express the different emotions I felt during the creation of these flowers.



Figure 12 Flowers depicting internment camps. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021



Figure 13 Petal depicting an internment camp. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021



Figure 13 Flower depicting an internment camp. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021

8.The Installation

75 flowers were attached to barbed wire- like stems hanging from the ceiling had been installed in different gallery spaces. While each installation has been different due to the uniqueness of each space, lighting, and the displaying of the installation by the gallery staff, all of them allowed the viewers to immerse in the space and engage in the multiplicity of the fragments of memories and create stories of them.



Figure 14 Flowers depicting cotton plantations. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarro, 2021



Figure 15 Detail Installation. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021



Figure 16 Installation. Artwork and Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021



Figure 17 An spectator viewing the installation. Photo by Lydia Nakashima Degarrod, 2021

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Daniel Steegmann Mangrané, *Independent artist*
Juliana Fausto, *Anthropologist and philosopher*

Abstract: Feral are those animals that, having been domesticated, return to live in wildness. Brazilian Philosopher Juliana Fausto uses this biological concept to reinterpret Levi Strauss' *la Pensée Sauvage*. In this famous book the french anthropologist proposed the possibility of a mind still untamed by western civilization. Fausto imagines one step further, questioning what would our thought become if we ever break the chains of domestication, liberate and decolonize our minds: It won't be a savage thought, but may become a feral thought...*La Pensée Férale* is fruit of Steegmann Mangrané's ongoing dialogue with the Brazilian philosopher, a work that blurs the division between animal and vegetal, object and subject, rendering uncanny images whose gaze interpellate us and reinforce that nature is not without sentience or feeling.

Bios:

Juliana Fausto is a writer and philosopher. She graduated in Philosophy from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, completed a Master's degree in Literature at PUC-Rio and a PhD in Philosophy at the same university. She was a postdoctoral researcher at the Federal University of Paraná. She is a researcher at species – Speculative Anthropology Nucleus and at Inuma – Human Non-Human Interfaces/UFS. She writes and speaks before and with extrahumans and dissidents of the cisheteropatriarchy in a myriad of contexts. She lives in Rio de Janeiro with Bruxo, Batatinha, Nausicaa, where she also works as a translator.

Daniel Steegmann Mangrané was born in Barcelona in 1977 and since 2004 lives in Rio de Janeiro. His research is particularly interested in biological processes and anthropological discourses, which he uses as inspiration to create works that confuse the traditional separations between culture and nature, subjects and objects, reality and dreams, visible and invisible, or corporeal and incorporeal ... dissolving them into relationships of mutual transformation. His works are found in the permanent collections of the Tate Modern, MAM Rio de Janeiro, Inhotim, Serralves, Kiasma, Walker Art Center, MACBA, Collection Pinault, Hamburger Bahnhof or Castello de Rivoli, among others.

Keywords: Feral Animals, feral thought, visible/invisible.

La pensée férale: introduction

Feral are those animals that, having been domesticated, return to live in wildness. Brazilian Philosopher Juliana Fausto uses this biological concept to reinterpret Levi Strauss' *la Pensée Sauvage*. In this famous book the french anthropologist proposed the possibility of a mind still untamed by western civilization. Fausto imagines one step further, questioning what would our thought become if we ever break the chains of domestication, liberate and decolonize our minds: It won't be a savage thought, but may become a feral thought...

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La pensée férale 1/7

Once part of a covenant, the great domesticated one, feral animals are exiles who now live in wild habitats. The circle was broken for them. Maybe by an atavistic power, they go back to a few of their old ways and traditions, and habitually avoid the race of men. All the same, they also, and mostly, create new ways and rituals. Some of the most common peoples-species that turn feral are cats, dogs, horses, and pigs. Once companion species, when the ancient pact of co-domestication is broken, the ill-fated ones have the crestfallen ability to *un-become-without* and walk another path, following a scent they sense from their ancestors no longer there. They become *feral*. Lévi-Strauss conceived *la pensée sauvage* (not *la pensée des sauvages*, as we are often reminded), a kind of “untamed” thought, kept alive in the modern western world within the “natural reserves” of art. Dogs cannot, as much as the wild calls them, become wolves; they are mostly a species-with-humans. Messmates. Few people would say they make art (but do they?). Yet, that does not mean mutts could not experience their own kind of *pensée sauvage*. A more captivating question, though, could be what mode of thought emerges when domesticated and wild collapse, promises are undone, their cosmos is wounded and they become feral.

text Juliana Fausto, images Daniel Steegmann Mangrané



La pensée férale 2/7

We are being looked at from one of the world's largest urban forests, the Tijuca National Park. The Atlantic Forest Biome, by the 19th century, that mountainous part of the Earth had already been ravaged by sugar cane and coffee plantations, fires and logging for charcoal production. The seemingly never-ending storm of both colonialism and capitalism was endangering Rio de Janeiro's water supply, and desertification was on the horizon. So, in 1861,

following Brazilian Emperor D. Pedro II orders, a group of enslaved men (lore says six of them, but new research suggests a credible number would be from 20 to 30) planted 100,000 seeds of mainly native plants. The forest became a National Park in 1961, by an executive order – a natural reserve.

text Juliana Fausto, images Daniel Steegmann Mangrané



La pensée férale 3/7

Feral dogs, those creatures not of nature nor culture, are now considered an ecological danger to the native species living in the forests they wander, both in the National Forest and elsewhere. Yet we see their eyes in the tree trunks. Are they becoming one with the trees? Are the trees looking through them? – at whom? At us? What do they see, what do they think, what do they say? This is a tentacular trans-becoming-matter, as one of the photos makes clear: an octopus-tree-mutt staring right at us: all bark, moss, dew, hair, eye, iris, leaf, dirt, humus. Forgotten dogs desecrate the natural reserve and mutter about the importance of commitments, but also about how connectedness is literally a matter of worlding and the possibility of reworlding – and that nature was never a virgin.

text Juliana Fausto, images Daniel Steegmann Mangrané



La pensée férale 4/7

The history of natural reserves is also a history of the expropriation of indigenous peoples from their territories. It is embedded in the domesticated thought that split culture and nature into two realms, one polluted, the other pure. By the time D. Pedro II was convinced there should be a forest in the city, although very much alive, natives were no longer welcome there, their populations decimated.. Presently, humans are not allowed to live in the park – albeit, for the dismay of conservationists, favelas surround the forest. Before the plantations, indigenous peoples used to walk there, surrounded by plants, animals and a plethora of other beings from many communicating realms. As new research shows, natives were actually responsible for shaping the Amazon rainforest. Some of them even raise dogs now. The forest watches.

text Juliana Fausto, images Daniel Steegmann Mangrané



La pensée férale 5/7

In an article that described dogs as “destructive mammals”, residents of Ipanema, one of Rio de Janeiro’s wealthiest neighborhoods, when interviewed, were certain their purebred puppies would never cause any damage to the forest. The researchers agreed with them: “The problem isn’t these dogs, who lead the coddled lives of European or American pets. The problem is the dogs in poorer and more rural communities, where the life of the dog is more frequently the life of hunger. They prowl the streets day and night with neither a collar nor an owner, looking for food wherever it can be found – in trash heaps, alongside roads, and in forests and fields, where they form packs to hunt and kill.” Poor dogs, as poor people, live a harsh life. They join gangs and kill. Australian researchers, using data available in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, placed dogs “in the number three spot after cats and rodents as the world’s most *damaging invasive mammalian predators*.” Last I checked, humans fit the criteria for predators. Nevertheless, the forest, planted by the hands of enslaved men, now surrounded by their descendants who were never coddled but sometimes have masters, watches. Forests, even young ones – after all, Tijuca is *only* 160 years old –, watch with their sharp dog eyes. They look back.

text Juliana Fausto, images Daniel Steegmann Mangrané



La pensée férale 6/7

When I was a child there was this record collection with little readalong booklets with stories and songs, full of beautiful illustrations. One of them had a song by Chico Buarque, “Passaredo”. Its lyrics haunt me to this day and go something like this: *Hey goldfinch/ Hi, common linnet/ blackbird, manakin/ Oh, white-faced whistling duck / Pauraque / Green-headed tanager, small-billed tinamou / Run, picazuro pigeon / Go, plumbeous seedeater / Song thrush, short-tailed nighthawk, blue-winged parrotlet / Shoo, brazilian tanager / Shoo, brazilian tanager / Shoo, nightingale, striped cuckoo / Disappear, double-collared seed-eater / Get out, corn bunting / Hide yourself, hummingbird / Fly, solitary tinamou / Fly, long-tailed tyrant / American kestrel / Keep your beak sealed / Beware / Here comes the man / Here comes the man.* There were no doubts for us brazilians. *Man* in the lyrics refers both to the military and to the species. The dictatorship had plans to destroy the Amazon rainforest, and they were partly successful. Indigenous peoples were their greatest human victims, with at least 8.000 killed. *Man* cannot be the species, but *Anthropos*, the civilized one, the one who wounded Earth and all of her people. In order to escape fascism, we may have to become feral, to transmute into something else. As Eva Hayward teaches us, “We are vulnerable to one another; our bodies are open to the planet.” The planet, by its turn, is hurt but not done. Those lonely eyes in an urban forest are witnesses.

text Juliana Fausto, images Daniel Steegmann Mangrané



La pensée férale 7/7

Russell Means used to say that “when the catastrophe is over, we American Indian peoples will still be here to inhabit the hemisphere. I don’t care if it’s only a handful living high in the Andes.” Those of us who are not indigenous, if we want to have a survival chance, might have to turn feral and forget about that Man birds and dogs and so many others have learnt to fear or even hate – and become others. That may be the lesson of the dog barks, the eyes in the tree trunks of a forest built together by many, including itself, as every forest is. We propose a feral thinking, a feral worlding, feral forests inhabited by “the future organisms we are becoming”, as Eva Hayward, once again, says. Where will we go when we abandon our Omelas? It certainly is not an easy path, but we like to think it resonates with Ursula Le Guin’s Ying’s utopia, the one that “involves acceptance of impermanence and imperfection, a patience with uncertainty and the makeshift, a friendship with water, darkness, and the earth.”

text Juliana Fausto, images Daniel Steegmann Mangrané

**vision
suois**

Bucarolito:

Re-generation

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract: *Bucarolito* was a collective action carried out in Little Haiti, Miami. It was the fourth action in a series of works called *Litofagos*, based on the absorption of stone in which a group of ninety people ingested Miamian clay in the form of “Búcaros”. These ceramic vases were replicas of the ceramics referred to as “Búcaros de Indias” by the royal family and aristocracy, which they ate in Spain during the 16th and 17th Century as part of their system of beliefs.

Keywords: art / art research / performance / collective process / clay ingestion / geophagia / Búcaros de Indias /

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Bucarolito. Re-Generation (September 2019)

Bucarolito was a collective action carried out in Little Haiti, Miami. It was the fourth action in a series of works called *litofagos*, based on the absorption of stone in which a group of ninety people ingested Miamian clay in the form of “Búcaros”. These ceramic vases were replicas of the ceramics referred to as “Búcaros de Indias” by the royal family and aristocracy, which they ate in Spain during the 16th and 17th Century as part of their system of beliefs. These particular clay ceramics had the medicinal and magical ability to cure and transform human biological functionality. The clay was specifically selected from particular places containing these proprieties. The most special clay was traded from Tonalá, Mexico and imported to Spain to be consumed in the form of aromatic ceramic vessels. Each particle of clay was a fragment of a land transported to another land to transform the body of their ingesters. During the collective action, their land was eaten, possessed and incorporated in the ingesters biological system. A group of inhabitants of Miami ingested the clay that forms the very foundation of this transitory and mutant Miami landscape.

The ingestion

Nothing can be expected when you are in the Caribbean. The land is as fluctuant as the weather in a viscous, incubatory heatwave.

All was after hurricane Dorian; we were just swept along by the weather in a kind of strange bewilderment. The feeling of having one's feet on the earth is the most precious incentive for feeling alive. At the very last moment, the hurricane changed direction, not hitting Miami. The Bahamas was under water. The city was quiet, breathing earth, sticky, sizzling, sweating. A week before, supermarkets and hardware stores were empty, guarded by the police to stop the recurrent, delirious looting of wooden boards, jig saws and drills. The city was ready to be submerged by the Caribbean Sea pushed in by Dorian.

There are very few places in the city that rise geologically from the flat tropical swamp; those are the development treasures for real estate. We are in one of them: Little Haiti.

People start gathering in the parking slot, there is the smell of iguana and prestige beer. The sun sets. It's hot. The air is still. The soil breathes through the cracks of the asphalt and concrete as the sun disappears.

The doors of the gallery stay open, magenta light streaming from inside the gallery. Outside, all is green.

People walk inside the gallery space immersed in a magenta-lit atmosphere. A strange *drown drone* sound fills the space. On floor sixty-four, "bucaros"¹ made with Miamian clay spread across the space like a kind of parasitic plant. They appear to be growing like plants inside the white cube. Half of the space is occupied by a structural body of shelves that contain a space within the space, a labyrinthine archive. The spectators look at the objects, geotectonic strata, weather morphologies, *Titanium Dentures*, *Land\$*, *Oolite* and *Controlled Mouths*, illuminated by strong "Phytolamp"² tubes. Under some of the objects are fragments of paintings from the 16th and 17th century that show the active presence of the "bucaros". The earth is present and waiting to be ingested. On the other side of the room a high table covered with salt occupies the space in front of the encapsulated iguana tails. Buried in the salt are metallic bowls containing a black, dense liquid and around them sit twenty-four ceramic bowls.

A group of around ninety people is inside the space surrounding the table. The collective is gathered. The doors of the space close. It smells sweet.

The sound of *Drown Drone* gets eclipsed by a strident distorted voice, obscured by a synthesizer connected to a tank of clay water. It is difficult to understand the meaning of the voice, but it creates a physical sound cloud within which all the bodies in the room are submerged. The transmission of the voice is distorted through the clay water tank, amplified by the electronic sound sensors.

The sound stops suddenly and four performers appear from within the public crowd dressed in white. Each of them takes a strange metallic object from the floor connected to a cable and places it on their chest. Slowly they open their mouths to reveal the brightness of their golden teeth, and a quiet and obscure sound now comes out of their mouths. The sound is projected through a small metallic object that only amplifies sound waves through contact. When connected to the performers skin, the metallic object makes the sound flow through their bodies and amplifies it in the hollow cavities inside the performers' bodies. Prosthetic teeth shine. Bodies become a resonance box

1 "Búcaros the Indias" were ceramic vessels made with clay especially from Tonalá, Mexico and used to contain perfume water. Those vessels were eaten by the royal family and aristocracy in Spain during the 16th and 17th Century to keep the whiteness of the skin, regulate menstruation, contraceptive or hallucinogenic.

2 A phytolamp light is electric light to help plants grow. This light provides spectrum that is more tailored to the needs of the plants being cultivated. The mix of this spectrum frequencies generates a strong pink light.

for the obscure sound. The performer holds this moment. It is long and dense. Spectators listen and look. Performers approach the participants and position the metallic object against their bodies. The spectators become conductors of the obscure sound; they can feel the voices inside, but do not understand them.

One performer points to one spectator and together they walk to the “bucaros”. Cordially the spectator, now participant, is invited to select a bucaro. Both come back to the table and position the edible ceramic, the “bucaro,” on top of the salt. The same action is repeated by the other performers: chance, to be chosen, walk, wonder, see, select and carry.

A person stands near the table and reads pieces of texts like a town crier, writings of the voices of those who were land.³

Santiago and I smile, we wear the meteorite grillz, shining a brightness older than the earth. Quiet, we witness.

Ceramics are on the table; the group of participants analyse them. The performer serves a dense, black liquid from the metallic bowl into each ceramic bowl. One hand goes up and smashes the first ceramic; by imitation hands follow the hands. “Bucaros” broken, the pieces get ingested by the spectators that are now ingestors, soaked in the dense, black liquid, rolled in the salt and masticated. Driven by a strange ecstasy, more “bucaros” are broken into pieces on the table. Participants can’t stop eating.

Mouths are dry and sandy, lips tinted by the clay. We feel the land scratching our tongues. We all drink desalinated water to help with the swallowing. Participants are full of land. Each of them holds Miami in their stomach. Now the matter they are made of is as much organic as inorganic, they are as Land as they are Human. Now they are the litofagos.

The performers mix the excess dense, black liquid from each bowl in the metallic glass of desalinated water and hold it in one hand. They ask the participants to take a handful of salt and clay from the table, the landscape of their ingestion, in one hand. The performers direct them slowly to the black platform situated at the access point to the labyrinth of shelves, on it a metallic plate. Participants deposit the handful of salt and clay on the metallic plate and pulverize the liquid with their mouths into a cloud of perfume. One mouth after the other, ninety handfuls of territory in one place, on the table.

Serious and stern, the performers ask the participants to stand at the back of the room. Santiago and I approach the metallic plate. We take a torch at the same time and torch the tables to solidify the salt and remains of clay. Now the action is to transform to rock, a fossil of the ingestion, a trace of the litofago.

³ These readings contained fragments from the texts of Natacha Serena, Julio Ramos and Beatriz Nates Cruz and notes from Santiago Reyes and alfonso borragán.

CL: Without a doubt if I had to find a word, I would say it is the “transient” city. Here, people and things move frenetically; all comes and goes.

AB: I know what you mean, nothing seems fixed, a matter as transitory as it is nebulous that people call place.

CL: Even culture was created through the importation of others and then the “Other”... Miami is formed by bodies moving in and out, things coming and going. Very few things go back more than three generations.

AB: ...nothing is durable ...all changes. Somehow it feels like a metaphor of a kind of biology that cannot be contained by the rocks. This place resets itself completely.

CL: For me, this relates to the geological analysis you were doing before...

AB: Oh yes, for me it is like an allegory of Miami. The geological floor of Miami is extremely young. Oolite, the foundation of the city, is just 150,000 years old. It has a sandy and vulnerable floor but it is an excellent base for the development of organisms. And on top, there are the traces and fragments of past life in the form of sand and shell dust, like a layer of powder of ephemeral life far genealogically younger.

CL: You mean the geological formation of this land is just a kind of life deposit...

AB: Yes, it is the sediment of transient things upon a place ready for momentary sedimentation.



Figure 1-2 Museo Archeologico Nazionale del Piemonte. *Terra sigillata* from Augusta Taurinorum. Torino, 2016. Constantin Hansen. *Prometheus creating man in clay*. Copenhagen, 1845.



Figure 3 Frans Lanting. Red and green Macaw eat clay in a "colpa" to counteract the toxins of the plants they eat. Tambopata, 2014.

CL: The tropics are fertile but fragile...

AB: Exactly. The soil on top of all these layers is just a few centimetres thick and easily blown away. It is the narrow line of temporary nature... and then there is the weather.

CL: ...and on the surface, the Dade County Pines⁴, the rail rocks, the asphalt and the coal...

AB: There are some sacred sites under the concrete of Miami.

CL: The land was sacred; Haitians are some of the very few that still understand and connect with this... It was the naming of things that erased the meaning... Everything was named.

AB: There are also some trees, the Ceiba Cuban trees... They are like a symbol that manifests the power of this place, cracking the concrete to connect the sun and the earth.

CL: They definitely are! The Baobab trees came from Africa to Cuba and then to Miami. The one in Little Havana at the Memorial Plaza on 13th and Calle Ocho is really impressive.

AB: It is like a place that re-imagines itself through the thinking of its inhabitants. For me, it is like a place constructed by the tales that become images of the place.

CL: I find it fascinating that the ones that built the city, the workers, are the ones that really invented it... They are the only ones that remain longer here; everybody else is seasonal and led by exploitation, buying and selling... The workers are the real architects of the place, they create the images. I'm not sure if collective identity really exists or if it is just an unstoppable individual storytelling. Today it's one thing, tomorrow it can be something else. The identity changes...

AB: It is like a myth, always in movement, changing from individual to individual, possessing their bodies and getting transferred into other bodies. It is undefinable because it is always in change.

CL: It's more than a myth, it's also the DNA of the city. All is about image-making and myth-making. Since the very beginning it was built in that way... It's sort of a state that was like the capital of propaganda. The fact that Disney World, this totally invented place, is in Florida is not by accident...and this sort of idea of creating images and creating myths and selling them... and people subscribing to them. Which is also what makes it so fascinating; it makes it unique because it's alive...and it's made, somehow it's made by the people...

AB: It feels like it couldn't be built in a different way because the land was like this.

CL: Yeah, Miami is the copy and yet it feels authentic, made by many cultures that arrived here and tried to bring part of what they left behind, the diaspora of a diaspora carrying a place with you.

⁴ Florida native conifer tree, almost extinct.

Finely-grained as invisible
amalgamated by water
trapped in the mineral structure
each grain
a time of earth
all together
in a hybrid mother dough



Figure 4 Ryan Ellis. Rusty Skink is one of the lizards that contains more regenerative mother cells. Lake Darlot, 2017.



Figure 5 Victoria and Albert Museum. *Edible earthenware dimpled ceramic Bucaro de Indias*. Tonalá, Between 1600–1700.

Prometheus moulded men from water and earth. Ninmah created humans from clay at Abzu, the cosmic underground waters. Khnum created human children from clay before placing them into their mother's womb. Nüwa molded figures from the yellow earth, giving them life and the ability to bear children. Ninhursag the womb-goddess, created humans from clay and blood of a slain god. Parvati made Ganesh by mixing dust from the ground with her respiration. Obatala created humans with clay from the edge of the pond and moulded it into the shape he had seen in the reflection. The Christian god created men from the dust of the ground, exhaled into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul. Tane Mahuna, Maori God of the forest, created the first woman out of clay and breathed life into her. Viracocha formed humans from clay on his second attempt at creating living creatures. Native American Earth-makers formed the figure of many men and women from soil and dried them in the sun.

3.77 billion years ago, abiogenesis: non-living matter transforms into living matter. Clay microcrystals grow, maintaining the atomic structure in a tightly-packed repetitive series. Thermal and pressure conditions accelerate their division into new crystals wherein one "mother" crystal gives rise to "daughter" crystals. Clay crystals behave like living systems. When a crystal breaks apart, new quirks are introduced by the stress of fracturing. The process is similar to genetic mutation. Crystals pass their peculiarities onto their daughters; these unique inherited traits became peculiarities that affect their natural selection for evolutionary advantage. Clay emerges as a system of self-replication, self-assembly, autocatalysis. Dislocations come about through the process of crystal growth. The pattern of dislocations is inherited by the daughter crystal, and for as many mutations exist, are introduced once the daughter crystal breaks off. The crystals gradually, but very efficiently, catalyse in the polymerisation of amino acids and nucleotides, supporting the possible existence of an RNA world preceding a cellular world.⁵

Clay is a plastic matter, sticky, with the ability to form and be formed, with unique crystal structure, organized 2-dimensional plate, like molecules. Slippery, swelling when wet, shrinking when dry, it metamorphoses with fire into a rock transmuting into geological time. It is impossible to ignore the human obsession in considering clay to be a matter of and for creation.⁶

5 Fiction created from the theories of the chemist Cairns-Smith who proposed clay crystals as possible genetic material preceding the cellular world.

6 RNA adsorbed to clay minerals can be encapsulated within vesicles. Once formed, such vesicles could grow by incorporating fatty acids and divide, thus mediating vesicle replication through cycles of growth and division. The data obtained so far suggest that clay minerals played an active role in the abiotic origin of life. (Graham Cairns-Smith, 1987)

‘The tradition to ‘eat Bucaros,’ ‘eat mud’ or ‘eat plaster’ must have been sufficiently ingrained in Spanish society to have been incorporated, as a description or in the form of jest, to dictionaries in the literature of the Golden Age.’⁷

Eat
Become

A group of people smash a big rock of clay into small pieces. Some of them put the small fragments on their tongue and wait for them to dissolve in their saliva; others bite them and swallow. ‘It is like ingesting a place’, they said: ‘each bite is a piece of land that becomes us.’ Passing from one body into another, they conceive of the earth as another body, the land as an organ. Their lips are white because of the clay. Some children roll on the clay pond. They are organs of a big collective body. Clay into body, body of clay, transfusion of bodies. They are the land, they are the others.

