The Second Annual Symposium of Latin American Art

Vistas

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Beyond the Symbolic: Art and Social Commitment in the Americas

Edited by
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ISLAA
INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES ON LATIN AMERICAN ART

The Annual Symposium of Latin American Art brings together graduate students, emerging scholars, and artists to share and discuss the multitude of perspectives that inform the artistic production and discourses of the region, as well as of US Latino art. This two-day series of panels also features prominent keynote speakers who are shaping the understanding of Latin American art today. Established by the Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA) and The Institute of Fine Arts at New York University in 2016, the event takes place each spring and is organized and run by the graduate students at The Institute of Fine Arts and invited partner institutions such as The Graduate Center of The City University of New York and Columbia University.

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Foreword

Edward J. Sullivan

The third edition of *Vistas* contains essays by participants in the 2017 conference on modern Latin American art sponsored by ISLAA and organized by students at the NYU Institute of Fine Arts. The papers could not be more poignant for pertaining to the unfolding events of the past year. Principal among the stimuli for choosing the overall theme "Art and the Symbolic" (referring specifically to the response on the part of artists to social engagement within visual cultures of the Americas) was the election in late 2016 of Donald Trump as president of the United States, that of Rodrigo Duterte as president of the Philippines, the rise of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil after the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, and the continuing destruction of the planet's environment. The decision to choose such a "loaded" theme as the guiding subject of that year's conference, which reflected a worldwide sense of "dis-ease" with politics and social mores, was a bold move on the part of the student organizers of the symposium.

An essay on Colombian women quilters indicates the strict relationship between what had been considered craft and what is now clearly a practice of social and political resistance. Clemente Padín's subversions of the status quo through his mail art illuminate the many pathways of anti-corruption information. Argentine artist Amalia Pica's use of "subversive mathematics" during the military dictatorship in her country serves, as do the subjects of the other essays, as an example of what we could call "underground art," that is, art that avoids (or evades) the consecrated systems of galleries or museums in order to become a radical tool of change in modern societies.

Preface

Juanita Solano Roa

In spring 2017 my fellow colleagues, Brian Bentley, Madeline Murphy Turner, Sean Nesselrode Moncada, Blanca Serrano Ortiz, and I organized the second iteration of a project that we envisioned a year prior: an annual symposium on Latin American art for emerging scholars. The symposium's aim was to build a platform and network of young researchers interested in the art of the Americas. The symposium served not only as a space to share the latest perspectives in the field, but also as a place to meet and discuss our interests with other scholars from all over the world, with whom we had not yet formed strong relationships. The symposium has proved to be a success: it is an ongoing project that has already had four iterations. This issue of *Vistas* compiles only a fraction of the wonderful papers that were presented at the symposium in April 2017.

Responding to the events that shook the world in 2016, the second iteration of the symposium, titled "Beyond the Symbolic: Art and Social Engagement in the Americas," interrogated the merging of art and politics in a context in which the concept of the symbolic seemed to be in crisis. Artists and activists alike called for action. For instance, Cuban artist Tania Bruguera responded to Donald Trump's election as US president by asserting: "The time for the symbolic has ended. Art is now a tool—not to make the system work better, but to change the system." With this in mind, symposium papers addressed the issue of politics in art, especially in works that explicitly resist political oppression, economic imperialism, and the legacies of colonialism in the Americas.

The essays selected for this issue of *Vistas* materialize the thought-provoking discussions that emerged from the symposium. Jessica M. Law's article on Amalia Pica's work evidences the extent to which the Argentine dictatorship of the 1970s assumed control over education, including seemingly innocent subjects such as mathematics. Law dissects Pica's installation *Venn Diagrams (Under the Spotlight)* (2011) through

an examination of the Argentine junta's censorship of an approach to math that was considered "subversive." Ultimately, Law questions the relationship between collective assembly and diagrammatic reasoning.

Pablo Santa Olalla's essay continues the theme of oppression under dictatorial regimes through an analysis of Clemente Padín's work. Santa Ollala focuses on the artist's *Inobjetal* series (1971) and argues that Padín's self-claimed "language of action" enabled him to create artworks that do not distinguish between poetry and art. Santa Olalla utilizes Mieke Bal's analysis of performance and performativity to examine the operations and displacements that Padín created through his pieces, many of which he circulated through mail art networks.

Lastly, Manuela Ochoa's essay addresses the work produced by the Costurero de la Memoria, Kilómetros de Vida y Memoria (Sewing Box of Memory, Kilometers of Life and Memory), a group of women who were victims of the Colombian armed conflict, who gather together to sew and share their experiences. Ochoa analyzes the performance-like work that these women produced in 2016—the year the peace deal with the FARC guerrilla group was signed—when they collectively wrapped the Palacio de Justicia (the Supreme Court of Colombia) in Bogotá with their own handmade quilts. The quilts narrate their painful stories and reveal some of the most horrifying memories of war. Ochoa juxtaposes this powerful work with a similar intervention by Doris Salcedo, and questions the circumstances in which media attention was lavished on the contemporary artist while virtually ignoring the artistic production of the mostly rural women, who have been silenced over decades and were finally able to publicly claim visibility.

Ultimately, the essays collected in this volume speak to the broad and exceptional research by young scholars working in a field that has finally assumed a more prevalent role in the global history of art.

Subversive Models of Thought: Notes on Amalia Pica's Diagrams

Jessica M. Law

Two spotlights mounted on a single stand face a white gallery wall. Upon detecting motion in the space, the spotlights project alternating monochromatic lights—one blue and the other pink—in a sequence that concludes with the two lights intersecting. It is perhaps more accurate to identify the tonality of the projected circles as magenta and cyan—the secondary colors of light. This distinction proves important. It indicates a process of additive color mixing and explains why we see white when one spotlight overlaps the other. White light is generated by the presence of all frequencies on the spectrum. A geometric figure now materializes on the wall: two projected circles and a common space in between, a shape familiar to most observers. Moving closer, graphite lines of text stenciled just below the projection read:

> A Venn diagram is a mathematical illustration used to describe group dynamics and logical relations of inclusion and exclusion.
>
> During the period of dictatorship in Argentina in the 1970s, gatherings of citizens were closely monitored, as they were considered a threat to the government. Prosecution for participating in any type of collective activity was carried out under the umbrella of the National Security Law. At the same time, group theory and Venn diagrams were banned from primary school programs as they could provide a model of subversive thought.

Artist Amalia Pica attended primary school in Northern Patagonia in the years following Argentina's military dictatorship (1976–1983), and was among a generation of students once again permitted to learn so-called subversive mathematics. For the artist, the censorship of the Venn diagram ultimately poses the question: what is the correlation between group formation

and diagrammatic reasoning? The discussion that follows is an attempt to explore this conundrum. By considering how the historical events brought to light by Pica's 2011 installation *Venn Diagrams (Under the Spotlight)* function as a cultural and social index against which the artist gestures, I suggest that Pica's practice deviates from the "language of mathematics" that so often epitomizes discourse on geometric abstraction in postwar Latin American art.[1]

All A Are B and All B Are A

The Venn diagram, as elucidated by Pica's installation, is a mathematical illustration used to describe group dynamics and the logical relations of inclusion and exclusion. Proposed by English mathematician John Venn in 1881, the Venn diagram was intended as a heuristic device to evaluate proofs or the validity of arguments. With his diagram Venn also sought to improve on an earlier variant from 1768 known as Euler circles. Venn claimed that the existing "schemes of diagrammatic representation" of the time failed to "naturally harmonize with the propositions of ordinary life or ordinary logic."[2] According to Venn, because Euler circles often required several distinct figures to illustrate only one proposition, they did not communicate information with the utmost clarity and efficiency.[3] The eighteenth-century system also did not allow for the expression of partial information. In a sense, Euler circles were all or nothing. Venn wrote in 1881 that the majority of propositions one encounters in life or in logic "are founded, and rightly founded, on an imperfect knowledge of the actual mutual relations of the implied classes to one another."[4] Venn's solution was to instantiate an adaptable space for information within a singular diagram that would neither impose expressive limitations nor deprive the formal system of the capacity to represent universal statements. The intersection of A and B materializes on the surface of inscription (a piece of paper or a gallery wall) the underlying basis for the mutual relation between the two. Additionally, Venn improved on the prior system by introducing the technique of shading as a syntactic device.[5] So, to convey the universal statement "All A are B and all B are A," the mathematician or logician filled in the two circles, leaving the space where they intersected blank, which could also be perceived as white.

Though the emergence of diagrams within discursive frameworks of Western philosophy and mathematics can be traced to Euclid's *Elements* (fourth century BCE), if not earlier, both Euler's and Venn's iterations attest to the proliferation of schematic modes of representation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But unlike the graphic charts and graphs that were conceptualized to wield "the principles of geometry to matters of Finance," as William Playfair sought to do in 1785, the Venn diagram was intended to aid in processes of experimental thought and syllogistic reasoning, not the visualization of statistical data.[6] To make this distinction more apparent (especially in our current age of ever-increasing quantification), it is useful to briefly consider another mathematician and philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce, who also sought to improve on Euler circles at the turn of the twentieth century. Peirce characterized his system of logical diagrams as "moving pictures of thought" because diagrams "take the place of the experiments upon real things that one performs in chemical and physical research. Just so, experiments upon diagrams are questions put to the Nature of the relations concerned."[7] The diagram, in other words, provides a logical model for experimentation prior to praxis.

