



**ALEXANDRA
GELIS: SEEDS**

EDITED BY MIKE HOOLBOOM AND CLINT ENNS





back from the strike









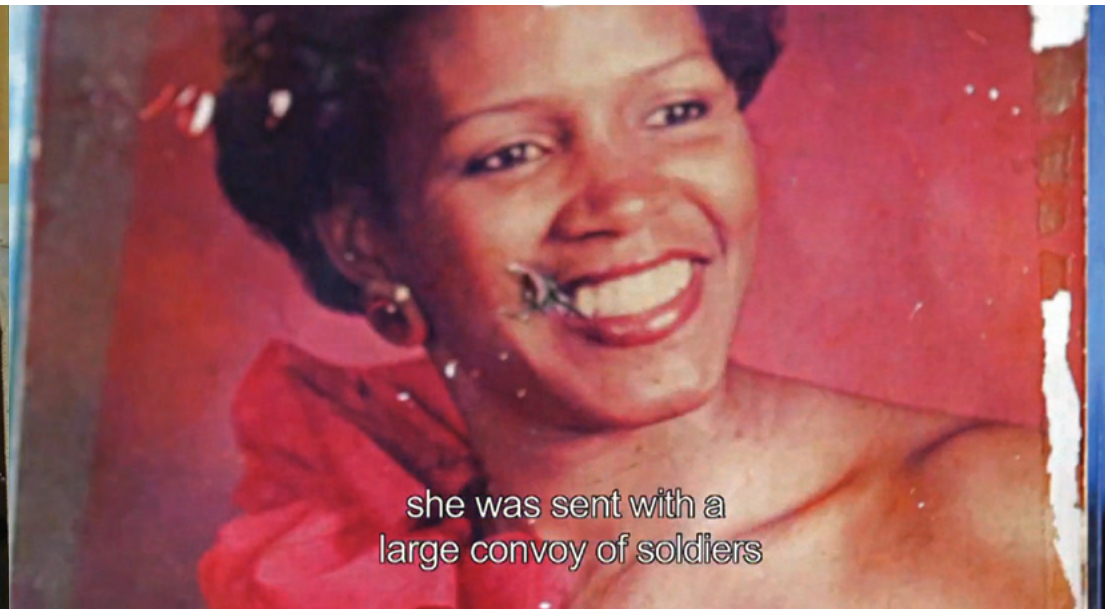








as a nanny



she was sent with a
large convoy of soldiers





ALEXANDRA GELIS: SEEDS

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INTRODUCTION I

MIKE HOOLBOOM AND CLINT ENNS

THE ARTIST IS A NOMAD. Before the endless treks, her living room overflows with cables, cameras, and recorders which somehow find a place in her oversized luggage. If her open heart leads her to plant roots wherever she travels, her recording gear is never far, absorbing traces of encounters, ideas, stories.

She is attracted to geographical wounds, sites of trauma, where the ghost trails of colonialism are all too evident. Wearing her armour of mini skirt and magenta hair, she facilitates workshops in a gender performance disguise, allowing her to pass, even amongst gang members and street youth. What she hopes to achieve in these workshops is the aim of any artist: to allow everyone to find their own voice and express their own life in their own way. Artworks contain potent seeds that when planted in the right conditions begin to germinate.

Many of Alexandra's works are made in the spirit of collaboration. In particular, her engagement with fellow traveller Jorge Lozano has been essential. They have been working on each other's artworks since the mid-2000s, lending footage, cutting side by side, weighing colour corrections and philosophical vantages.

The voice of the undercommons spreads through Alexandra's movies like a weed. Her single-channel work is marked by portraiture, offering glimpses of the homeless, of queer laundromat philosophers, of home-brewed historians. There are some who cannot forget, and she is there to absorb their feelings, and bring back the evidence. As Viet Thanh Nguyen writes in *The Committed*,

Americans sincerely believe, as all imperialists do, that they have taken over the world for its own good, as if imperialism were a kind of penicillin (for natives), with power, profit and pleasure merely being surprising side effects (for the doctors).

In Alexandra's installations, there is a persistent look at how her homelands have been marked by America's cruel imperialism and by the secrets that only plants can share with us. Hers is an evolving practice, as her tech-geek side meets up with local conditions and materials. One installation morphs into the next in a suite of theme and variations, always with the hope of producing contact and community, face-to-face encounters and, above all, new questions. Who are we, if we are not questions?

This book examines the roots of Alexandra's rapidly expanding body of work. The individual essays within are micro-studies of the environmental impact that her engagements have had on the fragile ecosystems inhabited by artists, activists, and scholars. As such, the book takes on a rhizomatic structure where none of the individual pieces is intended to provide a complete map of the work it's responding to.

When read in relation to the rest of the writing, each text provides the reader with different approaches to Alexandra's ever-evolving artistic practice and with ways to navigate the uncharted regions of the work on their own. These essays, like Alexandra's work, assert that there is space for the political in the poetic and the poetic in the political, and that, through dialogue, collaboration, and solidarity, we can better understand one another and find ways to recognize and fight systems of oppression.



INTRODUCTION II

ALEXANDRA GELIS

I HAVE HAD A NOMADIC LIFE, in constant migration from one city to another. I have been a woman traveller with a camera in my hands, sometimes into dangerous lands, capturing and reframing humans and non-humans usually absent from the media. At other times I have brought the tools (DIY technologies) and cameras into communities for self-representation workshops or collaborative creation projects.

In my life of constant movement I was “called” by the plants, and became interested in the relationship of plants and people. Plants that supposedly *don't* move are the ones that taught me most about the politics behind migration. I started exploring how native, non-native, invasive, and “migrated” plants are connected to the forced and non-forced migration of people and to the colonization of territories. The biopolitical presence of plants to control people and territories has been my main concern in the last ten years. My work deals with botanics as a form of resistance: plants that are used as territorial control technologies (TCT), both by those in positions of control and by subaltern resistances to those controls.

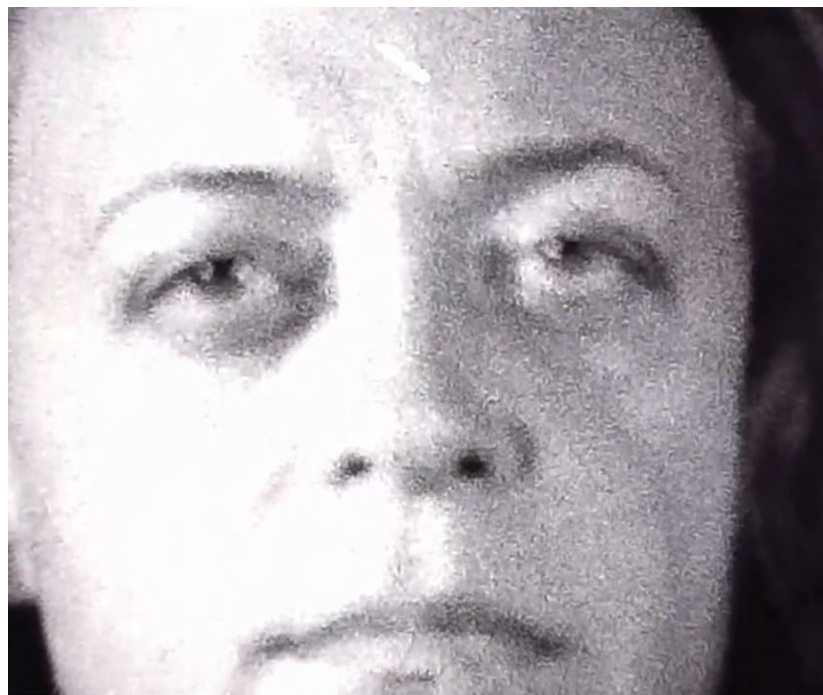
Since 2009, I have worked on two main projects. The first project, *Corredor*, is an ongoing exploration of the elephant grass planted as a living barrier around the Panama Canal by the United States Army during the Vietnam War. It was brought from Vietnam to control the Canal Zone and to keep Panamanians out of U.S. military bases.

The second project, *MAT: Medicinal Plants and Resistance*, was initiated in San Basilio de Palenque, an Afro-Colombian town, known as “the first free town of the Americas.” I investigate the history of seeds and medicinal and ritual plants that were brought by runaway slaves, often hidden in their hair. Used to reshape the new free territories, these plants are today growing all over patios, land, and sidewalks.

The smells of the fruits of Mrs. María, all my childhood memories with my aunties (my mom's best friends who were historians, educators, artists, women leaders who shaped the ethno-education law in Colombia and the declaration of San Basilio de Palenque as a UNESCO Heritage site) brought me back to the town in 2011 with an invitation to give a media workshop. To access memories of the plants, I started an art-based collaborative research and creation project working with elders, who had the memories, and with youths, who were no longer interested in traditional knowledge.

We used media technologies as a connection device; cameras became the main tool for intergenerational communication, youths framing the plants with cameras while elders explained the visible and the intangible aspects of the stories of the plants. Over several years we captured hundreds of stories, recording for new generations the images and voices of many *abuelos* who are no longer with us. Rather than write a book that the youth would not be interested in reading, I created an online platform to gather the complex plant-human narratives, stories told in layers where drums, colours, dance came together, where the storytellers' ways of moving, their Palenquero language, and their animistic beliefs formed a unit. This project became the base for my doctoral research: "An Arts-Based Inquiry into Plant/human relations in Equinoctial America: A case study of San Basilio de Palenque, Colombia."





PLANTS AND POWER: SAN BASILIO DE PALENQUE

ALEXANDRA GELIS

MIGRATED PLANTS

“Migrated plants” is how I designate the transfer of seeds from their native environment to another, either by natural action (wind, water, animals) or by human intervention. Linked to the beginning of the history of humanity itself, this process occurred in Africa and Asia, where hunter-gatherer groups faced both heavy rainy seasons and droughts. Moving to another region was the only way to survive. We know from archaeological studies that seasonal nomadism depended on a group’s ability to domesticate plants. Thus, these early humans likely took with them the seeds that helped them make it to the next season. 25,000 years later, Neolithic farmers moved into Europe, carrying with them their crops, their livestock, and Middle Eastern weeds. The adaptation of seeds to diverse climates and soils, the intermixing that they underwent, and the determination of which ones grow best next to each other was a long and uncertain process whose surviving document is the very existence of the migrated plants.

While the category of migrated plants is broad and applies to all that have been moved from their “native” environment, some of these plants go on to be further divided into “crops” or “weeds,” depending on the socio-historical



context. The dividing line between the two may be biological, but it is also cultural. This fine line separating the one from the other is constantly redefined within communities.

It is important to note that in my research-creation, I explore, document, and re-create ecologies that take shape between plants and people, and between plants and their multi-species interrelationships. The idea of plants as “political allies” is central to my concept of migrated plants as population and territorial control technology (PTCT). These plants have been appropriated as technologies, transplanted by those in a position of power to colonize. But they also become allies of those in subordinate positions as a form of resistance. This investigation takes into account the fundamental, autonomous behaviour of the migrated plants.

The case of migrated plants in San Basilio de Palenque, the location and context of my field research, is a specific example where it is possible to establish the proximity or blurred boundaries between “crops” and “weeds,” as well as the presence of plants used as PTCT. The criterion of race, legitimizing the new model of global power in the sixteenth century, predicated a new order that would apply to another form of life that was not human—flora—and it would be introduced by modern botany starting in the eighteenth century. In *Plants and Empire*, Londa Schiebinger observes that “eighteenth-century Europeans defined *botany* as ‘that branch of natural history that distinguishes the uses, characters, classes, orders, genera, and species of plants’ and the *botanist* as an ‘enquirer into the nature and properties of vegetables [who] ought to direct his [sic] view principally towards the investigation of useful qualities.’”

Botany was born with the purpose of identifying the “true nature” of plants. According to Carl Linnaeus—often considered the father of modern botany—modern botany emerged in the seventeenth century thanks to the discoveries of the sexual nature of plants by Camerarius in 1694 and Sébastien Vaillant in 1717. It was in 1737 that Linnaeus began using the sexuality of plants to establish a new system of plant classification.