Tetrahedrally Silicate
Octohedrally Aluminate
Bidimensionally layered
Hydratable
TOT TOT TOT

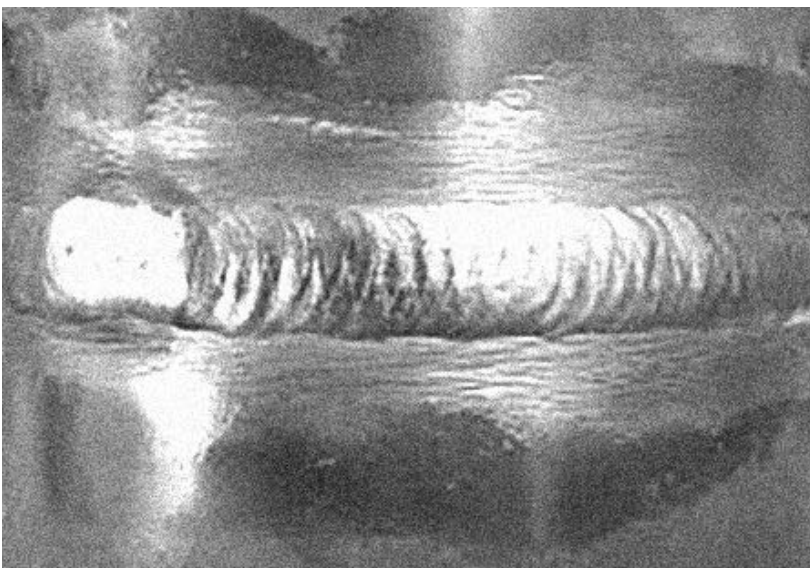


Figure 6-7-8 Ernest H. Lund. *Miami oolite on Bayshore Drive*. Silver Bluff, 1953.
Ernest H. Lund. *Ross-bedding of Miami oolite on Bayshore Drive*. Silver Bluff, 1953.
David Rodriguez. *Soldering on iron tube*. Chicago, 2003.



Figure 9 Gold Teeth Specialist. *Grillz-X*. Los Angeles, 2011.

‘The clay and crockery that Velázquez painted are clays of bright colour and strong smell [...] Some small pieces of jewellery have been invented for the ladies, so pleasant to taste that they drink the water and eat the clay; thus not a simple job for the confessors to halt this vice.’⁷

‘Let us not forget either, that the supposed properties of these clays included antidotes against poison, which was the obsession and scourge of the European courts.’⁶

‘When I was twelve, in 1609 approximately, the envious devil [...] inclined me to eat búcaro [...] a tradition that made his lady adorn the living room by placing many clay vases around the room and hanging them from a beam, and since I had seen them being eaten at the Marchioness of Laguna’s house [...] I thought it right and wished to try them. I did this, tasted it and liked the smell of earth so much that, with the urge of a vice, I succumbed to eating it.’⁷

‘It is said that they have many properties, that they work against poison and heal several illnesses. I have a large cup of that kind that holds a pint; wine is wasted when drunk from it, but water turns out to be excellent.’⁷

‘Jewelry and used to drink water, it is curious to point out [...] that after drinking its content, the container would be eaten; and it is said that, in order to avoid this pernicious abuse to one’s health, the priests had to forbid it during confession.’⁷

‘It’s a matter of ideology.’⁷

‘Some sort of shame and protection of intimacy seems to have prevented historians from giving accounts of this mania’⁷

⁷ Serena, Natacha. *El vicio del barro*. Madrid: Ediciones el Viso, 2009.

The size of a clay particle is extremely tiny, less than 2 microns of a meter. One particle can travel hundreds of kilometres through air. Clay is a resilient land spore. Somehow, it appears as a sort of a metaphor for how far the clay had to travel to be ingested. Land from Mexico travelled to be eaten in Europe. I hope one day someone will write a book about clay-diasporas.

Puerto Rican theorist Julio Ramos coined the term pharmacoloniality to denote an ‘inverse process of colonization’, whereby Latin American substances—sugar, tobacco, coffee, cocaine, music—‘wake up’ and develop European rationality.

Ramos suggests that the pharmacolonial condition defines and ‘stimulates’ the emergence of modern temporality intervening to accelerate European life from its slow rhythm in the middle ages.

‘The ingestion of clay would lead to a state of dreaminess and visions, good for meditation. [...] When eaten, what was sought were effects similar to soft drugs, as we would say today, and as the name they were given implies: “inebriating” (emborrachativas)’⁸

⁸ Serena, Natacha. *El vicio del barro*. Madrid: Ediciones el Viso, 2009.

‘The nuns said that ‘because what was eaten was such small amounts, it was of little importance; it seemed to me that it wouldn’t offend God [...] these temptations were tedious to God himself while they generated love in me, throughout my childhood I remember feeling more embraced, more at one with God’⁸

‘In general, the nuns make a continuous activity of the special labour they dedicate to these pieces, lifting their natural smell with artificial ones, scenting them with profuse lavender waters [a certain kind of aphrodisiac], with precious incense in the form of pastilles and perfume. The silversmiths, goldsmiths, all became weavers of filigree to adorn the búcaros.’⁸

‘Clay from Jurasán would be eaten, and this suggests that the ingestion of clay for medicinal ends would have been a habitual practice in the Muslim world. The Arabs must have taken this tradition from the Persians and transmitted it to al-Andalus, where it would arrive in the IX century, at a time when everything coming from Baghdad - the capital of Caliphate - was welcomed with enthusiasm; be that well educated slaves, singers or people of elegant means as described by al-Wassa, an Arab grammarian who died in 936. However, the hadiths of Muslim law prohibit the tradition of eating baked clay in the shape of crockery, in the same way as the Catholic church.’⁸

‘The production of búcaros was brought in from the Americas, despite, as we have seen with the ones from Talayera, the existing tradition in Spain before the discovery of the New World. However, with mostly Mexican products being sent, work on these porous clays in the peninsula began again.’⁸

Kaolin-based activated clotting Pharmaceutical Grade Kaolinites

They realized they could create land. Now soil was land. Not anymore, the material on the surface of the ground in which plants grow, the surface of the earth that is not covered by water, could be used for a particular purpose. Land was an idea that could be possessed and exchanged. It could be occupied, owned, re-signified and reassessed. The food of the earth was the soil.

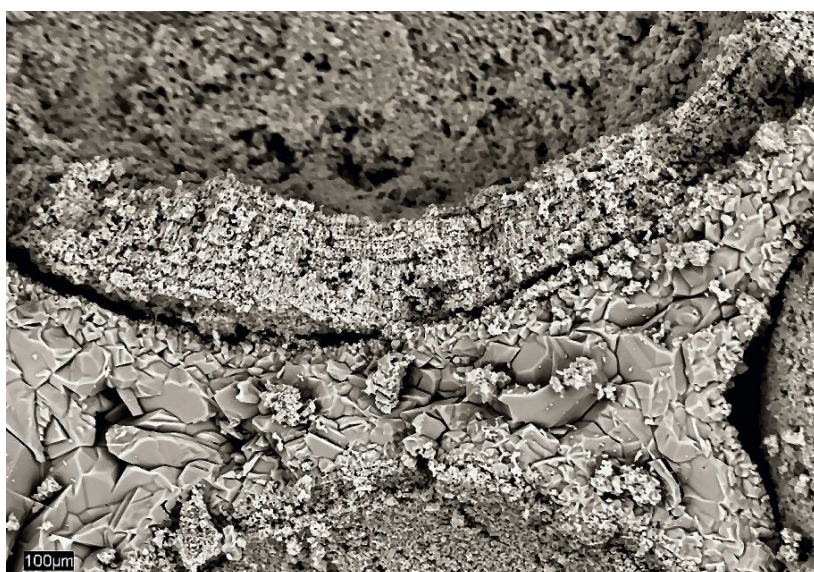


Figure 10-11-12 Wolfson Archives. Still from Miami promotion film: *Florida land of perpetual sunshine*. Miami, 1944-1946.

Dr. Richard Pearce. *Oolite layers at high magnification on SEM*. Southampton, 2012.

Wolfson Archives. Still from Miami promotion film: *Florida land of perpetual sunshine*. Miami, 1944-1946.

For rent
plastic due
particle size
atomic geometry
water content
become hard
brittle
non-plastic
drying
firing

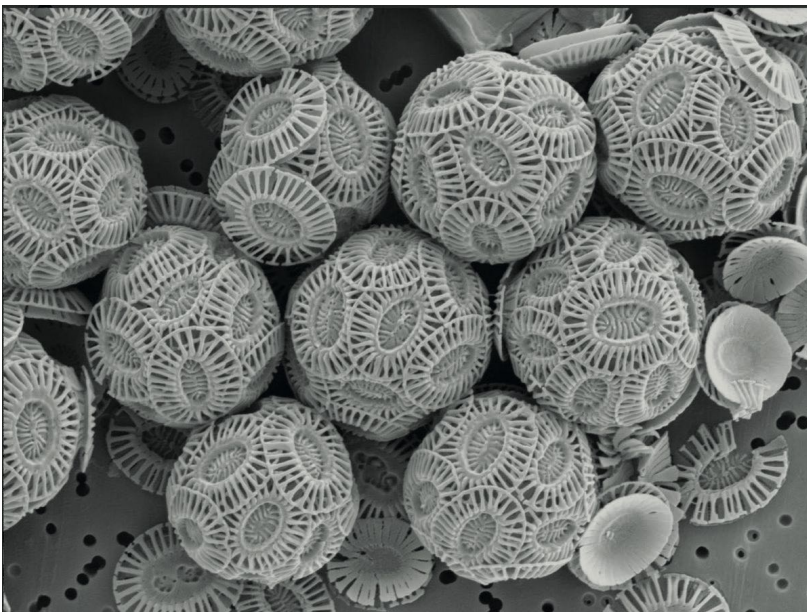


Figure 13-14-15 Jim Peaco. *Sedimentary clay*. Storm Point, 1989. Wolfson Archives. Still from Miami promotion film: *Florida land of perpetual sunshine*. Miami, 1944-1946. London Natural History Museum. *Clay at high magnification on electron microscope: Coccolithophores*. London.

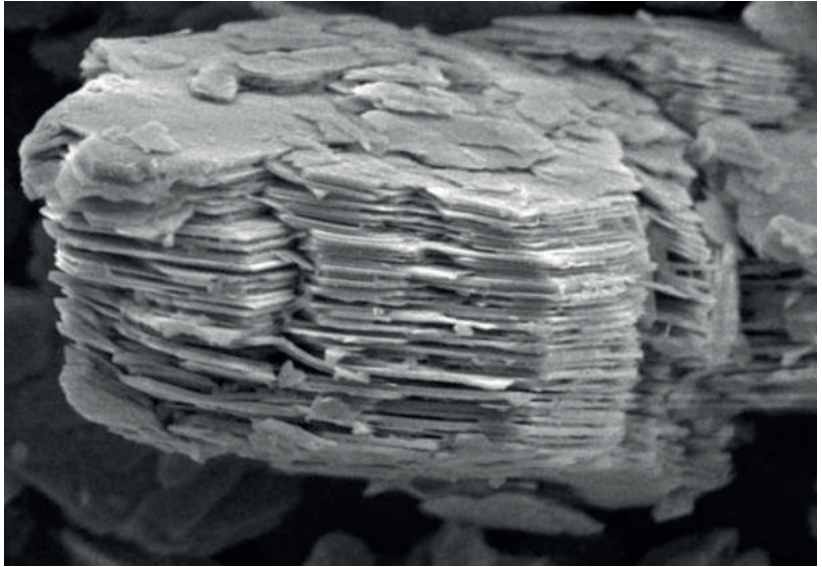


Figure 16-17-18 Yongjae Lee. *Ordinary kaolinite under an electron microscope, the first observation of a super-hydrated phase.* Yonsei University: Seoul, 2017.
 Andrew Roland. *Miami Beach.* Miami, 1924.
 Wolfson Archives. Still from Miami promotion film: *Florida land of perpetual sunshine.* Miami, 1944-1946.

CL: This is a long narrative. Land and real estate are the narration of Miami. It is not just in this city but here it is especially significant. The whole economy in the state is really based on it. Miamian land did not exist one hundred years ago; it was a swamp and refilled. Clay was the foundation of Miami.

AB: I believe it started around the 20's but it was not until the 40's and 50's when it really exploded greatly. It can be seen in all the promotional videos of the city selling their land... no-land taken to the water. Somehow it recalls the history of filmmaking in Miami as the history of the city, as transient and immaterial as a moving image.

CL: I think this is related somehow to the weather too. The city started to develop with the creation of air conditioning. The state of Florida was impenetrable, it was hostile. It was uninhabitable until technology was able to create climate-moderated spaces. At the very end of the 19th century, the train was able to connect the modern state of the country with the state that brought technology and supplies that would later develop into the artificial indoor weather created by air conditioning. However, you still have the hurricanes and the tropical storms that can destroy it all in a matter of days. And even then, the land does not stop increasing in value. All is artificial here.

AB: How do you think this affects the property of people here?

CL: In the past, long-lasting things were not possessed, as these disappear. This has been neglected, but all that has changed. Now, I think, all possessions are not long-lasting things. If you're not rooted and permanently invested in the place, the things you do to that place are very different; everything changes meaning. But I think that real estate and the land are the leitmotif that permeates it all.

Silence.

AB: I think his house is on a well or some sacred site.

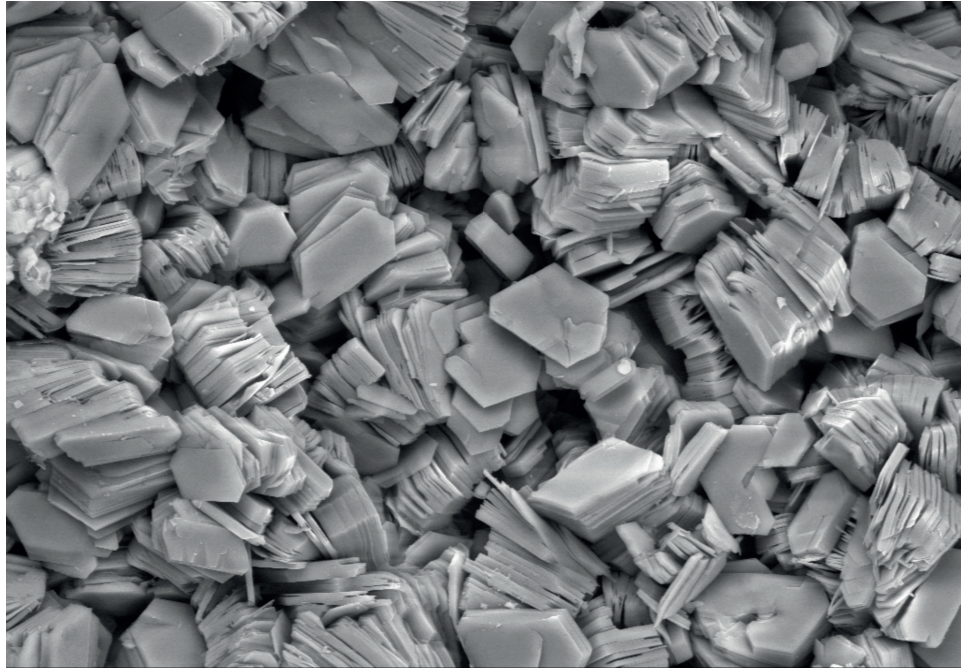


Figure 19 Evelyne Delbos. *Large dickite plates in sandstone*. James Hutton Institute: Aberdeen, 2017.

soft loose
earthy
clay

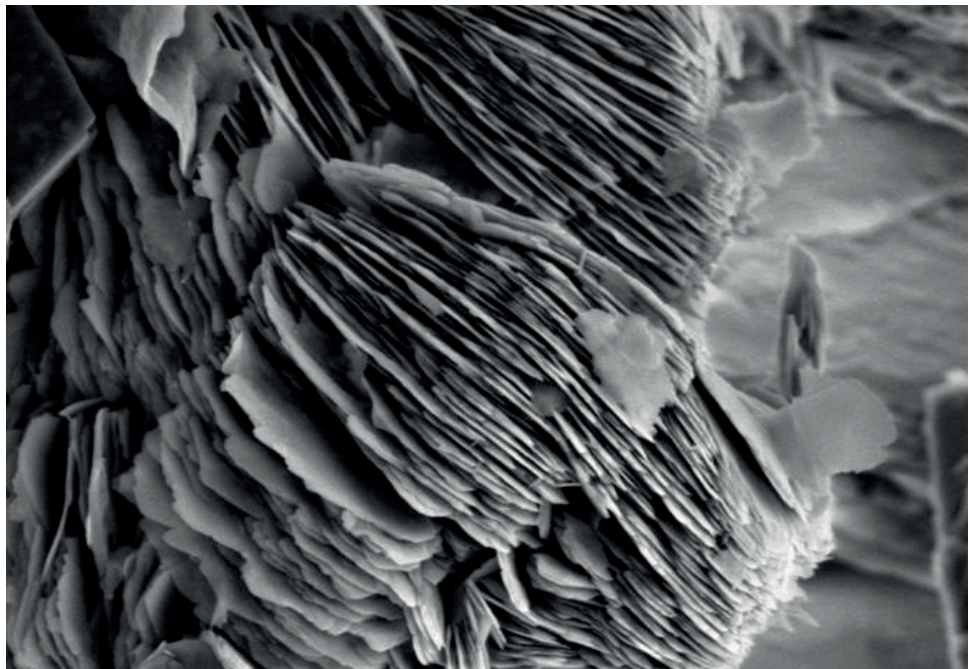


Figure 20 Wadah Mahmoud. *Kaolin clay sheets*. University of Jordan: Amman. 2011

Their feet move slowly, scratching the floor, dust climbing up as if the earth were evaporating. They sing, they dance, slowly. It is like they are waking up the land. They breathe the tiny particles of earth, deep inhalations that become long exhalations of word melodies. They sing. In each exhalation they bend their body, bringing their voice close to the soil. Each word is a manifestation, a desire, a message. Clay floats in the air, bodies move and sing, slowly. Slow motion. Time is strange and flexible; we are malleable, plastic matter. One hand approaches the floor, the others follow the hand. Hands collect the pulverized land and put it on the loose ends of their white t-shirts. The singing changes. There are no words any more, just slow, long, melodies. Particles of territory in their bellies, the pregnant bodies leave the clay quarry. We follow them.

Now we are home. The pulverized clay is inside squash bowls.

Dani is near the clay watching the dogs playing, puts his ear near the clay and tells me - 'You know? If you put your ear close you might be able to listen to the chants again, but now they are embodied in the soil and they sing in the language of the earth.



Figure 21 Wolfson Archives. Still from Miami promotion film: *Florida land of perpetual sunshine*. Miami, 1944–1946.

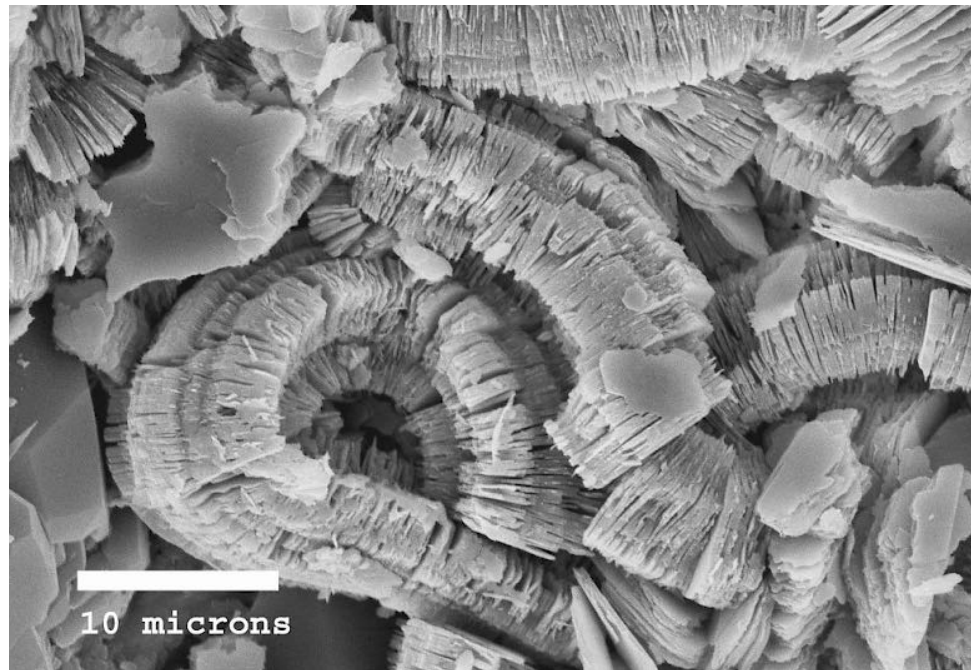


Figure 22 Ray Frost. *Vermiform kaolinite at high magnification on electron microscope.* Sidney, 2019.

Drown
Drone
Sound



Figure 23 Diego Velázquez. Detail of: *Las meninas*, the infant Margarita holds a Búcaro de Indias. Madrid, 1656.





Figure 24 Alonso Sanchez Coello. Detail of: *Duchess of Béjar with a dwarf*, the dwarf offers a Búcaro de Indias to the Duchess. Madrid, 1585.





Figure 25 Giuseppe Recco. *Detail of: Still live with servant*, the house keeper carries several Búcaros de Indias around the dining room. Sevilla, 1679





Figure 26 Juan Pantoja de la Cruz. Detail of: *The infant Ana of Austria*, the infant carrying several amulets. 1602





Figure 27 Juan Bautista Martínez del Mazo. Detail of: *Portrait of the widow Mariana of Austria*, in the back of the painting the servants of Carlos II offer him Bucaros the Indias. Toledo, 1666.



video-essays

Bio

Fiamma Montezemolo is both an artist (MFA, San Francisco Art Institute) and an anthropologist (PhD, University Orientale of Naples). She is an established scholar in border studies and Professor in the Department of Cinema & Digital Media at the University of California, Davis. She has exhibited in various institutions among which: Baruchello Art Foundation, Rome, (2024) Laboratorio Arte Alameda, Mexico City (2019), Herbert Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University (2019), Munich Jewish Museum, Germany (2019), La Galleria Nazionale, Rome (2023), Headlands Center for the Arts, California (2018), ASU Art Museum, Arizona (2019), Kadist Art Foundation, San Francisco (2016), Armory Center for the Arts, Los Angeles (2014). She is represented by Magazzino gallery in Rome. She is widely published and the author of two monographs: on Zapatismo and on Chicano/a politics of representation, as well as co-author (with Rene' Peralta and Heriberto Yepez) of *Here is Tijuana* (Blackdog Publishing, London, 2006) and co-editor (with Josh Kun) of *Tijuana Dreaming, Life and Art at the Global Border* (Duke U. Press, 2012). In 2022, she was awarded the Italian Council Minister of Culture Contemporary Art award in collaboration with On Public and Nero Editions. In 2024 her latest book *Hidden in Plain Sight*, edited by Martina Angelotti, is published by Nero.

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Link & password

<https://vimeo.com/94542787?share=copy>
eccolo

Echo, Digital Video, 38 minutes, 2014

Echo is set in the border between Mexico and USA and it is an ethnographic research on the after life and “echoes” of 9 art works that have been part of the two-decade old public art event called inSite. It highlights the procedures of intrusion at work in such a site as the US-Mexico border as well as the now canonical deployment of the emblematic figure of fieldwork. It teaches us that intrusion is an ontological dimension of intervention, at once anthropological, curatorial, and artistic. By revisiting the scenes of these curatorial and artistic interventions, “echo” emerges both as a concept and a practice that assembles the futures of art works beyond its expected ruins and remains. Each work/artist and afterlife/echo of those works -after the artists finish them and leave or focus on another work - raise different and enriching questions on social art, on its ethics, on the methods, on the people involved in the projects, on the city itself and its urban cycle, on the future of public sculpture. The assemblage of archival images and current reverberations, of text, voice over and interviews, of affects and representation has been a real challenge in this work. The result is that more questions were open after the initial ones. The conclusion is inconclusive: Narcissus (all of us working, representing, intervening on the border: anthropologists, artists, curators, etc.) and Echo (the context, the artists, the collaborators, the public sculptures, the objects, etc.) are part of the same scenario and they are both plural and problematic in their own way...

Mireia Sallarès

Visual artist

Kao malo vode na dlanu

(Like a little water in the palm of my hand), a project about love in Serbia, 2014–2018

Visual Ethnography

VOLUME XIII | No 2 | 2024
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.2-165

Biography

Mireia Sallarès (Barcelona, 1973) is a visual artist and guest lecturer at several international universities. She lives between Barcelona and other foreign cities in which she carries out her artistic projects because foreignness is an essential register in her artistic practice.

Her works are the result of long research process of life from situated feminisms concerned by nonfiction and political problematics that are formalized with films, books, installations and *site-specific* works. She has presented her work internationally and she has received important grants as the Leonardo Grant for Researchers of BBVA Foundation. *Las Muertes Chiquitas*, a long investigation on female orgasm as a political problem carried out in Mexico is the project with which she has obtained the greatest international recognition. *Kao malo vode na dlanu*, research on love in Serbia awarded with the Barcelona 2019 City Award is the second chapter of her bigger and ongoing project: *The Trilogy of trash concepts (truth, love and work)*.