Pica's *Venn Diagram* binds together the science of light with mathematical thought, expanding on Peirce's notion of moving pictures. Once initiated by one's presence in the gallery, white makes transparent a collective configuration of the internal elements—the colors of light—on the flat wall. When *all* of A and *all* of B intersect, C results. The intersection of the spotlights follows the same logic of adherence—the knowledge of mutual relations—that shapes Venn's overlapping circles, taking "the place of the experiments upon real things that one performs" in a realm outside the discursive space of the museum.

"Who's Afraid of a Vector?"

Before returning to Pica's practice, I would like to sketch a few historical coordinates that led to the censorship of the Venn diagram in Argentina. To do so, it is important to begin with the ways in which the term "subversive" operated as a catchall for

any and all activity seemingly aimed against the state. For example, in March 1976 Admiral César A. Guzzetti proclaimed, "My concept of subversion refers to terrorist organizations on the left. There is no right wing subversion or terrorism. The social body of this society is contaminated by disease that erodes its entrails and forms antibodies."[8] The rhetoric of disease went hand in hand with that of subversion. Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor argues that in the context of the Dirty War, the public sphere throughout Argentina was a stage for the "purification" and reconstitution of nation-ness whereby "[t]he seeming 'natural' performativity of everyday life transformed into a command performance."[9] Synthesizing Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities with Judith Butler's pivotal discussions on gender, Taylor critically examines the way "Argentines felt as if they were in exile, an internal exile, as the signs, sights and codes of their familiar environment became progressively stranger and more terrifying."[10] The visible semiology of daily life was uprooted as citizens of all ages were expected to adhere to a certain set of standards under the guise of national security. Flyers were distributed in schools with images that showed that the appropriate way for young men and women to dress was in conservative attire. Classroom behavior was also outlined in these flyers, with one reading: "It is prohibited to make a group presentation or collective request. It is prohibited to make any comment that affects the principle of authority and hierarchy."[11] The boundary between public and private blurred as Argentine society was being reconstituted in the image of the junta.

Within a month of the military coup and the formation of the National Reorganization Process (el Proceso) in 1976, the junta pillaged the libraries of the National University of Córdoba of all content considered to be against the state, the church, and/or the nuclear family. These books were subsequently set ablaze on public television in an effort "to avoid Argentinian youth being led into error over what our true patrimony is."[12] In addition to "cleansing the teaching area," as one reporter put it, another effort to contain and neutralize the erosion of Argentine society by "leftist ideology" and further implement strategies of control was giving military officials administrative positions at a number of public and private institutions.[13] For Mauricio Schoijet, an Argentine professor of electronic engineering teaching in Mexico

City, this was the very context that gave rise to the censorship of mathematics. In his article titled "Who's Afraid of a Vector?" (1980), which Pica also references, Schoijet included the following statement issued by the Associated Press of Buenos Aires on November 26, 1978: "The decision of the provincial (state) government of Córdoba to ban the teaching of modern mathematics because it was considered 'subversive' has shocked the [Argentine] scientific community and unleashed a controversy within the military regime itself."[14] Schoijet's article points to the appointment of military officials at several universities, concluding that this debate was simply a symptom of the junta's "thought control campaign."[15] Other sources Schoijet references—such as the text that supposedly started the debates on set theory and the Venn diagram in the first place—indicate just how complex and socially fraught the discussion on mathematics was in the late 1970s.

In March 1972 Spanish mathematician Julio Garrido submitted the report "Las matemáticas y la realidad: consideraciones sobre la 'matemática moderna' y la reforma de la enseñanza" (Mathematics and Reality: Considerations on 'Modern Mathematics' and the Reform of Teaching) to the French minister of national education on the behalf of the International Council of the French Language.[16] It is unclear why or how officials in Córdoba obtained the report, which provided the basis for the debates and subsequent ban on modern mathematics. In the opening passage, Garrido writes, "One of the fundamental characteristics of the time in which we live is the excessive fondness for novelties, innovations, and originalities. The words 'new,' 'modern,' and 'revolutionary' are epithets used successfully in propaganda. These words now carry an emotional charge that attracts the youth and seems to also seduce the less young, who in order not to lag behind, are often dragged meekly through the whirlwind of change and thoughtlessness."[17] The language used to designate modern mathematics as a "revolutionary" novelty aimed at seducing Parisian youth is, on the one hand, comparable to the aforementioned classroom prohibitions in Argentina. On the other hand, it is specific to the cultural and political climate in which it was written. In the aftermath of the Second World War and in the midst of the Cold War, France sought to reform its national educational system, with a renewed focus on mathematics, science, and physics. The key issue was whether

mathematics, as a classroom subject, needed to be updated in an era of new technologies and global economic development.[18] Yet, in Garrido's report, these reforms were not necessarily the target of his discontent. His major cause for concern pertained to the infiltration of certain mathematical trends in academia, or what is generally referred to as "new" or "modern" mathematics that at the time informed the debate on secondary education in France. As mathematician Maurice Mashaal notes, the study of modern mathematics "emphasized rigor in definitions, theorems, and proof-writing while deemphasizing all numerical, algebraic, and trigonometric calculations."[19] Abstract concepts took precedence over basic arithmetic and geometry.

Garrido channeled much of his angst toward a collective of mathematicians known as the Bourbaki.[20] The collective, whose members had secured several notable positions at the École Polytechnique and other universities at the time, strongly advocated for set theory as an essential principle of mathematics. During a debate in 1959, one member loudly proclaimed, "Down with Euclid! Death to triangles!"[21] Dispensing with twenty-five centuries of Euclid meant focusing on the inherent structure of set operations and the study of unions and intersections, rather than the classical fundamentals of a line, a point, or a curve, for example.[22] The supposed demise of triangles was referenced in Garrido's report, and became an issue in the public debate that unfolded in the Argentine media following the publication of the Associated Press news release in 1978. Additionally, the Buenos Aires–based daily newspaper *La Nación*, published a statement from the members of the Institute of Mathematics, Astronomy, and Physics at the University of Córdoba expressing their support for censorship, claiming modern mathematics was an "arbitrary concoction."[23]

Commentary published in the weekly magazine *Confirmado* was also illustrative of how the French debate was received in Argentina. In conjunction with modern mathematics, it also suggested the banning of pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus's work because, as one commentator mentioned, the slogan "Down with Parmenides, Heraclitus returns!" had been written in graffiti on a wall at the University of Paris during the May of 1968.[24] Here, we find the rejection of the philosopher of universal stasis and a revolutionary call for the philosopher of universal flux.

Sliding Structures

Though mathematics can be empirical and applied, it is generally understood as objective and neutral. The meaning of mathematics is not relational; it is considered essential. Claiming otherwise, as these accounts do, is therefore nonsense, for it shifts mathematics into the realm of politics and ideology. To once again quote from "Mathematics and Reality":

> The thought without content that characterizes modern mathematics constitutes an empty building structure, which can be occupied by different entities without taking into account what these may be. . . . The term "modern mathematics" should be replaced, according to some, by "mathematical structures," which elaborates mental forms or structures applicable to very different realities.[25]

Garrido's critique of the structural turn within the discursive realm of mathematics was more than an objection to math for math's sake; he felt it also left the discipline and its structures open to symbolic subversion. It seems there was a limit to the junta's shifting signs and codes under the Proceso. Mathematics needed to remain fixed in order for its meaning to be controlled. It is not surprising that we find the initial site of censorship in Córdoba, where the civil uprising known as the Cordobazo took place in May 1969.[26] By the 1970s Córdoba had become Argentina's second-largest industrial city, due to the foreign investment of capital and the manufacture of foreign motor vehicles. Within these conditions, labor unions emerged as major political actors. Mass production under the "corporatist dictatorship," as David Rock has described it, would be difficult if the working class only had knowledge of an "empty building," particularly one that adhered to and strengthened the logical function of their union.[27] Along with the burning of the library, a form of erasing past meanings, the censorship of the Venn diagram was another attempt to prevent the lessons one might learn from experimenting with diagrams, lessons that could lead to "very different realities" (fig. 1).[28]

A ∩ B ∩ C

Pica's *Venn Diagrams (Under the Spotlight)* is one such reality, and yet it is by no means an "arbitrary concoction." For the artist, the Venn diagram is never an empty structure. To conclude, then, I would like to return to the initial question raised in this essay by asking another: how might Pica's practice be considered subversive?

With her own experimentation, Pica brings to bear the historical and sociopolitical content that was imposed on this seemingly neutral mathematical structure. And along with the didactic text that accompanies the projection in *Venn Diagrams*, presence is manifested by our own bodies in space, since the sequence of light—the procedural unification of all color—is only materialized within the gallery when motion is detected. Bodily presence grounds the sequential unfolding of the Venn diagram without rendering the projection on the wall static. But above all, the pivotal intersection that occurs between observer and mechanical apparatus in *Venn Diagrams* undermines what it means to be "under the spotlight," for we are never captured by the distribution of light. In other words, Pica's spotlights operate as a vehicle for presentation as opposed to observation or surveillance.