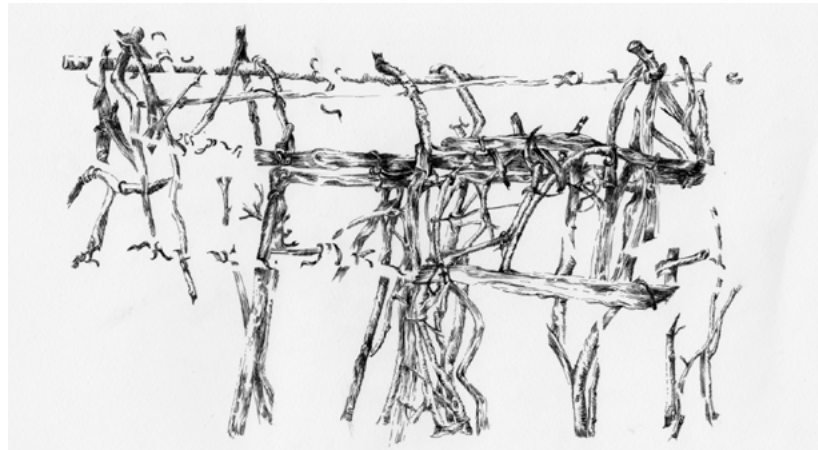
Two classifying orders, race and modern botany, together determined for two centuries that some human lives were more valuable than others and that certain plants mattered more than others. Both classification systems produced hierarchies, placing “slaves” and “weeds” at the bottom of the pyramid, analogues in the living world (a reflection made by art historian Paola Camargo González, with whom I collaborated on fieldwork in 2013/4).

Botany does not deal with things that change with time or place, but with organisms that are imagined to be perennial and stable: that is, with fixed abstract forms that can be transformed into data. In this sense, Linnaean botany has nothing to do with biology. It is a form of biopolitics that Antonio Lafuente

and Nuria Valverde refer to as “imperial biopower”; what matters is how to turn diversity, local variation, and qualia into data. For example, Alfred Crosby argues that the presence of “weeds” imported to the Americas is a result of the arrival of the Spanish colonizers beginning in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In his view, colonization was successful thanks to a virus (which decimated the population) and bovine animals (which ate the small native plants, clearing out areas), followed by the arrival of weeds that quickly spread in the new territories, as another form of invasion. However, Crosby speaks to the difficulty of ascertaining more about plants and weeds in this period. On the one hand, the conquerors were preoccupied by their search for gold for the Crown and for themselves; on the other, the chroniclers who travelled with Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés rarely noted the presence of weeds or plants in general. This perspective considers the colonists and explorers as active subjects in the movement of plants and seeds to the Americas, but fails to ascribe agency to the enslaved peoples. My research starts with the hypothesis that the African population brought to the Americas as slaves transported seeds in their hair.

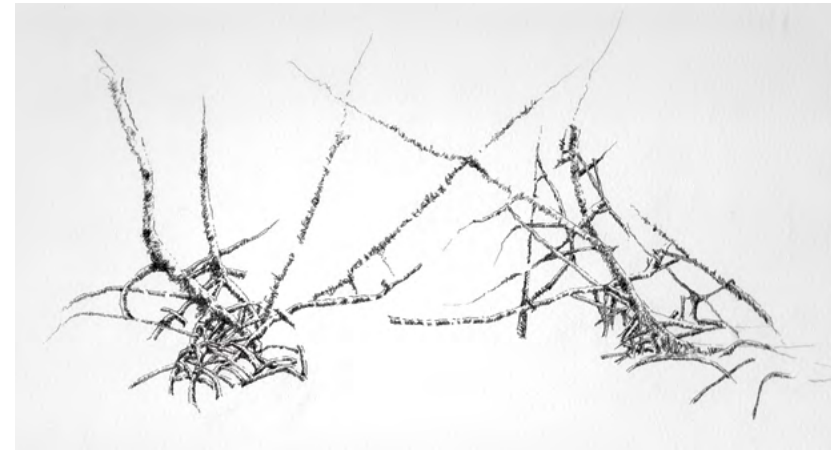
MIGRATED PLANTS AND EMPIRE

A comprehensive look at the literature on migrated plants and empire from the sixteenth century onwards reveals at least three schools of thought. The first privileges the role of the colonist in the transport of plants from Europe to the Americas: mainly European and Asian plants, both crops and weeds, which helped transform the territory. The second privileges the role of the botanist, the scientist,



and the illustrator in the discovery and transfer of American plants to Europe: The colonizers sent botanical expeditions to the Americas to bring back treasures from the “new world.” Finally, the third privileges the role of African people living in slavery and slaveholders as transporters of crops and medicinal plants to the Americas. Of these schools of thought, the first two privilege the presence and voice of the colonizer or officials of the Empire, not only as victors, in terms of expansion and territorial or epistemological dominance, but as people who granted themselves power over the living realm. The third, however, is an alternative path that proposes the rescue of powers of agency and resistance in historically invisibilized subjects. My research follows this approach, which allows me to expand and problematize the relationship between plants and empire and plants as “political allies” in the Americas. With this perspective, the voices and seeds of resistance may be included, as well as the question: What did the presence of migrant plants following the Spanish and Portuguese invasions imply in sixteenth-century Equinoctial America?

As previously mentioned, the migration of plants in Equinoctial America, starting with the Spanish invasion in the sixteenth century, is related to the biopolitics of empire. In addition to the obvious interest in commercializing plants via the implementation of monocultures (e.g. cane sugar from South Asia in Cuba, which radically transformed the landscape of the island), small plants holding little to no commercial interest managed to make their way from Africa and Asia to the “new continent.” As part of the objectives of the Spanish Crown in the eighteenth century, the botanical expeditions sent to the Americas were responsible for cataloguing and making an inventory of the newly discovered flora. In this regard, as argued by Lafuente and Valverde, “science and empire are cause and effect of one another: they are not identical; each determines and each is defined by the other.”



One of the consequences of the Spanish empire in the Americas is directly related to a new system of organizing nature, especially flora, which produced a hierarchy of plants. In *The Botany of Desire*, Michael Pollan refers to this as a “grammar.” Its imposition established which plants are productive and which are not, depending more on the whims of human beings than on the plants themselves. According to Pollan, “domesticated species” have managed to co-evolve with humans for thousands of years, as in the example of the perfect apple of our modern era, shaped by the human desire for sweetness. Might it be possible to one day include the “non-productive” plants and ill-named “weeds” in the category of *desired plants*?

PLANTS TRANSFORMING THE LAND

Before the Spanish and Portuguese invasions of the fifteenth century, the Americas were a territory inhabited by hundreds of Indigenous communities that possessed ancient knowledge of plants and the territory. During the sixteenth century, the colonists interested in medicine and amateur surgeons who came to the Americas learned about healing from the Indigenous shamans and traditional knowledge holders. As reported by Alfredo de Micheli-Serra, there is documentation of the continued use of native medicinal plants by white doctors in sixteenth-century New Spain, a region which consisted of present-day Mexico, many U.S. states (including parts of California, Nevada, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, Oregon, Washington, Florida, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana) and the southwestern part of British Columbia. These plants and elixirs were soon exported to Spain from Peru, Mexico, and New Granada for the treatment of diseases such as syphilis. The colonizers’ process of learning about Indigenous medicinal knowledge in the sixteenth century took a drastic turn in the seventeenth century. The Spanish holocaust that destroyed most of the population of the Americas, nearly a hundred million people in all, meant that the conquerors needed new labour power. A new trade in humans developed, humans as commodities, mostly from Africa, often shipped to the Americas. Along with their arrival, a new episteme of plants was added to the Spanish and Indigenous body of knowledge. With the establishment of the Tribunal of the Holy Office in Cartagena de Indias in 1610, Indigenous and African knowledge of plants began to be outlawed and persecuted. Evidence of this persecution in historical records offers a view of the new knowledge challenging a complex power structure.

Anthropologist Inés Sosadías argues that Black people who were knowledgeable about plants and who had to answer Inquisition charges of witchcraft and sorcery, represented less of a danger to Catholic doctrine, and more of a challenge to the social order imposed by the colonizers. For the Spanish and Portuguese at the time, it was unthinkable that a Black person could be a doctor or healer. They needed to preserve the idea of racial superiority and at the same time strip the African people of their humanity, reducing them to the status of labouring animals. The colonizing enterprise fought to maintain its monopoly of knowledge about medicine because in doing so it assured control over human life, which it profited from. Far from recognizing other medicinal practices and sources of knowledge, Europeans recycled the two-centuries-long witch hunt and brought it to the Americas in order to delegitimize Indigenous and African knowledge. In Europe, the witch hunt, which was responsible for the torture and death of tens of thousands of women, was used both to colonize women, and to erase healers who used traditional plant medicines, decrying them as “primitive” or “backwards.” In the “new world,” associating the ancient knowledge of plants and healing medicines with demonic worship opened the door to the elimination and punishment of longstanding community practices and relationships.

The perspective of Sosadías on witchcraft runs counter to the theses of other researchers on the same period, for whom this issue was directly related to a clash of mentalities, confined to the magical-religious sphere. By contrast, Sosadías proposes that one worldview was replaced by another through violence, transferred to the field of science and biopower. African healing knowledges were persecuted because they constituted a power-knowledge about the living world, which largely derived from the ancient knowledge of plants. A Black person who was enslaved but in possession of this knowledge challenged the hierarchy of colonial society.

The persecution and murder of the African and Indigenous people knowledgeable about plants appeared not only in Cartagena but throughout colonial America. In both Lima and Cartagena, Inquisition Tribunal documents detailing the trials of witches, healers, and sorcerers from that time have been found. The attention of the Tribunal in Cartagena was focused on exposing the paganism of the Africans (as well as Indigenous peoples) and the danger of their spiritual crimes, in no way acknowledging their understandings of the physical world. This partly explains the omission in the existing record of specific uses of plants found in African communities in the Americas and of effective disease cures in traditional African medicine. Some scholars have discussed the transgressive nature of the black healers, who were deeply knowledgeable about flora, but they do not describe what kinds of plants could have been part of the *cimarrón*, the runaway slave resistance.

Even as there was a persecution of knowledge, there was also insurrection in the colonial history of the Americas. In Cartagena we find an emblematic case of this type of resistance. In her doctoral thesis, the historian Clara Inés Guerrero located documents that related the case of Domingo Biohó (as he was known to the colonial authorities), or Benkos Biohó (as he was known to the Palenqueros). He was the great king of Arcabuco (from the Biohó region, nowadays Guinea-Bissau in West Africa), forcibly taken to Cartagena in 1599. While enslaved, he managed to escape from his masters with his wife, two children, three other men, and three other women, settling between the mountains and water near Cartagena. According to Guerrero, after five years of struggle with the Crown, in 1605 he achieved peace for one year with Gerónimo de Suazo y Casasola, the governor of Cartagena. The Black people who lived in Palenque managed to be treated with respect by the authorities; move freely throughout the zone, including Cartagena; and bear arms both inside and outside the city. This first peace agreement allowed them to lay the groundwork for what would a century later be Palenque de San Basilio, the first free town in the Americas. The recognition of the freedom of the Palenqueros was the result of the struggle of an entire people. Biohó was eventually killed, and other Palenquero captains would be hunted and killed for over a century. The Crown finally made a deal with them to avoid the uncontrolled growth of *palenques*, or villages of escaped slaves. It recognized their freedom under the condition that they not take in any more runaway slaves. In 1713, an agreement was finally signed, by which the Crown granted them freedom, territory, and autonomy, three basic needs required for a sense of autonomy and identity.





MOVIES



ENGLISH FOR BEGINNERS

REBECCA GARRETT | 2009

The video opens in darkness, with a genderless voice reciting the English alphabet, accompanied by a percussive knocking sound, birds, and random noises of a neighbourhood, amplified. A mouth appears; a long neck, dangling earrings, shoulders. The head is cut off above a lipsticked mouth. Is this the sound a voice makes when it is in transition? Wait! The head is split down the middle, the two sides bracketing a blurry, banal streetscape. The result is an awkward, intolerable doubling. A mouth speaking, a body intersected by houses and yards in a placeless place.