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Link & password

<https://vimeo.com/480867477?share=copy>
LOVE_SERBIA_4



Sinopsis

What is the amorous thinking we have incorporated, who exploits it and who abuses it? What inequalities does it generate and what withholding of recognition does it entail? Does it contribute to the reproduction of inequalities or can it subvert them? Can it be a productive force or only reproductive? Is love, when all is said and done, a passion of domination or of emancipation? As a way of relating to these questions, in this film-conversation in which only two people seem to be talking, many voices from different places are heard: the interpretation of the Yugoslav Wars, the transformation of ownership since communism and the transition to capitalism, the critique of romantic love, the anarchist legacy and feminist anthropology, the condition of the stranger and the tragedy of the refugees, psychoanalysis and the fiction of a police interrogation in which art calls into question the meaning of its practice.

Methodology

This project began during an investigation into truth in Caracas in 2011. This was the origin of the *Trilogy of Trash Concepts*, a Mireia Sallarès's still ongoing project from prolonged researches into life in relation to the doubtful political prestige of concepts such as truth, love and work. Someone told her the story of love's birth, Eros, son of Penia, goddess of poverty, a beggar. However, this precarity of love was resonating far beyond material precarity: love as a *trash concept* served to open up the question of everything and everyone that counts for nothing in the common imaginary regarding love on our lives.

Throughout four years of field work, going back and forth to the ex-Yugoslav territory, this project supported the importance of sustaining projects over time and borders, in the ups and downs of the intensity and the recognition that time is also a great creative force that works on what has been lived and imagined. A project in which the artist needed to dissolve the usual boundaries between theme, methodology and form. What Helena Braunjštajn, the first Serbian that Mireia Sallarès met, years ago in Mexico, who accompanied this project from its inception, helped to explain in the words of Jacques Derrida: any treatise on love must be an act *of* love, an act *with* love. To turn the theme into methodology and form, that is, to investigate love with love in order to produce loving acts, implied, among other things, to be open to that which could not be theorized or organized but which claims us. Open to the unexpected, to the unforeseen, to the unthinkable. It also implied surrendering to the power of fiction as a way to talk with care and respect to people who would not have accepted an interview in the usual documentary style. People tired of being commonplaces in historiography. People, as Helena's brother, the main character of this film, who crossed what Derrida described as a dense forest of prohibitions, discriminations, codes, scenarios and positions we must make our way through in order to cease separating love from other affects such as charity or friendship. This extended investigation by Sallarès shows what can happen to art when it lets itself be pervaded by an amorous practice. A lesson in humility and love for art.

Nuria Guell

Visual artist

Una película de Dios

Visual Ethnography

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[dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.2-166](https://doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.2-166)

Biography

Born in 1981 in Vidreres (Girona, España), lives and works in her native village.

Photographic, video, administrative and textual documents attest to its projects, most often performative. Her practice is not the expression of contemplation or a virtuous display of technique, but a practice of confrontation, of questioning evidence and conventions. She does not understand artistic practice as a cultural practice, but quite the opposite: she understands it as a socially and politically necessary practice in which the cultural and the established are brought into play.

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I made all recordings myself with a camera and my own mobile phone, without any previous script. The script for the video essay was conceived and developed on the basis of the documentation obtained during the process. What the editing script does, beyond bringing together the documentation, is to add another temporality, a narrative of its own in which the real bursts in to prevent us from settling too comfortably into preconceived ideas.

Link & password

<https://vimeo.com/514597838?share=copy>
UPDDENG22

Synopsis of the video

I collaborated for several months with eight underage girls who had been immersed in the context of sexual abuse and exploitation in Mexico to jointly produce a curatorial piece accompanied by an audio guide of religious paintings, mostly from the colonial period.

I showed the children around fifty paintings from Mexican collections, and from these they chose the nine that would end up making up the curatorial project. The content of the audio guide was extracted from their subjective interpretations of the Catholic scenes depicted.

I then contacted a family of former pimps – a mother and two of her children – who, while in prison for their crimes, “found God” and became Christian pastors. I invited them to interpret, based on their experience as traffickers, the paintings selected by the minors, thus complementing the audio guide.

I asked the MUAC, Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (University Museum of Contemporary Art), to negotiate the loans of works of art with the institutions that owned the paintings in order to display the original works in the exhibition.

STRUCTURE

The video essay is divided in 5 parts or thematic chapters:

PART 1 / The artist

To work or to make works in collaboration with subjects who expose part of their intimacy to the cameras’ eyes and ears is a sensitive practice, and it becomes reckless when the exposed subjects are minors who are victims of sexual abuse. As a woman from Vidreres (Girona) who barely makes a living from artistic practice but who at the same time must feel privileged for it, in this type of project I am just another subject that adds to the plot or narrative. I am there with my ignorance, with my prejudices, with my subjective experience, with my contradictions; and I consider this an ethical requirement.

While the narrative does not follow a chronological order – each chapter includes moments from my three stays in Mexico for the production of the work – this first part also serves as an opening chapter, as I introduce myself to the girls and explain my proposal to them.

PART 2 / The paintings

This part covers the process of selecting the paintings. Through the paintings, we begin to get to know the girls and their singularities, and we become immersed in the religious and cultural context of the piece. In the representations shown in the paintings, we can clearly see some of the traits attributed to the feminine by the dominant Christian culture: purity, spirit of sacrifice, victimhood, object of male desire, subordination to men, etc... The children begin to come to terms with the fact that the violence they suffered was not their inescapable fate, but rather part of a way of understanding existence that is the consequence of a vast cultural framework.

PART 3 / The girls

The girls live together in a Christian shelter, where they stay temporarily. Each one carries her own story. These girls between 13 and 17 years old have suffered in their flesh and in their minds a violence that most citizens cannot even imagine, but they are still there, and they do not want to be victims, they want to live, they want to understand.

PART 4 / The mother, the father and the stepfathers

Organising a society based on a particular concept of power has consequences; the scale of power is applied in all institutions, so that whoever is at the bottom of the scale receives all the blows, all the stray bullets. The family is a key institution in the patriarchal order, most abuses of power tend to take place within it, far from the public eye. Psychologists' and psychoanalysts' offices are full of family traumas, the echo of their confessions resounding in every corner of the public space.

PART 5 / God

Every power orders and identifies according to a scale of values based on faith. Power implies subordination and abuse, and this pattern serves as a model in the production of subjectivities. This film is a film about God and its consequences, about the consequences of organising a society on the basis of a power core, and no culture or community is free from that. Power is flexible, it adapts to all kinds of signifiers, it can take the form of Homeland, Love, Family, Identity, Justice, Destiny, etc., and it is always accompanied by the best intentions.

Out of topic

Articles

Oro bianco, oro nero:

un esercito di donne nelle piantagioni
(Chaco & Amazzonia)

Visual Ethnography

VOLUME XIII | No 2 | 2024
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.2-167

Zelda Alice Franceschi, *Disci, Università di Bologna, Italia*

Lorena Córdoba, *IICS – UCA /CONICET, Buenos Aires, Argentina*

Abstract

In this essay, the authors offer the reader some photographs. They are images portraying women in the Bolivian Amazon in the early 20th century and in the contemporary Indigenous Chaco (Argentina), respectively. The photographs offer an analysis of the two extractive contexts (rubber in the Amazon and cotton in the Chaco) through the unseen gaze of Indigenous, European-white, Immigrant and Creole women. They have been completely marginalised and erased from ethnographic and historical sources. The photographs offer an unusual interpretation of the intersectional dynamics of class, gender and race.

Keywords: Rubber boom; Cotton; Women; Amazonia; Chaco.

The authors

Zelda Alice Franceschi ha conseguito il dottorato di ricerca in antropologia della contemporaneità presso l'Università di Milano Bicocca ed insegna all'Università di Bologna. Conduce ricerca di campo nel Chaco argentino e in particolare lavora su autobiografie indigene con particolare attenzione ai temi legati al genere. Ha scritto sull'antropologia dell'alimentazione, sul ruolo della meccanizzazione e sul rapporto tra memoria autobiografica e immagini fotografiche.
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Lorena Córdoba ha conseguito il dottorato di ricerca in antropologia sociale presso l'Università di Buenos Aires ed è ricercatrice presso il CONICET, Argentina. È specializzata in etnologia ed etnostoria dell'Amazzonia boliviana e in particolare studia le relazioni di genere, la parentela e l'organizzazione sociale. Nei suoi lavori analizza inoltre il ruolo delle industrie estrattive nel Chaco e nell'Amazzonia. Ha concluso una borsa Marie Curie della Unione Europea all'Università Ca' Foscari Venezia www.unive.it/nameless-stories
e-mail: lorena_cordoba@uca.edu.ar

1 Lorena Córdoba ha scritto i seguenti paragrafi: Dall'Amazzonia al Chaco: Cosa resta di gomma e cotone; L'oro nero che piangono gli alberi; Trasparenti o invisibili?; Lo sguardo femminile all'estrattivismo; Accedere al passato attraverso la memoria delle donne. Zelda Alice Franceschi ha scritto, *La foto mi guardava*; I boschi di cera, ovvero l'oro bianco; Attraverso i campi di cotone; Le piantagioni. Le conclusioni sono state scritte insieme. Lorena Córdoba ha compiuto ricerche di archivio e conduce ricerche etnografiche in Bolivia. Zelda Alice Franceschi ha lavorato negli archivi parrocchiali della provincia del Chaco e nel *Archivo Histórico de San Lorenzo* (Rosario) e fa ricerca di campo in Argentina.

2 Petrowskaja 2024.

3 Gli archivi fotografici che conservano immagini dell'industria della gomma si trovano in collezioni private e istituzioni pubbliche sparse in misura maggiore in Europa piuttosto che in Bolivia. Pochissimi di questi materiali sono disponibili in Open Access ed è solo grazie a una paziente e approfondita ricerca che Lorena Córdoba è riuscita a scoprire un corpus fotografico sull'argomento che rimane praticamente sconosciuto. Córdoba ha inoltre lavorato sul campo e qui offerto alcune immagini dal suo lavoro etnografico. D'altro canto, le fotografie delle raccogliatrici di cotone conservate nell'*Archivo General de la Nación* sulla produzione di cotone, del Chaco ma non solo, non permettono di valorizzare né quantificare la partecipazione femminile. Zelda Alice Franceschi si è quindi servita di immagine fotografiche scattate sul campo e di alcune conservate negli "archivi privati" delle famiglie con cui ha lavorato.

4 I Wichí (famiglia linguistica matak-maka) sono uno dei gruppi indigeni presenti nel Chaco.

La foto mi guardava¹

Katja Petrowskaja. Scrittrice tedesca di origine ucraina, raccoglie 57 testi-minature a commento di fotografie pubblicate ogni tre settimane da un importante quotidiano tedesco. Il titolo del libro è, *La foto mi guardava*². La prima immagine: un minatore ucraino ripreso a mezzo busto in orizzontale e con il volto appena intuibile dietro una coltre di fumo, il nero della faccia è solcato da una sigaretta bianca che pende dalle labbra. La foto è del 2015. Scrive Petrowskaja: "quell'immagine mi inchiodava, sembrava pormi una domanda: 'dove sono io, con le mie capacità intellettuali, la coscienza, il mio impegno politico?'"

Petrowskaja non riusciva ad afferrare lo sguardo di quell'uomo perché gli occhi rimanevano nascosti dal fumo. Che cosa voleva esprimere il suo sguardo? "Disperazione? Rimprovero? Saggezza? Rabbia? Fede? Per lui una cosa vale l'altra?" (2024: 14) si chiede la scrittrice. Quell'uomo, i cui occhi non riusciamo ad intravedere non è cieco, "cieca sono io nella mia insipienza", chiude Petrowskaja (Ibid.).

In questo saggio saremo guardati da alcune fotografie, alcune scattate sul campo dalle autrici, altre invece più antiche e facenti parti di collezioni private di inizio secolo. Ci troviamo in sud America e le fotografie parlano di due contesti estrattivi.

Da un lato la Bolivia e la gomma elastica il cui commercio navigava a vapore e i cui stabilimenti (*barracas*) si stanziavano lungo fiumi o affluenti amazzonici (Madeira, Mamoré, Beni, Orthon, Acre, Madre de Dios, ecc.). Le *barracas* spuntarono come i funghi in autunno: alla fine del XIX secolo imprese europee così come boliviane, furono come calamite che attraevano genti da ogni dove, dall'oriente boliviano (la Chiquitanía, Mojos o Santa Cruz de la Sierra) erano chiamati indigeni e non solo, lavoratori andini e, infine una massa di immigrati francesi, inglesi, tedeschi e svizzeri (Córdoba 2024: 14). Tutti furono inghiottiti nella "macchina della gomma".

Dall'altro lato il Chaco argentino, forse più noto per gli stabilimenti (molti furono inglesi) per la lavorazione della canna da zucchero (Córdoba, Bossert, Richard 2015), gli *ingenios*, ma qui inquadrato invece per quell'impresa folgorante e miserevole delle piantagioni di cotone. Il Chaco argentino divenne infatti protagonista di una colonizzazione che a inizio del secolo XX vide in prima linea immigrati europei (tedeschi del Volga soprattutto ma anche cechi, croati) chiamati ad occupare e "colonizzare" un territorio appena divenuto "nazionale". Tutti dovevano prepararsi per i futuri "boschi di cera": i campi di cotone.

Le donne furono attrici protagoniste ma rimasero sempre ai margini. Tutte: bianche, creole, immigrate e indigene vennero incorporate negli ingranaggi della lavorazione della gomma nell'Amazzonia, così come in quelle del cotone del Chaco. Violentemente, pesantemente, inconsapevolmente, naturalmente. Oggi queste fotografie ritrovate grazie a ricerche etno-storiche in archivi privati o rimaste nascoste in archivi pubblici mostrano la quotidianità nelle *barracas* amazzoniche³. Molte mancano all'appello, quelle per esempio delle donne indigene Wichí⁴ chiamate alla marcia del cotone a partire dagli anni Quaranta del Novecento. Alcune fra queste sono visibili solo consultando fonti ufficiali come i diari dei missionari o le si ritrovano in archivi parrocchiali o in ex-conventi divenuti oggi archivi storici. Immagini: trasparenti alcune, opache altre, uniche, straordinarie e comuni come spesso lo sono le biografie che le accompagnano. Ma quanto o a quale livello possono parlarci? Dove sono le pieghe di quelle immagini, quali strati di memoria si sono sedimentati su quelle fotografie? E quali orizzonti di immaginazione aprono per chi compie ricerca di campo e di archivio? Ci sono fotografie che possono illuminare le oscurità del passato, chiazze di luce che riproducono ombre che sono rimaste nascoste. Alcune sono talmente belle che potrebbero essere rimproverate perché riproducono una sorta di estetica dell'esotismo di cui vogliono svuotarsi e sbarazzarsi le poetiche e politiche post-coloniali⁵. È possibile invece pensarle o mostrarle come "atti estetici di opposizione nuovi e alternativi"? (hooks 2020:

121). Può essere la dimensione estetica ed estetizzante delle fotografie un efficace strumento politico per riformulare le questioni dell'intersezionalità? Altre immagini invece sono più comuni e colpiscono per la loro sciapa bruttezza. Forse sono quasi naïfes, ma la questione rimane la stessa.

Senza entrare nel merito del loro valore storico, etno-storico e sociale, sulle dinamiche innescate dalla loro circolazione e sul loro essere dispositivo per la testimonianza storico-culturale, si tenterà un lavoro su due livelli. Alle immagini assenti si sovrapporranno ricordi che parlano attraverso le voci delle donne, quelle "sopravvissute" a più di mezzo secolo di lavoro nei campi. Esse faranno anche da contraltare alle scritture di uomini, ma non solo, saranno il contrappeso per quelle immagini che invece sono rimaste e che testimoniano che le donne c'erano e, nel mondo delle *barracas* non occupavano le fessure o le giustapposizioni della vita quotidiana ma "erano il quotidiano", o meglio "facevano il quotidiano".

Si proporrà quindi una sorta di percorso "a ostacoli" in cui Amazonia e Chaco arriveranno quasi a sovrapporsi anche in maniera discontinua e, perché no, dissonante. Attraverso la fotografia, usata analiticamente come inizio e fine, si restituirà e in un certo senso si proveranno ad "afferrare" alcuni scatti, immagini rappresentative che rendono conto di molte delle "dimenticanze" della storia ufficiale di questa colonizzazione estrattiva; e, in particolare, del processo di invisibilizzazione o occultamento delle donne indigene, creole ed europee che erano attivamente coinvolte sia nell'industria estrattiva del caucciù ("oro nero" nelle fonti) sia nella coltivazione del cotone (rispettivamente, "oro bianco" nella propaganda ufficiale). Etnografia e ricerca di archivio, dunque, per riscattare alcune storie di vita: minime, marginali, invisibili, mute fino ad oggi.

Quale immagine rimane nella memoria locale e regionale di entrambe le industrie e della partecipazione delle donne? Quali narrazioni e tropi narrativi permangono nella memoria quando invece non ci sono immagini, e cosa succede nella ricostruzione di un passato non così remoto in cui le donne non sono "viste" nei documenti e negli archivi? Quale potenziale ha la fotografia nel ricostruire le dinamiche intersezionali di variabili come classe, razza, genere e/o etnia? E infine, se è la memoria a fungere da "documento", "fonte" o "archivio", quando si tratta di rendere visibile la presenza delle donne nell'universo estrattivo, perché nelle fonti scritte non c'è quasi mai un luogo proprio che le identifichi, né che riporta i loro nomi, i loro volti, né tanto meno viene documentata l'esperienza del loro lavoro?

È bene ricordare inoltre quanto gli apparati estrattivi, così come le piantagioni, oggi sono un tema piuttosto insistente nelle ricerche etnografiche, contrappunto di temi o meglio di posizionamenti disciplinari rispetto al valore delle ontologie native, delle questioni ambientali, etiche e politiche, femminili e femministe⁶.

Dall'Amazonia al Chaco: cosa resta di gomma e cotone

In quello spazio che si può definire come "il cuore" delle cosiddette "Terre Basse" del Sud America si trova la regione chiamata Chaco, costituita dai territori di tre nazioni (Bolivia, Argentina e Paraguay), una regione scarsamente popolata⁷, costituita da un bosco secco, deciduo, con strati erbosi e graminacee e con numerosi cactus e bromeliacee. La porzione più a nord è quella boliviana dell'Amazonia, con le sue estese foreste verdi, la lussureggiante giungla pluviale e un numero quasi infinito di fiumi, laghi, torrenti e affluenti, dove la vegetazione rigogliosa è onnipresente.

Come mettere in relazione due regioni che, a prima vista, sembrano distanti e poco comparabili? Un primo punto in comune è che entrambe erano (e sono tuttora) abitate da numerose società indigene molto prima dell'arrivo dei colonizzatori europei, come tutto il territorio americano del resto. La particolarità di questa zona del mondo è che rappresentò uno degli ultimi avamposti della colonizzazione. Pertanto, l'avanzata delle diverse ondate colonizzatrici

⁵ Si vedano i contributi di Mignolio 2010 e Spivak 1985.

⁶ Si veda a tale proposito Tsing, Haraway 2019.

⁷ Per analizzare la relazione tra Terre Basse e le società indigene si vedano, tra gli altri Combès, Villar, Córdoba 2020; Richard, Franceschi, Córdoba 2021.

sopraggiunse solamente in un XX secolo già inoltrato. Dominazione, conquista, evangelizzazione incrinarono e plasmarono rapidamente la vita indigena. Missionari religiosi di diversi ordini e denominazioni, distinti attori sociali che hanno incarnato l'avanzata degli Stati nazionali, che gradualmente andavano costruendo – a volte pacificamente, spesso violentemente – le loro frontiere di confine (esploratori, militari, funzionari), innumerevoli viaggiatori, avventurieri o commercianti che, attratti dai racconti e dalle visioni dell'epoca sulle ricchezze promesse dalle sue esotiche risorse naturali, iniziarono a tracciare mappe, scrivere libri, fare disegni e, quando possibile, scattare fotografie.

Tra queste ondate di colonizzazione si verificò anche una fondamentale avanzata – graduale ma sempre più inarrestabile – dei fronti di colonizzazione che dalla metà del XIX secolo avevano dato forma alle diverse industrie estrattive. Oltre alla società nazionale, all'economia regionale e all'ambiente stesso, protetto dalla retorica civilizzatrice dell'ordine e del progresso, un estrartrivismo più o meno sistematico trasformò per sempre l'esistenza di quasi tutti i gruppi umani in entrambe le regioni. Pertanto, né il Chaco né l'Amazzonia possono essere compresi appieno senza tenere conto che questi processi apparentemente economici o produttivi, in realtà, costituirono fenomeni multidimensionali che coinvolgevano una vasta gamma di trasformazioni di ogni tipo: economiche, geografiche, demografiche, etniche, politiche, ambientali, simboliche.

Per documentare alcune delle modulazioni locali di questo processo, ci si concentrerà su due industrie estrattive che hanno trasformato le società indigene nei bassopiani sudamericani e, allo stesso tempo, hanno avuto un certo impatto sulle fonti storiche: nelle cronache e nei documenti testuali, ma anche in altri archivi della memoria come le raccolte di immagini pittografiche o fotografiche, nella cartografia, nei racconti orali delle persone o, più recentemente, nella memoria locale.



Figura 1 Accampamento nella selva in cui il cauchero secca palle di látex della gomma per poi affumarle

L'“oro nero” che piangono gli alberi

Tra il 1880 e il 1920, i Paesi del bacino amazzonico, e in particolare l'Amazzonia settentrionale boliviana, si dedicarono all'estrazione, alla produzione e alla commercializzazione del caucciù (*Hevea brasiliensis*), più comunemente



8 Córdoba 2015.

9 Córdoba 2015: 371.

Figura 2 Una casa commerciale di inizio secolo dove si può vedere la produzione di gomma amazzonica, sulla stessa gomma il timbro identifica l'origine sudamericana della materia prima. Sullo sfondo ci sono operai, uomini d'affari e nella casa, quasi nascosta, una donna con un bambino piccolo.

noto come “gomma”⁸. Quando vennero scoperti migliaia di alberi di caucciù sparsi nella giungla selvaggia, iniziò una feroce corsa alla conquista di questi territori dimenticati e inospitali, fino ad allora abbandonati e tacciati come improduttivi “deserti verdi” in cui gli Stati nazionali non avevano alcuna presenza effettiva. Esploratori, commercianti, uomini d'affari, imprenditori, avventurieri e naturalisti boliviani e stranieri arrivarono per raccogliere e poi vendere il prezioso lattice. Dopo un processo di coagulazione, il lattice biancastro veniva trasformato in solide sfere di gomma scura o “oro nero” che, a bordo di piccole imbarcazioni, attraversavano i fiumi della giungla per raggiungere i grandi porti del Brasile – Belém do Pará e Manaus – e da lì i mercati europei e nordamericani. Promettendo una ricchezza fino ad allora senza precedenti, lo sfruttamento del caucciù spinse a una politica sistematica di esplorazione territoriale e di consolidamento delle frontiere repubblicane, alla fondazione di città, porti e uffici doganali, all'apertura di nuove vie di comunicazione e anche a una massiccia migrazione di coloni da altre regioni del Paese, dalla regione andina e anche di immigrati francesi, inglesi, tedeschi e svizzeri. Spesso la realtà contraddiceva i sogni di fortuna e il canto delle sirene del caucciù si affievoliva rapidamente per le malattie croniche della giungla, la violenza di un'industria dispiegata in regioni marginali o anche l'indebitamento ciclico del lavoratore stesso, e nessuno era completamente al riparo dagli inarrestabili alti e bassi che la sorte riservava: né i caucheros boliviani né gli stranieri. Ciononostante, il caucciù rimase redditizio e per anni il mondo chiese a gran voce “caucciù e ancora il caucciù”⁹, che ogni giorno usciva dall'Amazzonia per raggiungere il mondo.

10 Misión Nueva Pompeya che dipendeva dal Colegio Apostólico di San Diego (Provincia di Salta) venne fondata dal *Colegio di Propaganda Fide* nell'anno 1900. Si veda Franceschi 2023.

11 Molto è stato scritto anche sull'immigrazione italiana nel Chaco ed in particolare su quella friulana.

I boschi di cera, ovvero l'"oro bianco"



"Decauville", propiedad de la S. A. La Chaqueña, transportando algodón.

Figura 3 Raccolta del cotone. Chaco argentino anni Trenta del Novecento. *Archivo Histórico Juan José Alumni*, Resistencia, Chaco.