With her interactive installation *A ∩ B ∩ C* (2013, fig.1), Pica revisits the logic of the Venn diagram through a collaborative gallery performance that involves the overlapping of monochromatic translucent shapes.[29] The performers are instructed to each choose a shape and to overlay it with another shape for thirty seconds, before returning it to a different spot along the wall. The way Pica has the performers materialize the Venn diagram's movement—its logic—in space and time in this work is comparable to how each observer initiates the projection of diagrammatic thought in *Venn Diagrams (Under the Spotlight)*. However, the former is distinct from the latter in that the artist chooses to isolate the shapes, calling our attention to the points A, B, C, and so forth, before the moment of their intersection. This moment, Pica explains, is brief. "The compositions always happen in a very different way," she claims.[30] "Abstract compositions [come] together that will never happen again."[31] As Heraclitus tells us, it is not possible to step twice into the same river. In isolating each point, before and after the moment

of intersection, and in correlating the performers with this model of thought, Pica reminds us that there is an inherent contradiction to the Venn diagram. What was excluded from *A* that afforded the intersection with *B* to then formulate *C* is a proposition for which Venn's diagram cannot account. The Venn diagram, as an expression of group dynamics and logical relations of inclusion and exclusion, is never neutral. To reiterate Venn himself, unity is "founded on an imperfect knowledge of the mutual relations of the implied classes to one another."[32] This paradoxical condition becomes both subversive and productive the moment it is brought to light. What is under the spotlight, for Pica, is the cultural and social value of diagrammatic reasoning.

1. An earlier version of this essay was delivered at The Institute of Fine Arts at New York University-ISLAA symposium, "Beyond the Symbolic: Art and Social Commitment in the Americas" at The Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, April 15, 2017. I must express much gratitude to the organizers: Brian Bentley, Madeline Murphy Turner, Sean Nesselrode Moncada, Blanca Serrano Ortiz, Edward J. Sullivan, and lastly, Juanita Solano Roa, to whom I give my sincerest thanks for the invitation to contribute to this issue of *Vistas*.

Geometric abstraction in Latin America—in particular practices that emerged between 1940 and 1960 in Argentina, Venezuela, and Brazil—was often framed as a passive rehearsal of its European counterparts, like Neoplasticism or Constructivism. As Mónica Amor has argued, Latin American geometric abstraction "manifested in crisis," and thus carried the historical burdens of sociopolitical and economic conditions specific to each country, region, or city from which it emerged. Though the present essay does not have the space to address this issue directly, it is worth noting that Latin American geometric abstraction has been a striking subject of interest over the past decade among curators, scholars, and collectors. The majority of this scholarship has been published in exhibition catalogs, which according to Amor, "mark[s] the coincidence of this trend with the consolidation of major private collections and the steady increase in auction house prices." Mónica Amor, "Displaced Boundaries: Geometric Abstraction from Pictures to Objects," *ARTMargins* 3, no. 2 (June 2014): 101. See also Amor, *Theories of the Nonobject: Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, 1944–1969* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016); and Edward J. Sullivan, "The Cube, Sphere, and Cone: Constructed Abstractions in America," in *Making the Americas Modern: Hemispheric Art, 1910–1960* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2018), 223–50.

2. John Venn, "On the Diagrammatic and Mechanical Representation of Propositions and Reasonings," *Philosophical Magazine Series 5* 10, no. 59 (July 1880): 2.

3. See Sun-Joo Shin, Oliver Lemon, and John Mumma, "Diagrams," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2018). https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/diagrams/.

4. Venn, 2.

5. Venn, 1–17; see also Shin, Lemon, and Mumma.

6. Thomas L. Hankins and Robert J. Silverman, *Instruments and the Imagination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 117.

7. C. S. Peirce, "Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmaticism," (1906), quoted in Hankins and Silverman, 141.

8. César A. Guzzetti, *La opinión*, March 10, 1976, quoted in Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 277, 11n.

9. Taylor, 99.

10. Taylor, 99.

11. Ministry of Culture and Education, Circular 137, quoted in Taylor, 105 (translation by Taylor). In addition to student guidelines, there was a media campaign called "Calls for Individual Responsibility," which ran ads in magazines and other print media in order to communicate ideal principles to the general public.

12. Nick Caistor, "Cleansing the Teaching Area," *Index on Censorship* 7 (May/June 1978): 20, quoted in Haig A. Bosmajian, *Burning Books* (London: McFarland & Co. Inc, 2006), 171 (translation by Caistor).

13. Caistor, 20. While strategies like book burning seem trivial in comparison to the brutal abduction, torture, and forced "disappearance" of nearly 30,000 people by the regime, it does speak to the profound authoritarian principles that were enacted within all registers of daily life in the late 1970s, including the educational system.

14. Associated Press of Buenos Aires, November 26, 1976, quoted in Mauricio Schoijet, "Who's Afraid of a Vector?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 36, no. 6 (June 1980): 60–62 (translation by Schoijet). See also Amalia Pica, interview by João Ribas and Julie Rodrigues Widholm, in *Amalia Pica*, eds. João Ribas and Julie Rodrigues Widholm (Chicago, IL: MCA Monographs, 2013), 15–16.

15. Schoijet, 61.

16. Julio Garrido, "Las matemáticas y la realidad: consideraciones sobre la 'matemática moderna' y la reforma de la enseñanza," *Verbo*, no. 104 (April 1972): 391–418, accessed December 10, 2019, https://fundacionspeiro.org/revista-verbo/1972/104. Schoijet only briefly mentions Garrido's report. Following its submission to the Minister of National Education in 1972, the report was also printed in *Verbo*, a magazine published by Fundación Speiro in Madrid.

17. Garrido, 391. All Garrido translations by the author. I thank my colleague Daniela P. Montelongo for her assistance with my translation of Garrido's text.

18. Maurice Mashaal, *Bourbaki: A Secret Society of Mathematicians*, trans. Anna Pierrehumbert (Providence, RI: American Mathematical Society, 2006), 139.

19. Mashaal, 141

20. Garrido, 403–4.

21. Schoijet, 61.

22. Mashaal, 102.

23. *La Nación*, December 5, 1978, 6, quoted in Schoijet, 60–61 (translation by Schoijet).

24. Schoijet, 61.

25. Garrido, 399.

26. The movement began on May 29, 1969, with a national worker's strike. University students immediately joined, helping to eradicate the barricades. See Horacio Tarcus, "The Argentine May," *Verso*, trans. Nicolas Allen, accessed December 10, 2019, https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3935-the-argentine-may. Originally published in Spanish as "El Mayo argentino," *Revista OSAL* 9, no. 24 (October 2008): 161–80. Notably, according to Tarcus, the "French May" was not a rallying cry in Argentina. Rather, independent publishers in Argentina "imported" the event through intellectual texts and images, like reproductions of the posters by Beaux Arts students.

27. David Rock, "Racking Argentina," *New Left Review* 17 (September–October 2002): 62–64. For a thorough history of Córdoba's industry and labor unions, see James P. Brennan, *The Labor Wars in Córdoba, 1955–1976: Ideology, Work, and Labor Politics in an Argentine Industrial City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

28. Garrido, 399.

29. Pica's *A* ∩ *B* ∩ *C* (2013) was included in the exhibition *Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today (Bajo un mismo sol: arte de América Latina hoy)*, held at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 2014.

30. Amalia Pica, "*A* ∩ *B* ∩ *C,*" interview for *Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today*, Guggenheim Museum (2014), accessed December 10, 2019, https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/under-the-same-sun-art-from-latin-america-today.

31. Pica, "*A* ∩ *B* ∩ *C*," interview for *Under the Same Sun*.

32. Venn, 2.

Figures

Jessica M. Law

Subversive Models of Thought: Notes on Amalia Pica's Diagrams

Figure 1

Amalia Pica, *A ∩ B ∩ C*, 2013. Acrylic and occasional performance, overall dimensions variable. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Guggenheim UBS MAP Purchase Fund, 2014. Courtesy Amalia Pica and Herald St.

Not Only Mail Art: From "Inobjetal" Experiences to Performance. Clemente Padín, Performativity and Activism, 1971–1977

Pablo Santa Olalla

In *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (2002), Mieke Bal addresses the concepts of performance and performativity. She posits that an important aspect of their meanings is lost when the two terms are analyzed separately, suggesting memory as the common denominator linking them. It is well known that the concept of performativity comes from linguistics. In the fifties, John L. Austin defined it as the special characteristic of expressions that do not enunciate or depict, but that carry out the action they mention. This linguistic category developed into a philosophical concept via Barthes and Derrida. Performativity became a capacity of agency subjected to generalization, first in the realm of language, and second within other vectors, such as gender and ideology. Derridean "speech act theory" tells us that utterances made through any code are not unique or free exertions, but "performative utterances," working within iterability and repeated and recognized through social convention and context.[1] Bal notes that this conventional iteration cannot be achieved by any means other than memory. She suggests the metaphor of memory as a "stage director."[2]

On the other hand, performance has also been theorized from the perspective of aesthetics. Bal defines performance as the unique execution of a work from a preexisting score.[3] No matter how free or brief this score is, for Bal, it always exists. Performance prioritizes execution and minimizes the importance of the score or, as Bal terms it, the "pre-text."[4] In this way, the traditional hierarchy between a primary work and its derivatives is inverted. Performance includes within artistic practice what was excluded from the artistic scope and those things that were considered by-products before. Nevertheless, this recognition is not enough for Bal, and she introduces here the Derridean concept of iterability in order to explain performance, linking it with performativity. According to her, we can only understand the inversion of the traditional hierarchy between a work and its derivatives, entailed by performance, if we take into

consideration the role that memory develops through iterability.[5] What Bal means is that a performance is an articulation within the language of performance, which is achieved through repetitions and recognitions that can only be socially and contextually created and interpreted. It also breaks with the traditional schema of intentionality within artistic creation.[6] Thus, performance operates by means of a language of action, for which two aspects are essential: overcoming instituted limits and memory.