I am from Venezuela. Where are you from?

The sense of place produced by the soundtrack is at odds with the ordinariness of the image. The discomfort is amplified by the soundtrack: an incessant percussive sound and the screaming of birds or children . . .

I have been here for six months.

I have been here for one month.

The head is split open, colonized by images that are banal but also overwhelming, lively, and colourful. The motion of the streetscape is dreamlike, unconnected to



other elements in the piece, evoking traces and hauntings. The framing shows us everything and nothing.

I am. You are. He is. She is. It is.

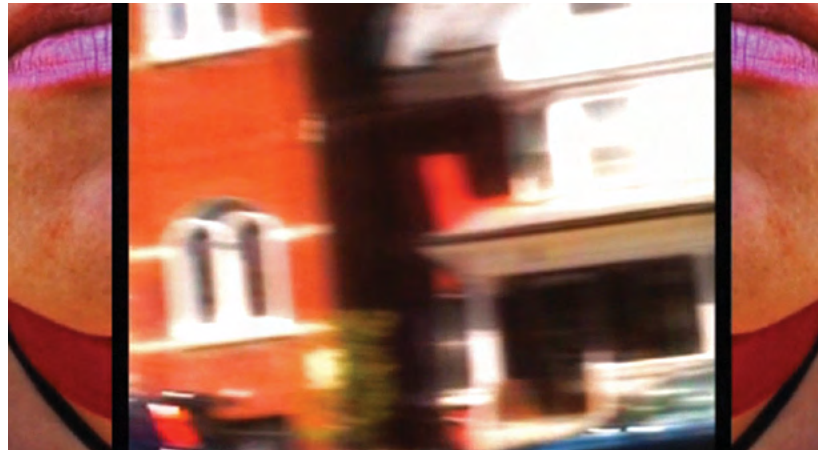
Is it credible that this speaker is a “beginner,” as the title implies? They appear to have mastered the language. But there is no pleasure in mastery here.

Where are you from? Where ARE you from? Where are you from? I'm from Venezuela.

What a place to live! A split body, doubling and repeating over and over again.

C. A. N. A. D. A.

.....
Rebecca Garrett is a Toronto-based artist whose work expresses a long commitment to naming economic, colonial, and social injustices, and to building relations of exchange and reciprocity.



ENGLISH FOR BEGINNERS

ALEXANDRA GELIS | 2009

This was the first tape I made in Canada. I had studied French, but the French that people speak here is different. So I thought, OK, I need to learn English. The tape offers some of the earliest moments in a language lesson. “Where are you from?” Gender and action are being named. “I am, you are, he is, she is.” In Spanish, on the other hand, we have verbs to differentiate between various states of being.

When you’re learning a new language your voice changes, it’s affected and transformed. A new voice is being created as part of the learning.

The tape is a self-portrait about learning a new language and discovering the land. The frame is divided into three parts, like the Canadian flag.



ONE DOLLAR CLICK

SCOTT BIRDWISE | 2010

“Click,” etymologically speaking, is both a verb and a noun, meaning to cause “a small, sharp sound.” We all know the clicking sound of the shutter on a camera when a picture is taken. The sharpness of the click pierces the air. It indicates that an encounter has taken place and that an image is (or will be) the result.

The click indicates that something is taken. And perhaps that something is an image that will somehow be returned to the imaged. All too often, however, it isn't.

Alexandra Gelis's *One Dollar Click* is, among other things, about the political consequences of the click. Condensed into its brief duration is an aesthetic questioning of the image—the image taken, circulated, territorialized. The image of a place. The image of a people. The image as financial transaction. The image as extraction. The image as site of struggle.

The place is Kuna Yala. It is a small territory of islands in Panama. It is inhabited by the Kuna people. They have resisted colonial rule and imperialist violence since the conquistadors arrived there in the 1600s. It continues today. According to the website *Geoback*, Kuna Yala is located at 9° 33' 0" N, 78° 58' 0" W. This information is another form of taking and making an image—in a sense, of clicking. Gelis appropriates the click to question its bounded, touristic logic of inscription, of capture, of taking. She uses animation and drawing to deterritorialize the recorded picture, the image taken, the taken image.

The stark, whited-out silhouette of a Kuna woman is an emblem of this taking and this resistance. Her body is a site of erasure and projection, but it is also the place where interchanging patterns of Kuna design, the sewn cloth of the molas, are animated. The figure is a threshold. A Kuna banner shown in the film states: “People who lose their tradition, lose their soul.” A little Kuna boy with a plastic toy machine gun in his hand looks at the camera. The click of the camera is heard. A picture is taken.

The Kuna people remain.

Scott Birdwise holds a PhD in Cinema and Media Studies from York University and has published essays on film and philosophy, experimental and documentary film, and Canadian cinema.

ONE DOLLAR CLICK

ALEXANDRA GELIS | 2010

One Dollar Click is an island story. There are 365 islands between Panama and Colombia, completely controlled by the Indigenous Kuna community. They began a revolution in 1925 to take back their land, and they won. Kuna Yala, or Guna Yala, became an autonomous territory, a district for the Indigenous inhabitants that they ruled themselves. The region has a different political and administrative organization, independent of the districts and villages. I've travelled there many times and I started taking photographs after I was invited to. The movie is called *One Dollar Click* because they usually ask tourists for one dollar per photograph. You can take my photo but then you have to give me one dollar.

The video is made almost entirely out of photographs. The first shot shows a small airport, and then the camera goes into the boat to the island. My feet walk on the sand, there are drawings and banners, and the flag of the Kunas, and then we meet the little boy with a gun in his hand who says, “One dollar! One dollar!” The video questions our presence in this Indigenous stronghold. We arrive full of devices, with our computers and sound recorders and cameras. I am shown as a digital animation, a presence that walks but doesn't have a face, and the dress displays the history of these islands. The sky of the Kuna is made out of gold, all the objects they have are kept in the sky. Everything that passes by their island is taken into their sky. They have absorbed everything while maintaining a strong identity. They've survived by being resourceful.



LA CASA DE MARÍA / MARIA'S HOUSE

DOT TUER | 2010

On a wintery day in Corrientes, Argentina, I meet via Zoom with Alexandra, who is 14,000 kilometres away in the midst of a Toronto summer heatwave, to discuss her testimonial video, *La Casa de María / Maria's House*. Filmed over several years in Panama City—where a shipping canal built with American money and Caribbean labour at the beginning of the twentieth century cuts the American continent in half—*La Casa de María* documents the life story of María Uter, an elderly Black woman whose house lies just outside of the old city walls. In short fragments demarcated by intertitles, María speaks of her family and work, of class and race politics and colonial legacies, and of remembrances anchored to home and neighbourhood.

María tells us how her grandparents came from the Caribbean to build the canal; how her mother worked as a nanny for the elite families of the city; how her youngest daughter, Fatima, who is a colonel in the United States Army, was first stationed in Germany and then served in Iraq, where she would have been killed except for the intercession of her mother's prayers. María describes the apartheid-like conditions of everyday living that separate Panamanians of African descent from the Americans who oversaw the building of the canal and the Spanish colonists who came before them. She shows us the visible ruins of the old city wall that divided rich and poor in colonial times. She recounts her experiences as a schoolteacher and elected representative in local government during the populist Torrijos regime. She explains how during the American invasion of Panama in



1989 she ran through the city streets dodging bullets and tanks to reach the hospital, and how an old man selling candy in the central square died in the bombing of the El Chorrillo neighbourhood. At the end of the video, María laments that when her daughter Fatima last visited from the USA, she cleaned the house of a lifetime's accumulation of mementos and stuff. María then places a large photograph of a younger self on a now empty shelf. The woman in the photograph and the woman being filmed are equally beautiful, guardians of memory in their fierce pride and wisdom.

When *La Casa de María* was completed in 2010, María was eighty-eight years old. She died a few years later in her mid-nineties. What was a living document of a remarkable woman is now a commemorative tribute to a remarkable life. In our discussion that wintery Corrientes day, Alex and I talk for hours about the history of Panama City and the canal, about María's role as a community activist and mentor whom Alex met when she was teaching video workshops to neighbourhood youth in the late 2000s, and how stories like María's are elided from the official versions of Panama's colonial past and neoliberal present. Alex tells me that she is unsure whether viewers will be able to understand María's stories without knowledge of the historical context of Panama, or to appreciate the resonances of María's memories, which had been condensed from years of visiting her and hours of filming to a few elliptical fragments of testimony. I respond that the viewer does not need to know the history of Panama to comprehend the depth and power of María's place of memory and to value her testimony. In her very presence, she embodies remembrance.

Dot Tuer is a writer and cultural historian whose scholarly and creative work focuses on the intersection of archival traces and visual storytelling in artistic practices of memorialization.



LA CASA DE MARÍA / MARIA'S HOUSE

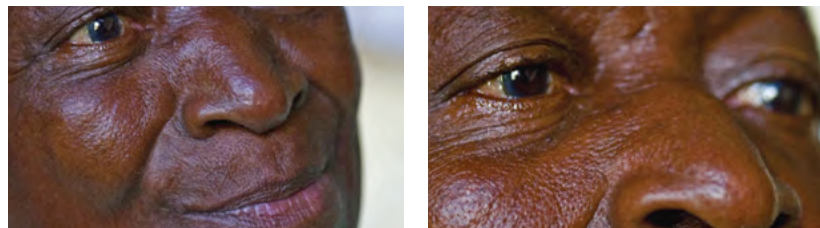
ALEXANDRA GELIS | 2010

We grow up with many moms in South America; elderly women adopt you when they like you. María became like my mom. She was the town activist and the first woman in the local government who represented the neighbourhood. She was also a professor, a teacher of many generations, very well known and respected.

To understand her house is to understand the history of Panama. She lives in front of a wall that was built to separate Gold Roll from Silver Roll (or slaves from whites in colonial times)—it was part of the Spanish Empire for more than three hundred years, from 1513 to 1821. The slaves came from Africa to work in the colonies. Most of the Black communities in South America came from West Africa.

María lived just outside the wall. She says in the film, “My family lived outside this wall, even though during the day they worked inside the wall for the rich.” She talks about the separation in Panama between Black and white, and about how even though her family helped to build the Panama Canal they weren’t able to go to church because they were slaves.

María’s daughter joined the United States Army, and after she had a baby she invited her mother to join her in Germany, where she was stationed. María talks about her experience there, the strange language, as we see pictures of military bases. I kept returning to film her house for many years, as the house was always changing. In the last shot of the movie the house is empty and she says, “Alex, I love my house, but my daughter came last week and told me, ‘You’re crazy, this house is full of garbage.’ And she took everything I had gathered.” Now the house is all empty. This is the story of the U.S. in Panama, how they came and took everything.



COOLING REACTORS

SOJIN CHUN | 2011, COLLABORATION WITH SOJIN CHUN

While making *Cooling Reactors*, I was interested in combining origami, the art of folding paper, with performance video. Although Japanese in name and origin, origami is now a fairly universal childhood craft. I was obsessed with origami and found a book titled *Baby Gami*, on the art of baby-wrapping, and I wanted to wrap adults in this fashion.

Around the time we made *Cooling Reactors*, Alexandra and I were constantly collaborating and hanging out. We shared our mutual desire to address complex histories of specific locales through experimental storytelling. The first origami video that we worked on together was a performance video titled *Suburban Origami* (2009). In it, I stacked large origami boxes in the alleyway near my apartment and near a Scarborough strip mall.

Cooling Reactors was commissioned by the Letters from the Sky Festival: Experimental Films on Climate Change in South Africa. Through our research, we first discovered that Lake Ontario meant “Lake of Shining Waters” in the Huron-Wendat language, and that Lake Ontario is surrounded by three nuclear generators. In the video, we wanted to reference the environmental harm caused by these generators, which often goes unnoticed by those who use the lake. We also wanted to suggest the nuclear generator’s potential for an even greater catastrophe.