Il Chaco argentino divenne Territorio nazionale piuttosto tardi, negli anni Ottanta dell'Ottocento. L'azione del governo nazionale creò riduzioni indigene, missioni, colonie agricole e rese possibile all'inizio l'acquisto a grandi proprietari terrieri di enormi latifondi per creare imprese per la lavorazione dello zucchero e del cotone (1876, Ley Avellaneda). Diverse leggi successive abolirono il sistema di colonizzazione attraverso società private. Si costruirono nel frattempo ferrovie e importanti estensioni di terreno furono riservate allo Stato per la fondazione di colonie. Furono questi gli anni in cui il Ministero dell'Agricoltura argentino e l'Ente Nazionale per il Cotone svilupparono un'intensa relazione con esperti per la produzione del cotone. Le Breton, allora Ministro dell'agricoltura, promosse l'immigrazione europea nel Chaco e consigliò i coloni sulla selezione delle sementi; si fondarono cooperative e sindacati. Vi era una effervescenza esplosiva, secondo la propaganda nazionale, le piantagioni erano chiamate "i boschi di cera" mentre il cotone, "l'"oro bianco" del Chaco.

In quegli anni, i Wichís conosciuti, i figli o i nipoti di coloro che avevano fondato nel 1900 con alcuni missionari francescani Misión Nueva Pompeya¹⁰, scappavano alle piantagioni dello zucchero attratti dai nuovi beni che ricevevano come ricompensa al lavoro: utensili, armi, pettini, vestiti, scarpe, alimenti (Montani 2015; Dasso, Franceschi 2015). Lavorarono alle piantagioni dello zucchero solo fino al 1924 perché poi l'allora governatore del Chaco, Fernando Centeno, vietò loro di lasciare la sua giurisdizione, costringendoli a rimanere in un territorio dove l'unica possibilità di lavoro era il cotone. A quell'epoca, la regione del Chaco si preparava a diventare uno dei principali produttori di cotone dell'Argentina, mentre negli anni Cinquanta il Chaco diventava provincia.

Nella zona dell'*Impenetrable* convivono più o meno stabilmente indigeni, creoli, e discendenti degli immigrati che la letteratura chiama anche "coloni". Gli indigeni Wichís, resi sedentari nel 1900, sono stati braccianti tutta la vita; si scontrarono con i creoli che a fine Ottocento con i loro animali, mucche prevalentemente, entrarono da Salta e Santiago del Estero in cerca di pascoli. Anche loro, conosciuti nella letteratura come *chaqueños* o *norteños*, sono stati braccianti alle piantagioni. A partire dal 1907, a seguito della Ley Avellaneda e di molti altri provvedimenti, il settore nordoccidentale del Chaco si popolò di immigrati provenienti dall'est europeo. In questa zona arrivarono quelli che la letteratura conosce come "i tedeschi del Volga"; la complicata situazione della Germania a seguito della Guerra dei sette anni (1756-1763) e una serie di privilegi concessi dalla zarina Caterina II, li avevano portati dapprincipio a colonizzare le terre intorno al Volga (Ladilova 2019: 129). Si trattava di un piccolo gruppo etnico che emigrò poi dalla Russia all'Argentina a causa delle crescenti ostilità russe e per ragioni economiche; furono infine trascinati nella recente colonia del cotone, Juan José Castelli. Il luogo era una landa povera e desolata e vi arrivarono le più disperate immigrazioni¹¹.

Le dinamiche interetniche si sono conformate con sfumature e sfaccettature diverse rispetto agli interlocutori e ai luoghi di azione: missioni, piantagioni, foresta, scuole, sindacati, ospedali, chiese in un contesto storico dove il *peronismo* ha giocato la sua partita storica e politica, locale. Il governo di Perón¹² non fece espliciti riferimenti alla razza ma spinse su concetti come “assimilazione” e “omogeneità” e parlò di “popoli” e “tipi” piuttosto che di razze. Già nell’Argentina degli anni Quaranta del Novecento i temi legati alla razza come il colore della pelle e altri tratti fisiognomici assunsero chiari significati politici (Elena 2016). Il *peronismo* ebbe un ruolo cruciale nelle organizzazioni sindacali legate al cotone e fu presente come alleato dei movimenti dei “Sacerdoti per il Terzo mondo” che operava nel Chaco negli anni Settanta¹³. Molti insulti degli antiperonisti erano a sfondo razziale. I peronisti delle province erano chiamati “cabecitas negras”¹⁴, i creoli che lavoravano alle piantagioni di cotone erano i “negros”, mentre nel peronismo gli indigeni erano accettati se li si collegava al passato rurale dell’Argentina, loro infatti erano chiamati dai coloni, “paisanos” e cioè contadini. L’epiteto significava “del paese”, erano “nativi” del paese e le connotazioni erano anche peggiorative, i “paisanos” erano “i selvatici, i non civili”. D’altra parte, gli indigeni definivano i bianchi coloni come *tsekhu*, “gringos dagli occhi blu”. *Tsekhu*: “cechi” che erano arrivati da lontano attraversando il mare. Questo è un dato fondamentale per capire le dinamiche di classe, razza e genere nelle colonie del cotone fra creoli, indigeni e bianchi. Si tratta di un dato sensibile che oggi impariamo ad associare alle fotografie, noi antropologhe certo, ma soprattutto alcune donne immortalate in quelle immagini. Mentre le foto ci guardano.

Trasparenti o invisibili?



Figura 4 Donne creole ed europee vestite nella città di Riberalta per un incontro sociale all’inizio del XX secolo. Tra loro ci sono alcune donne immigrate europee di prima e seconda generazione. Le fotografie di questa collezione si concentrano sulle attività sociali: balli di carnevale, partite di tennis, caccia nella giungla ed escursioni turistiche.

12 Juan Domingo Perón (1895-1974) è stato un generale e politico argentino. Presidente dell’Argentina dal 1946 al 1955, quando venne rovesciato da un colpo di stato militare. Rieletto alla stessa carica nel 1973, morì l’anno seguente e gli subentrò la terza moglie, Isabel Martínez de Perón.

13 Come sottolinea Elena (2016: 197), “pubblicazioni come *El Descamisado* dedicarono ampi servizi alle lotte delle comunità indigene in Argentina e, più vagamente, ai lavoratori rurali svantaggiati nelle zone provinciali associate alle popolazioni creole e non bianche”.

14 Questo termine era utilizzato per evidenziare la loro presunta ascendenza indigena e/o africana, la loro condizione di classe inferiore (Elena 2016).



Figura 5 Donne indigene e creole in una capanna vestite e pettinate in stile "europeo" con oggetti (fazzoletti, fiori e ventagli), 1908-1911, Bolivia. La distanza sociale tra loro è evidente: tuttavia, l'autore dell'immagine non fa alcuna distinzione tra loro e intitola l'immagine *Indias*.

Sullo sfondo dell'universo estrattivo delle pianure sudamericane, poco o nulla si conosce delle donne creole, europee e indigene coinvolte in un modo o nell'altro nell'ingranaggio del caucciù: dagli operai che estraggono la materia prima nella giungla profonda, alle compagne, amanti o mogli dei produttori di caucciù, dall'esploratore che guida i produttori di caucciù nella giungla o traduce le lingue indigene alla signora europea che gestisce la *barraca* e organizza eventi sociali nei club del nord della Bolivia. In effetti, nella percezione canonica della storia del caucciù, le donne sono rappresentate al massimo come personaggi minori, trasparenti, quasi invisibili, dimenticate, relegate o menzionate in modo laterale, obliquo o indiretto. I resoconti di viaggiatori, esploratori, soldati, naturalisti, industriali, politici e persino degli stessi missionari che percorsero e tracciarono la geografia della regione ci presentano uno scenario sociale in cui le donne non compaiono o sono presentate in modo marginale. Tuttavia, se le cronache scritte "dimenticano" o ritagliano la presenza delle donne nel mondo dei battitori di gomma, molte immagini dell'epoca le mostrano allo stesso tempo in primo piano. Sono le fotografie, infatti, che non solo confermano l'esistenza dei volti femminili e delle loro occupazioni, ma ne attivano anche la memoria locale. Così, lavorando con la memoria orale delle donne discendenti di questi primi immigrati, ascoltando le storie di *Doña* Emilia, figlia di svizzeri che avevano la loro piccola impresa della gomma, l'industria lascia il ricordo di anni d'oro: lusso, balli di carnevale e opulenza (di cui poco o nulla è sopravvissuto fino ai giorni nostri). Emilia conserva una vasta collezione di fotografie che testimoniano il lavoro di tutte le donne della sua famiglia: i tempi e le modalità del lavoro della gomma. Le collezioni fotografiche private e pubbliche diffuse in Europa e in America ci presentano tutta una serie di donne che partecipano attivamente allo sforzo estrattivo come lavoratrici che accompagnano i loro partner nella giungla per raccogliere il lattice, che più spesso lavorano come venditrici, tessitrici, cuoche, lavandaie o domestiche, che si occupano di piccoli dettagli della vita domestica in caserma – che, tutto sommato, sembra più prevedibile per l'epoca – ma che a volte vendono anche il proprio corpo, o addirittura si occupano di un processo essenziale per l'industria come il reclutamento della manodopera¹⁵.

Nei campi di cotone



Figura 6 Susana Nazareno. Misión Nueva Pompeya, Chaco Argentina, 2023.

Lei è Susana Nazareno ha 60 anni. Ha iniziato ad andare alle piantagioni di cotone quando ne aveva 5. Nel 1976. Andava con i suoi genitori che avevano cominciato alla fine degli anni Quaranta. Racconta che all'inizio accompagnava i genitori ma che già quando aveva compiuto i 12 anni lavorava con loro e con i fratelli e sorelle maggiori. Iniziava alle sette e mezza e terminava alle dodici. Poi riprendeva il lavoro al pomeriggio. Prima della vera e propria raccolta l'attività era quello del diserbo, si toglievano le piante infestanti e si spruzzavano pesticidi. Poi, passato circa un mese, si iniziava. Tutti i Wichís parlano di “prima”, “seconda” e “terza” mano riferendosi alla “prima raccolta” e poi a quelle successive. L'uomo andava per primo e la moglie dietro di lui con i figli. Marito e moglie avevano una valigia che si attaccava con una cintura al bacino dove riponevano il cotone. Alla fine della fila del campo, che si percorreva raccogliendo il cotone, la valigia diventava pesante e la si svuotava una volta arrivati alla punta. Si riponeva il cotone in un sacco che poi, a fine giornata, veniva pesato dal padrone, il “patrón”. Si accumulavano più sacchi e per riconoscerli si marcava con un arbusto (“yuyo”) colore azzurro. Tre figli di Susana sono morti alle piantagioni e due avevano già un nome. Morirono forse perché riposavano su tele di plastica, su campi che erano stati appena diserbati. In ogni famiglia morirono bambini. “I bambini del cotone”.

Le donne lavoravano scalze, spesso incinta e la sera si prendevano cura della “casa”, una specie di capanna dove i maiali dei coloni bianchi gironzolavano. Le donne andavano a prendere l'acqua e spesso lavoravano anche nei campi dei coloni che mantenevano coltivazioni di girasole, mais, sorgo. Il dolore e la sofferenza nello sguardo e nelle parole di Susana non hanno nessuna recriminazione né vittimizzazione. C'è la verità di quanto hanno vissuto che pare trasformare la loro esperienza nelle piantagioni in una sorta di “contro-memoria”. Nei campi di cotone, nel monte e nelle strade della città di Juan José Castelli, la colonia del cotone, hanno disegnato una “geografia degli affetti” che è divenuta anche strategia di sopravvivenza.

16 *Gaceta algodonera*, Buenos Aires, 31 di marzo 1924: 8

17 *Gaceta algodonera*, Buenos Aires, 30 di aprile 1924: 10.



Figura 7 María e José Schmidt ex coltivari di cotone a Juan José Castelli, Chaco. Argentina, 2023.

Lei è Maria, la moglie di José Schmidt. Lui è il barbiere del paese, ha scritto anche diversi libri sulla storia del Chaco. Maria e José aggiungono un altro etnonimo le cui origini non sono riuscite a ricostruire, dicono che gli indigeni venivano chiamati *kayok* e che lavoravano duramente, come i creoli del resto. Anche la madre di Maria e Maria lavorarono nei campi. Dicono di essere stati i “coloni”, di avere contribuito alla colonizzazione del Chaco. Erano già agricoltori, già contadini e vissero vite miserevoli. Sia Maria che José hanno accenti paternalistici, non nascondono discriminazione, mostrando altresì una solidarietà sfilacciata ma costantemente presente nelle piantagioni di cotone. Nel caso della produzione di cotone, il lavoro domestico e agricolo era pensato integrando gli sforzi di tutta la famiglia, i giornali di propaganda insistevano sul fatto che “la raccolta del cotone richiedesse molto personale (il principale fattore di aumento dei costi di produzione), ma essendo un’operazione in cui non era necessaria l’energia muscolare, ma piuttosto la resistenza al clima, potevano essere impiegati donne e bambini”¹⁶. La famiglia, sarà l’elemento che permetterà il successo della produzione di cotone e di tutti gli agricoltori che vi partecipavano: “le caratteristiche della coltivazione del cotone permettono di sfruttare, soprattutto nella stagione del raccolto, non solo le donne, ma persino i bambini. Questo, naturalmente, aumenta notevolmente i profitti”¹⁷. Il lavoro delle famiglie dei coloni coltivatori di cotone viene offerto come esempio di vita rurale orientata al bene dell’intera comunità. La presenza delle donne, colone e immigrate nella cura dei campi non sarà solo occasionalmente ammessa, ma entrerà a tutti gli effetti come parte fondamentale dei loro doveri domestici (De Arce 2015: 186). L’apparato iconografico nelle riviste di propaganda ufficiale (*La Chacra* per esempio) proponeva allora, nel periodo di auge del cotone, fotografie che ritraevano donne colone nei campi.

Lo sguardo femminile all'estrattivismo



Figura 8 Donne indigene in una fabbrica di *chicha* in Bolivia (bevanda fermentata a base di manioca), che mostrano le grandi pentole utilizzate per produrre chicha e i contenitori usati per distribuirli.



Figura 9 Donna indigena che trasporta legna da ardere, ritratta a *Misión Cavinás* (Bolivia) all'inizio del secolo dal famoso etnografo svedese Erland Nordenskiöld (2003 [1922]: 124) che dopo un viaggio nell'Amazzonia boliviana disse: "Senza indios non c'è industria del caucciù".

Le fotografie rivelano il funzionamento quotidiano dell'ingranaggio estrattivo, in cui la presenza femminile ha indubbiamente svolto un ruolo fondamentale. Nella giungla più profonda ci sono lavoratrici che estraggono il lattice dagli alberi e altre che rimangono nel campo per prendersi cura dei figli. Nelle *barracas* centrali o nelle case commerciali si trovano anche le lavandaie, le portatrici d'acqua, le filatrici, le tessitrici e le cuoche che svolgono le mansioni domestiche dell'intera impresa, che può arrivare a contare fino a duecento lavoratori che vivono contemporaneamente nelle *barracas*. Dall'altro lato, ci sono notizie di donne – per lo più indigene – che, grazie alla loro conoscenza della geografia locale, fungono da guide per le esplorazioni che tentano di mappare il territorio sconosciuto e la delimitazione dei confini internazionali, o accompagnano le commissioni private e statali che viaggiano attraverso l'Amazzonia come traduttrici o interpreti, partecipando attivamente non solo alla ricerca di nuovi alberi della gomma, ma anche alla scoperta o all'apertura di nuove vie d'acqua che possano esportare la preziosa merce verso i porti del Brasile. Mentre la storia ufficiale rende invisibili tutte queste donne, le immagini che hanno iniziato a comparire e a circolare negli ultimi anni le riportano gradualmente alla ribalta. La partecipazione delle donne era importante quanto quella degli uomini e per molti anni l'industria del caucciù è stata il motore economico che ha posizionato l'Amazzonia al centro del mondo. La ricostruzione dell'*agency* femminile sostenuta da queste immagini non è priva di luci, ombre e ambiguità. Esse documentano una situazione dinamica in cui si intersecano e si sovrappongono le categorie analitiche del genere (maschile e femminile), della razza (donne europee, creole, meticcie, indigene), della classe (donne appartenenti a grandi famiglie di produttori e lavoratori del caucciù), della geografia (lavoratrici rurali e urbane), ecc. Cosa pesa di più, in ogni caso, per comprendere e ricalibrare correttamente il peso relativo della partecipazione femminile all'industria del caucciù? Tutto: in alcuni contesti il rapporto indigeni/creoli diviene cruciale, mentre in altri prevarrà l'analisi di genere, quando si analizzano le relazioni tra uomini e donne che hanno partecipato all'industria. Se si omette o privilegia una delle categorie sopra citate a scapito di altre, la ricostruzione storica sarà incompleta.

Accedere al passato attraverso la memoria delle donne

In Amazzonia ci sono città che, ancora oggi, vivono nel ricordo di un'epoca d'oro di lusso e sterline che scorrevano nella giungla con la stessa ricchezza dello champagne francese. L'industria del caucciù arrivò, conquistò tutto e poi si estinse quasi con la stessa velocità con cui crebbe: così velocemente, infatti, che molti dovettero rendersi conto che stavano assistendo in prima persona all'inizio della fine. A metà degli anni Dieci, con l'ingresso dell'Europa negli eventi che portarono alla Prima Guerra Mondiale, l'industria boliviana del caucciù andò in totale declino di fronte alla concorrenza delle piantagioni britanniche del Sud-Est asiatico e, lentamente, il caucciù venne dimenticato.

Ma cosa accadde allora alle società indigene che parteciparono ed entrarono in contatto con questo mondo di ricchezza tanto effimera? In realtà, non tutti gli indigeni amazzonici parteciparono all'industria. Alcuni potevano convivere con i coltivatori di caucciù, altri li affrontavano apertamente. Nel caso dei Chacobo, un gruppo di lingua pano che abitava la regione, non furono incorporati come lavoratori nelle *barracas* perché non erano considerati pienamente "civilizzati", come invece lo erano altri gruppi indigeni della regione. Tuttavia, erano ritenuti gruppi "amici" con i quali potevano scambiare perline o altri oggetti con cibo come mais, manioca o selvaggina. In alcune fotografie, quindi, si possono vedere questi indigeni che vivono con i coltivatori di caucciù con i loro abiti o vestiti tradizionali. Per loro la gomma faceva parte di un processo di sedentarizzazione del territorio: compare nei loro racconti mitici, ma anche nelle genealogie, nella toponomastica, nelle memorie collettive, nelle biografie e nelle storie di vita. *Bahi*, un'anziana signora chacobo mentre accende il fuoco per combattere il freddo, con calma racconta un lontano

episodio della sua infanzia, quando una fra le sue sorelle fu rapita nel mezzo della giungla da alcuni tagliatori di gomma in fuga. Per lei, l'era del caucciù è innanzitutto il ricordo doloroso di quella perdita. Il caucciù ha segnato la sua traiettoria: sia con l'incorporazione di cognomi spagnoli attraverso relazioni di patronato e *compadrazgo*¹⁸ con i raccoglitori di caucciù che persistono ancora oggi, sia nella memoria delle donne che ricordano, ad esempio, il rapimento di bambini o donne in quei tempi di violenza quasi quotidiana.

18 Relazione personale e di reciprocità tra il padre di un bambino e la persona che è stata designata come suo padrino di battesimo e che si suggella con il sacramento. Le due persone si definiscono come *compadres* da cui deriva la parola *compadrazgo*.



Figura 10 Bahi nella sua comunità Chacobo, Bolivia, luglio 2013.

Le piantagioni

Le piantagioni sono oggi studiate da femministe ed ecologiste che sostengono quanto esse accelerino i tempi di generazione e sconvolgano quelli di tutti gli attori coinvolti. Esse, secondo Haraway e Tsing semplificano radicalmente il numero di “giocatori” e creano situazioni per la vasta proliferazione di alcune “specie” e l’eliminazione di altre. Si tratta di un universo che attira epidemie, capace di riorganizzare la vita delle specie nel mondo. Nel lavoro forzato le autrici includono anche piante, animali e microbi.

Per Donna Haraway e per Anna Tsing la piantagione è a) semplificazione radicale b) sostituzione di popoli, colture, microbi e forme di vita c) disordine dei tempi di generazione tra le specie, compresi gli esseri umani d) interruzione radicale della possibilità della cura e la rottura del legame con il luogo. Elementi costanti, in varie combinazioni e trasversalmente presenti nelle piantagioni intensive: semplificazione ecologiche che comportano un disciplinamento delle piante e degli uomini per lavorare su di esse (Tsing, Haraway 2019).

Per bell hooks (2020) anche nelle situazioni più marginali (come nelle piantagioni, per esempio, ma non solo) le donne sono state capaci di accudire, curare, amare, proteggere. Per Virginia Nazarea (1998) la memoria delle donne delle piante è un potente antidoto alla distruzione ecologica.

Le mani di Susana, quelle di suo marito, le mani di suo figlio Paulino Díaz e quelle di Maria (nella foto con il marito) hanno visto, toccato, sofferto i campi di cotone. Susana oggi raccoglie *chaguar*, una blomeliacea (*Bromelia hieronymi* e *urbaniana*) con cui confeziona diversi artefatti, nel monte, coltiva cotone nel suo piccolo orto di casa e se riesce anche mais e meloni, raccoglie i frutti nel monte durante la primavera e l’estate.

Ritorniamo allora e in punta di piedi a quelle miniature di Petrowskaja e ad un'altra immagine che rimanda all'artista francese Natacha Nisic che dal 1995 registra i gesti quotidiani, "un catalogo delle azioni pacifiche mai celebrate [...] due mani tengono una sfera di legno come fosse un globo terrestre, mani femminili che indossano guanti di gomma. [...] Altre mani che contano il denaro" (2024: 231). Un archivio di mani e di gesti, mai casuali, sempre ricercati che disvelano la storia di queste donne, che coltivavano e coltivano, raccoglievano e raccolgono, cucivano e cuciono, che si prendevano cura e che si prendono cura dei loro figli. Una collezione di gesti che si ripetono nel tempo e che basta a se stessa.



Figura 11 Susana Nazareno e il figlio Paulino Díaz mostrano il cotone che coltivano nel loro orto del *paraje Polenom*, Misión Nueva Pompeya, 2023.



Figura 12 Susana mostra l'algarroba che conserva per l'inverno e che ha raccolto.

E i ricordi dei Wichís alle piantagioni restano: orrendi, solo dolorosi. Ma non sono solo questo. Quando sono stati interrogati sulle piantagioni hanno voluto raccontare della chiesa cattolica di Juan José Castelli, per esempio, dove celebravano i loro matrimoni e dove i figli indossavano i vestiti che potevano comprarsi con i soldi che guadagnavano. Queste fotografie permangono e ci arrivano in una forma quasi pura e immacolata; direbbe Petrowskaja “sono così espressive che è come se le qualità umane pervenissero qui in una forma distillata” (2024: 231).



Figura 13 Una anziana Wichí conserva questa fotografia e racconta degli abiti che durante la raccolta del cotone comprava per i figli che raccoglievano con lei.

Conclusioni

La voce dell'esperienza femminile interetnica e subalterna nell'industria cotoniera del Chaco e quella della gomma dell'Amazzonia boliviana mostra come fosse all'opera l'interconnessione, spesso complicata e opaca, tra identità di genere, etnia, classe ed età. Poco rilevante risulta essere la determinante della classe sociale, mentre il contatto interetnico dell'apparato estrattivo diventa un mezzo sia per ampliare l'orizzonte di socievolezza degli indigeni sia uno strumento per comprendere nel lungo periodo le radicate gerarchie etniche dei lavoratori del Chaco che precedono l'industria del cotone e lo stesso estrattivismo.

Nei campi di cotone, la distinzione razziale è sempre incorporata ed esplicitata in un universo, quello del criollo e dell'indigeno, che aveva già specifici criteri di identificazione legati, come abbiamo visto, alla politica *peronista*; nella marcia verso i campi di cotone, si aggiunge la categorizzazione etnica degli *tsekhu*. Le politiche di disciplinamento imposte a queste donne alle piantagioni di cotone non hanno loro impedito di accudire i loro figli e di curarli. Susana mostra con orgoglio le foto dei figli con i vestiti della festa, molte donne creole hanno ricordato le difficili solidarietà tra donne poco abituate a convivere, María conosce molte delle donne Wichís, testimoni privilegiate. Ricorda del sapone che le chiedevano, delle scarpe che volevano in prestito.

Nella selva della gomma, esistono momenti in cui non importa più se i lavoratori sono creoli, indigeni oppure europei: tutti gli uomini e le donne sono indebitati e vivono in uno stato di schiavitù a credito. Su un altro piano, però,

la differenza tra le donne si fa sentire e non è la stessa cosa essere l'amante di un battitore di gomma o essere una donna sposata che vive in città. Anche in questo caso c'è un'ampia gamma di categorie di donne indigene, che non solo lavorano nell'industria, che si rimboccano le maniche per andare nella giungla in cerca di lavoro e che fanno funzionare l'intera macchina estrattiva, comprese quelle che si prostituiscono nelle grandi città come Manaus, Belém do Pará o Riberalta. Nella memoria di *Doña* Emilia l'industria lascia il ricordo di anni regali dove balli e opulenza brillano di luce propria. Mentre nella storia di *Bahi*, una donna Chacobo, il caucciù sfugge e scivola nel ricordo della sorella rapita dai tagliatori di gomma, di sparizioni forzate e di molto altro ancora.