Uruguayan artist Clemente Padín also theorized a "language of action" for artistic expression. In this case, his artworks operate in the way of what Bal has referred to as "theoretical objects," that is, practical works that develop theory.[7] The "language of action" idea led Padín from poetry to performance, without drastically discriminating between them. Padín's career can be understood as a continuum, despite a forced interruption to it caused by his imprisonment and house arrest during the Uruguayan dictatorship (1973–1985). This essay overviews his career through an examination of four of his most important works: the mail art series *Inobjetales* (Inobjects, 1971); the performance *O artista está a serviço da comunidade* (The Artist Is at the Service of the Community, 1974); the book *De la representation a l'action* (From Representation to Action, 1975); and finally, the self-published booklet *Hacia un lenguaje de la acción* (Toward a Language of Action, 1977).

When Padín was twenty-five, he moved to Montevideo and began editing several experimental poetry magazines. The first one was *Los Huevos del Plata*, published between 1965 and 1969.[8] Its purpose was to create a space of expression for young poets, counteracting official spaces held by the Generación del 45 (Generation of '45).[9] Soon *Los Huevos del Plata* started to contribute to the expansion of the international network of experimental poetry magazines. Other publications within this network included *WC* and *Diagonal cero*, edited by Edgardo Antonio Vigo in Argentina;[10] *El techo de la ballena*, published in Venezuela;[11] and *El corno emplumado*, published in Mexico.[12] The Latin American network was connected in turn to other international networks, and in this way it established links with Europe and the US. Padín's experimental approach led to a dispute within *Los Huevos del Plata*'s editorial team, and the publication was discontinued in 1969. Once this first magazine

ended, Padín obtained funding to publish ten issues of another experimental magazine, *OVUM 10*, which came out between 1969 and 1972.

The Uruguayan government, headed by Juan María Bordaberry, worked directly with the military to carry out a coup at the end of June 1973.[13] The country was strained by various paramilitary groups including the Tupamaros on the left and the Escuadrón de la Muerte and Juventud Uruguaya en Pie on the extreme right. In this environment, and once the *OVUM 10* cycle was over, Padín started to self-publish a continuation of the project, called just *OVUM*. This second publication experienced mounting organizational and supply problems as the dictatorship advanced.[14] Despite this, between 1969 and 1977 Padín continued to foster a presence in the international mail art network. When Padín was imprisoned for the "mockery and vilification of the armed services" in 1977, *OVUM* was also discontinued.[15] After his arrest, this network provided enough international pressure to get him released from prison in November 1979. Even so, the dictatorship still kept him placed under house arrest until 1984.

In April 1971, Padín published *Inobjetal 1* (fig. 1) on the back cover of the last issue of *OVUM 10*. With this first proposal from a series of four, Padín sought to transfer poetic action from the sender to the recipient, thus creating a double displacement. On one hand, he disrupted the hierarchy between the so-called original artwork and its derivative.[16] On the other, he transformed written language into action through the artwork's materiality. Consistent with his personal philosophy on "new poetry," he sought to create an artwork that "escapes from artifice," that "might be only life," and that is *not* art "that [only] talks and doesn't do."[17]

One month later, Padín sent *Inobjetal 2* through the mail art network (fig. 2). It consisted of one sheet, folded and sealed with staples and attached to another sheet, onto which the word "forbidden" was written in many languages. Once again, action was at the center of the work, which could only be completed by reading the hidden content on the first paper: "If you are reading this note, you have understood that you have just engaged in an action by intervening in an object, the unique purpose of which was to trigger thinking/acting synapsis."[18] In a poetic way, *Inobjetal 2* is a call to action, a gesture aimed at counteracting

any kind of oppressive system. In this sense, meaning surpasses action itself, positing that rule breaking "is enjoyable."[19] For Padín, an art open to action is always political.

While approaching the performative core of his works, Padín tried to subvert the traditional understanding of what an artwork might be and how it could work. At this point, the artist realized that authorship was still present, and *Inobjetal 3* tried to solve this flaw. This artwork consisted in the transmission of a manifesto about "inobjetal art" through the mail art network in June 1971. The text questioned the authority of the artist and sought to go beyond the artist's activity as an one-way imposition, which was still present within both preceding *Inobjetales*:

> By putting aside the work of art, inobjetal art eliminates other outcomes: the use of representative systems [that are] easily deformable by the status for its benefit, or in the best case, for the benefit of the author, who is eager to exercise the authority of his personal norms.[20]

Padín's "inobjetal art" worked through the dematerialization of the traditional artwork and against the presence of the artist as an author, thus preventing the hijacking of art by power structures such as the state or the market. *Inobjetal 3* invited the receivers' participation by asking them to send back artworks that followed the tenets of "inobjetality" in return. The site of the artwork was thus no longer located between Padín's proposal and the receiver's action, but rather, it was created by means of communication within the mail art network itself.

In August 1971 Padín sent the last artwork of this series, *Inobjetal 4*, which insisted on extracting art from its limits in order that it conform to reality, not just represent it. It had a clear political aim, pointing to action and presentation in order to subvert representation. Padín felt that action should be the means of breaking with artistic tradition by operating within a social framework. That is what Padín theorized soon after as the "language of action."[21]

Padín received many responses to his mail art proposals from artists including Klaus Groh, Richard Meltzer, Paul Woodrow, and Petr Stembera. In the years that followed, Padín made other

postal requests like these, further developing the idea of "inobjetal art," the tenets of which were troubling, as we will see in a moment.

However, the next step in this course toward a "language of action" was Padín's involvement in the group exhibition *Prospectiva '74*, curated by Walter Zanini, director of the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC USP), and his close collaborator, the Spanish artist Julio Plaza. Padín's proposals, like the *Inobjetales*, were always militant and ideological. For this Brazilian exhibition, Padín proposed a performance: *O artista está a serviço da comunidade* (fig. 4), consisting of several elements. The first was the identification of specific instructors, who were tasked with explaining contemporary art and the exhibition to visitors; the second was the hanging of a large banner at the exhibition entrance bearing the title of the performance; and the third was the promotion of the performance by radio, press, and city-wide announcements, by throwing flyers throughout the exhibition space, and by broadcasting messages over loudspeakers inside it.

Although this elaborate proposal was reduced in its execution to just the banner at the entrance and the presence of only one instructor, the performance's core ideas were still active. The instructor was a Spanish performer living in Brazil named Francisco Iñarra, who drove the visitors around the exhibition in a cart while commenting on contemporary art and the works on view. Iñarra wore a shirt with the slogan "O artista está a serviço da comunidade" (the artist is at the service of the community), creating a recursive situation. Without a doubt, it was a "performative performance," as Padín himself noted in the preparatory writings for this work: "[t]he language of action is straightforward: its meaning is materialized at the same time it is undertaken."[22]

In this performance, the "language of action"—which at the beginning needed the distinctive support of means like poetry and mail art—was directed toward spatiality and multimedia. Even so, Padín did not lose the centrality of action and an activist position, always inherent to his work.

In 1975, Padín compiled the complete set of experiences around the "language of action" in his book, *De la representation a l'action* (fig. 3). This compendium was published in Marseille, as part of the series Les anartistes, edited by Nouvelles Éditions

Polaires, a publishing house coordinated by the artist Julien Blaine.[23]

The Uruguayan artist condensed the process that drove him from the semiotic analysis of language to experimental poetry, and from there to the "language of action," within the book's six chapters. The artworks included in it acted as "theoretical objects," as Mieke Bal would say, with regard to the theory of the "language of action." Nevertheless, Padín felt the necessity of a compilation and a theoretical implementation of his practice.

The book's first three chapters develop a semiotic theory of experimental poetry. This theory-in-practice starts with visual games composed of written-language signs, and ends with works that provide their meanings through actions that operate as signs.

The book's fourth chapter reveals another proposal Padín submitted to the mail art network in 1972: *Temas y variaciones* (Questions and Variations). In this section, he presents the proposal's rules, a selection of responses by several artists (including Robert Filliou, Pierre Garnier, Janos Urban, Klaus Groh, Guillermo Deisler, Ken Friedman, Robin Crozier, and Jaroslaw Koslowski) and some theoretical conclusions. The activist character of Padín's proposal is highlighted in his concluding observations:

> The artist, while wielding his decision-making capacity at the level of representative systems, operates over reality too, at the level of ideology. . . . The language of action, apart from inaugurating an unprecedented representational system due to which a new mode of communication is possible, would perform not only on an ideological level as the other languages do, but also at the level of reality itself, due to the character of its sign: the action.[24]

The book's fifth chapter develops the previous chapter's conclusions, delving into the theory of the "language of action." The four *Inobjetal* works are collected here, and the context of their creation is revealed, along with some critical comments:

> I stopped my research when I understood the status of the sign that operates in the language of action. It

> is an obvious contradiction, which is impossible not to notice: to be transmitted, information has the necessity of an object, whether a sheet or a recording, an environment or an action. The intended distinction of the object in and of itself, which seemed to overcome contradiction, did not work because connotations depend on the interpretant. . . . This is how we have returned to the beginning point: we have a foggy consciousness about the existence of a language of action, and we have detected the status of its sign. . . . We ignore the rest: How could we articulate a sentence by the means of the language of action? What are the significant and non-significant unities? Is there a dictionary or a coding of actions? Would it be possible to overcome referentiality on the level of expression and to access the aesthetic expression using the language of action? Would history be a long dissertation about man's transformative action over the world? To what extent are each of us integrated in this dissertation? Which is to say, how are we integrated in history? To what extent do we transform the world with our actions?[25]

This last question clearly underscores the connection between the "language of action" and history or, in other words, between performativity and memory. The last chapter of the book is a compilation of subsequent texts that abound in what has already been noted. Therefore, this path "toward a language of action" ends—in this essay, but not in Padín's career—with his proposal *Hacia un lenguaje de la acción* (fig. 4). Padín released it to the mail art network in August 1976. Importantly, Padín also worked intensely as a curator during this period. Via international calls through the mail art system, he obtained artists' materials, from experimental poetry to new media and conceptual art. In this way, he curated several exhibitions, including *Exposición internacional de la nueva poesía* (1969) at Galería U in Montevideo, *Exposición Internacional de ediciones de vanguardia* (1970) at the University of Montevideo, and *Exposición exhaustiva de la nueva poesía* (1972) and *Festival de la postal creativa* (1974), also both at Galería U. The proposal *Hacia un lenguaje de la acción* followed

the same procedure of opening a call through the mail art network. However, the result was not an exhibition, but rather a self-edited booklet created in 1977.