Against the backdrop of Cherry Beach, wrapped bodies appear along the shore and go unnoticed by those windsurfing. These images were also intended to parallel the news imagery of boat migrants that lost their lives looking for a better life. Though climate change is undeniable, so are the harsh political realities that force people to leave their homeland. Being immigrants to this land, Alexandra and I are constantly reminded of the contradictions we see and *Cooling Reactors* was one attempt to show this.

sojin Chun is a Toronto-based video and installation artist whose work examines the idiosyncratic moments of everyday life in its inconclusive and contradictory nature.

LA CASA DE OLGA / THE HOUSE OF OLGA

CLINT ENNS | 2010

While experimental cinema often promises to offer new ways of seeing, the cinema of Alexandra Gelis provides new ways of listening and new forms of solidarity. Through personal cinema, film poets present new visions to the world, allowing others access to their subjective gaze. Gelis's work challenges this notion by asking us to think beyond consciousness as an individual's first-person perspective. Instead her work orients us towards communal consciousness and interconnectivity, both human and non-human. While faces tell stories, what stories do the individuals behind these faces tell? Given that we only have limited access to the experience of others, it is through storytelling and collective experience that we are able to relate to another person's subjective reality. Gelis's work is a gesture away from first-person experience and towards a third-person experiment.

Exhibit A: CONVERsalón was started by Gelis and Jorge Lozano as a way of disseminating contemporary art outside of traditional gallery spaces. The series usually takes place in their living room and the title is derived from the Spanish word *conversar*, meaning “to talk.” The work exhibited is an entry point, a framing device—it offers a way to communally think through ideas, concepts, and politics. It is not a singular vision, but a collective dialogue. The work is there to facilitate this conversation and, since it is impossible to think on an empty

stomach, delicious meals are lovingly prepared by the hosts for each event. These gatherings are an experiment in solidarity and communal consciousness. Each guest is treated with the same respect that is traditionally reserved for the artist (and other celebrity guests).

Exhibit B: *The House of Olga* is a video documenting Olga Leticia's house, an open-air space beside the ruins of an old church in Panama City. Gelis's camera does more than simply bear witness to Leticia's living situation; it listens to her without judgment. As Leticia reveals, “They don't understand it. Everybody thinks I live in bad conditions. They ask, How can you live like this?” She replies to this hypothetical question with a grin and a shrug: “I just let them talk. I keep quiet.” If Gelis had simply bore witness, one might perceive Leticia as a “poor woman” living in “bad conditions.” But because Gelis actively listens, we begin to understand Leticia's situation and see her strength, resilience, defiance, and independence.



LA CASA DE OLGA / THE HOUSE OF OLGA

ALEXANDRA GELIS | 2010

One afternoon in Panama City we were shooting a video with one of the workshop participants at the old monastery where many families had lived until recently. We filmed plants and roots that had grown inside the walls of the building. It looked like a very futuristic landscape, after the demise of human beings. Then Olga came up from behind us and exclaimed, “Alexandra, are you coming to visit me?” I was so surprised. “Olga, do you live *here*?” We went to the back of the building and there was Olga’s “house.”

She lived in what used to be a church, and she was the last one left in a space where the interior had become an exterior. The government had offered residents different houses and apartments but she didn’t want to leave her idyllic space. She told us, “This is my bed,” and the camera shows that her bed is a big rock on the ground. She insisted, “I have everything I need. I don’t need a big apartment. I’ve travelled all over the world, I’ve lived in Spain; I don’t need so much space. Here I have everything. I have my candles, my photographs . . .” She pointed to an exterior wall with a few belongings tucked into the cracks, everything out in the open. She was always taking care of the plants and flowers. She used to sell the plants. There was a yellow umbrella where she could shelter from the rain.

She said, “I need air, I can’t live inside walls.” My mom met Olga two years ago, and apparently she’s moved out of this place, she’s moved to a balcony. Olga told my mother, “I need air. I don’t need a house, just air.”



BORDES / BORDERS

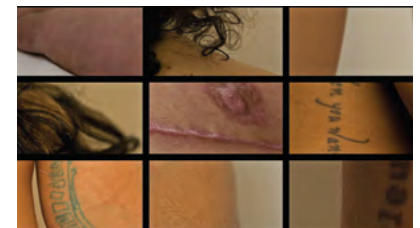
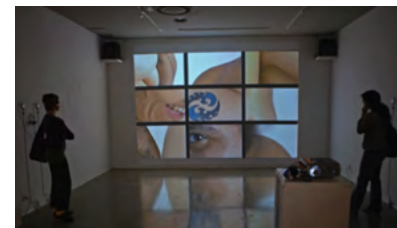
JEAN MARC AH-SEN | 2009

On my first viewing of Alexandra Gelis’s *Borders*, I was struck by its representation of the tenuous, insubstantial quality of bodies when filmed in isolation from one another. This indeterminacy is enhanced by the film’s voice-over track of guttural mutterings and pauses presumably from social interactions viewers are not privy to. I feel as if we are witnessing the interstices between filmic spaces usually governed by language, narrative, and subtext. The photographed limbs, genitals, and extremities no longer connote fear, vulnerability, agitation, aggression; stripped of these complex signals, the bodily forms are left uninscribed by meaning.

The film gestures towards the way meaning is usually written on the flesh, but it does this by reinforcing the absence of what is signified; the subjects photographed paradoxically inhibit signification when viewed through the film’s fractured arrangement of grids. The pangs of embodiment remain unarticulated. Is Gelis’s film an act of resistance against the interpellation of our corporeality by institutions, culture, and ideology? Does this resistance take the form of laying bare this process of interpellation by documenting the physical ramifications on the flesh?

Borders invites viewers to examine the myriad ways in which the body is a site of transformation, erasure, and trauma. Tattoos, surgical scars, and other examples of body modification expose the disarming truth that although meaning is fluid, it remains anchored in experience.

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Jean Marc Ah-Sen was born in East York, Toronto, and is the author of In the Beggarly Style of Imitation and Grand Menteur.



CONCHITAS / CONCHES

CLINT ENNS | 2010, COLLABORATION WITH JORGE LOZANO

Conchitas was made in collaboration with Jorge Lozano, and presents itself as a diptych. One screen sees Gelis sunbathing while the screen is being partially covered in gummy bears. The second screen shows a landscape being partially covered in seashells. One video is shot by Lozano in Canada, the other by Gelis in Panama. The gummy bears are wet and slimy and slide across each other as they are being stacked. The seashells are hard and come directly from the land. The real is juxtaposed with the artificial: the natural landscape with its seashells and the beach with its gummy bears. *Conchita* is a diminutive for *concha*, which means seashell, as well as a diminutive for *Concepción*, which refers to the Immaculate Conception. It is also a region of the Chiriquí Province in Panama.

The two worlds are held together with a text that scrolls quickly across the screen. The text “en una conversación no planificada” is from an unplanned conversation between two women, Cristina Lombana and Elizabeth Pérez, who hunt for seashells and casually discuss their fears including: drowning and river snakes, an asthma epidemic in Chiriquí, and their family dynamics. One woman states, “The seashells look beautiful when you string them together,” to which the other responds, “Yes, I string them together.” Their simple exchange articulates one of the functions of artworks that is too often forgotten, namely, the social function of art making.



CONCHITAS / CONCHES

JORGE LOZANO | 2010, COLLABORATION WITH JORGE LOZANO

Conchitas is made out of two videos, one by each of us, though that wasn't planned. Alexandra started shooting on a beach in Panama City that is full of little rocks and seashells, which are called *conchas*, or *conchitas*. Her mother and a friend are talking about their fears, fears of the water, of snakes. On the horizon is a mountain, and while her mother talks Alexandra builds a little pile of seashells in front of the camera until the mountain in the background disappears.

Years pass.

Back in Canada we went camping and stopped to get a drink and bags of fruit gum candies, gummy bears. We arrived at a campground in the Bruce Peninsula, which was very beautiful, only there were a lot of noisy people. I said, “Why don't we make those people disappear using gummy bears?” We started looking for a place to shoot but couldn't agree and got into a terrible argument. She lay down on a rock and I framed up a shot, then started building a pile of gummy bears in front of the lens to obliterate her. The candy keeps sliding off, birds come by; she looks up, then settles back again. When I showed it to her we both started laughing and said, “Hey, it looks like *Conchitas*.” So we came back to the apartment and put the two shots together. Both have the tension of building something that falls down.

The good thing about working when the situation provokes you, more than when you provoke a situation, is that it can produce meanings that escape its creators. The artist offers you a path that bifurcates, so you can choose.

Jorge Lozano is a media artist dedicated to the elaboration of impure punk poetic cinema, worlds within worlds.



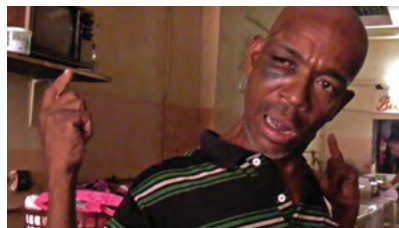
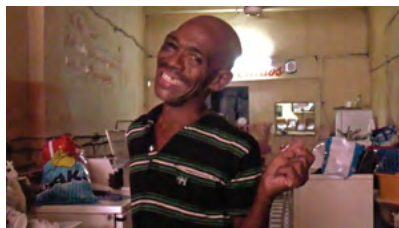
SAN RAFAEL

MIKE HOOLBOOM | 2010

So many of the artist's works are portraits, sketches quickly drawn from a chance encounter, or else the result of a magnetic lure that returns her, again and again, like a boat to its berth, back to her subject. These portraits are mostly drawn from her travels, where she is busy delivering the dream of democratic media via workshops to the undercommons.

The only rule for this nomadic gatherer is: Never leave home without the camera. When she arrives in a Panama City laundromat she catches the black eye of a stranger, who approaches her with a question. What is it about this artist's face that permits these chance encounters? She pulls out her camera at his request, and doesn't turn it off until he walks off his new laundromat stage. He's a middle-aged handsome, flamboyant even in his drab attire, folding the remains of clothes that have been washed too often. His back is arched and torqued, leaving his heart open, while his head swings from one side to the other, as if he were continually reframing the shot, finding another perspective, and most importantly, another language fragment that issues in a charmed and glamorous flow.

He turns the other cheek as if to examine the other side of the matter, then returns with another smile. He raps about the angelic origins of his name, and about how the most perfect archangel is the devil. He strikes a pose of a smile with his head cocked, then pulls back so that the same smile becomes a suspicious question. Who are you exactly? Are you getting this? Class struggle mixes easily with bible quotations and knowing asides as he invents himself word after word, dressing and redressing his world with glittering prose. At last he recounts an epic bout with "the champion of the world." Another price he's paid for being a queer man in Colombia perhaps, his missing tooth and the stitches over his left eye evidence that his desires, his ability to turn ordinary encounters into a queer sublime, are not always welcome. They mark him as a survivor, an eloquent and elegant sage, or as the artist has retagged him: a saint.



SAN RAFAEL

ALEXANDRA GELIS | 2010

I stayed downtown for a month doing workshops in Panama City, always traveling with my camera. The whole neighbourhood knew me because I'd been doing workshops there for two years already. One day I was doing laundry when Rafael started talking to me. "So do you have your camera?" he asked, and so began a cryptic and enigmatic performance. The video is just one shot of San Rafael, who is sporting a black eye from a fight.

After talking to him I realized that he had been trying to pick up young men on the street and one of them gave him the black eye. He talked about Roberto Durán, the champion boxer who came from that neighbourhood, and about how he punched harder than him, though he says it in a very ironic and queer way that undercuts any macho routines. Most of the people who live in the streets have stories with double (or more) meanings. It is interesting to see their capacity to create something out of very little.