D'altro canto, nell'ascoltare molte storie delle piantagioni di cotone si è indotti a pensare quanto siano le stesse donne a voler superare e travalicare le divisioni di classe, razza e genere. Le donne non vogliono che tutte queste dinamiche – razziste e classiste – inghiottiscano il resto. Invitano a guardare negli interstizi, nelle fessure e in tutte le giustapposizioni del quotidiano. Perché? Perché, forse, c'era dell'altro oltre alla sofferenza. Perché propongono una visione che ci appare inedita di un passato così terrificante? Quello che viene in mente e che più emerge è che le storie raccontate servano ancora per costruire "rifugi", nel senso espresso da Donna Haraway (2015). L'orto dove Susana coltiva il "suo" cotone è per lei oggi rifugio da tutto ciò che continua a mancarle, la foresta dove va con le sue vicine di casa a raccogliere algarroba (*Prosopis alba*), è rifugio di fronte ad un bosco sempre più devastato. O, come diceva Nazarea, un deposito di memorie. Anche per i criollos andare nel monte è un rifugio e la loro farmacopea persistente, lo dimostra. Per tutte loro, dunque, una cosa non vale l'altra.

In questo lavoro si è tentato di unire entrambi gli ambienti geografici attraverso le fotografie di donne indigene, creole ed europee. Ignorate, marginalizzate e trascurate, testimoniano non solo le loro storie di vita ma anche le loro azioni nella storia, una storia che generalmente le dimentica. Se il Chaco è distante dall'Amazzonia, le fotografie qui raccolte si uniscono in un continuum di racconti, memorie e storie scritte, parlate e catturate in forma femminile. Non sono diverse o differenti quando si parla di donne nelle due industrie estrattive, sebbene separate da migliaia di chilometri da un lato e da una distanza temporale di oltre cinquant'anni dall'altro. Le immagini sono la prova di una riflessione che è punto di partenza: il processo di invisibilizzazione o di occultamento delle donne indigene, creole ed europee che erano attivamente coinvolte sia nell'industria del caucciù sia nella produzione del cotone.

Il potere delle immagini ci permette di ricostruire le dinamiche intersezionali di variabili quali classe, razza, genere ed etnia, aggiungendo non solo il materiale delle fonti storiche ma anche le storie e la memoria orale delle donne che illustrano e danno voce a queste fotografie.

Legenda delle fotografie

Fotografia 1. *Choza para ahumar goma de seringueiros en San Francisco*, 15 de agosto de 1911, Eduard Seler, Legado Ernst Ule © Instituto Iberoamericano, Berlino.

Fotografia 2. *Patio de la Casa Suárez con bolachas de goma en Cobija, Alto Acre*, 11 de enero de 1912, Eduard Seler, Legado Ernst Ule © Instituto Iberoamericano, Berlino.

Fotografia 3. Raccolta del cotone. Chaco argentino anni Trenta del Novecento © Archivo Histórico Juan José Alumni, Resistencia, Chaco, Argentina.

Fotografia 4. Donne a Riberalta © Archivio privato Hecker Rojas, Riberalta.

Fotografia 5. *Indias*, Emil Bauler, 1908-1911 © Archivio privato Wolfgang Wiggers, Ottersberg.

Fotografia 6. Susana Nazareno. Misión Nueva Pompeya, Chaco Argentina © Zelda Alice Franceschi, 2023.

Fotografia 7. María e José Schmidt ex coltivari di cotone a Juan José Castelli, Chaco. Argentina. © Zelda Alice Franceschi, 2023.

- Fotografía 8.** *Fábrica de chicha en Baures, 1900* © Historische Fotos aus Bolivien, Instituto Iberoamericano, Berlino.
- Fotografía 9.** *Mujer llevando leña, Misión Cavinás, 1914* © N. Erland Norden-skiöld, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin / Ethnologisches Museum, Berlino.
- Fotografía 10.** *Bahí, Alto Ivon, Beni, luglio 2013* © Archivio privato Lorena Córdoba / Diego Villar, Buenos Aires.
- Fotografía 11.** Susana Nazareno e il figlio Paulino Díaz mostrano il cotone che coltivano nel loro orto del paraje Polenom, Misión Nueva Pompeya, Chaco, Argentina. © Zelda Alice Franceschi, 2023.
- Fotografía 12.** Susana Nazareno mostra la algarroba che conserva per l'inverno. Misión Nueva Pompeya, Chaco Argentina © Zelda Alice Franceschi, 2023.
- Fotografía 13.** Una anziana Wichí conserva questa fotografia e racconta degli abiti che durante la raccolta del cotone comprava per i figli che raccoglievano con lei. Misión Nueva Pompeya, Chaco Argentina © Zelda Alice Franceschi, 2023.

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How Painted Backdrops link Photographic studios:

A case from Cameroon

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

The model of intellectual genealogy formed by relationships between masters and apprenticeships is used to help understand patterns of connection among studio photographers in Cameroon from the 1970s and 1980s. Chains of apprenticeships between photographers existed parallel to those between painters and their apprentices. Painted backdrops were moved between studios and gifts of backdrops marked the end of an apprenticeship as a new studio was established. The networks thus established bridged the anglophone and francophone divide as conventionally seen between the Ouest/West Region and the North-West Region. Photography as a form of modernity defied boundaries. Photographers and painters with the painted backdrops that connected them formed networks relatively little affected by political divisions.

Keywords: Cameroon; history of photography; painted backdrops; intellectual genealogy

Biographical notes

Valentine Nyamndon earned a PhD in visual culture from the Photographic History Research Centre (PHRC) of De Montfort University in 2023. A former lecturer at the Catholic University of Cameroon, Bameinda, he has a background in Anthropology, Sociology, and philosophy and is an active member of the Pan Africa Anthropology Association (PAAA). He started as a part-time lecturer in the Photographic History Research group at De Montfort University in 2023.

David Zeitlyn is professor of social anthropology at University of Oxford and *conseil technique* to the chief of Somié in Cameroun. He is an initiated *ngam dû* spider diviner. He has been working with Mambila in Cameroon since 1985. Recent publications include *An Anthropological Toolkit: Sixty Useful Concepts* (2022) and *Mambila Divination: Framing Questions, Constructing Answers* (2020). In 2021 with Erica Jones he co-curated an exhibition at Fowler Museum, UCLA featuring the work of three Cameroonian photographers. *Photo Cameroon: Studio Portraiture 1970-1990s*. <https://www.fowler.ucla.edu/exhibitions/photo-cameroon/>

1 Argenti (2002) considers the parallel case of wood carvers in Oku (Northwest Province). He points out that as well as the network of apprentices and masters there were many self-taught young carvers who were *not* formally apprenticed and were distanced thereby from the Palace, the seat of traditional power and authority. The key difference between his material and ours is that in Oku the carvings produced by masters and their apprentices were part of the complex connecting traditional authority and the symbolism of traditional religion. Contrastingly, photography deals with the symbolism of modernity. On Argenti's account (2002: 520) the young carvers of Oku were also acting as brokers with modernity, introducing new tropes and reinterpreting old ones in their light.

2 In 1961 Northern Cameroons, the other half of Cameroon under the British UN trusteeship, joined Nigeria. This makes what is a border between administrative units in the south as mentioned here, an international border in the north, outside our study area.

3 Note that to reduce confusion between the names of administrative areas we use the French spelling for the Ouest Region. Readers should also note that the official name for the large scale administrative units in Cameroon is Region (until 2008 these were called Provinces).

The idea that relationships between teachers and students (particularly doctoral supervisors and research students) resembles that between parents and children is well established and this leads naturally to the concept of an intellectual lineage or genealogy (see Russell and Sugimoto 2009, Sugimoto, et al. 2014, Hook and Zeitlyn 2019 or for an instance within art history DeMayo 2012). The model of parental relationships can be applied more widely, to a variety of different sort of teachers and pupils. In other words, there is a quasi-genealogical relationship between apprentices and their masters. One can trace a family tree, a genealogical network between a master, their apprentices, and subsequent generations such as the apprentices of the apprentices and so on.¹

Here we consider the instance of apprentices and their masters (usually male). This has emerged from ongoing research in Cameroon on the wider topic of the history of studio photography (Zeitlyn 2019) as well as a more focused piece of research on painted backdrops used in studios (Nyamndon 2023). We have been led to a consideration of the separate intellectual genealogies between photographers and their apprentices and those between painters along with their own apprentices. These genealogies cross and become intertwined as painted backdrops circulate, linking photo studios in parallel to the ways that they are linked by apprenticeship genealogies. More than that, in cases we have documented, the gift of a backdrop has been used to mark an apprentice leaving his master to set up their own photographic studio.

In this paper we concentrate on the 1970s and 1980s in Cameroon. We consider some studio photographers and the painters who produced the painted backdrops that were used in their photographic studios. We explore how these different intellectual genealogies, separable in principle, were intertwined on the ground and how the circulation of painted backdrops acted to connect different parts of the genealogy of studio photographers. This took place across the boundaries between anglophone and francophone areas that now (2024) loom so large. Photography and backdrop painting as exemplars of modernity seem not to have been much affected by the languages in which it was expressed! In the quasi-genealogical diagram that summarizes the data presented in this paper (Figure 8) we have added a broken line to represent the boundary between the anglophone Northwest region and francophone Ouest Region. However, positioning the line and people relative to it was extremely difficult.

Before we can consider the wider issues raised by our case study we first provide some necessary historical context.

Context 1. History of administrative structures in Cameroon (French and British spheres)

Although most of the period of this study is after the formal independence of Cameroon the consequences of the preceding colonial regimes had (and still has) an important bearing on economic and social relationships in the areas we are considering. As a consequence, a short introduction to the complexities of Cameroonian history is needed. After the first World war the former German colony, Kamerun was administered by France (c. 80% of the territory) and Britain (c. 20% of the territory) first under the League of Nations Mandates then, after the Second World War, with the United Nations Trusteeships. The result was a country with two official administrative languages and two different administrative colonial traditions.

The photographers and painters we consider here worked on either side of the former boundary between British and French administered areas, a division which continues into the present as the boundary between what was Anglophone Southern Cameroon² (now South-West and North-West Regions) with the Francophone rest of Cameroon (Littoral and Ouest³ Regions respectively). Our study has concentrated on the Ouest and North-West Regions.

The importance of the differences can be exaggerated. Some of the people we have studied moved between Anglophone and Francophone areas. However, those divisions form an important part of the historical context for the development of photographic studios within our time period. A further important historical note is that the *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC) uprising in the Bamiléké areas (mainly in the Ouest Region) which started before Independence continued until the early 1970s. This drove some Francophones from what was then the Ouest Province of Cameroun to become refugees in Anglophone Southern Cameroon (which at the same time also received internally displaced refugees from the Biafran war in Nigeria (to its west). After the British Cameroons plebiscite in 1961 when Southern Cameroons chose to join Cameroun rather than Nigeria it also accommodated those from Southern Cameroons who had to return from Nigeria).⁴

A photographic coda to this is that although British Southern Cameroons was administered from Nigeria until October 1, 1961, from 1950 and continuing until 1965, there were instances of photographic exchanges between the Federal Information Service in Lagos, Nigeria, and the Commissioner of the Southern Cameroons in Buea.⁵ As many photographers have told us Nigerian photographic supplies (film, papers and chemicals) were widely used in Cameroon before and after independence.

The circulation of the images that the studio photographers produced and of studio backdrops complicates and, in fact, challenges any simple mapping of cultural identity and difference onto crude divisions such as Anglophone vs Francophone. A host of evidence attests that this area has been multicultural, multilingual and multiethnic for much longer than the relatively brief period of colonisation.⁶

Context 2 Photography in Cameroon

The history of photography in Cameroon has been studied by Geary (1988, 2004), Nsah (2017), Schneider (2010, 2015, 2018b, 2023) and Zeitlyn (2015, 2019) among others. René Egloff's (2013) sadly unpublished thesis (also we note untranslated into a Cameroonian language) on the studio photographers of Bamenda has been a key reference for us. Itinerant photographers travelling along the West African Coast first introduced photography to the coastal cities in the second half of the Nineteenth century which led to a few studios being established before the century's end, at least one of which was by a Cameroonian photographer. After the first world war photography spread slowly to the large towns but only really took off once photo ID cards became compulsory in the 1950s.

As already noted the start of the UPC insurrection in the late 1950s occurred in the run up to Independence. Among many other things, it provided an impetus for the introduction of compulsory ID Cards containing ID photos.⁷ This was a very important spur for the development of studio photography in Cameroon and all studio photographers benefited from it. A further elaboration of the bureaucracy of control was that in the areas where the insurrection was concentrated (particularly the then Ouest Province, officially called Ouest Region since 2008) an additional temporary document, also with an id-style photograph, was required in order to travel within the country, a '*laissez-passer*'. To travel repeatedly many *laissez-passers* and therefore many photographs were needed, a boon for the photographers.

After independence and the end of the UPC insurrection in 1972 although *laissez-passers* were no longer needed, ID Cards continued to be required, as well as other administrative documents most of which had to have passport-sized photographs attached. This meant that studios flourished until the arrival of colour photography and self-contained photo processing labs to print from colour films, as well as autofocus cameras. In the 1980s these eroded the profit margins of studios. The introduction of ID card machines that included a camera in the late 1980s effectively ended the 'golden age' of the studios.

⁴ Walter Nkwi discusses the material cultural associations of this (2016 & 2017). After the 1961 plebiscite British Northern Cameroon joined Nigeria.

⁵ The official Photo Archives in Buea have been studied by Schneider (2018a) and Nsah (2017).

⁶ See Njeuma (ed.) (1989) for a summary of relatively recent Cameroonian history, and de Saulieu et al. 2021 for an account of the intertwined linguistic, archaeological and genetic histories of the wider area.

⁷ The key date is 24th September 1953 (Order 599 of 24 Sep 1953, JOCF 53 p.1688), when an ID Card with compulsory photograph became required for residents in urban centres in French Cameroon. This order was imposed over the entire area under French administration in the years 1954-7. ID photos had to have a plain background. But the need for them in effect kept the price of photographs low and this enabled many clients to get both ID photos and recreational photos with painted backdrops when they visited a studio.

8 The studio with these usually had curtains so a plain background could be established for ID photos.

9 Chéroux (2005) discusses the fairground versions in mid C20th France.

The relatively small literature on the Cameroon visual landscape focuses on photographic studios with emphasis on the many faces of studio photographers, the rise and fall in the statistics of commercial photographers, the professional legacy of studio photographers and the decaying states of their archives (Zeitlyn 2008, 2009, 2019; McKeown 2007, 2010; Schneider 2010, 2018a and b, 28-40; Egloff, 2013). This work discusses among other things, the salience of photographic studio, changing business practices, and the desirability of studio interiors created by the use of props and backdrops. Some of the scholarly contributions paid special attention to photographers and studios in Mbouda and Batcham (Tatsitsa, 2015) in the Ouest Region. However, these publications give little information on how materials (such as backdrops) circulated between studios becoming thereby an object of socio-cultural connection between the photographers and painters.

Backdrops: an introduction

Photographers have used painted backdrops since almost the earliest photographic studios. We are distinguishing between photographic backgrounds, backdrops and painted backdrops. All backdrops are backgrounds but not all backgrounds are backdrops. Backgrounds may be arrangements of studio props, buildings, vegetation or fences as well as murals painted on walls. The simplest backdrop is a piece of plain cloth placed behind a sitter (common for ID photos). Patterned cloth is also often used as a backdrop in recreational images (these have been particularly celebrated in the work of Seidou Keïta (especially from the 1950s) but comparable examples can be found in our area of study, for example in the work of Jacques Toussele in the 1970s and 1980s). Our concern in this paper are what we are calling 'painted backdrops'. Those painted on canvas or plywood are moveable, but they may also be unmoveable fixtures: murals painted on studio walls⁸. Painted backdrops show scenes, although sometimes they are painted to resemble patterned cloth. In a more or less formalised and self-conscious way, they all dissemble. The idea is to enable the sitter to appear as if they are in a drawing room, or standing in a forest or on board a boat. These have given rise to novelty cut-outs and to elaborate arrangements where the sitters may be seated as if piloting a aircraft or in a boat.⁹ However, there is little attempt at a *trompe l'oeuille*: the images are artefactual, and clearly reference their own artificiality.



Figure 1 Backdrop by Yanky. Reconstructed from many images in the Jacques Toussele archive. Painted c. 1980



Figure 1a Yanky signature

Early photography along the West African coast used painted backdrops imported from commercial suppliers in Europe and North America (e.g. painted backdrop featuring classical columns) but quickly local artists saw the opportunity and started supplying their own backdrops to the photographers who became established in Africa in the second half of the Nineteenth century. Some tropes were widespread, used by different painters. We discuss some Cameroonian variants below.

In photographic studies there is a small literature on backdrops. The journal *Afterimage* had a special issue in 1997 (vol 24 issue 5), which includes Arjun Appadurai's much cited article "The Colonial backdrop." In this he makes the point that the use of backdrop breaks some of the indexicality of the images – it is not obviously taken in place X. A studio portrait of someone standing in front of the Taj Mahal could have been taken anywhere. It is actually of someone standing in front of a *backdrop* of the Taj Mahal. As such it is robbed

10 Photographs with backdrops are at the opaque end of 'the zones of visibility and opacity' that Hayes and Minckley identify in their collection 'Photography and Visibility in African History' (2019:1

of its evidential value and stands as an (admittedly small) challenge to colonial rule.¹⁰ Soon after this, George C. Berticevitch's collection of backdrops from fifteen countries round the world was exhibited in California, as discussed by Pritikin (1998).

Those working on American Civil War photography have used backdrops to identify photographs from the same studio (Anon 2003, Mohanty et. al. 2023). This can be helpful as some early *Carte de Visite* prints from that period do not have the names of the studios on them (as later became the norm). For those researchers finding the studio can be a first step in identifying the person depicted.

Erica Nimis in her study of diaspora Yoruba photographers devotes a few pages to backdrops (2005: 169-172). She notes a systematic difference between coastal and inland studios and their backdrops. Inland, and at the edge of the Sahel, there is relative sparsity with fewer backdrops and those there are less elaborate. Along the coast the studios have a wider range of more elaborate backdrops. This is exemplified by the work of the Ghanaian Steven Abiodu Thomas who was both photographer and backdrop painter. As documented by Wendl (2001: 91) he corresponded with the UK backdrop manufacturer Pember-ton brothers in the 1930s and later painted backdrops himself, not only for use in his own studio but also for sale to other photographers.

Our study

This study uses photographic backdrops found in the Northwest, Ouest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon to widen the intellectual genealogy that connects different photographic studios. We consider the histories of a few photographic studios and the parallel histories of some painters and their own studios. These parallel histories are connected through the use and distribution of photographic backdrops. We also briefly consider the socio-cultural meaning of the studio backdrops in the Cameroon visual scene.

During research carried out in 2017 and 2018 in the Northwest, Southwest, and Ouest Regions purposive sampling was used to select participants with photo albums or other photo collections born after 1920 and before independence in 1960. Some followup interviews were conducted in 2022. Those interviewed included elders, retired and active studio photographers, archivists, and curators. Among the elders were civil servants, retired civil servants and traditional notables, as well as those who, when young, had worked on plantations on the coast. During the interviews we documented their photo albums or collections, and undertook photo elicitation exercises concentrating on the black and white photos with backdrops. Elicitation interviews were conducted with 54 people about their albums in three regions, each lasting between 45 minutes and 90 minutes

Other interviews were conducted with painters and photographers, identified through snowball sampling. We also conducted structured and unstructured interviews about other peoples' choices in the use of photographic backdrops in the images they commissioned. About 80 people aged 25-70 were interviewed (including teachers, traders, nurses, and students). Some of these were face - to- face, others were conducted using phone, whatsapp and email.

Backdrops were identified during interviews with studio photographers, the personal archives of many individuals (c. one hundred, as just described), as well as from research undertaken in some public archives and museums. Overall, the material collected enabled us to examine the circulation of backdrops between photographic studios. This took place in the context of a larger and usually unregarded circulation: photographs moved as people moved between places and also moved between people (for example, as gifts between friends). Personal albums crystalize such movements which happened for many reasons including visiting friends or family members during holidays, longer stays for education and for work.

Our initial sources for backdrops were surviving photo studios. Many photo studios could once be found in the economic heart of Bamenda city in the 1960s and 1970s (the boom years that followed independence). Just off Commercial Avenue are Independence Street and Treasury Street (now known as Old Treasury Street). At their crossing was Gay Photo Studio that started there in 1960s and still occupies the same building. Other photo studios originally in the same immediate area were Saloon De Young and Hilford Photo which closed when their owners returned to Nigeria.

According to Paul Mubang, a retired studio photographer, in the 1970s the area had at least nine photo studios but in 2018 only two (Mirac and Gay) were still active. Walking down the street, we found an old painted sign for a photo studio, placed awkwardly against a wall alongside an enlarged sign board for building materials and groceries. It is of note that some these businesses are owned by the same person who once ran a studio. As the market changed, they had shifted from photography to, in one case, selling building materials. As Figure 3 illustrates another photographer branched out to run a 'call box' phone business in parallel with his photography. In other cases, landlords have renovated the buildings that once hosted photo studios.

Our research has had to contend with demography – many of the photographers and painters who trained in the 1960s are no longer with us. As well as that, recent political instability has meant that some photographers with Nigerian roots who had photographic studios in Cameroon in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s have returned to Nigeria. To some extent there is more of a market today for painters than for photographers, even that is greatly diminished by cheap printed posters as alternatives to painted backdrops and computer-generated graphics instead of painted business signs.

A photographic dynasty: Tokontio Abraham

Tokontio Abraham (Abraham Photo) started his photographic studio in the 1960s. Tokontio's photo studio was located at Nkwen Quarter about six kilometres away from Old Treasury Street where photo studios were concentrated. Our information about him was obtained from one of his apprentices, Djeuti Boniface since he had died around 2009. According to Djeuti, he himself with Tokontio, and Jacques Toussele all came from the same village of Bammesingue in the Ouest Region of Cameroon which bound them together in various ways. Tokontio Abraham escaped the UPC uprising which started in 1955 to open his photographic studio in Bamenda in the North-West Region. Djeuti Boniface became his apprentice in Bamenda, and also there Jacques Toussele stayed around 1960 when the security situation in Mbouda where Toussele was otherwise based became too difficult to work. See Figure 8 below for a visualisation of these relationships.

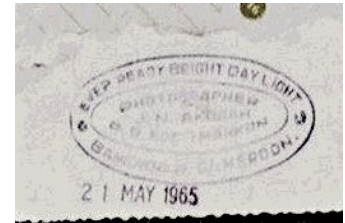


Figure 2 Portrait of Jacques Toussele in Bamenda in 1965 with Abraham's stamp on back (Figure 2a)

One of Tokontio's daughters was interested in photography and worked as a photo-journalist. In 2019 Djeuti told us that she was then working with one of the media houses in Yaoundé, the political capital of Cameroon.

Tokontio Abraham had three apprentices, Djeuti Boniface (from Bammesingue, Ouest Region), Dzoutoua Timolion (from Babadjou, Ouest Region) and Tata (from Nso, North-West Region). We could not track down Dzoutoua and Tata, but we found Djeuti Boniface still active as a photographer in 2019 working in a studio in an old shipping container in Bamenda city. We note that Tokontio straddles the Francophone / Anglophone divide. He was from the Francophone zone but worked in a major Anglophone city and had apprentices who were from both Francophone and Anglophone areas.