The responses he received from other artists in *Hacia un lenguaje de la acción* verify how the "language of action" completed the transformation of the artistic fact proposed by Padín. Artworks were no longer only created by him as an artist-in-chief, but they required a receiver to operate them. Hence, Padín became a *curator*, a *mediator*. Materiality disappears in almost all the responses he received. They operate in the territory of performance, action, and spatial intervention, or in the documentation of these practices. At the same time, their content is ideological and political, highlighting the activist character of the "language of action." Padín had attained success with his proposal; it fit in perfectly with a new collective and international feeling about what artistic practice had to be: art had to be intertwined with life, working performatively with reality by acting on it.

Padín is a performer. His works possess performativity, since they are actions that intend to affect reality. And they do so if the receivers of the messages transform them into artworks by performing them. When this happens, the circle closes, *performing the performativity* from Padín's proposals. Although Bal made her comments on performance and performativity regarding James Coleman's work, her theoretical *dérive* can also be applied to the works of our Uruguayan artist:

> Memory as stage director. . . . This is what makes a viewer a performer. But a viewer can only be a performer if performance is taken, here, in the double theoretical sense. The viewer plays the part scripted by the work to the extent that he or she acts, responds to the perlocutionary address of the work, which reaches out, over time, from the past of the work's making into the present of viewing. The viewer is the agent of performance. But, at the same time, the play performed by the viewer is not pre-scripted, prescribed.[26]

Thus, the performances proposed by Padín are a collection of different methodologies and agencies. Within them, linguistics,

experimental poetry, mail art, networking, action art, propositional art, and conceptualism meld together to produce a particular product. Padín's "language of action" stands as a process of hybridization developed, tested, and criticized step by step, not only by the artist himself, but also by the receivers, who are no longer mere spectators, but active performers. When the public confronts one of these artworks by Padín, it opens a dialogue with him, and in this sense, each spectator becomes a performer. Nevertheless, Padín's proposals always negotiate the zones between aesthetics and politics. The spectator has to choose between becoming an activist or remaining passive. Either choice is a performative response within the "language of action."

Padín was subdued by the Uruguayan dictatorship between 1977 and 1984, first in prison and then on house arrest, where he was denied a passport. His performative strength was quiet, but it remained intact. Once his passport was restored and democracy arrived in Uruguay, Padín resumed his artistic practice, continuing his activist performances in numerous corporeal and political works throughout the eighties and nineties.[27]

1. This article is part of a broader research project framed within the research group Art Globalization Interculturality (AGI) and the research project Decentralized Modernit(ies): Art, Politics, and Counterculture in the Transatlantic Axis during the Cold War [MoDe(s)] (R&D HAR2017-82755-P), both located at the University of Barcelona.

Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1992 [1988]), 13–19.

2. Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 186.

3. This definition compiles several different ideas presented by Bal. See Bal, 175, 181.

4. Bal, 181–82.

5. Bal, 178.

6. Bal, 181.

7. Padín's idea of a "language of action" predated Bal's theories on performance and performativity. It is necessary to remember that Bal does not mention Padín's work in any sense. Nevertheless, Padín's "language of action" can be read as an illustration of Bal's theories, especially because the former works as an example of what Bal understands as a "theoretical object." See Bal, 61.

8. It is not possible to easily translate *Los Huevos del Plata*. "El Plata" refers to the river, the Río de la Plata, and "los huevos," literally meaning "eggs," is also slang for "balls" (testicles). By simultaneously referencing eggs and balls, the magazine's title is intended

to invoke both creative potential (eggs) and the strength of the young generation of poets (balls).

9. The Generation of '45 was a literary movement that renewed Uruguay's cultural field. Well-known members included Mario Benedetti and Ángel Rama, among others.

10. See "WC," CAEV Ediciones, accessed September 4, 2019, http://caevediciones.blogspot.com.es/p/wc.html; and "Diagonal cero," CAEV Ediciones, accessed September 4, 2019, http://caevediciones.blogspot.com.es/p/diagonal-cero.html.

11. Ángel Rama, "Prólogo: El techo de la ballena," in *Antología de "El techo de la ballena"* (Caracas: Fundarte, 1987), 11–37.

12. Margaret Randall, "*El corno emplumado*/The Plumed Horn," last modified September 18, 2016, accessed September 4, 2019, http://www.margaretrandall.org/-El-Corno-Emplumado-The-Plumed-Horn-.

13. This coup d'état started a period of dictatorships that lasted until 1985.

14. "So I brought out a second era of *OVUM*, in a somewhat new form for that time: cooperatively made. I asked all my friends to send me to my address five hundred legal-sized sheets, whatever they could logically do. When I had ten or twelve packages, I would assemble an issue, adding a couple of unprinted cardboard covers on it, because I didn't have any money; I would staple it and the magazine was ready to go." (Saqué, entonces, una segunda época de *OVUM*, bajo una forma un tanto novedosa para aquella época: cooperativa. Yo les pedía a todos mis amigos que me mandaran quinientas hojas, lo que pudieran, lógicamente, de tamaño oficio, a mi dirección. Cuando yo tenía diez o doce paquetes, armaba un número, le ponía un par de tapas de cartón sin imprimir, porque no tenía dinero, le ponía dos grampas y ya estaba la revista pronta). Clemente Padín, "Entrevista: Clemente Padín / Artista," YouTube video, 52:55, Subte Centro de Exposiciones, March 14, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oO1JGglYsvI. All translations by the author, unless otherwise noted.

15. Clemente Padín, "La nueva poesía y las redes alternativas," interview by Fernando Davis and Fernanda Nogueira, *Errata* 2 (August 2010): 204.

16. *Inobjetal 1* consists of a multiple inserted into a serial publication.

17. "Un arte que escape al artificio, creado y disfrutado por todos, que sea solo vida y no obras que dicen y no hacen." Clemente Padín, "La nueva poesía II," *OVUM 10*, no. 4 (1970), n.p.

18. "Si Ud. lee esta nota, ha comprendido que ha realizado un acto al intervenir sobre un objeto cuyo único propósito fue desencadenar la sinapsis pensamiento/acción." Clemente Padín. *Inobjetal 2* (Montevideo: Clemente Padín [self-published], 1971), n.p.

19. Padín, *Inobjetal 2*, n.p.

20. "El arte inobjetal, al dejar de lado a la obra, elimina las otras consecuencias: la utilización de los sistemas representativos fácilmente deformables por el status en su beneficio o, en el mejor de los casos, en beneficio del propio autor ávido de ejercer la autoridad de sus normas personales." Clemente Padín, *Inobjetal 3* (Montevideo: Clemente Padín [self-published], 1971), n.p.

21. See Clemente Padín, *De la représentation à l'action* (Marseille: Nouvelles Éditions Polaires, 1975).

22. "A linguagem da ação é direta: seu significado se materializa ao mesmo tempo em que se realiza." Clemente Padín, "Projeto: O artista está a serviço da comunidade," in *Terra Incógnita 2. Conceitualismos da américa Latina no acervo do MAC USP* (São Paulo: Museu da Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, 2005), 216.

23. See Padín, *De la représentation à l'action*.

24. "El artista, si bien ejerce su capacidad de decisión a nivel de los sistemas representativos, opera también sobre la realidad a nivel ideológico. . . . El lenguaje de la acción, aparte de inaugurar un sistema inédito de representaciones gracias al cual sería posible una nueva vía de comunicación, obraría no solamente a nivel ideológico como los otros lenguajes, sino también a nivel de la realidad misma dado el carácter de su signo: el acto." Clemente Padín, *De la representación a la acción* (La Plata: Al Margen, 2010 [1975]), 105.

25. "Cuando comprendí la naturaleza del signo del lenguaje de la acción, detuve mis investigaciones a causa de la contradicción evidente e imposible de no apreciar: la información tiene la necesidad de un objeto para transmitirse, así sea una hoja o un disco, un ambiente o una acción. La pretendida distinción del objeto en y por sí mismo, objeto que parecía superar la contradicción, no funcionó pues las connotaciones dependen del interpretante. . . . Es así que hemos vuelto a nuestro punto de partida: tenemos la conciencia nebulosa de la existencia de un lenguaje de la acción y hemos detectado la naturaleza de su signo. . . . Desconocemos el resto: ¿cómo se puede articular una frase mediante el lenguaje de la acción? ¿Cuáles son las unidades no significativas o significativas? ¿Existe un diccionario o código de actos? ¿Será posible superar el nivel de expresión referencial y acceder a niveles de expresión estética utilizando un lenguaje de la acción? La historia, ¿será un largo discurso de la acción transformadora del hombre sobre el mundo? y, ¿en qué medida, cada uno de nosotros se integra en ese discurso, es decir, cómo nos integramos en la historia? ¿Y, en qué medida, transformamos el mundo con nuestros actos?" Padín, *De la representación a la acción*, 123–24.