BRIDGE OF AMERICAS

CASSANDRA GETTY AND DIANNE PIERCE | 2011

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN MUSEUM LONDON'S *TRANSAMERICAS: A SIGN, A SITUATION, A CONCEPT*

For artist Alexandra Gelis, landscapes can be seen as “the intertwining of cultural and biopolitical constructs in which our sense of place and memories reside.” Her works track changes in landscapes, in which evidence of numerous interventions can be seen. These have been brought about by population shifts, trade routes, authoritarian regimes, and the economic and even political use of plants, including weeds and invasive species.

Gelis makes single-channel videos, sound sculptures, and the aural environments for performances. In *Bridge of the Americas*, she presents impressions of the Panama Canal, a revolutionary conduit for international commerce, emblem of global collaboration, engineering wonder of the world, and site of a century’s worth of international political contention.

The bridge in question is a major thoroughfare where, day and night, numerous vessels and vehicles pass under and over it, entering or departing the Canal. There are also wide access ramps at each end, and pedestrian walkways on each side. Gelis notes “the persistent background of life in the Panama Canal Zone are these passing ships crammed with waving travellers, the most temporary of citizens, their eyes like rain.” In a related work, *Corredor: The Big Picture*, the artist uses footage from surveillance cameras found at the extremities of the Canal Zone.

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Cassandra Getty is the Curator of Art at Museum London. Dianne Pearce is a painter and installation artist, and was Curator of Public Programs at Museum London.



D-ENUNCIATION

JORGE LOZANO | 2014, COLLABORATION WITH JORGE LOZANO

Kuenta, *D-Enunciacion*, and *NaCl* were all shot on the Atlantic coast of Colombia in one trip. It’s such a beautiful country geographically, but marked by violence for economic control. Many corporations have benefited. When resources are discovered, paramilitaries kill half a dozen people, and the rest flee. The land is then open for exploitation by the corporations. There is a connection between violence in Colombia, the use of our natural resources by developed countries, and the support of the sales of arms and training of paramilitary groups (ex-United States Army, -Israel Defense Forces). The work of paramilitaries is orchestrated by the army; there is complicity between the state, the military, and the paramilitary in assassinations and in threatening communities of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous farmers who have lived in these territories for years. Profits from drug trafficking continue to flow into Canada and the United States.

Alexandra and I went to Rincon del Mar (literally: a corner in the sea), a beautiful little town with a mostly Black, Afro-Colombian population. We were the only ones staying in the hotel that time of year. We walked into the most amazing sunset and found a local party with salsa, feasting, lots of people. We had our cameras and recorded, then walked back along the town’s very long streets. Living room lights were on, and every one looked like an installation. The locals had built the walls themselves; the architecture was stunning. The next day we knocked on doors asking if we could film people in their living rooms. They would



pose for a family photo, and then realize it was not a photograph and return to their normal activities. We filmed all of that. When I returned to the hotel it was surrounded by armed paramilitary police; they look like police but had bigger weapons. I set off quickly to look for Alexandra and ask her what we should do. Let's just go and face them. We returned and said, "Hi, hello, how are you doing? Oh we're just here to take pictures of this beautiful town." They looked at us strangely and eventually left. We went out for lunch then continued filming.

In the evening we ate at a diner where we met university professors who had stopped to eat on their way to Bogotá. We gave them our names, told them our hotel was surrounded by the paramilitary, and asked them to please remember that they talked to us. The owner of the restaurant was a really great cook. She saw we had cameras and said, "Why don't you come tomorrow and record me because I want to tell you something." We went back in the morning to talk to her, and she told us she was going to make a denunciation. We decided not to record her face even though she said she wanted to make it public. So we shot her from the back.

She talked about how the paramilitary had controlled that town for twenty years. They came from other areas of Colombia. The commanders weren't Black, but they controlled the local Black population. They organized beauty pageants with young girls of twelve and thirteen, who would be raped after the show. They forced gay men to fight to the death. They turned these people into slaves.

To get to Rincon you get off the road, then take a motorcycle or taxi to bring you to town. On that road there was a farm where the paramilitary would bring people to be tortured and killed. That's where this woman's two brothers were killed. They were boat mechanics; it was a town that was very well placed for exporting cocaine by boat to the U.S. The paramilitary made a lot of money there. The state began pushing back, the DEA infiltrated them, and when they started being arrested they began killing everyone who worked for them, to eliminate witnesses. They brought this woman's two brothers into that farm and tortured them, but allowed one of the brother's wives to visit. The brother told his wife that his sister had to leave right away. So the sister went to Bogotá where she met a Canadian man who taught her how to cook, and she became a restaurant chef. Years later she went back, after the paramilitary had lost much of its power. When we arrived there was only a light presence, the mafiosi were in retreat and low key, the state had recuperated certain powers.



We didn't want to compromise this woman, and it's information you don't want because it compromises you too—she names names. The night before we recorded with her I packed our bags, ready to leave at a moment's notice. I slept with one eye open. I thought they would come in the night and kill me and torture Alexandra. Men get raped too, but they get killed quicker, while women are kept alive as sexual servants.

Later that day we filmed more living rooms. I needed to go to the hotel to get some batteries but when I got there it was again surrounded by paramilitaries. I was really scared, but we decided to stay in town and continue filming because we were so visible. I kept checking on the hotel, and as soon as they left I grabbed our bags. There were two motorcyclists and we asked them to take us out of town. We went very fast, until we saw police ahead stopping people. Alexandra's bike went through but they stopped my motorcycle and I was certain I would be killed. I gave them my ID and they just said: Go. I climbed back onto the motorcycle but I was so nervous that I put my leg on the hot exhaust pipe with its HONDA tag on it, and burned the word into my leg.

A few months before we arrived, a couple from Bogotá had travelled to a nearby territory controlled by the paramilitary, and they were assassinated. The paramilitary might have thought they were spies. My theory is that the night we arrived there was a local party, and all the town politicians were there, and we may have filmed someone we shouldn't have. When you go to those places it's dangerous to film, they can kill you for taking a photograph. At the same time they might have been confused. What helps Alex survive is that she's very tall and has pink hair, so she's very visible. Her appearance upsets stereotypes so they have to think twice. She might be from another country, the United States or Holland, so they might take a little bit longer to act. Of course she could be kidnapped as a foreigner. We found out that the paramilitary had talked to the hotel owners; they wanted to know who we were.

We see *D-Enunciation* as a video installation, though it was exhibited that way only once, in Uruguay. We showed thirty-eight portraits made in living rooms, along with the video. That's the work.

We promised people we would come back and give them the photos we took. Ten years later we returned and the town had changed; it's become more touristic



and there is more money. That morning was like the birth of photography. We knocked on the first door and said, “Hi, we were here ten years ago, do you remember us? We wanted to bring you a picture that we made.” Three girls came and took the picture from us—it was a picture of the three of them, along with their brother and mother. Then one of the girls screamed, “My mother!” and they all started crying and Alexandra cried with them. We felt so guilty. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” we told them. They replied, “No, no, this is the only picture we have of our mother.” Then they started laughing because their mother had come back to them.

In Rincon everyone hears everything, so more people came, and we told them we had more pictures. The whole town came out and followed us; it was incredible. They didn’t have printed photos in their houses, it was like they were seeing photos for the first time, as if we were discovering photography together. We went on from house to house; people were so grateful to see photographs from ten years ago. I recorded all of that, and we promised them that we would come back again and show them that movie, though we haven’t done anything with this footage yet. We don’t call ourselves community artists, but for some reason we get involved in communities, because we are community. We return to places and maintain our connections.



RHIZOMATIC DIRECTED SIMULATION

MADI PILLER | 2014

Borges worked with words to create literary imaginaries and to construct realities through symbols and references. Alexandra Gelis’s *Rhizomatic Directed Simulation* begins with a quote by Borges: “The best imitation consists of the original’s destruction and the creation of a self-referential text.” Alfonso de Toro’s 1994 paper “Borges y la ‘simulación rizomática dirigida’: percepción y objetivación de los signos” [“Borges and the ‘Rhizomatic Directed Simulation’: Perception and Objectification of Signs”] provides an additional connection: Deleuze, Borges, and Gelis—a holy trinity of perception.

The frame forms our perspective. The camera on a tripod, in telephoto mode, like a sniper aiming at a person’s back. Is this *self-reflexive* as well? Am I also the target? An ouroboros where the surrogate is also the viewer?

The emulsion layers with its images—and its images within images—all contending with bloody actions and hollowed graves. The body is an incarnation of power and weakness at the same time. The cameraperson does the shooting while being shot. We, in the foreground, are the observers producing and recollecting the realities. We assemble the symbols and transmit the messages, the stories, the continuous parables. The film can be seen and appreciated from the outside looking in and from the inside looking out.

A person is alone. A person is a creator. A person is a witness. A person is a shadow. A person is a target. A person is a human.



This reality speaks, so close to me, as the materiality reveals black and white images of military parades, emanating from a battlefield of colours. Briefly appearing, before disappearing, persisting in the background amidst all the chaos. The film impersonates the reality of Latin diasporas capturing the symbols to reconstruct their narratives. We are outside the frame.

Madi Piller is a filmmaker, animator, programmer, and independent curator currently living and working in Toronto.



RAYADO EN QUEER

CHRISTINE LUCY LATIMER | 2014

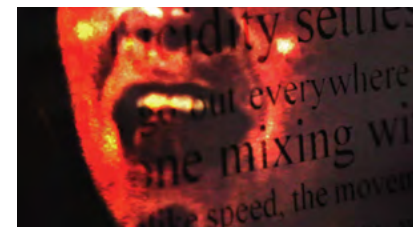
Super 8 film immediately calls to mind its place in consumer home-moviemaking and the revolutionary convenience it enabled for erotic and pornographic dalliances. I hearken to this era of film being a material of embossed and dyed layers, of Kodachrome-ness, of colours that (with a little encouragement) can scratch and crack, both revealing and obscuring their renderings on the screen.

I hear the film on the soundtrack in the form of present projector noise, the sound accentuating the celluloid moving through in divergent directions, backwards and forwards, evading starts and finishes. Can the experience of an image be undone when played in reverse? Has the erotic engagement ended before it started? What happens to pornographic inevitability when the predictable sequence changes direction, re-clothing the breast, re-buttoning the gusset, repealing the gesture that might signify escalation?

Scanning traces of text passing across the screen, I grasp at what sticks to my eye with a bit too much commitment, attempting to locate the theory within these stray theoreticals, realizing that these glimpses of commentary are also caught mid-gesture.

Amidst the projector sounds and the multi-directional bodies, I see a cameraperson from behind spearheading the documentation, foretelling even more convenience and immediacy, that of video. Anticipatory stripes of post-commencement and pre-resolution weave before my eyes, while documentation and presentation coalesce in liminality. Scanning another body of text as it passes, the words “post-pornographic” traverse the screen, large and emphatic. I realize the post-pornography in this perfect nexus of super 8 adult-anticipatory content—multiplicity—the projector, the cameraperson, and the spectator. This is the middle. I am in the middle. We are in the middle together.

Christine Lucy Latimer is an experimental filmmaker and photographer based in Toronto.



KUENTA

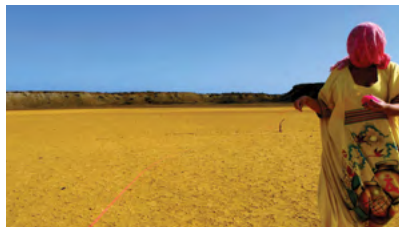
JORGE LOZANO | 2015, COLLABORATION WITH JORGE LOZANO

Kuenta is one of three videos we made on the Atlantic coast, on a little peninsula at the tip of Colombia. It's home to the Wayuu, who live in both Colombia and Venezuela. They're a unique people, organized in clans, never conquered by the Spanish, largely abandoned by the state. They look a lot like people from India—they have the same features and very dark brown skin. It's dry like a desert there, always windy, so sunlight streams through the clouds and pans the landscape all day. When the light hits the ground it glows a beautiful bright yellow and orange, all the different yellows greet you there.