Djeuti Boniface (of Young Abraham Photo Studio) was born in 1952 in Bammesingue village, then under French administration. Although he grew up in the village, Djeuti and his siblings were relocated for a short period of time by their parents to Bali Gham a village in the North-West Region relatively unaffected by the UPC uprising. (This helped him to learn Pidgin English, a lingua franca extensively used in Anglophone Cameroon and neighbouring Regions). Djeuti Boniface then attended a francophone primary school in Mbouda (the main town near Bammesingue) until 1967. That year he graduated with six of his half-siblings from different mothers since his father had six wives. According to Djeuti, post-primary education for siblings from a polygamous background was a game of chance. Unlike the examples from Ivory Coast and Niger documented by Erica Nimis (2013:132), where only those who had failed in education embarked on apprenticeships in photography, in Cameroon it was considered a noble profession. After his graduation from primary school

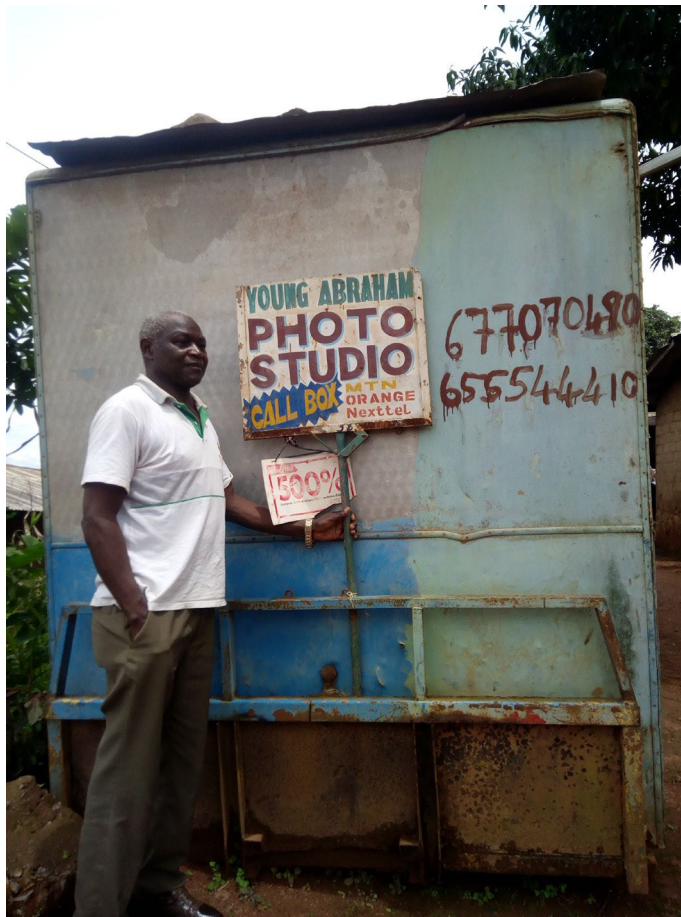


Figure 3 Djeuti Boniface by his shipping container, Ntamulung Bamenda-Cameroon. Photo by V. Nyamndon 2019.

).¹¹ This is the same pattern described by Stephen Sprague for apprenticeship among Yoruba photographers which generally lasted for three years but the fee would be reduced if they served longer (1978: 9-10, 135). Nimis (2005 p164, 2013:133) says the average payment in the 1970s was 50,000 (talking about photographers in Niger). Both note that fees were sometimes reduced or waived, a pattern that is also reported among Nigerian motor mechanic apprentices at the same time in what Sara Berry calls an 'expansionist strategy' since the apprentice master wins their free labour (1985: 136-137).

he spent a year at home. Then Tokontio Abraham was asked by Djeuti's father to choose a child out of the five boys and a girl who had graduated from school the previous year for an apprenticeship in his studio in Bamenda. The six children were asked to line up for Abraham to make his choice, and 'luck shone' on Djeuti Boniface for he was selected.

He started his photography apprenticeship on December 31, 1968 at the Photo Abraham studio at Nkwen-Bamenda. He completed his apprenticeship in 1972, having put in four years in order to have a reduced fee (twenty thousand francs CFA).¹¹ According to Djeuti, he had mastered the profession after barely a year of his apprenticeship but could not become independent since he had to work the other years in lieu of some of his apprenticeship fees. These were paid in two instalments: first, fifteen thousand CFA and then five thousand CFA.

Although, Djeuti spent more years on his apprenticeship than absolutely required, it gave him a solid background that enabled him to manage four studios in different Regions (Provinces) of Cameroon. Djeuti's four studios, were managed by him and his apprentices. Djeuti Boniface continued to run his original studio in Small Mankon, Bamenda, while Notio David ran the studio at Sonac Street in Bamenda. Nkonlac Boniface ran another studio in Mbouda, Ouest Region and Djeuti's brother, Tamen Michael, was hired to run the '*Carefour bon fils*' studio in Douala, Littoral Region. Djeuti still regrets that he involved his family in the running of his photo studio business because he says his brother squandered the income generated from the Douala studio so that he couldn't continue paying rent for it and had to close it. Although it should be noted that this studio lasted for longer than the others! We suspect the distance of Douala from Bamenda meant it harder (and more costly) for Djeuti to visit often to supervise the management of the studio.

Tokontio invited painters from the Ouest Region to paint backdrops for his Bamenda studio. Other paintings in his studio were done by painters who were based in Bamenda and elsewhere in the North-West Region. He used painted backdrops showing columns, patterned cloth, the Wouri bridge in Douala (a symbol of modernity), highways, and mountain chains. The gift of a backdrop was made from master to apprentice as the apprentice set up his own studio, serving as a mark of trust, hard work, and support. Djeuti Boniface was given a painted backdrop (featuring a column) by his master Tokontio Abraham when he was permitted to open his first independent studio at Small Mankon Bamenda. Although the information about Tokontio Abraham is limited it is indicative of the master/apprentice genealogy presented in this paper.

Djeuti's four studios

As mentioned Djeuti had four photo studios at the following places:

Small Mankon opened in 1972 and closed in 1988.

Sonac Street opened in 1976 and closed in 1990

Mbouda Studio opened between 1979/1980 and closed in 1994

Douala (*Carefour bon fils*) opened 1983 and closed in 1999.

Studio	Stamp
Studio 1: Bamenda (Small Mankon) North-West Region	
Studio 1 Alternative stamp: Bamenda (Small Mankon) (North-West Region)	
Studio 2: Bamenda (SONAC Street) North-West Region	
Studio	Stamp

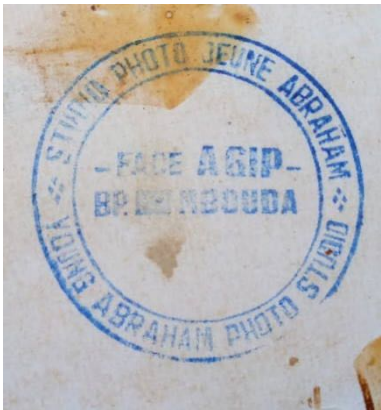
Studio 3: Mbouda (Opposite AGIP Petrol station) Ouest Region.	
Studio 4: Douala (Carefour Bon Fils) Littoral Region	

Table 1 studios and their stamps

Djeuti's four studios present further evidence on the commissioning of backdrops, and how they are exchanged, and circulated. His four studios (in three different Regions) suggest a broad base of connections between photographers and backdrop painters. For example, Djeuti said he commissioned the first dual carriageway or motorway backdrop in 1979 as a development from the single-lane road backdrop he had had painted in 1975.

Backdrops	Studios			
	Bamenda1 Small Mankon	Bamenda2 Sonac St	Mbouda	Douala
single lane road	X (1975)	X		
double lane road	X (1979)	X	X (1980)	
column	X (1972)	X	X	X (1983)
waterfall	X	X		
Spiral column	X	X	X (1980)	
Airports/aircraft	X	X	X	X (from here)
Painted blue/white cloth	X	X	X	
Seascapes	X	X	X	X

Table 2 The circulation of backdrops between Djeuti's four studios in Cameroon. Source: V. Nyamndon 2019.

Tokontio and Djeuti are unusual for crossing the lines between French and British spheres of influence. Djeuti's case contrasts with that of Tchoffo Pascal, the most successful apprentice of Toussele Jacques. Although Tchoffo came from Mbouda (very close to the border with the Anglophone North West Region) he never opened a studio in the North-West (Bamenda is close to Mbouda). but concentrated his activities in the francophone areas, opening studios and colour processing laboratories not only in Mbouda and Bafoussam but also, much further away, in Nkongsamba and Douala, all major towns in the francophone area.

12 A single backdrop on the standard-sized piece of a plywood (2.44 m x 1.22 m) cost about seven thousand francs CFA in c. 1970.

13 In this case Djeuti's backdrop painter was Neba Vincent.

Painterly Dynasties: biographic sketches

Here we will explore the work and biography of six painters who provided backdrops for photographers in Oust and North-West Cameroon in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. That we have been able to discover so little about them is itself significant. For a long time, all we knew were professional nicknames, and in many other cases that is all we still know.

Photographic backdrop artists in Cameroon made important contributions to the business of studio photographers. According to Djeuti Boniface, backdrop painters realised his wishes (that reflected those of his sitters) in the backdrop paintings he commissioned. The backdrops represented objects, landscapes, buildings, and other structures. They were painted in varying dimensions for different costs¹² on canvas, pieces of plywood or, in some cases, on the walls of photographic studios. The photographers wanted backdrops that would attract clients. Studios in the Northwest and West Regions often had several backgrounds at any one time so sitters could choose which backdrop they wanted to be used. Discussions between sitters and photographers also indirectly contributed to the commissioning of new backgrounds. Conversation about the sitters' desires led to later commissions for new backdrops. New backdrops were also commissioned from time to time to entice regular clients to make new images. It seems that Djeuti renewed his backdrop every 4 or 5 years, and would move them between his different studios so creating novelty for the clients local to each studio. Backdrop artists in Cameroon played an important role in the photographic industry. Despite this we do not know how many there have been, where they were based, let alone, in most instances, their names.

Nyamndon's field work on backdrops in the Grassfields and Coastal regions of Cameroon has collected data from photographic studios, photo collections and albums. He has also considered photographic materials using painted backdrops now in archives and museums. Based on interviews with studio photographers who provided names of popular artists active in the Cameroonian photographic industry he has documented some two hundred backdrops from 1955-1980 (grouped in three periods: 1955-1960, 1961-1970, 1971-1980). The names provided, as well as artist's signatures on print backdrops were used to collate a fuller list.

Many of these artists put signatures on painted backdrops (e.g., *Yanky*, *Lucky Sparrow*, *Waffi*, and *Le Décor*) which was some assistance in tracking them down. We did document an instance where the photographer Djeuti Boniface had obliterated the signature on the 'dual carriageway backdrop' an innovation he had commissioned so competitors from rival studios could not find the painter to commission similar scenes.¹³

In the following we discuss six backdrop painters Graphic Art Studios (Fon Mathias and Neba Vincent), Yanky, Sparrow, Ndzoti, and Waffi Arts. We discuss painterly genealogies (apprentices and their masters). Following this we list the types of backdrops they painted.

Yanky Arts (Achi Jofred Tapong) and Rocky Arts

The research was made difficult by the absence of Yanky's contemporaries. This was because of the return to Nigeria of artists like Rocky Art, who had been his apprentice master. Achi Jofred Tapong (Yanky) was born in 1948 at Nku-Mbome in Mbengwi (his parents were from Mbengwi, a few miles from the city of Bamenda). After a lot of work to track him down Nyamndon was able to interview him by phone in 2021 and then meet him in person in 2022 for a follow up interview in Cameroon. Achi had attended primary school in Mbengwi and completed the standard six in 1964. He had a zeal for painting ever since he was a young boy. His apprentice master, Rocky Arts was a Nigerian who had fled the Biafra war and settled in Bamenda becoming prominent in backdrop paintings by c. 1969.¹⁴ Rocky's art studio was at Old Church Junction, Bamenda where under the terms of his apprenticeship he taught Yanky house painting and car spraying. Backdrop

painting was not included in this, so he taught himself to paint them, inspired by what he saw his master doing. Rocky Art later returned to Nigeria where he later died. The dynasty continued since Yanky then taught Fon Mathias, Neba Vincent's elder brother and apprentice-master, from Graphic Art (Studio I).

A few months after his graduation in 1970, he opened his first studio in Bamenda at 'Las Vegas' near the main Total petrol station behind Commercial Avenue. There he worked in as a general painter, doing more car spraying than painting backdrops. In 1979 he moved his studio to Ringway where he remained until he retired in 2005.

Initially, he didn't devote much time to backdrop painting but the few backdrops he painted were in high demand from photographers in the Ouest and Littoral regions of Cameroon. Some photographers from Douala came to Bamenda to buy his painted backdrops. In Bamenda he recalled painting for Gay, Mirac and Hilford photographic studios, but most of his work for clients outside Bamenda were in Mbouda in the Ouest Region although he also painted some for studios in Mbengwi, his natal village.

14 Besides being an artist in the 1970s Rocky led the Igbo choir group at the Big Mankon Cathedral in Bamenda.

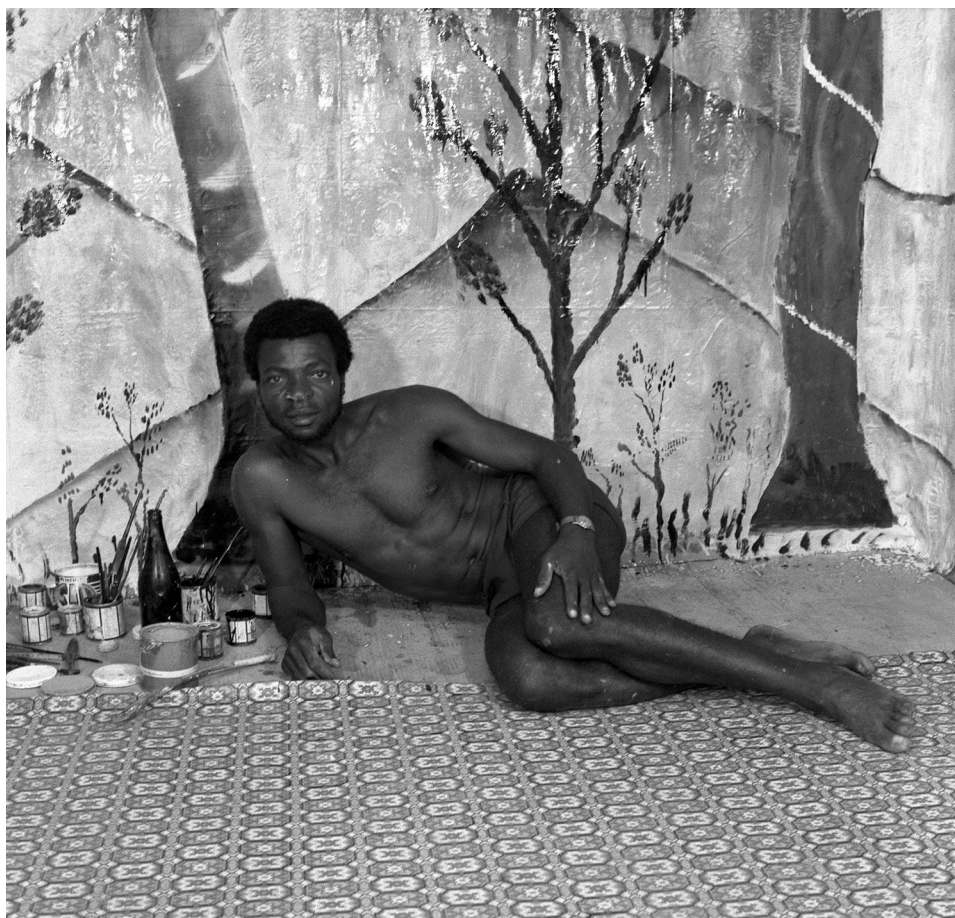


Figure 4 Jacques Toussele photo of Yanky at work c. 1975 (EAP054_1_110_51)

He recognized himself in the photo of himself at work from the Jacques Toussele Studio in Mbouda (Figure 4) but no longer remembered the name of the photographer nor the studio (Photo Jacques). The Jacques Toussele archive also has another photograph of him Figure 5. The only thing he remembered was that he had been invited by the 'Mbouda Man' to paint on the wall of his photographic studio in 1971 or 1972. Another similar backdrop features in a few images in the Jacques Toussele archive although in nothing like the number of other backdrops used by Toussele. It is signed "Yanky Arts Mankon Bamenda". It has been reconstructed from the archive images as seen in Figure 1.



Figure 5 Jacques Toussele photo of Yanky c. 1975 (EAP054_1_6_25)

Two Brothers: Fon Mathias (Graphic Art studio I) & Neba Vincent (Young Graphic Art studio II)

As we have said, Fon Mathias, (Graphic Art Studio I) was taught by Yanky. Fon Mathias then taught his younger brother Neba Vincent (Young Graphic Art Studio II). This pair of full brothers are from Mankon village. When Fon Mathias retired in 1982 Neba Vincent took over the Graphic Art Studio and renamed it. However, the studio location did not change. It has been on Independence Street opposite the Bamenda Municipal Stadium since the 1970s. Among the backdrops Fon and Neba painted the most popular designs were highways and mountain scenes.

Emmanuel 'Lucky Sparrow' Arts

Emmanuel 'Lucky Sparrow' was originally from Batcham, Ouest Region. He was married with two wives and died c. 2010 (we have not been able to establish an exact date or year of death). At one point he ran a studio in Mbouda on the main highway to Bafoussam. His studio in Mbouda was adjacent to the then Rozi Cinema (near to where Jacques Toussele's final studio was located). When he left this studio, it was taken over by the photographer 'Photo Jazz' and later became a baker's shop. His later studio in Bamenda was located at the Old Town neighbourhood near the present central police station.

In the North-West Region, Sparrow painted backdrops featuring the Wouri bridge in Douala, mountain chains, columns and seashore scenes, as can be seen in photos taken by Djeuti (Saloon de Young Abraham). Other examples of his work (showing the Wouri bridge), were found in the G.B Photo Studio in Bali, the Awa and Son Photo Studio in Bamenda and in Photo Jacques'

studio in Mbouda. Because he once had a studio in Mbouda the photographer Jacques Toussele remembered him and was able to identify him in some of his own photos.



Figure 6 Jacques Toussele photo of Emmanuel Lucky Sparrow and his then girlfriend. Early 1970s. (EAP054_1_138_227)

Ndzoti Ernest (*Le Décor*)

For the past 30 years Ndzoti has been one of the prominent backdrop painters in the Mbouda part of the Ouest Region. In 2019 he was living in Toumaka, a village on the main Bamenda-Mbouda road where he still owned an art studio. Examples of his painted backdrops were on the walls of photo studio Delmas in Bamessingue and at the entrance of 'Hotel la Difference' in Mbouda (owned by the photographer Tchoffo Pascal, an apprentice of Toussele). His paintings were signed 'LE DECOR' giving this artistic nickname, contact number and residence as seen in Fig. 7 on the wall of Tchoffo's hotel in Mbouda.



Figure 7 Painted mural by Ndzoti 'Le décor' at the Hotel la Difference in Mbouda in late 2013. Photo: DZ 2013_Nov_897

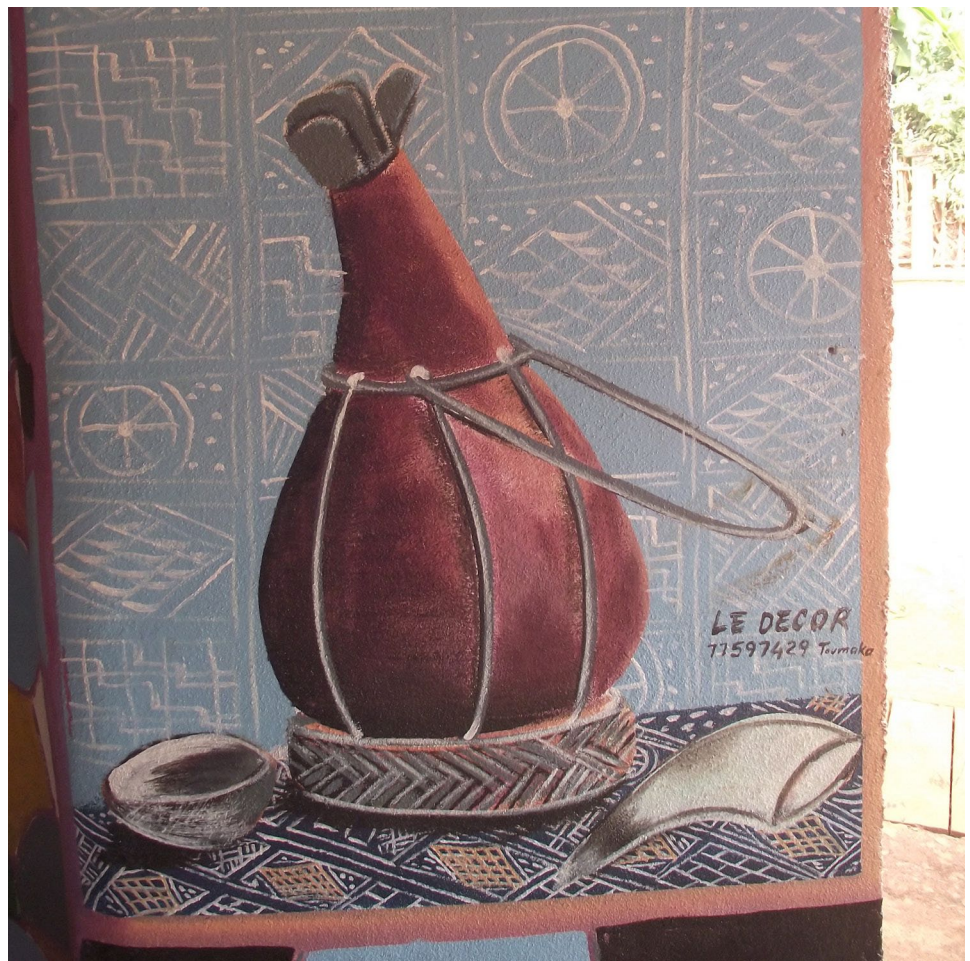


Figure 7a Ndzoti's signature and phone number on a different painted mural at the Hotel la Difference in Mbouda in late 2013. Photo: DZ 2013_Nov_899

After starting but not completing a university degree, Ndzoti worked as a designer with Messa Press the publisher of the bilingual daily newspaper *The Cameroon Tribune*. This led to his interest in painting. He was twice selected by the Minister of Culture to attend international arts exhibitions (in Gabon and Ivory Coast). Over the years one of his main interests has been in landscape painting. He was the main supplier of backdrops to Tchoffo Pascal as well as to other studio photographers in Douala and Yaoundé. For Pascal and his apprentice Photo Saint Delmas (Telkam Delmas Joel) in Bamessingue he also painted wall murals¹⁵ and backdrops that depict the high prestige blue and white cloth used throughout the wider grassfields (see e.g. Feldman-Savelsberg 2005). This cloth was used often in the background of photos shot outside studios (and sometimes also used in some studio scenes, brought in specially by the clients). These painted blue and white cloth backdrops distinguish his contributions from those painted by Waffi Arts who we discuss next.

Waffo Jean-Pierre (Waffi Arts)

Waffo Jean-Pierre lived in Bafoussam the capital of the Ouest Region. He was self-taught, having been inspired by dreams to start drawing while in primary school. He was originally a sign painter (who also made decorative paintings) starting his business in 1999. He started painting landscape scenes for backdrops around 2010. Comparing himself with those in the anglophone regions who, he said were more focussed on rubber stamp production, and painting pattern cloth backdrops, Waffo considered painting as his profession and vocation. He declared:

I do mostly landscape painting and my backdrops reflect natural space in different environments. I was not taught painting by anyone, though I am developing it through exchanges and interaction with other painters. The skills I have acquired up to now I may say come from God. My paintings include some of the backdrops at Pascal Tchoffo's photo studio and on the walls of his hotel. Others are by my colleague Ndzoti Ernest. Waffo interviewed in Mbouda. 14/8/2019.

His painted backdrops are in studios in Bafoussam, nearby in Bamessingue and Mbouda as well as also much further away in Douala and Yaoundé.

Tropes in backdrop styles

There are some designs that recur in many different backdrops by different painters. Many of these shared tropes refer to symbols of modernity¹⁶, others to forms of nostalgia (as may be experienced by migrant workers). Others are hard to classify: for example, the persistence of columns as a motif seems more of a survival from early nineteenth century studios in Europe than anything else (via backdrops imported from Europe). They are, however, also found in the facades of houses constructed by the rich as forms of conspicuous consumption (these also reference neo-Classical European building styles) which means a column in a backdrop can be seen as an allusion to extravagant displays of wealth. Seascapes combine nostalgia with elements of modernity. Among the common tropes we find the subjects listed in Table 3.

¹⁵ In another case of painting of high status imagery on walls, Richard Fardon (2005) discusses tiger imagery on the walls of Grassfield palaces, especially that of Bali-Nyonga. The murals, featuring lions, tigers and elephants, were used as backgrounds for photos especially those taken during the Lela festival. The Bali Nyonga murals were painted by David Louis Musi in the 1990s. He was described as 'a school-teacher and the town's leading electric guitarist as well as an artist and carver' (Fardon 2005: 82).

¹⁶ See Zeitlyn (2024) for discussion of the complexity of modernity in the context of the struggle for Independence.