26. Bal, 186.

27. These included, among others, *Por el arte y por la paz* (1984), *Juan y María* (1988), *Huelga de arte* (1990), *No están muertos . . .* (1996), and *Zona de arte* (1999).

Figures

Pablo Santa Olalla

Not Only Mail Art: From “Inobjetal” Experiences to Performance.
Clemente Padín, Performativity and Activism, 1971–1977

Figure 1

Clemente Padín, *Inobjetal 1*, 1971.
Offset lithograph on paper, 8 9⁄10 × 6 1⁄10 in. (22.5 × 15.5 cm).
Image courtesy Padín Archive, Universidad de la República del Uruguay.

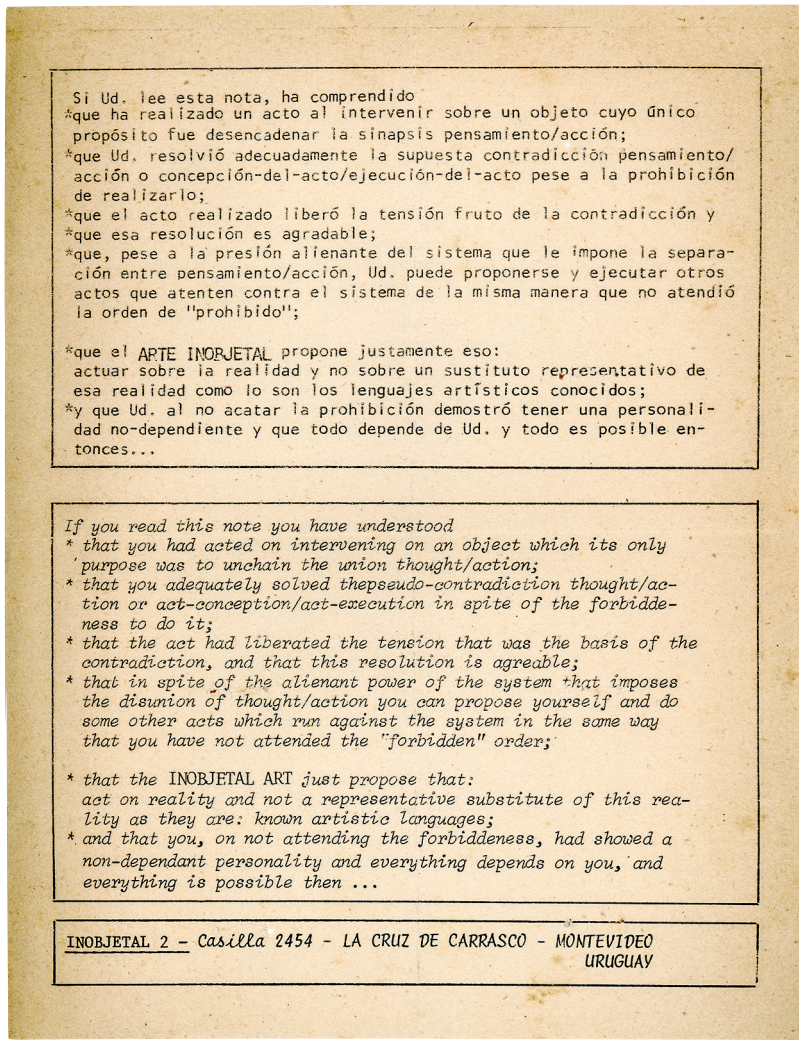

Figure 2

Clemente Padín, *Inobjetal 2*, 1971.
Offset lithograph on paper, 8 9/10 × 7 3/32 in. (22.5 × 18 cm).
Image courtesy Padín Archive, Universidad de la República del Uruguay

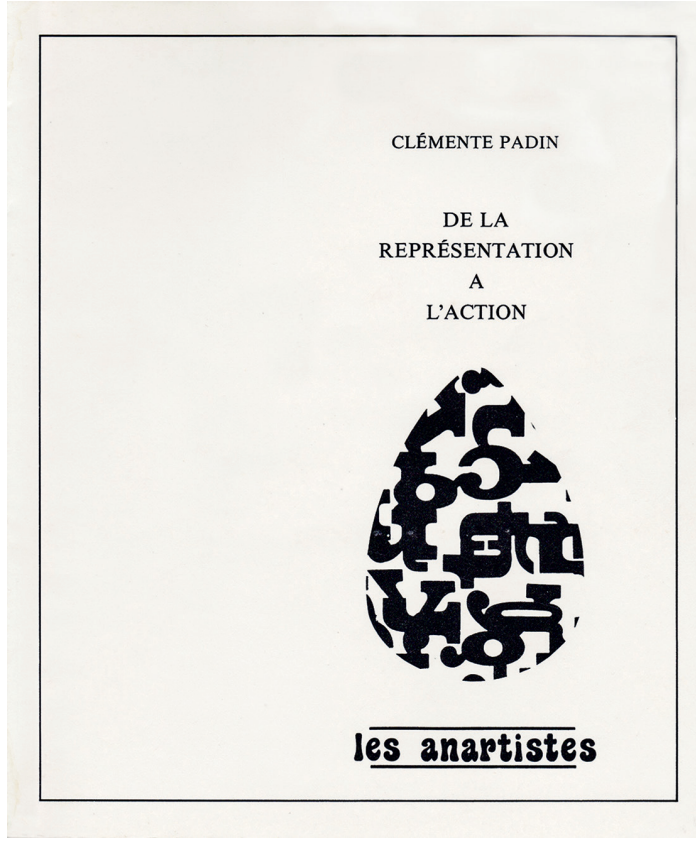

Figure 3

Clemente Padín, *De la représentation à l'action* (Marseille: Nouvelles Éditions Polaires, 1975). Author's private archive.

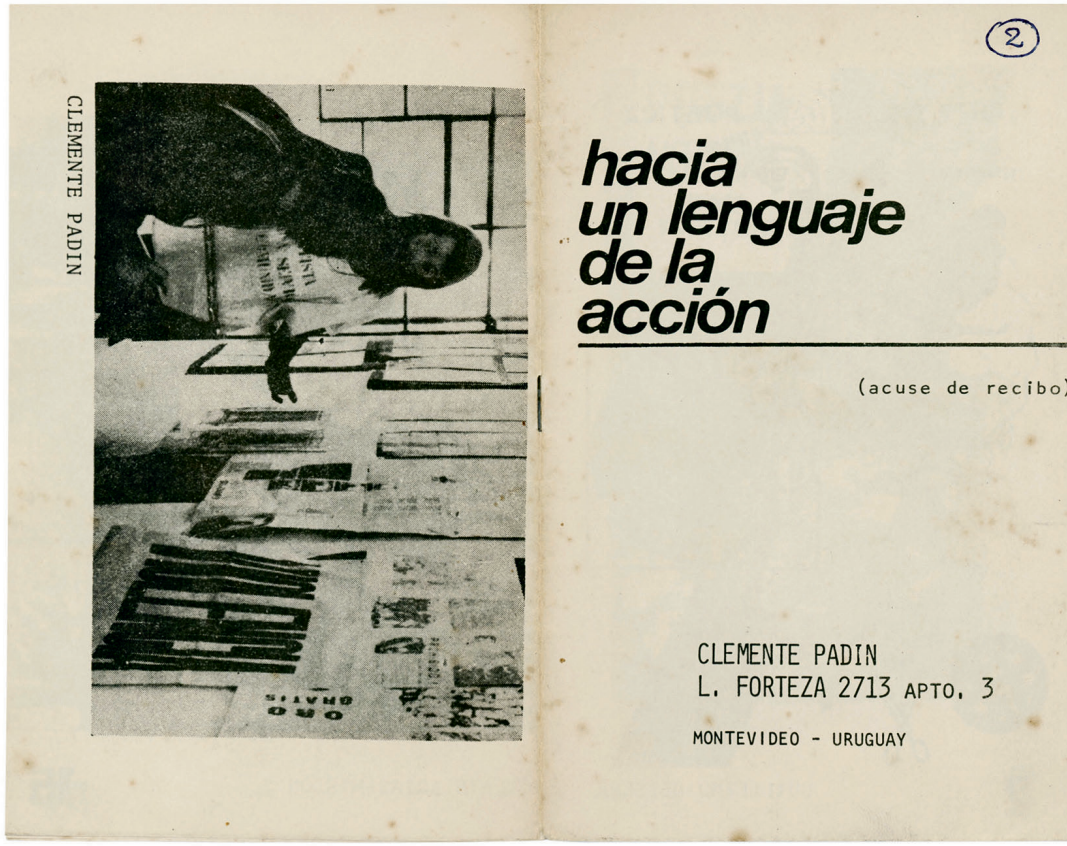

Figure 4

Right: Cover of Clemente Padín, *Hacia un lenguaje de la acción* (Montevideo: Clemente Padín [self-published], 1977).
Left: Back cover of *Hacia un lenguaje de la acción*, showing a photograph of the performance *O artista está a serviço da comunidade*, 1974.
Image courtesy Padín Archive, Universidad de la República del Uruguay.