It's a place of trading, with lots of illegal activity; there's less law there, the state has less control. We found a store where they sell threads to make hammocks and bags, and we bought a big ball of pink thread. Alexandra has pink hair, a colour the Wayuu use a lot, so there was an affinity, a connection. We began making interventions with that string in the landscape, using sticks to create patterns in the desert.

A woman told us about a paramilitary massacre that happened right in the place we were standing. They killed eight women community leaders. She gave Alexandra her yellow dress—here, just put it on, wear it. We filmed Alexandra rolling down the dunes in that dress, a metaphor for the women falling to their death. We pulled the strings until they broke because that's what happens in those places: tensions build and break.

Kuenta is the person who tells stories. The woman who lent Alex the dress told us that. When we came back to Canada to edit, it felt like we were taking the trip again. The tape is made out of moments that impact you; they're not entirely clear, but they make you see things differently. All three works we made on the coast are also the story of Colombia, with its extravagant landscapes and gorgeous faces that have seen what no one should ever see.



HOW TO MAKE A BEACH

JORGE LOZANO | 2017, COLLABORATION WITH JORGE LOZANO

Art is a form of knowing, a tool we use to investigate things we don't know. It's an aesthetic investigation, seeing things differently means developing a poetic approach, but it's also like science, a means of getting to know what you don't know.

Alexandra's family has an apartment in Cartagena, Colombia, that faces the beach. While we were there, giant machines dredged the beach, digging out sand. We talked a lot about robbing the ocean, how life was removed from the ocean to create beaches. We decided to stage an intervention. Alexandra would walk from the bulldozers carrying a colander filled with sand, which spilled through the holes. Underneath was a GoPro camera recording close-ups of the sand falling. We also had two cameras on the street, and one behind a glass bowl full of water that sat beside the window. The glass bowl was originally made from sand; the action was to bring sand back to this bowl, which parodied or resembled what the workers were doing.

A year later Alexandra went back to Cartagena and we were talking on the phone. I asked her, "Were they still dredging sand?" "Yes," she replied. She made another intervention, carrying the colander, while her mother and nephews helped her with the cameras. Months later she was still there, and made a third action, so there were three takes over a period of two years. The deconstruction site was very masculine, manmade; all of the workers were men, with giant trucks and machines. Alexandra arrived in her bathing suit.

Afterwards we began reading about sand and the making of beaches. We come from a country where there's been so much violence because of the cartels that control the cocaine trade, employment, and politics. Then we discovered the same thing has happened with sand. In India, the sand cartels behave exactly like the cocaine cartels—they control politicians. They drag sand out of the beaches, destroying those beautiful places for big construction projects in the Middle East. The ecological destruction, the gigantic boats carrying sand across the oceans, is a major crisis of neoliberalism and its endless extraction or "progress." Islands are disappearing because sand is required for construction.

HOW TO MAKE A BEACH

FRANCESCO GAGLIARDI | 2017, COLLABORATION WITH JORGE LOZANO

I remember approaching the beach straight on. I remember a white building to the left with terraces facing the sea and to the right another building, low and wide, opening onto a patio roofed with palm fronds. I remember a stripe of white water beyond an expanse of grey sand and a song playing from a jukebox about looking at the moon and being bored. There is no happiness in the memory but an exultant sense of place.

Sand is the substance of which we consume the highest volume, after water. It is used in virtually every construction and manufacturing process, but most of the sand we extract goes into the production of concrete, which is made by mixing one part cement (clay and lime) with five to seven parts sand.

Globally, our annual consumption of sand, gravel, and other aggregate materials is somewhere around 110 trillion lbs., the equivalent to every person on earth using 44 lbs. of sand every single day. This accounts for approximately 85% of global mineral extraction. By the most conservative estimates, we are extracting sand more than three times faster than nature can replenish it. Licensing is poorly regulated and environmental impact assessments rare. When they exist, laws are routinely flouted. There are no global treaties governing extraction, use, or trade. Sand extraction destroys habitats, pollutes rivers, and erodes beaches. A way of reducing it is to optimize the recycling of concrete rubble. This approach needs to be complemented by the introduction of taxes to incentivize use of alternative materials.

Francesco Gagliardi is a performance artist, writer, and occasional filmmaker based in Toronto.



THE ISLAND

RICHARD FUNG | 2019

I try to find it on a map. It's not labelled. Scanning back and forth across the asphalt grid between Oakland and Berkeley, I search out a triangle of green. But as I hover like a digital raptor, zooming in and out, I fail to locate this "island of love" in a sea of alienation.

Alexandra Gelis's portrait of Brian Decobray is simultaneously a cartography of suffering and of survival in California's Bay Area. At sixty-five, Decobray's family has passed, and he is alone in the world looking at "the last course of life." He has found sanctuary caring for a grassy shrine where people plant trees and mount photos as tributes to departed loved ones.

After years of addiction and imprisonment—a fate shared with countless Black men in the afterlife of slavery—Decobray celebrates five years of being clean. To keep going he shuns bitterness and honours every day. He wouldn't alter the past as it's made him who he is. He's said his goodbyes "cause you never know," and focuses on his passion for photography.

Decobray's isle of healing didn't emerge by itself from the concrete and tar. Former Black Panther and disabled activist Aunti Frances started a weekly food program for the homeless here. Neglected by the city, it's up to Decobray to cut the grass and clean up the garbage, tasks that give him purpose. It's a reciprocal relationship.

Gelis renders Decobray and his refuge in scratchy black and white. But as we strain to capture his image through the flickering curtain, the wisdom served up in his polished baritone is vivid and unforgettable.

Richard Fung is a video artist and writer, and Professor Emeritus at OCAD University.



RADIOTHERAPY

MIKE HOOLBOOM | 2019

Cancer is the word that haunted my mother. She watched her closest friends shrink into shells of their former selves, then die, and as each one passed the new home she had made here in Canada became a smaller place.

It still seems unthinkable that cancer would come for Alexandra's mother Cristina, the indomitable radio host, filled with the energy of a minor earthquake or a neighbourhood revolution. I remember Cristina telling me, with her hands mostly, and a few English words, how she set off on a bus to watch the Rolling Stones the previous night, standing for hours in a field with tens of thousands of others. Never mind that she was sixty-two years old, she was happy to go by herself and ride the feeling.

After receiving the news, shipwrecked, the artist began a new series of works that would rejig her primary relationship, inviting a mother-daughter collaboration that would turn Cristina's trials, doctor visits, cruel treatments, and hair loss into a new art of family. There has been a steady flow of movies and installations; *Radiotherapy* is the smallest moment of the project to date. It shows her mother in a beautifully ruined factory interior in Panama City. She stands naked, as if newly born, and touches the dots they burned into her body in order to centre the radiation machine. Points mark a star on this new map of her body. She appears always in a wide shot, as if some necessary distance must be kept, perhaps out of respect, perhaps because this body insists on its wholeness, its singularity; it must be considered "all at once." Her eyes are closed, she has given over her sight to her daughter, and how much more besides?



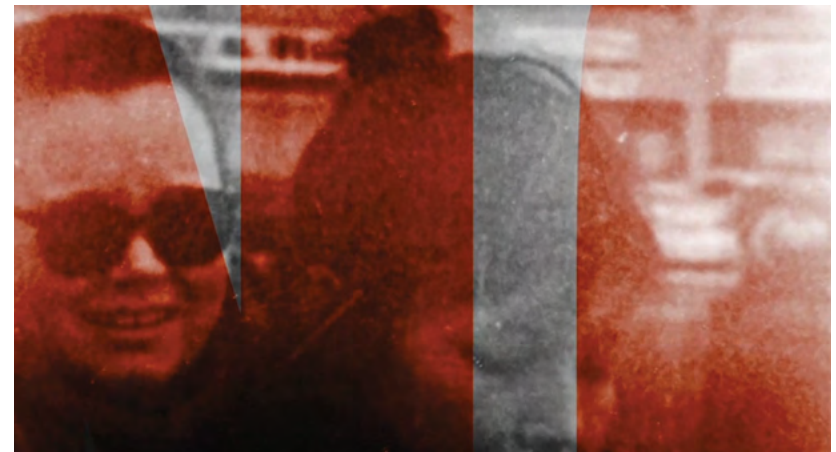
THOUGHTS FROM BELOW

JORGE LOZANO | 2019, COLLABORATION WITH JORGE LOZANO

I think that the title comes from French philosopher Jacques Rancière, who investigated how nineteenth-century workers spent their leisure time. There was a lot of creativity, poetry, and reflecting on life that led him to coin the phrase "thoughts from below."

Thoughts was triggered by trips we made to York University during our master's degrees. There were two labour strikes in two years. Sometimes after striking we went to the countryside, still carrying 16mm cameras. The film follows the rhythm of a day: morning walk, strike, countryside. Sometimes images tell you: Put us together. Though, images can also refuse relationships, or conspire to create another world. After the edit, we began writing a voice-over that went through many changes. The film begins with a story about how Alexandra was nearly kidnapped while walking with a friend in the jungle. In the voice-over we define ourselves as immigrants who belong to different worlds. As an immigrant you're always in a process of becoming, you always have to say to the system, I don't want to be assimilated into the structures you're trying to impose. There are always defenses, questioning fields of perception, trying to create your own fields and rhythms. I eat, move, talk in *this* way.

We are from a country that is at war; we know what civil war is. At that moment the Syrian war was still raging, and although our war was not as genocidal, we could feel the pain of those who were being bombed, or who had to leave home



and therefore lost everything. That's familiar to us. We have the capacity to understand others in many ways. When we meet African immigrants, we can imagine what they're going through because they weren't brought up by this system. We have many points in common because we don't belong. We are asked to construct an identity out of the negotiation between belonging and not-belonging.

The tape shows a workers strike at York University that is trying to achieve more economic stability and certain privileges. We compare this to a strike at a Colombian university where we tried to change the structure of the institution. In Toronto, there was no questioning of racism or inequality. York is full of immigrant students from all over the world, but this isn't reflected in the staff or the curriculum. For us, America is a continent that includes Afro-Americans, Latinx, Chicanos, Asians, and more. After the Black Lives Matter demonstrations we understand what structural racism is; now we need to go beyond recognition to restructure the university with more people of colour and Indigenous professors who represent untapped archives. All institutions are racist and we participate in that. We are part of it. Change has to begin with each of us, then we need to shift our organizations. Individual emancipation and societal change.

The next scene shows statues that provoke a conversation about structural change. Knowledge becomes like these statues; they are a representation of petrified power and knowledge. At some point they were valuable, but they remain colonial representations celebrating Greek ideals, white police and rulers, a history of the standardization of knowledge.

We shot on 16mm film because we were tired of seeing the video image. Film creates another form of working—you can't shoot indefinitely so you gather little bits. I edit while filming, shooting compact segments.

It was exciting to be back in the darkroom, the ritual we all experienced with analog photography years ago. You participate in the production of the image, you experience joy when pulling out the film and say, "Oh, there is an image!" However, you always get what you don't expect. Sometimes you get almost nothing, but when you look closer it's amazing. You learn to accept these mistakes and welcome them into the work. But then you get tired of making mistakes. We've been developing by hand, now we're starting to hate the scratching so we're looking for a Lomo tank. Film provides different sensations for the viewer, the rhythms of perception are different, and you think differently.

In the final scenes we return home to hear Alexandra's position on feminism, which is all-embracing—it's for everyone in the underclass. Seeing feminism in a wider way requires new forms of thinking, a new science and sociology, new ways of relating with nature. It's difficult to do because we can imagine the end of the world but not the end of capitalism.

THOUGHTS FROM BELOW

KATHRYN MICHALSKI | 2019, COLLABORATION WITH JORGE LOZANO

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN *OFFSCREEN*, VOL. 24, ISSUE 8-9-10 (OCTOBER 2020)

Thoughts from Below is a fragmented, dream-like self-portrait of two artists struggling to find balance between their lives in the present, as the past constantly ambushes them.