Title	Notes
Wouri bridge	This bridge in Douala was opened in 1955 (then on the outskirts of the city, now quite central) and became a symbol of modernity. Many photos of it were published in newspapers and as postcards. It was used as a backdrop by many photographers.
Highways (single and double lane)	Roads and multi-lane highways are also symbols of modernity.
Airlines/ Aircraft/ Airports	Another well-established trope of modernity. These backdrops showed airports, generic aircraft or planes with airline names e.g. <i>Air Afrique</i> or <i>Cameroon Airlines</i> .
Paintings of patterned cloth	Painted versions of high-status locally produced blue and white prestige cloth, indexing royalty and chiefship and inherited traditional roles.
Columns	Columns have been a staple of studio backdrops in Europe, America and West Africa since the 19 th century. An early example is the backdrop in a photo taken (c 1874) in Douala (Littoral Region) (published in Zeitlyn 2019: 313). There were many variations, including twisted or fluted columns, those with curtains and with decorated bases. See discussion in Nyamndon (2024).
Seascapes: beaches/ boats. Canoes and fishing	Beaches and seashores are places where many different types of people meet, including youths, students and tourists. Examples include the black sand beach in Limbe and the 'Coconut Island' area also in Limbe where tourists and elites spent their leisure time. The seashore features in many painted backdrops from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Allusion is also made to the canoe racing that forms an important part of the culture and tradition of the Sawa people in the Littoral Region as exhibited during the annual 'Ngondo' festival in Douala.
Waterfalls	There are several well known waterfalls in Cameroon including the Mifi falls in the Ouest Region and the Menchum falls in the Northwest Region.
Hills/Mountains	Mountains are characteristic features in the Grassfields region. Mount Cameroon is an active volcano in the Coastal region and also features on some backdrops, as a symbol of the coastal area in the South-West.

Table 3 Backdrop Tropes

Intertwined dynasties: the movement of backdrops

The following table summarizes the way in which the different painters and photographers that we have mentioned are connected by different types of backdrop. A graphic representation is given in Figure 8 which shows how photographic and painterly intellectual genealogies are intermeshed.

Title	Painter	Photographers
Wouri bridge	Lucky Sparrow	Tokontio, Toussele
Roads (Single and double lane)	Graphic Art studios, Rocky	Djeuti, Tokontio
Paintings of patterned cloth	Le Décor	Djeuti, Tokontio,
Columns	Lucky Sparrow	Djeuti, Tokontio, Toussele
Seascapes	Le Décor, Lucky Sparrow, Waffi, Yanky	Delmas, Djeuti, Tchoffo, Toussele
Waterfalls	Le Décor, Waffi	Tchoffo, Delmas
Hills/Mountains	Graphic Art studios, Le Décor, Lucky Sparrow, Waffi	Djeuti, Tokontio, Toussele

Table 4 Who Painted Whose Backdrops?

The peaks of photographic production were usually during prominent religious public holidays such as Christmas, New Year, and Easter. Photos were also often taken on the Cameroonian public holidays such as the National Day on the 20th of May and Youth Day on 11th of February. In anticipation of such holidays Djeuti would move backdrops between studios so repeated photos taken at the same event on different years had different backgrounds. It should also be noted that because of his family connections he visited Mbouda frequently, and took the opportunity to move backdrops between the Mbouda studio and the Bamenda studios. His supervisory visits to the Douala studio (which were less frequent than to Mbouda) also enabled the movement of backdrops.

The following diagram summarizes the discussion presented in the text above in a somewhat more genealogical style. As mentioned in the introduction it also shows the spatial distribution between the Northwest and Ouest regions.

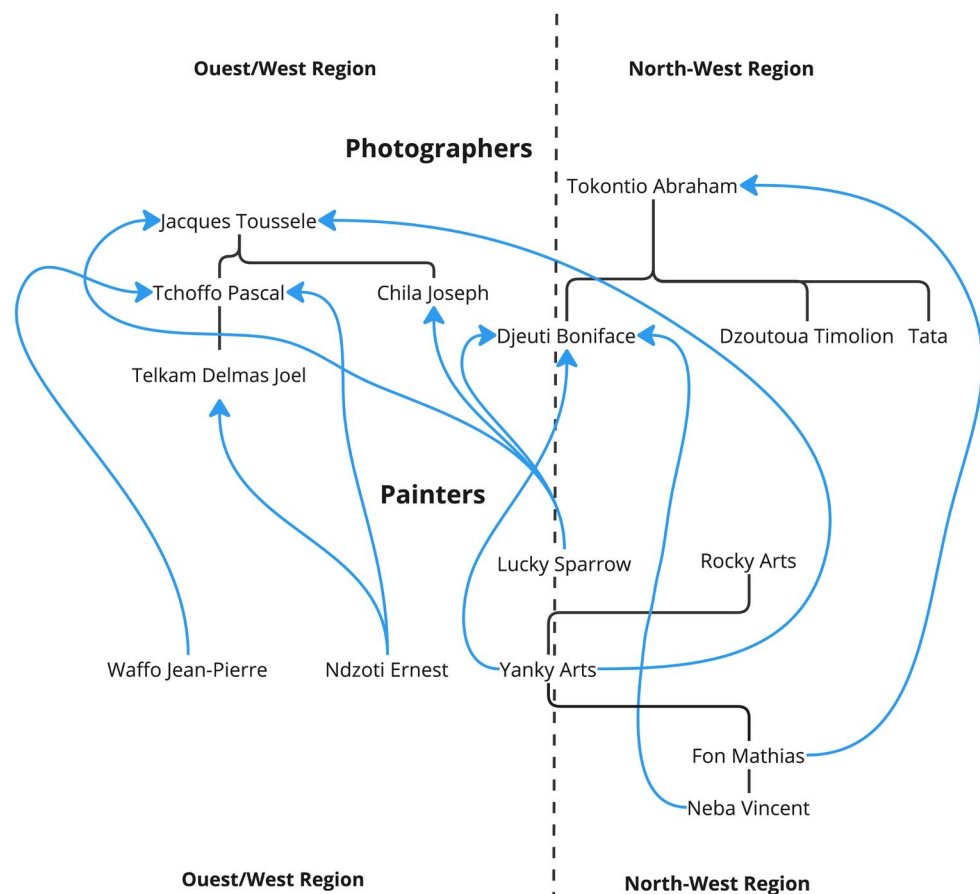


Figure 8 An intellectual genealogy of photographers and backdrop painters
Blue arrows show backdrops from a painter being used by the specified photographer. Black lines join masters and apprentices

Conclusions

The commercial world of studio photography during its golden era in Cameroon (post-Independence) was complex and involved many actors. This included those supplying the film, printing paper and chemicals, and those supplying the accoutrements of the studios. Not only the painted backdrops we have been considering here but also the studio props that were very widely used (which must be considered elsewhere). In this paper we have looked at how painted backdrops served to connect studios along and across the lines of photographic apprenticeships, while noting the parallel sets of apprenticeships linking painters.

A key finding is that photography and painting did not respect spheres of colonial influence. Photography has always been international. It started in the area in the nineteenth century moving along the West African coast on steamships, connecting, for example, Senegal, Ghana and Fernando Po (now Bokito). As our material demonstrates photographers such as Tokontio and then his apprentice Djéuti crossed the lines between French and British spheres of influence, as did painters such as Yanky and Lucky Sparrow. Photography in Cameroon stands as a counterexample to narratives of clashing Francophone vs Anglophone mentalities. Rather the international ecumene of photography expressed the very idea of modernity (alternating or combining with nostalgia), often made visible in the backdrops that moved between studios.

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Photo-essays

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The Last Frontiers:

Adventure and Belonging in the Anthropocene

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

In this photographic essay, I explore the romantic pursuit of happiness in Svalbard and Patagonia—places imagined as among the world's last remaining wilderness areas. I use the camera as a tool to contrast and compare ways of life in these sites, drawing on the analytical category of dwelling-mobility in a visual approach to landscape, transience, settler ethos, history, exploration, community, home, globalization, spirituality, and future. The research draws on critical perspectives that examine the changing conditions of the good life under global capitalism and non-dualist, phenomenological, and ecological approaches that situate our relation to the world at the centre of contemporary notions of happiness.

Keywords: Wilderness, happiness, tourism, conservation, enclosure.

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Introduction

In this essay, I explore the romantic pursuit of happiness in places imagined as among the world's last remaining wilderness areas through photography. I see these sites as articulated through an ethos of exploration and adventure on the one hand, and through the romantic trope of return, of communing with and dwelling in the landscape, on the other. Thus, the entanglement of the existential categories of adventure or mobility and dwelling or belonging as centrally informing romantic notions of happiness structure my approach (see Dahlberg & Galvin 2010). Additionally, my research is informed by non-dualist (Spinoza 2007 [1670]; Vetlesen 2019), phenomenological (Heidegger 2001), and ecological approaches (Næss 1995, 2008), that situate our relation to the world at the centre of contemporary notions of happiness and on critical perspectives that examine the changing conditions of “the good life” under global capitalism (see Han 2015; Eriksen 2016; Rosa 2019). Through these perspectives, I challenge what I perceive to be a reductive standard analysis of the relation between man and nature (see, e.g. Cronon 1996), unpacking the complexity and depth of meanings that are attributed to the natural landscape in Western Modernity. The purpose of this exercise is to show the multiplicity of ways in which the western view of nature goes beyond the instrumentality that is often assumed and taken for granted in popular narratives of environmental destruction.

Despite their geographical distance, Svalbard and Patagonia are embedded in a common cultural history as the frontiers of civilization—sites where scientific and national agendas have merged. First, through the western practice of exploration: the discovery, mapping, naming, and cataloguing of geographies that have been imagined as remote, pristine, and inhospitable. Next, through imperialist processes grounded in the territorialising practices of settler colonialism, resource extraction, and conservation. Thus, layered historical processes have often involved the dispossession of groups that formerly inhabited these territories. Today, a new form of dispossession is taking place at these frontiers, mainly driven by infrastructural developments and a rapidly expanding tourist industry that challenges local forms of life, reshapes relations between humans and the environment, and transforms modern citizenship ideals according to market dynamics (see Fairhead *et al.* 2012; Salem 2023; Salem *et al.* forthcoming).

There is a long tradition in anthropology to look to societal margins to better attain a necessarily critical distance to and, thereby, an improved understanding of key processes of systemic change (see Das and Poole 2004; Tsing 2005). Approaching Svalbard and Patagonia as the frontiers of globalization and comparing the ongoing reconfiguration of socioenvironmental relations at these sites through the photographic lens, I have tried to grasp the relation between past, present, and future imaginaries of and conditions for “the good life” and how changes are expressed, challenged, and resisted by the romantics and adventurers of the 21st century.

The processes I observed raise many questions and concerns with regards to the future of democracy and of humanity's relationship to the landscape. In an urbanized and industrialized world, the compounded effect of hyper-rationalism, alienation, and environmental risks are increasingly imagined as an existential threat (Roitman 2013). Echoing romantic tropes, there are growing concerns that the modern world is “sick” and that in order to “get well” we must “heal” our relationship to nature (MacMahon 2006; Rosa 2019). Through my research, I have tried to reflect on how our relation to the natural landscape is changing and what this means—also for processes related to ideas of healing.

What is the role of the natural landscape in processes of social reproduction? How does nature act as a liminal space and source of creativity, spiritual connection, and meaning? How are contemporary market- and state-dynamics changing our relation to nature? Why is it important to guarantee equal

access to the natural landscape for all humans? Why do modernist cosmologies pitting humans against nature and how can we ensure that the needs of both human and non-human nature are met in the future? What socio-political forms do we need to develop to meet these needs?

Thus, my project seeks to reclaim the value of nature in a broad and relational sense. Through ethnographic encounters and theoretical discussions I challenge the understanding of nature as being first and foremost a resource for humanity (see Spinoza 2007 [1670]; Næss 2008). Instead, I emphasize how nature often figures as a healer and spiritual other; as a social and ritual space; as a home and provider; as part of our cultural history and identity; as the source of universal consciousness and thus, as a part of us. Importantly, I try to show how these different roles of nature are not limited to animist or indigenous cultures, but inherent in western modernity—an insight that equips us with the tools to distinguish the value of different relations to nature in attempts to reflect on its importance and role in the futures we envision and seek to create.

Affective Landscapes



Figure 1 Snowmobile on the sea-ice on the East Coast of Spitsbergen (Svalbard). Photo by Tomas Salem, June 2021.

The “High Arctic” is a region that has been shrouded in mystery for its remoteness and inhospitable environment. Covered by a vast and moving sheet of sea-ice and lacking in the basic resources needed to sustain human populations, it remained one of the last areas of the world to be mapped and explored. Svalbard was visited by European explorers as early as the 16th century and became an important site from which expeditions to reach the North Pole were launched in the early 1900’s. Polar explorers like Fridtjof Nansen,

Roald Amundsen, and Helge Ingstad became national heroes in Norway and have all been important figures in the production of the Svalbard a place for adventure, exploration, and Arctic imperialism. Alongside the vast and purportedly “empty” wilderness landscape of the archipelago, these historical figures continue to inspire islanders and visitors who see the icy Arctic desert as a place to find peace, calm, and solace: as a place to experience a sense of timelessness and to enact the ethos of exploration.



Figure 2 Climber in front of the Fitz Roy-massif at dawn (Patagonia).
Photo by Tomas Salem, January 2023.

Fernando Magellan, Charles Darwin, Perito Moreno, Bonnie and Clyde, Cesare Maestri, Cesarino Ferrari and Bruce Chatwin are some of the names that have been strongly associated the southernmost region of Latin America. Colonized by European settlers as late as the latter half of the 1800's, the indigenous Tehuelche and Mapuche tribes have been known for their fierce resistance to the Argentine and Chilean military campaigns that annihilated much of their culture through genocidal violence. This part of Patagonia's cultural history has remained a footnote in western imaginaries of the region, which emphasize its “discovery” by European explorers. Today, Patagonia is seen as the epitome of wilderness in western culture: bountiful wildlife, jagged peaks, large glaciers, and a vast natural landscape that has been imagined as empty or scarcely populated by *estancias* (remote mega-farms) in decline. Shrouded in mystery and romanticized in lore and literature, the Patagonian landscape continues to effect a magnetic pull on new generations of settlers and modern explorers. The granite peaks of the Fitz-Roy and Torre massifs have long been considered among the world's most challenging ascents, attracting French, British, and Italian climbers in particular. They continue to fuel ego-battles, heroic narratives, and social dramas to this day.

Transient Villages



Figure 3 Longyearbyen (Svalbard). Photo by Tomas Salem, May 2021.

Longyearbyen was established in the early 20th century as a coal-mining settlement and company town and has always retained a sense of exceptionalism. It has a highly transient and cosmopolitan population. Most town dwellers stay for a period of time before returning to the mainland, and almost all the housing infrastructure is state-owned (it used to be owned by the mining company). Historically, it has been a highly stratified society, with mine operators living in the upper parts of the valley, removed from the administrative employees and bureaucrats who lived near the coast. Today, as mining is being discontinued as part of a national strategy of green transition, the economy is being geared towards tourism, research, and satellite communication. Class hierarchies are becoming racialized as professional niches are occupied by different nationalities, with ethnic Norwegians at the top and southeast asians at the bottom of the professional hierarchy. To avoid further pressures on the ecosystem, local authorities have set a cap on hotel beds such that tourist growth must be achieved by attracting wealthier guests and by extending the tourist season.



Figure 4 El Chalten (Patagonia). Photo by Tomas Salem, October 2020

El Chalten is Argentina's youngest town. Established in 1985 following a territorial dispute with Chile, the small tourist hamlet has seen an exponential growth in residents and visitors, especially after the opening of the international airport of El Calafate in 2001 and the paving of the mythical *Ruta 40*—the highway that runs across Argentina from north to south along the Andes-range—in the mid 2000's. At about the same time, reliable forecasting radically changed alpine climbing in the surrounding mountains, making it possible for climbers to wait out the bad weather characteristic of the region in the village. Lacking cell-phone signal and efficient internet connection well into the late 2010's, the village retained its atmosphere of remoteness and adventure. However, booming tourism and development has radically transformed the area, with mounting pressures to expand the village beyond its current limits and a growing housing emergency similar to those produced in the world's major "global" cities, fuelling processes of expulsion and a sense of living in a state of permanent impermanence. Meanwhile, foreign and out-of-town investors try to establish El Chalten as an elite destination, developing luxury hotels and infrastructure.

Settlers and Pioneers



Figure 5 Marina's home (Svalbard). Photo by Tomas Salem, May 2021.

Dutch settler and modern adventurer Marina in her tiny home and workshop. Marina spends half her time on Svalbard, where she runs a small jewellery-shop, and half her time in the Mediterranean, living on her sailboat. Through the years, she has been on many expeditions in the Arctic wilderness, cultivating a close and intimate relation to Svalbard's nature, like many long-term residents. While the Svalbard Treaty grants Norway territorial sovereignty over Svalbard under the condition that citizens of all the signing countries are given equal access to the archipelago, Marina and other non-norwegian settlers are facing increasing bureaucratic challenges. They attribute this to the Norwegian authorities' decision to privilege Norwegian citizens as part of a geopolitical attempt to ensure a Norwegian majority in the cosmopolitan island community. This is a different kind of Arctic imperialism on an archipelago that never had an indigenous community, compounding the effects of the racialization of the job-market and attributing further privileges to Norwegian residents in relation to other groups.



Figure 6 La Chocolateria (Patagonia). Photo by Tomas Salem, March 2021.

In the early 90's, after hearing that the state was giving out plots of land in El Chaltén, Anabel packed her belongings on the back of her pick-up truck and drove 3000km from her home in Rosario to the provincial capital of Santa Cruz. There, a dismissive military officer informed her that there was no land left in the hamlet. Ana had brought the officer to her truck and uncovered the tarp protecting her belongings. Among them were two ferns and a broomstick: the officer had to accept that she was there to stay. Eventually conceding to her demand, Anabel and her partner were told to count 30 meters to the left at the end of the main boulevard, mark the spot with a wooden pole, count 30 meters further, and place a second wooden pole. This delimited their plot. At the time, El Chaltén was not much more than a few administrative buildings and gravel streets. Very few private homes had yet been built. On the night of their arrival, the fierce northwestern winds that normally sweep down the valley had shredded their tent, forcing them to seek cover in the low woods surrounding the village. A few weeks later, they made the 6-hour drive along the gravel road to the neighbour town of El Calafate. They spent the little money they had on materials that allowed them to erect a small cabin and over the course of the next years, they built *La Chocolateria*, Anabel's chocolate factory, with timber that had been cleared when the 40km road to Lago del Desierto was opened. 30 years later, Anabel's small café has gained mythical status among climbers from all over the world as a social meeting point.

Cultural History



Figure 7 Reindeer hunter (Svalbard). Photo by Tomas Salem, September 2020.

The first groups that engaged in economic productive activities on Svalbard were hunters and trappers from today's Russia that traded in fur: polar bear, polar foxes, and seal. In the 19th century, whale-hunting incited the establishment of the first settlements on the island. However, it was the coal-mining of the 20th century that spurred the creation of the first year-round towns of significance. The hunting and trapper-culture has been upheld at a few trapper-stations and by hunting practices among locals, who hunt reindeer, ptarmigan, and seal at annual, ritualized events that can act as important social events in their own right. Both the hunting and trapping tradition as well as mining, which is gradually being abandoned, retain an important symbolic and material presence on Svalbard, with old infrastructure, including old cabins that are used by locals, dotting the Arctic landscape.



Figure 8 The gaucho Don Guerra in his *quincho* (Patagonia).
Photo by Tomas Salem, January 2020.

The *asados* at Don Guerra's *quincho* started as an end-of-season ritual among alpine climbers that would spend the summer months up at the Fitz-Roy and Torre base-camps decades ago, before predictable forecasts radically transformed climbing in the area. Today, Don Guerra's *asados* are an institution in El Chaltén, signalling community belonging. Originally from northern Patagonia, Don Guerra worked as a *gaucho* (cowboy) at the *estancia* that occupied the valley of Rio de las Vueltas prior to the establishment of the village. While Patagonia is often imagined as an empty wilderness, it has sustained human populations for thousands of years. Early populations were nomadic hunters but the few Tehuelches that survived the Argentine genocide carried out in the late 19th century under the name of the "desert campaign" farmed the upper areas of the valley through the 20th century. Their descendants still live in the village and have resisted the dispossession of their land in the courts to no avail. The *estancias* that were established on native lands relied on grazing practices that have led to the desertification of the Patagonian steppe. The creation of national parks and protected areas in the 20th century often implied a challenge to agricultural production and today, while the gaucho culture remains alive at some *estancias*, many farms have turned to tourism for income.

Modern Explorers



Figure 9 Skiing down from Nordenskiöldtoppen (Svalbard). Photo by Tomas Salem, May 2021..

A group of friends ski-touring to Nordenskiöldtoppen, near Longyearbyen. During the spring and summer months there is 24 hours of sunlight in Svalbard. On this particular day, the group summited around midnight. Sheltered by the cold winds that had picked up during the short ascent, they celebrated the birthday of David, an Italian glaciologist and modern explorer who has skied across Svalbard from south to north and spends large parts of the year out in the Arctic landscape. Longyearbyen is home to a many young outdoor enthusiasts who get enthralled by the atmosphere of adventure that permeates the town. Many locals plan and carry out “expeditions” to faraway corners of the island, spending days, weeks, or even months in the icy desert landscape. Some roam the landscape by ski, others by snowmobile, yet others with an entire entourage of dogs and sleds. Some live isolated lives as hunters and trappers, others spend the dark winter months in remote huts in quiet contemplation, in tests of character. As one young women put it: “In Svalbard, everyone can be an explorer.”



Figure 10 Climbing on Aguja Guillaumet (Patagonia). Photo by Tomas Salem, November 2020.

Southern Patagonia is a climbing mecca. With a rich climbing history filled with dramatic tales of death and survival, of false ascents and heroic achievements, and of the changing conditions and technologies for big-wall climbing, the Torre and Fitz-Roy massifs have continued to impress awe and respect in the climbing community. On any given summer day, the climbing areas near the village are brimming with climbers from Europe and the Americas. In recent decades, El Chaltén has become the epicenter of a growing Argentine climbing-community, with the biggest walls proving to be veritable rituals of passage on the ladder to success. Among the young generations of Chaltenenses, climbing any of the granite peaks is a ticket into the world of the “climbers”. They are looked upon with a mix of awe, respect, and resentment among the “commoners” in El Chaltén. In latter years, this community has seen a feminist revolution, as more and more women have entered the traditionally male arena. Simultaneously, climbing practices have been transformed by technological advances that allow European climbers to hop on a plane to Buenos Aires and Calafate when the forecast predicts a weather-window, changing the rules of the game.

Social Reproduction



Figure 11 Nordenskiöld Cabin (Svalbard). Photo by Tomas Salem, May 2021.

Besides the pub in the town center, the outdoors is one of the most important social arenas for the people of Longyearbyen. Groups of friends often organize trips to the nearby mountains and huts—many of which are accessible to members of the local hunting and fishing association for a modest price. Others have either been abandoned or are available to those who want to use them according to a “first come first served”-principle. The hut on the picture is an old Finnish research station. Abandoned for many years, two guides living in Longyearbyen decided to tidy it up, and keep it open to visitors on weekends. The outdoors also serve as an arena for community building through ritual practices such as the yearly garbage clean-up, when Longyearbyen’s residents clean the arctic beaches for plastic that has drifted to these latitudes on ocean currents. Most children are introduced to the Svalbardian outdoor culture from an early age, either by their families or through school, and there are two higher education institutions in Longyearbyen that teach outdoor culture and nature guiding to Norwegian and international students.



Figure 12 Bouldering near the village (Patagonia). Photo by Tomas Salem, February 2021.

El Chaltén has historically been a climbing mecca. The granite peaks are the obvious draw but the valley is full of sport-climbing areas and bouldering rocks. On windy days, local and out-of-town climbers congregate at the big rocks near the village—most of them sheltered by the surrounding *notofagus*-forest. Across the Fitz-Roy river, the 100 meter high wall *el paredón* (the big wall) has near 200 climbing routes, many of them multi-pitch trad-climbing. Most summer days these sites will be brimming with people: friends, friends of friends, future friends and rivals. On rainy days climbers and local youth meet at the boulder hall of the Andean Club. Every late summer, near the end of the season, Chaltén celebrates the “Boulder Festival” by the big rocks near the club and later the “Trekkling Festivities” organized around a mountain marathon. The climbers of El Chaltén have been defining of the village identity—to the pride of some and dismay of others who do not identify with the community. Many climbers and villagers are volunteers of the local rescue team, which assists the park-rangers of the National Park in mountain rescue. While El Chaltén does not have any higher educational institutions, national and international guiding schools carry out educational activities in the area from time to time.

Home in Nature



Figure 13 Camping in the icy desert (Svalbard). Photo by Tomas Salem, May 2021.