When Memory Surrounded Justice: The Case of Colombian Women Quilters

Manuela Ochoa

On December 4, 2016, more than two hundred people wrapped Bogotá's Palacio de Justicia in hundreds of testimonial quilts, repeatedly chanting "Memory wraps justice," like a mantra. The quilts were made by women who were victims of the Colombian armed conflict. From every region of Colombia, they slowly walked side by side, clasping their stitched memories. They held them up like banners, and they covered their bodies with them like clothes. They created an ephemeral history of the war from their own recollections, complaints, and hopes.

Stitch by stitch, victims of the armed conflict have made visible the disappearances, sexual violence, crimes, and forced displacements chronicled in judicial records and the media. Although most of the Colombian survivors are women, their stories about the impact of war on their own families and bodies are unknown to many Colombians. It was a war suffered by others who live in the countryside, far from the country's larger cities. That day, these women stitched a second skin onto the rest of us, turning us into witnesses of their struggle against oblivion, injustice, and impunity.

Mending

In 2010, Blanca Nieves Meneses found the bodies of her four daughters buried in an unmarked grave in Putumayo, in the south of Colombia. Her search had begun in 2001, following the afternoon in which a group of paramilitary soldiers entered her home and snatched the four sisters, Nelsy Milena, Mónica Liliana, Yenny Patricia, and María Nelly.

Meneses and her daughter Nancy, the only child they did not take that day, managed to get the district attorney's office to send someone to the location where the four sisters lay buried. Before her daughters were found, Meneses said that she would start digging whenever she heard of an unmarked grave.[1] The forensic investigation concluded that the Galárraga sisters had

been tortured, raped, and murdered. Their clothes had been torn, and their bodies had been dismembered.

During the search, Meneses dreamt of her daughters' fragmented bodies. In her dreams, one of them would take off her clothes in order to reveal a large wound on her chest, and when her mother would go looking for a rag with which to heal her, the daughter would disappear. That same year, she had the idea of stitching together a patchwork of fragments of the clothes her daughters had left in their closet. She cut the articles of clothing into pieces of different sizes and shapes and stitched them together forming a rectangle.

There are also photographs of Meneses and her family on the quilt. The photos are surrounded by a poem written by her daughter Nancy and divided into fragments. The poem not only narrates the painful memory, but through a metaphor of the sisters as seeds and later as sunflowers, it also draws attention to the complex relationship between farmers and their lands amid the armed conflict. The sowing of the land has been interrupted and replaced by the search for family members under the ground, particularly in places where the imminent threat of land mines keeps district attorneys away.

Meneses's use of her daughters' clothes conveys a sense of their absence, what they left behind. It also retraces the lives of those who used them, with the fabrics partly faded, fuzz and loose threads, and buttons missing. In contrast to the ripping caused by the soldiers' excessive force, she was meticulous in the cutting and stitching of the bits of material. As in her dream, in which the mother tries to cure her daughter's wound, so in her quilt, she patches up what remains of her daughters.

Embroidering

Meneses's quilt and the story of her family have become a reference for other victims who have approached her in search of words of advice and encouragement in finding their own loved ones. According to her daughter, Nancy Galárraga, "Every day they would come to me, and I became a sort of intermediary, a spokesperson, and tried to help and encourage them. I would speak to them and tell them to say whether they knew where other graves could be found, and if they were afraid, I would go

to their homes so that they could talk to me in confidence."[2] Similarly, they have inspired human rights advocates such as Claudia Girón, whom Meneses worked with on a trip to Putumayo. As Girón mentioned in an interview:

> We were very impressed by how Blanca Nieves's quilt spoke about a matter so taboo but so common in the country as sexual violence. She inspired us to create symbolic objects that could be not only commercialized, but made to make memories visible, that would have a political, juridical, and cultural impact.[3]

Girón, director of the Manuel Cepeda Vargas Foundation, together with Francisco Bustamante of the Minga Association, organized a sewing workshop called the Costurero de la Memoria, Kilómetros de Vida y Memoria (Sewing Box of Memory, Kilometers of Life and Memory), in Bogotá. The title alludes to the great distances victims of the armed conflict have had to travel all across the country. The objective of the Costurero is to create a space in which victims residing in Bogotá may sit, knit, chat, and share their stories with people from different contexts. It was only in 2014 that the first law was passed in Colombia establishing sexual violence felonies committed within the armed conflict as crimes against humanity, war crimes, and acts of genocide. According to the Grupo de Memoria Histórica (Group of Historical Memory):

> All groups, but especially the paramilitary, used [rape] to humiliate women leaders; to destroy the affective circle of their enemies; to "punish" transgressors; as an incentive for cohesion within the troops and also articulated to chauvinistic practices often found in the countryside.[4]

The first workshops at the Peace, Memory, and Reconciliation Center in Bogotá were attended by seventeen families from the city's Soacha neighborhood. For the most part, they were the mothers or relatives of the victims of state crimes. Between 2002 and 2009 their sons, husbands, or brothers disappeared only to be later presented by the national army as members of guerrilla groups killed in combat. The appalling number of extrajudicial

executions, known by the euphemism "false positives," motivated the formation of the group Las Madres de Soacha (the Mothers of Soacha), who have spent the past eight years demanding justice for their relatives, so that their murderers do not remain unpunished and the circumstances of their deaths unknown. These families have lodged complaints regarding victims and witnesses being threatened and the complicity of some court officials with military officers under investigation.

Cecilia Arenas is one of the Soacha mothers who sews at the workshop every Thursday. Her brother, Mario Alexander Arenas, went missing in Soacha in 2008, and his body was found years later in Santander, a very warm region of the country. Cecilia was informed by a military judge that her brother had died in a combat between guerrilla fighters and the national army. He showed her a photo of the body taken by the authorities. Cecilia remembers saying to the judge:

> Why is my brother wearing sweatpants and why is he wearing camouflage? I know those coats are very thick. Right then he said: and how do you know that camouflage is thick? So I told him: because I am a seamstress and where I work, we only do fixing. A lot of little soldiers went there to have a badge sewn on or to make some change or other to those coats. That's why I know they are so thick.[5]

Her observation about the thickness of her brother's coat can be traced to her sharp sense of touch and her manipulation of materials in her work as a seamstress. The characteristics of the fabric led her to doubt the judge's account and to question the real reasons why her brother had died with so many layers on in such a warm place. In 2014, on the day that three soldiers confessed to the murder of her brother, Cecilia quilted her story. She used military camouflage on the clothing of the three soldiers depicted while in the process of disguising a man's body; they put rubber boots on his feet, while a soldier bends over to put some weapons around the body. During Alexander's court proceedings, the only visual evidence provided was the staged photograph of the body. Cecilia's quilt is "extrajudicial" evidence. It is also the representation of the injustice and the truth that was obscured for years.

Wrapping

The Palacio de Justicia, seat and symbol of Colombia's judicial power, also represents a painful memory to many. This is especially true for the relatives of the eleven people who disappeared as a result of the combat carried out inside the building between M-19 guerrillas and the army on November 6 and 7, 1985. From its inception, the main objective of the Costurero de la Memoria was to produce kilometers of quilts in order to wrap the whole Palacio de Justicia. The idea gathered strength during an exhibition of testimonial quilts at the Museum of Antioquia in Medellín titled *La vida que se teje* (Stitching Lives). Curated by Roberta Bacic, Isabel González, and Beatriz Elena Arias, the show took place in May 2016. It gathered eighty-five pieces from different regions of Colombia and other Latin American countries experiencing social, political, or armed conflicts, including Chile, Peru, and Mexico.

For visitors who had never experienced the horrors of political persecution or the deep pain of war, this exhibition was an opportunity to get to know, and ideally to understand, the quilters' collective and individual histories, peace initiatives, and nonviolent resistance methods. Co-curator Roberta Bacic, a Chilean researcher of textiles and human rights, underscores the importance of recognizing the internal, external, and communitarian time of these quilts: "as they sew, the women reflect upon what they have lived through. They begin, they stop, they cry."[6]

As part of the event's programming, leaders of various regional quilting workshops in the country, located and contacted by Isabel González and Beatriz Arias, got together and formed the Red de Tejedoras por la Memoria y la Vida (Network of Weavers for Memory and Life).

They decided that the network's objective would be the creation of collective and peaceful initiatives of political empowerment with the aim of promoting processes of reparation and civil resistance founded on the quilt's narrative strength and expressive richness.[7] Given this premise, they agreed to produce enough quilts to wrap around the Palacio de Justicia in December 2016, beginning with two guiding questions: How can we, the citizens, contribute in our everyday jobs to the construction of peace in Colombia? And what are our demands before the state

and the guerrilla groups in terms of complying with what was agreed to in the peace deal?

While quilters across the country focused on answering these questions, President Juan Manuel Santos and the leader of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri, known by his wartime alias Timochenko, signed the peace agreement that put an end to the five-decade civil war. By law, the deal had to be submitted to a referendum for approval, and it was on October 2, 2016. However, it was rejected by a very small margin, largely by the population of the areas less affected by the war. It was thus relegated to legal limbo until the end of November of that year, when it underwent renegotiation.

During those two months of uncertainty, many Colombians expressed their views in a variety of ways. On October 12, communities of victims from across the country traveled to Bogotá to gather at the Plaza de Bolívar, the city's main square, and demand a ceasefire (fig. 1). The square was thus transformed into a space of permanent protest, to the point that a group of people decided to camp permanently until the new agreement was signed.