In the film, the two reflect on the difficulties of being, while thoughts and traumas of their previous lives obscure the lens from which they view, and are in fact themselves viewed in, the contemporary moment. While their bodies inhabit one land, their souls seem in flux between multiple places and times. They walk down the peaceful streets of Toronto plagued by thoughts of war, kidnappings, bombings, and the struggle to feel at peace in a world that feels "suspiciously safe." A quiet stroll, lacking in violence and pain, is a surreal place. They seem to take solace in each other, both knowing what it is like to make their own path, not quite knowing what to expect next. Like the, dare I say, beautiful image of the seagull landing shown in reverse, theirs is a struggle with temporality, between here and now, there and past.

Lozano speaks of re-representation, of a life in which he feels both fortunate to be safe and yet scratched, imperfect, and full of holes, similar to the ones in 16mm hand-processed film. In a section titled "The Future," the two work through feminist ideologies relating to concepts including nurture, nature, love, and how to tend to plants, to children, and to others. They are building a unified



front, while pondering their identities. While their current lives may be rooted in previously lived trauma, they nonetheless are able to imagine a future built on tenderness and compassion.

Their catharsis comes not only from nurture but from creation as well. As the film progresses, we join Gelis and Lozano at the 2015 York University strike. In this moment plagued with conflict, they marvel at how it is possible to peacefully express one's beliefs in Canada, whereas in Colombia one could be shot for seeking change. Yet the strike is also disappointing, as they witness the futility of their actions, feeling like pawns, like nothing more than a photo op for the union leaders. They ponder their inclusion, while forever feeling like outsiders. Lozano whispers,

The University continues to be a factory, a container, to conform, to repeat, to fit in. People like us have to adapt to systems that exclude us and we're expected to be thankful that we represent the inclusion of diversity. When in fact, we have been left systematically out of place because we are of the wrong physical, cultural, conceptual shape.

In other words, Lozano and Gelis continue to exist in a system that only pretends to be interested in diversity and inclusion.

Lozano records a scene of Gelis holding a super 8 camera pointed at herself while spinning in circles. This footage forms the basis of *Walking in Circles*, Gelis's documentation of the York University strike from 2015; but, more importantly, it shows the ways in which both artists heal and reflect upon difficulties, that is, through the creation of art.

Gelis and Lozano live in a diptych of their own, split between multiple places. They are split between two competing worldviews with their roots showing, the very roots that provide their strength and resilience. They find ways to feel at home in a culture that both tokenizes and excludes them. Regardless they persevere, they are building a world for themselves, a new future, one in which squirrels break into their home in Canada to snack on Supercoco candies from Colombia.

Kathryn Michalski lives in Tiohtià:ke/Montréal and has recently returned to writing about cinema after a brief hiatus.

RAÍCES FÚLCREAS / PROP ROOTS

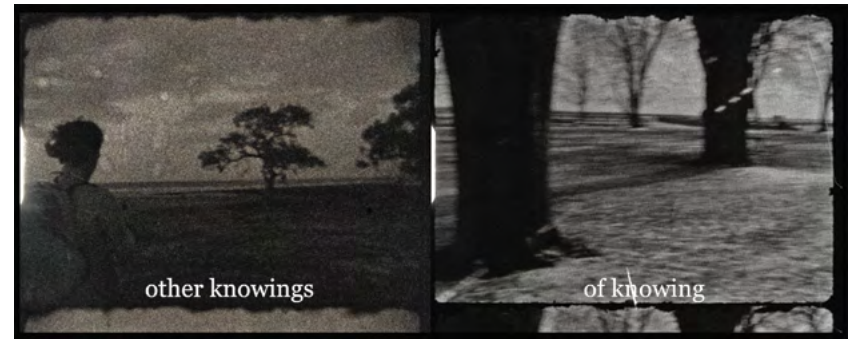
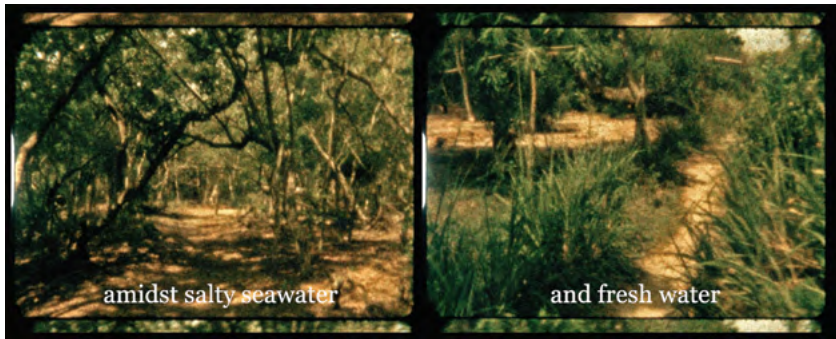
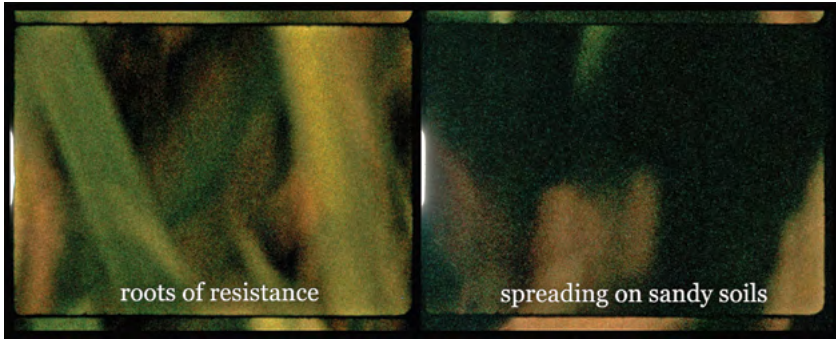
KATHRYN MICHALSKI | 2018

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN *OFFSCREEN*, VOL. 24, ISSUE 8-9-10 (OCTOBER 2020)

In *Prop Roots*, Alexandra Gelis uses the mangrove as a metaphor for existing between two spaces. The mangrove, a salt-tolerant tree known for its ability to adapt and survive under harsh coastal conditions, lives in that space where land and ocean meet. What makes the mangrove remarkable is its prop roots. While some of the roots manage to protect themselves from the elements, a large part of them are bare and grow above the ground, elegantly adapting to the world around them. These plants survive and thrive under difficult conditions despite the fact that their prop roots are exposed to the elements of the world. The prop roots are strong and vulnerable at the same time.

The pacing of this film is both hypnotic and unsettling. We feel connected to the images of nature and to the accompanying sounds, but are never quite given enough time to fully absorb them; as such they are fleeting moments to be experienced. Our senses are further bombarded by the use of dual screens. *Prop Roots* was originally shown as a super 8, dual projection at the8fest in 2018. The film was later revamped into its current dual-screen, digital version, with added sections and text. While the two screens are intricately related, they leave one feeling split, conflicted, with the sensation of being caught between two or more places. The film leaves one with the visceral feeling of scrambling to establish footing within one space, while also desperately wanting to belong to another.

The natural surroundings become Gelis's allies on this journey. Birds and butterflies, delicate transitory creatures, accompany her—but they only temporarily inhabit the space themselves. Familiar and foreign—one cannot miss the duality that is rampant throughout the piece, between the landscape and Gelis, the conflict within. The audience is also forced to work, to focus, to try to establish a sense of permanency; to try to understand what is happening as our attention is pulled from one place to another. Gelis, who now lives next to the cold-water lakes near Toronto, uses her roots as a form of resistance. She balances all that has been built with all that she is currently trying to cultivate. Her previous life and traumas, balanced with the now. Part of it feels like a dream, as though she exists in multiple places at once.



roots of resistance

spreading on sandy soils

nomadic

extasis every-where

amidst salty seawater

and fresh water

becoming

trans-territorialization

other knowings

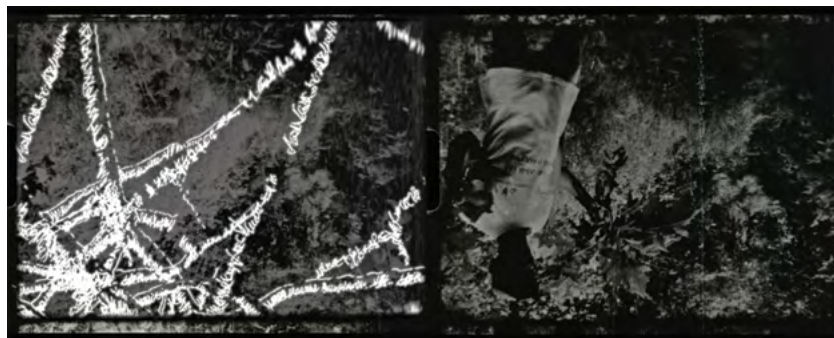
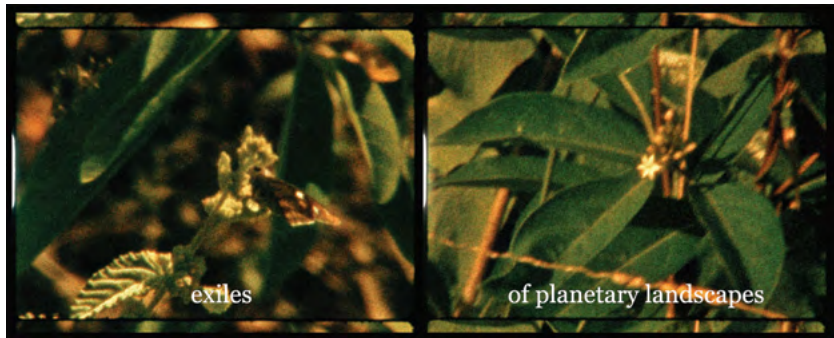
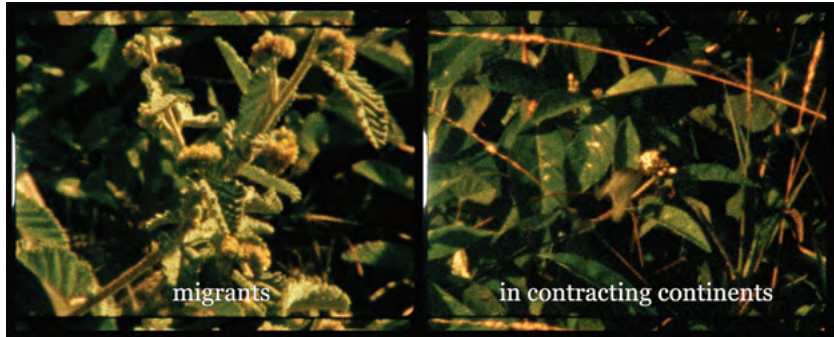
of knowing

on-going movement

end-less permanence

transitory spaces

for birds and butterflies



ALERTA. ALERTA. ALERTA.

CHRISTINE NEGUS | 2020

Paths we can call desire lines, created by not following the official paths laid out by disciplines. These paths might have become fainter from not being traveled upon, so we might work harder to find them; we might be willful just to keep them going by not going the way we have been directed.

SARA AHMED

Alexandra Gelis's *Alerta. Alerta. Alerta.* documents the Women's March in Lima, Peru, in 2019. We enter the work in a similar manner to those entering a demonstration: through a crescendo of chaotic noises—screaming, chanting, and drumming. The sound of footsteps on the street reverberates, and we sense that space is undoubtedly altered before we even see the people.

In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed utilizes the main character from Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* to reconsider the movement of bodies (particularly femme ones) in public spaces. Ahmed uses the street as an example of a path, which she defines as an established and understood social-orientation device. She suggests, "a path gives life a certain shape, a direction, a sequence." The street has a teleology: directing bodies forward, moving "the crowd."

Something happens, however, when these lines come to a halt: the street becomes crowded. *Alerta. Alerta. Alerta.* bears witness to a counter-crowd as femme bodies flood the Lima streets. This reorientation of public space clogs the



established lines of movement—these bodies break the linearity of the thoroughfare and get in the way. Ahmed notes that on occasions like this “you become an obstacle; an inconvenience.” This inconveniencing act purposefully challenges the gender-based violence of the regulatory constraints and heterochronology that play out within the social sphere.