While Svalbard has many private and public cabins, expeditions of the kind Longyearbyen's modern explorers sometimes carry out, often imply going to remote areas where tenting is the only option. This requires safety precautions that tenting elsewhere rarely demands, such as polar-bear scouts, trip-wires with pyrotechnics, as well as signal flares and guns for self-protection. By law, groups are required to carry guns when leaving the confines of Svalbard's urbanizations as polar-bear attacks occasionally occur. General rules of thumb, like avoiding to set up camp close to shore (polar-bear hunting-territory), must be followed diligently. In the spring, temperatures can still reach below -20 C, and camping in these conditions is not for the faint-hearted and often requires a lot of protective gear and equipment. Regardless, many Svalbardians feel at home in these icy landscapes, incorporating them as part of their character and identity.



Figure 14 Base camp Piedras Negras (Patagonia). Photo by Tomas Salem, February 2021.

Argentina lacks a cabin-culture like the Norwegian one. In northern Patagonia, mountain clubs like the Andean Club of Bariloche have established a network of staffed huts and trails inspired by the Alpine clubs of Europe. In southern Patagonia, huts are few and far between. In El Chaltén, however, the different basecamps used by climbers to access the granite peaks have been meeting sites for alpinists and often have a rich cultural history and symbolic meaning. Places like Piedras Negras (picture), Paso Superior, Nipo Nino, Bridwell, or Rio Blanco have been used by climbers for decades. They are usually established in sheltered places, where one can wait out bad weather, access water, and be safe from physical dangers such as avalanches or rockfall. At some of the basecamps, specially the low-lying campsites in the forests, past climbers erected primitive structures as they would often spend the summer months without setting foot in the village—some of these sites were even established prior to the village. Later, tour operators have maintained basic infrastructure and structural domes (big tents) at some of these campsites, using them for commercial tours.

Impact of Tourism



Figure 15 University students on the sea-ice (Svalbard). Photo by Tomas Salem, May 2021.

Infrastructural and technological developments have brought Svalbard closer to civilization, to the point that to many residents, Longyearbyen is now seen as a “central” location—“only” a three-hour flight from Oslo. Similarly, remote regions of Spitsbergen can be accessed by snowmobile in just a few hours, with GPS and satellite communication significantly reducing risks and lowering the threshold for these endeavors. Frequent flights to the mainland, modern and luxurious tourist infrastructure, and the multiplication of tour-operators and Arctic cruises are gradually transforming the Svalbardian wilderness alongside rapid climate change. To protect the wildlife from the mounting pressures of tourism and thawing sea-ice, authorities are implementing new environmental regulations that limit tourism but also impacts on customary engagements with the landscape, producing a sense of loss among some of Longyearbyen’s residents.



Figure 16 Forest fire (Patagonia). Photo by Tomas Salem, January 2023.

In El Chaltén, growth has exceeded the infrastructural capacities of the village. While tourism has increased exponentially in the last decades, this has not been accompanied by adequate investments. As a result, both the village and park infrastructures have collapsed: untreated sewage flows into the rivers, the local population is sometimes left without water and electricity during peak season, trails deteriorate, and national park authorities are unable to meet the demands caused by overcrowding—such as search and rescue or rule enforcement. Strong winds and a drying climate means that the risk of forest fires is increasing, and the high number of tourists compounds these risks. Many fear that a fire in the national park's forests will be impossible to extinguish, threatening the entire village, which is located downwind from the main trails.

Searching for the Divine



Figure 17 Randonnée on the West Coast of Spitsbergen (Svalbard).
Photo by Tomas Salem, May 2022.

Among Norwegians, as well as many European settlers, nature is perceived to have healing properties. Life in the outdoors is seen as healthy and good for body but, especially, mind. To some, seeking out to the vast Arctic landscape is described as a way to encounter “the creation” (*skaperverket*) and experience the “forces of nature” (*naturkreftene*). Traditionally associated with notions of the sublime, the wilderness is a place where the modern subject encounters the divine, experiencing a sense of being a small part of a larger whole—a universal consciousness—and where one can retreat to quiet contemplation around the fragility and brevity of human existence.



Figure 18 Summit of Cerro El Trébol (Patagonia). Photo by Tomas Salem, December 2019.

“What about the spiritual aspect?” This question was the first thing Diego, one of my friends from El Chaltén, asked me when I explained what I wanted to focus on in my research project on mountains and happiness. Trained in critical perspectives, “the spiritual aspect” had eluded me completely. As my project progressed, I realized that to the people that participated in my research, life in the outdoors was first and foremost a practice that imbued their lives with profound meaning: they simply could not imagine a good life where nature did not play a major part of the equation. This feeling was perhaps best expressed when discussing the risks of alpine climbing. Few people are as aware of the thin line that divides life and death as alpine climbers. They would often stress that they would rather die doing what they loved than abstain from the risks of climbing.

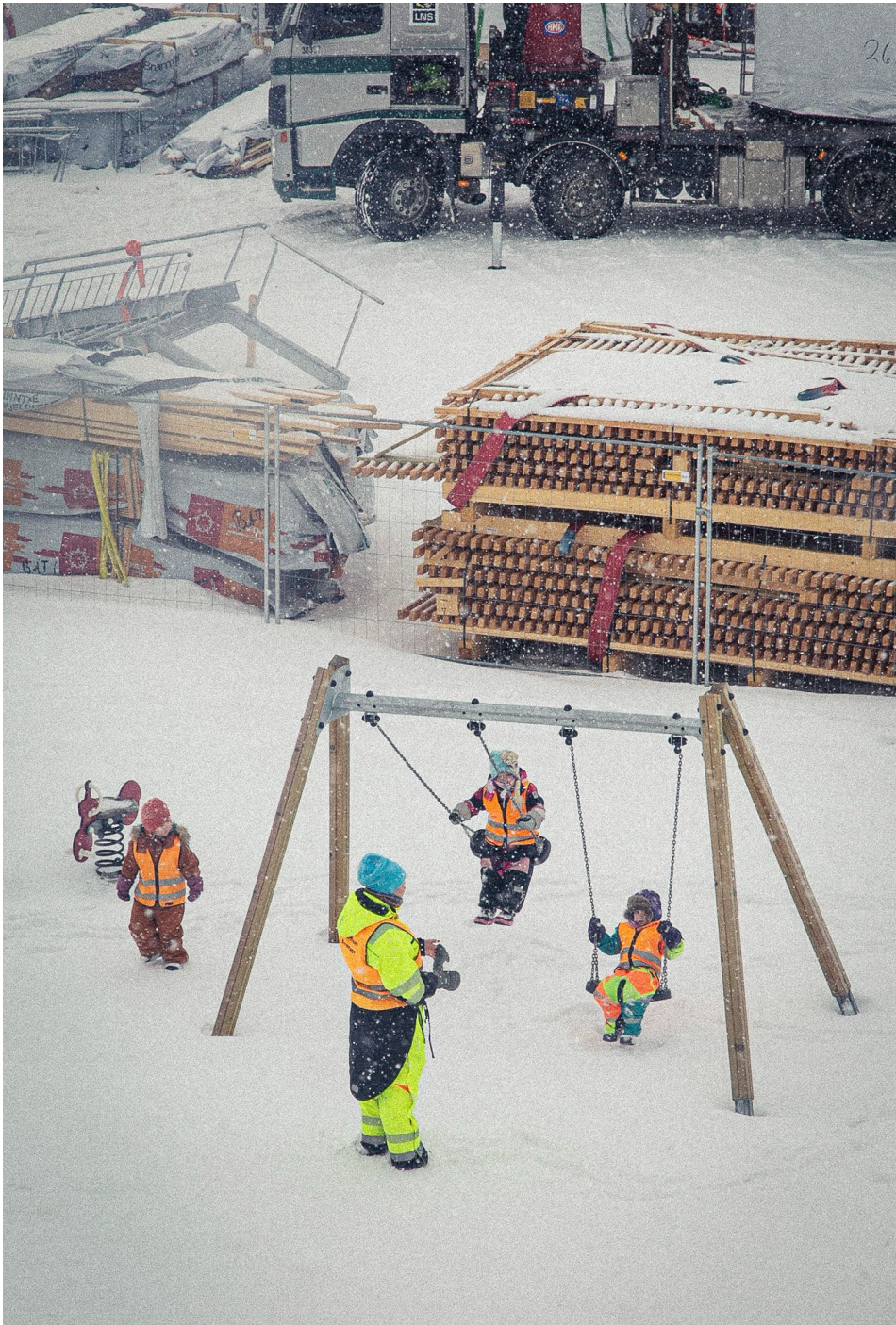


Figure 19 Children playing next to a construction site (Svalbard).
 Photo by Tomas Salem, May 2021

The relentless encroachment of development, growth, and progress on the natural landscape is radically transforming the modern subject's relation to the natural world. As the landscape is commodified, regulated, and repurposed, the spontaneous engagement and unstructured play in nature that some psychologists describe as essential to the healthy brain development of children is disappearing. In Svalbard, environmental regulations that restrict access to the natural landscape challenges the right to roam and mirrors global trends towards the enclosure of the natural world.



Figure 20 Boy in caravan (Patagonia). Photo by Tomas Salem, March 2021.

While the children of El Chaltén still have a vast natural landscape in which they can play, the dynamics of global capitalism and tourism are fueling a logic of expulsion, forcing many families to move from the village as the costs of housing skyrocket. Meanwhile, institutions that would secure former generations access to the area have been closed, such as the *Planta Estable* camping, created for schoolchildren from the province of Santa Cruz, and the Madsen-campsite, where visitors could pitch their tent for free. Today, there are no free campsites left in El Chaltén, narrowing public access to the National Park, while tourism is booming.

Where do the Children Play?

Well, I think it's fine
Buildin' jumbo planes
Or takin' a ride
On a cosmic train
Switch on summer
From a slot machine
Yes, get what you want to, if you want
'Cause you can get anything

I know we've come a long way
We're changin' day to day
But tell me, where do the children play?

Well, you roll on roads
Over fresh green grass
For your lorry loads
Pumpin' petrol gas
And you make them long
And you make them tough
But they just go on and on, and it seems
That you can't get off

Oh, I know we've come a long way
We're changin' day to day
But tell me, where do the children play?

Well, you've cracked the sky
'Scrapers fill the air
But will you keep on buildin' higher
till there's no more room up there?
Will you make us laugh?
Will you make us cry?
Will you tell us when to live?
Will you tell us when to die?

I know we've come a long way
We're changin' day to day
But tell me, where do the children play?

- Cat Stevens -

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video-essays

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Bodies on Hold

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

Bodies on Hold explores the phenomenology of watching people at risk and its ethical implications. It includes both a visual analysis of two experimental documentaries about migration and an original sensorial investigation in the city of Philadelphia of how temporal precarity is created on screen with no human subject.

Keywords: migration, ethics, spectatorship, waiting, abstraction

The author

Anat Dan, Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of Pennsylvania (2024), is currently a Lecturer in the Department of Cinema and Media Studies. Her research on global documentary media cultures focuses on contemporary tensions between humanist and post-human aesthetics in experimental documentaries.

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Link & password

<https://vimeo.com/881170053?share=copy>
Bodies2023



1 Lauren Berlant, "Introduction: Compassion (and Withholding)," in *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, ed. Lauren Berlant (London: Routledge, 2004), 4.

Bodies on Hold is a situated investigation into the spectatorial experience of watching people at risk on screen. Inspired by critical discussions about the mobilization of compassion in liberal cultures, this video attempts to reconfigure the relationship between viewers and on-screen subjects. Mass media representations of endangered human lives perpetuate unequal relation between viewers and on-screen subjects by emphasize emergency and sentimentality. Lauren Berlant clarifies how this mechanism works: "Compassion is a term denoting privilege: the sufferer is over there. You, the compassionate one, have a resource that would alleviate someone else's suffering."¹ This disposition, she argues, suspends a critical consideration of the ways by which regimes of violence enable the reproduction of political and global capital today. Following Berlant and other critics of humanitarian imagery, I am searching after an alternative spectatorship experience, one which may point at the direction of politics of equality.

Developed as a complementary part of my dissertation writing process, the video's point of departure is the analysis of two experimental documentaries dealing with migrants awaiting rescue at sea. Philip Schefner's *Havarie* (2016) and Amel Alzakout's *Purple Sea* (2020) were made against the backdrop of the Mediterranean crossing in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the civil war in Syria. *Havarie* reworks a short YouTube video recorded from a cruise liner that features blurry images of a dinghy adrift with thirteen people onboard. Three minutes' worth of footage is slowed down so that it unfolds at one frame per second. It is accompanied by the marine radio traffic recorded during the rescue operation and a mosaic of voiced testimonies, in which anonymous men and women recall their experience of historical conflicts. *Purple Sea* (2020) also examines an unfolding event of endangered migrants waiting to be saved. Here the perspective is that of a GoPro camera mounted on the wrist of a Syrian artist and filmmaker who took the smugglers' route to Europe. Just before reaching the coast of Lesbos, her vessel capsized, and she fell overboard along with more than 300 other passengers. They waited almost three hours in the water for help, and forty-three people died in the incident. The film is comprised of dizzying footage of fluorescent orange life jackets, dangling legs, tiny feet in white sneakers, a bobbing packet of cigarettes, life preservers. These nearly abstract close-ups are accompanied by tactile soundscapes above and below water.

Whereas the first film observes the unfolding event from a perspective that is too distant and the second offers a view that is too close, both abstract the human figure. *Bodies on Hold* study the films' techniques of abstraction by means of split screen, graphic animation, separating video from audio, and producing original video material. However, while these two films serve as guiding examples for counter-hegemonic, interruptive nonfiction media practices, the video focuses on my viewing experience and is constructed around it. My voice-over reflects on the experience of watching people who I cannot discern waiting for a rescue team. Other abstraction techniques such as slow motion, minimalism, and decentralized narrative structure bring to my attention the ways by which the films allude to different kinds of waiting—some are more precarious than others—yet there is no hierarchy implied. Watching waiting and watching as waiting (for something to happen) open two questions that I pursue in the second half of the video: What are the conditions of possibility for seeing “waiting” on screen without a human subject? When does “waiting” become precarity?

The filming process was led by the idea that one way of confronting the question of how to ethically account for the inherent power relations between documentary subjects and viewers is to construct a scene in which the viewer could watch precarity with no subject (this does not mean though that there are no people in the frame). I borrow the term “temporal precarity” from migration scholar Nicholas De Genova, who highlights how capitalism manipulates time to produce global inequalities. In the context of irregular migration, De Genova argues that, in addition to the legal and administrative production of waiting by the border regime, the threat of detention or deportation can itself intensify migrants' precarity by rendering their lives unstable and unpredictable, making them more vulnerable to exploitation as a source of labor force.² I began filming in designated waiting areas around Philadelphia but early in the process I turned the camera to other corners in the city as well. My aim was to point to the fact that temporal precarity characterizes the lives of many people across the globe; and that because it is mundane and structural, it is imperceptible to the humanitarian eye.

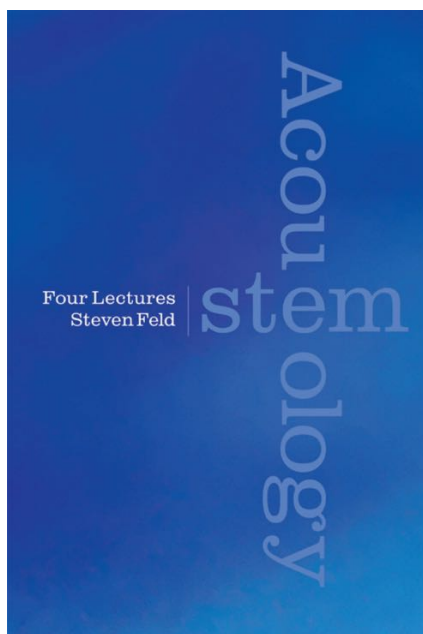
Bodies on Hold's prologue is composed by a slowed-down scene taken from Pierre Braubenger's documentary *The Bullfight* (La Course de Taureaux, 1949). This documentary is at the center of André Bazin discussion about what he perceived as a radical rupture between the transience of life and the repeatability of death on-screen.³ Unlike watching “the tragic ballet of the bullfight” on-site, wherein the moment of death is unique by definition, in cinema, death is subjected to endless repetitions. Thus, for Bazin, death on-screen is intrinsically obscene. I follow Bazin's appreciation of cinema's unique linkage with contingency, yet, when it comes to temporal precarity on-screen, I depart from his account by considering it from the vantage point of life rather than death. *Bodies on Hold*, thereby, shifts the focal point from the imminent death of subjects (such as the toreador and the bull) to the physical relations between the body of the viewer and the missing body on the screen.

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² Nicholas De Genova, “‘Doin’ Hard Time on Planet Earth’: Migrant Detainability, Disciplinary Power and the Disposability of Life,” in *Waiting and the Temporalities of Irregular Migration*, ed. Christine M. Jacobsen, Marry-Anne Karlsen, and Shahram Khosravi (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 193.

³ André Bazin, “Death Every Afternoon,” in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 27–31.



Steven Feld

Acoustemology. Four Lectures, VoxLox, 2024

<http://www.stevenfeld.net/acoustemology-four-lectures>

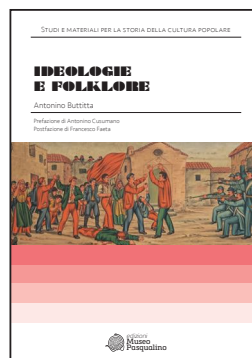
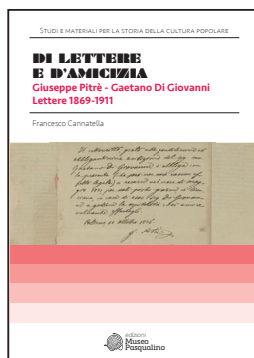
So when colleagues and students began to request or suggest a book about acoustemology, I tended to put them off, saying that there was already enough in print since I coined the term in the early 1990s. Responding to various prompts, I said that I didn't want to do another intensive ethnographic monograph, nor another collection of essays and dialogues, nor another lectures-into-monograph mix of history, biography, and memoir. And I had already explored, outside of purely film and audio projects, multiple book formats for collaborative art-anthropology conversation with mixes of photography, audio, video, essays, and dialogues. I also didn't want to return to more standard forms of academic book collaboration, like the seminar essay to edited collection.

The realization that I was running out of book genres more than matched the realization that my carbon footprint was running out of karma. Dashing here or there so often for many years to perform academic lectures was starting to feel questionable. Then, in late June of 2019, I gave the Anthropology of Music lectures and master class on the theme of Acoustemology for the Institut für Ethnologie und Afrikastudien at the Johannes Gutenberg Universität in Mainz, Germany. On three successive days I delivered versions of the second, third, and fourth of the lectures presented here, hearing them resonate in the context of presentations by the sixteen workshop participants and questions by discussants and audiences from multiple areas of anthropology, music, sound studies,

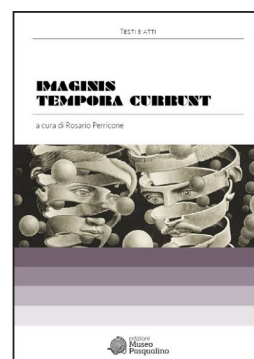
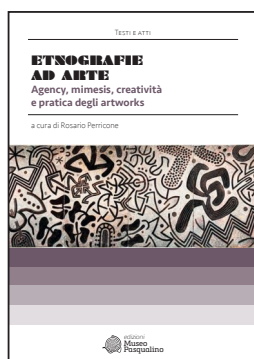
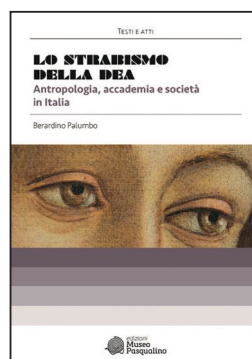
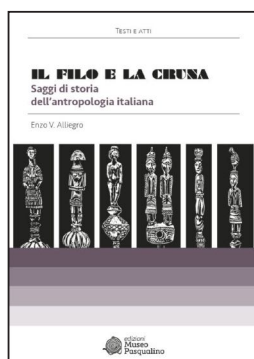
media and technology studies, cultural studies, and communications. Additionally, just before and just after, I gave the first of these lectures to audiences at the universities of Würzburg and Cologne.

At various points in the week, particularly around the Mainz conversations, I was asked when and how I was planning to publish these pieces. I was told that they were "deceptively simple," meaning easy on the ear but dense with thought. Students and colleagues said that they would benefit from being able to read the texts after hearing and seeing a live performance. In the moment I was also very aware that, despite the impressive linguistic abilities of an audience for whom English was largely a second or third language, these pieces were hardly written in international academic English. Besides, I was not presenting my thoughts in the more familiar presentation genres of deep descriptive music/sound ethnography or history, or pointed arrangement of theoretical proposals and critiques, exemplified by grounded examples. Rather I chose to experiment, each lecture creating a storied performance of juxtapositions that might generate certain revelations, even if they might also produce certain ambiguities.

Steven Feld is an anthropologist, filmmaker, musician, and sound artist, and Distinguished Professor of Anthropology Emeritus at the University of New Mexico



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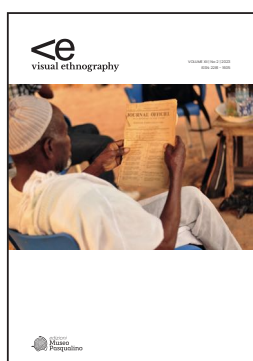
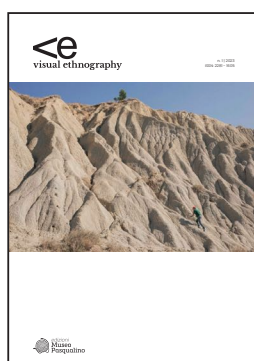
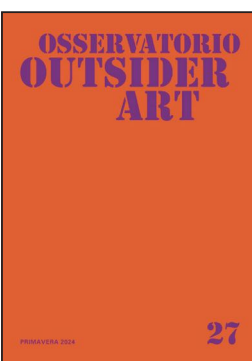
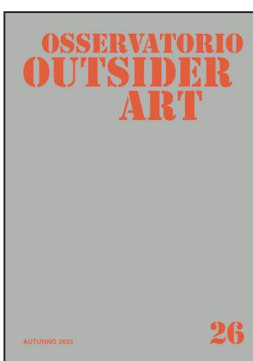
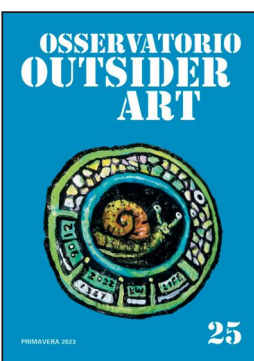
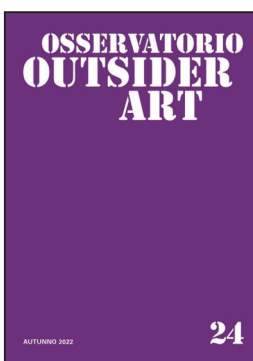
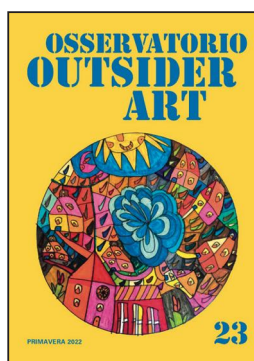
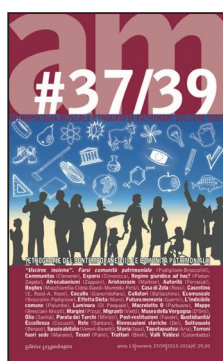
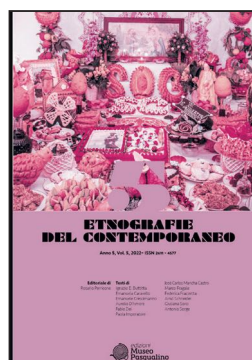
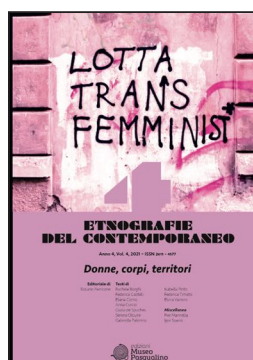
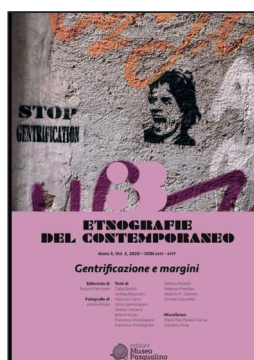
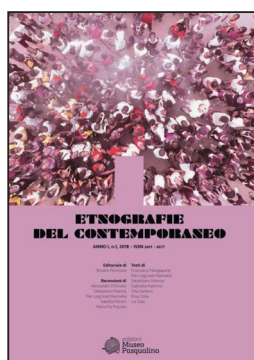


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