On December 4, a Sunday, a week after the new peace deal was signed and the protests had dispersed, a group of nearly thirty quilters from all over the country gathered at the Plaza de Bolívar to perform the group action *La memoria envuelve la justicia* (Memory Involves Justice). They assembled all their quilts and completed the 420 meters necessary for wrapping them around the Palacio de Justicia. The quilts had different sizes and presented either a series of scenes or a precise moment in the history of their families and communities.

Many had words or sentences, like "peace" or "justice," embroidered onto the quilt, complementing or titling the images. The creative and expressive variety reflected each quilter's personal style and, in some cases, the tendencies of a group or a particular community. For instance, in most of the quilts created by the Quilters of Mampuján, there is an embroidered sun. In some cases, it is a great yellow circle; in others, it hides behind the mountains. In all the quilts that feature it, stories are explicitly and colorfully narrated in great detail. For them, the sun symbolizes hope and reaffirms the will of the Quilters of Mampuján to "bring to light" the horrors so many lived through in

Montes de María in 2000, despite the widespread silence on the matter at the time (fig. 2).[8]

After a series of musical presentations and a performance, the quilters announced that they needed volunteers to hold the quilts and make a human chain. When about one hundred volunteers finally stood in line before the Palacio, they started to walk very slowly carrying more than 300 quilts, one after the other, occasionally interspersed with photographs of the people missing from the 1985 siege of the Palacio de Justicia (fig. 3).

The ensemble of quilts narrated multiple tragedies: from state crimes and paramilitary attacks to the massacre of Bojayá, to which a whole quilt titled *Quilt of the Memory of Bojayá* was dedicated. It was embroidered with the names of the eighty-four people who were killed during a confrontation between the FARC and other paramilitary groups. Hundreds of civilians took refuge in the town's church, where the guerrillas threw a gas bomb that exploded and reduced the building to rubble.

The sequence presents many creative discourses and gestures, highlighting the particularity and diversity of the experiences of war in different communities. Sewing, an intimate, domestic labor performed by women and considered purely decorative and inconsequential, is commonly perceived as a craft or a popular art at best. In the workshops, quilting is an intimate act for these women. Even if the ability to feel pain is as physical as the ability to smell, it differs from the latter and from other bodily and physical sensations in that pain does not have an object in the exterior world; feeling pain is an isolated sensation—it is internal and solitary.

Testimonial textiles are highly emotional for their makers. Given the difficulty of communicating their enormous pain, their quilts have become a means of preserving and accessing their personal histories. Sharing spaces in which to talk and sew together has transformed the isolated sensation into a transformative atmosphere of shared feelings. These connections allow affects (and effects) to emerge. Over the years, the Costurero and the Red de Tejedoras have nurtured relationships, as one participant Cruz Elena Alzate explains: "Here [at the Costurero] you understand that you are not the only one, that there are many others, and that we can unite. We are like birds of a feather."[9]

With the intention of taking their quilts out of the private space where they are sewn to show them in public space, the

quilters transformed their work into a political act of denunciation and resistance toward the continuous violation of human rights. Unfortunately, *La memoria envuelve la justicia* had little repercussion in the national media, and it was not featured by any international news outlets. Although a few informative pieces were published in the press, it did not enjoy the same attention as other artistic manifestations in the Plaza de Bolívar, such as Doris Salcedo's *Sumando ausencias* (Adding Absences, 2016, fig. 4). In this work, Salcedo convened with volunteers to write the names of nearly 2,000 victims of the Colombian armed conflict with ashes on rectangles of white fabric. These were then stitched together by hundreds of people in order to create a quilt that covered the entire plaza. The action lasted an entire day, and the quilt was removed that same night.

Salcedo's work prompted a silent atmosphere in which participants were focused on sewing the pieces of fabric together in a meditative manner to acknowledge the thousands of Colombian lives that the war has claimed. By contrast, the action by the Red de Tejedoras, which consists mostly of rural women who have been silenced for decades, aimed at speaking loudly and clearly about impunity and injustice, seeking to remind Colombians and the state that, in spite of everything, they are still alive.

Even though both actions in the plaza were relevant and timely in this particular sociopolitical context, and both managed to involve hundreds of citizens from different social contexts, the (silent) piece by Salcedo was backed by universities, renowned intellectuals, and the public and private institutions that helped gather people in the plaza to foment an urgent sense of expectation. This piece also created numerous controversies around the artist's ethics in relation to those for whom they speak and what the appropriation of a certain political discourse means. Even though the quilters were also backed by some public institutions and human rights organizations, their action was only reported on by the newspaper *El espectador* and by the news channel RCN Noticias.

Nevertheless, for the quilters, the event was a milestone in their efforts to construct a historical memory of their lost loved ones. For the first time, the voices and quilts of the members of the Network of Weavers for Memory and Life gathered together in the country's capital, a city largely indifferent to these victims

because its inhabitants are used to seeing them only on television or begging in the streets. Although the testimonial quilts cannot stop the war or its consequences, their authors value these moments of unity and solidarity because it is in these spaces that they recognize themselves as women and citizens with rights, who are no longer invisible and destined to suffer.

1. Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *Hasta encontrarlos. El drama de la desaparición forzada en Colombia* (Bogotá: CNMH, 2016), 359.

2. Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *Hasta encontrarlos*, 359. All translations by the author, unless otherwise noted.

3. Claudia Girón, interview by the author, Bogotá, Colombia, February 15, 2017.

4. Grupo de Memoria Histórica, *¡Basta ya! Colombia: Memorias de guerra y dignidad* (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 2013), 254.

5. Blu Radio, "Cecilia Arenas relata la historia de su hermano víctima de falsos positivos," YouTube video, 32:06, posted on September 15, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sp2ItZSMfn4.

6. Museo de Antioquia, "La vida que se teje," Vimeo video, 5:14, May 11, 2016, https://vimeo.com/166271848.

7. Beatriz Arias, interview by the author, Bogotá, Colombia, March 18, 2017.

8. Verdad Abierta, "Miembros del batallón Malagana fueron cómplices de paras en Mampuján," Verdad Abierta, April 29, 2010, accessed March 22, 2017, http://www.verdadabierta.com/justicia-y-paz/2419-miembros-del-batallon-malagana-fueron-complices-de-paras-en-mampujan.

9. Esteban Montaño, "Entre hilos y agujas," Pacifista!, April 9, 2015, accessed March 1, 2017, http://pacifista.co/entre-hilos-y-agujas/.

Figures

Manuela Ochoa

When Memory Surrounded Justice:
The Case of Colombian Women Quilters

Figure 1

Members of Costurero de la Memoria, Kilómetros de Vida y Memoria gather to protest at the Plaza de Bolívar on October 12, 2016. Photograph by Costurero de la Memoria, Kilómetros de Vida y Memoria.

Figure 2

Mujeres Tejiendo Sueños y Sabores de Paz, *Hacinamiento*, 2009.
Fabric on woolen fabric, 67 ¾ × 40 3/16 in. (172 cm × 102 cm).
Photograph by Francisco Escobar.

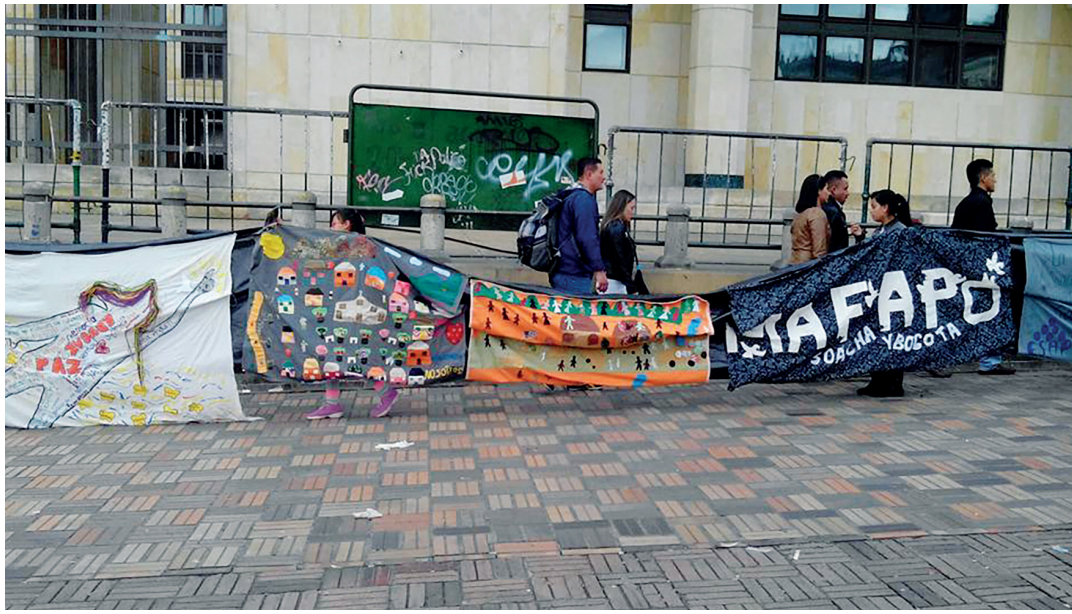

Figure 3

Volunteers at Plaza de Bolívar holding the testimonial quilts, 2016.
Photograph by Manuela Ochoa.

Figure 4

Doris Salcedo, *Sumando ausencias*, 2016.
Textile installation, 3149 ⅝ × 3149 ⅝ in. (8000 m × 80 cm).
Photograph by César Romero for Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2016.

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