Using a similar teleologic, the typical film sequence also functions as a street, a way to move the viewer forward along a given path. Gelis’s work, like the demonstrators, defies this. Black frames disrupt the fluidity of viewing. The forward motion of the film is challenged by footage shown in reverse. Normative timing is estranged. Heterochronology is abandoned as Gelis brings bodies to a standstill. *Alerta. Alerta. Alerta.* doesn’t simply represent a protest; it enacts one.

Gelis protests discipline, convention, and the pleasures of viewing as she employs feminist modalities and tactics much like those demonstrating in the Women’s March. Just as a demonstration can disorient and queer the streetscape, Gelis queers the film sequence. *Alerta. Alerta. Alerta.* embodies a warning, a declaration oriented towards a different future, one so necessary within queer and feminist circles of artistic praxis and beyond.

Fuck your flow, we’ll make our own way.

All quotes from *Living a Feminist Life* by Sara Ahmed.

Christine Negus is a multidisciplinary artist and writer from London, Ontario, whose works often employ humour and irony to investigate nostalgia and loss.



ALERTA. ALERTA. ALERTA.

INTI PUJOL | 2020

It is difficult to speak about a context that is not my own, as I am Argentinian and feminism is a wide-ranging territory. When I think of Peru today, I think of Keiko and the threat of the worst. When I think of Peru’s past, I think of the mass castrations and rapes of Fujimori’s presidency.

I cannot talk about what has seeped into the Peruvian body, but I can ask myself—Will the revolutionary dreams of feminists catch fire in Latin America this time? Can it really happen? Can we face class conflicts together?

In my country, some historical claims of feminism have been completely affected by party politics and its internal struggles, leaving behind the true expression of the corporeality that feminisms often inhabit in the streets and at the grassroots level. This generates divisions that are expressed through the invisibilization of conflicts, such as violence within political and activist networks, or white feminists writing about grassroots realities that they do not understand and have not inhabited, but which they have entered via the sciences, TERF feminism, Kristalina Georgieva, etc.

Naming ourselves a force does not necessarily make us a force. In any case, it cannot be denied that in Latin America feminisms alerted us to the extreme policies that continue to haunt us in the form of mining companies, banks, loans, and labour precarity. It is here that class divisions become evident, and it is there that the logic of solidarity breaks down and other body politics begin to rule. Shall we go on strike?

Inti Pujol is an Argentinian visual artist born in Mendoza in 1978.



ENTRADAS Y SALIDAS / EXITS AND ENTRIES

TOM MCSORLEY | 2020

Don't go. I am now all John Lennon primal scream afraid straining out "Mother" inside my thundering head, my heart stricken. But of course you go straight into battle with cancer, being fearless—the paradoxical mother of all my fears and my mute terror of you going away. I have no choice but to inscribe your unacceptable impermanence onto celluloid that is itself decaying, a frail, luminous palimpsest of time imprinted on our bodies.

This is what I can process.

I will place my camera and witness these semaphore signals from your naked body's marked skin, calling to me with love and reassurance across oceans of unknowns. I will print and speak upon the trembling surfaces of the emulsion, almost incantatory, like prayers: "We transformed uncertainties into interventions" and "We learned to touch." Our many hands will shave and sew your glorious dark hair that has "fallen off uncontrollably" and it will be like "reinventing each day." It has to be.

This is our way out and our way in.



This array of sounds, of music, of my scratching consciousness, of blemished skin and blemished vision in the ambient anonymity of names called out in a hospital waiting room—I am there: watching, listening, rendering.

I see you now on a day reinvented, beautiful and smiling on a sunny street under new hair. There is an image of you flowing through my camera; there remains a whispering sound in my ear.

Don't go.

Tom McSorley is a Canadian film critic and scholar based in Ottawa.





INSTALLATIONS

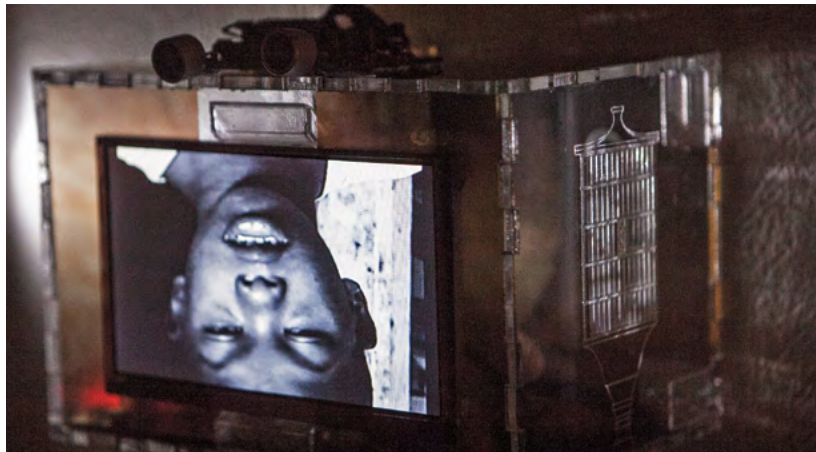
CASITEROS

MIKE HOOLBOOM | 2011

Like so much of her work, this one lives in different versions. The one I saw was single-screen, shot and projected on super 8. The image unaccompanied. In the earliest days of the movies, silent films were routinely joined by a chatty host, and then by a musician. But as the century wore on, artists reinvented silence. What is being kept silent here?

There is only one shot, lasting the length of a roll of film in a single unmoving frame. It shows a young boy holding his cat familiar with tenderness and care. His quiet gestures suggest that he too would like to be held like that, if only it were possible. Perhaps he is able to extend a kindness he is unable to receive. The young cat obtains an uneasy foothold, struggles and gestures, always on the move while the boy moves in and out of his body. He's right there with his cat pal, and then he vacates, he drifts far away, his face caught in a frozen stare of remembrance. How can a face this haunted belong to someone so young?

The light is warm and beautiful, showing a ruin of a house. Behind the boy a clutch of handmade wooden cages rises up in broken columns; 150 roosters are being bred for the cockfight. Difficult roommates. We are in a poor neighbourhood known as El Bosque (The Woods) in Cartagena, Colombia. The young man who can't keep his body for himself, whose body doesn't belong to him, is named Pachito. Can it be already too late when you are only six or seven?



AUTORGANIZACIONES: 24H INFORMAL ECONOMY NEWS

MANUEL ZUÑIGA MUÑOZ | 2012

In 2012, I began curating a news project for *Dospuntocero: Public Sphere and Participation*. I was inspired by the importance of networks in the Arab Spring, the response of Colombian civil society to failed justice reform, and the need to resist communication monopolies (by Rupert Murdoch, among others) that homogenize discourses of power.

As part of this project, I invited Alexandra, who made an international call asking for one-minute videos that reflected on the informal economy in local environments, and on strategies that people invented to survive in the market. *Autorganizaciones* was a collaborative web documentary that used news, stock market fluctuations, and academic documents to complement videos, as well as meta tags and keywords that generated multiple visual, sonic, and textual reflections on the informal economy.

Subject to a continual live feed, Alexandra's project made and remade itself, translating the biological phenomenon of self-organization into a digital environment. It examined the quality of life within its own system, creating digital metaphors of living beings.

The idea of the bourgeois public sphere emerged in nineteenth-century Europe, alongside the Industrial Revolution, as the face-to-face meeting of influential people. Today the diktats of the ruling class remain pervasive on the Internet, a public space which some critics have called a domestication of social experience. This is challenged by initiatives like *Autorganizaciones*, which offer unpredictable, sometimes random, always risky, process-driven outcomes, and which do not fear death in their attempt to create new forms of resistance.

Manuel Zuñiga Muñoz is a research artist, curator, and university professor, a specialist in environmental management of coastal areas.

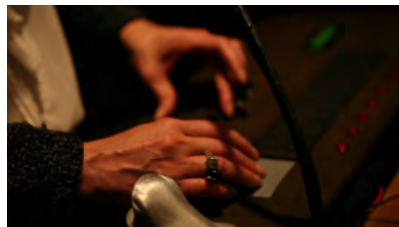


RASPAO, AFECTOS DESCENTRADOS, PERSONIDOS

JORGE LOZANO | 2012/2013

Afectos Descentrados [de-centred affections] shows how Alexandra's work follows different paths as it enters into new relationships, new frames. This one began with her installation *Raspao*, where she modified a snow cone cart with cameras and electronics in order to produce community conversations. The idea was to gather people around the cart so they could see themselves; the cart became a camera, documenting its surroundings, as well as the customers. She made another version in Canada where she added surround sound. There were microphones, a mixer, and a small pad that looped sounds. You could mix loops and make music out of them. People would buy cones and play music; sometimes street musicians would join them. The cart became a sound machine.

She was doing a workshop with Indigenous Cree youth in Wemindji, Québec, when she was invited for a residency in Colombia. She gathered sounds and images from Wemindji, then documented her travel until she reached the residency in Pereira, where she continued recording sounds. She went to a bar to buy a table and chairs and brought them back to her studio. She picked up objects around the city that had sweet resonances, that might become instruments or sound-making tools. She took apart the chairs and table and built objects out of them; the leather of the chairs became drums. For the installation she scattered these new instruments across the floor, along with half a dozen microphones and eight speakers. People were invited to record their voices and movements with the microphones, and to make sounds with all the little objects on the floor. Those sounds were turned into loops that visitors could mix to create their own music. It invited people to listen to themselves, and to each other, to relate to each other in a different way. There were multiple microphones, so inevitably strangers began to jam with each other. The installation invited connection and the creation of a community. It was also an intervention into the standards of installation, because Alexandra was also there, part of the conversation, talking about the geography of sounds, and about her trip to this place.



PERSONIDOS

Alexandra began a youth workshop in La Perseverancia, a dangerous neighbourhood in Bogotá. She met with them and after a number of conversations, eventually proposed creating a sound studio for their hip hop and spoken word performances.

She brought her *Afectos* installation there, in pieces, disassembled. She wanted to show them how sound works in order to create an installation. She taught them how to make microphones, and about the scientific properties of sound. As they began soldering the sound studio together she changed the programming. In the earlier installation the loops were short, just five to seven seconds long, but for this piece they would need to be as long as three minutes, because these guys were making songs.

The youth were in different gangs and she helped to reconcile their differences. The making of the work and the performances that followed helped bring these gangs together. Alexandra has worked so often in these dangerous places, with her boundless capacity to relate to others. She is never harassed because the people protect her, they look out for her.

All these kids began using art as a form of resistance. Some began to see the world differently. They performed in the market and other public spaces using sound recordings from their neighbourhood. The work was invited to La Otra Bienale (The Other Biennale). It was important to bring the subaltern—people who had never visited a gallery or art festival—to become active participants in these art spaces. The installation had cameras, so they could create performance documents and distribute their sounds. There were open mics that invited others to perform as well. People were united by the work, which kept changing as people interacted with it, and with each other.



COSIENDO EL BOSQUE / SEWING THE WOODS

JULIETA MARIA | 2013

As we approach the Priscilla sewing box, with its colourful spools of thread jumping out from the dark wood, we are drawn in by the object, which conjures memories of historical domesticity. *Sewing the Woods* is an interactive work where the Priscilla box contains a screen that displays videos of everyday life and events, recorded by Alexandra in the El Bosque (The Woods) neighbourhood of Cartagena, Colombia. Her grandmother's house in El Bosque was Alexandra's base during this period, while she worked on various pieces involving the community in different ways.

In the sewing box, each spool of thread triggers a different one-to-three-minute video loop. Each video starts moving forward in time, initially in a slow succession of still frames, stuttering if the thread stops moving. These videos are not readily available; they require the attention of constantly pulling the thread for a few seconds, at the right speed, to activate them fully.

I think about the seamstress, who in one of the videos meticulously sews black fabric. Alexandra told me she initially wanted to base this piece on the seamstress's battle with breast cancer, but most of the footage was lost. Alex's works often draw from elements that have migrated from one project to the next. Several years later, this sewing box became the host and mechanism of *Doing and Undoing*, which Alexandra made with her mother, Cris, following Cris's breast cancer diagnosis.



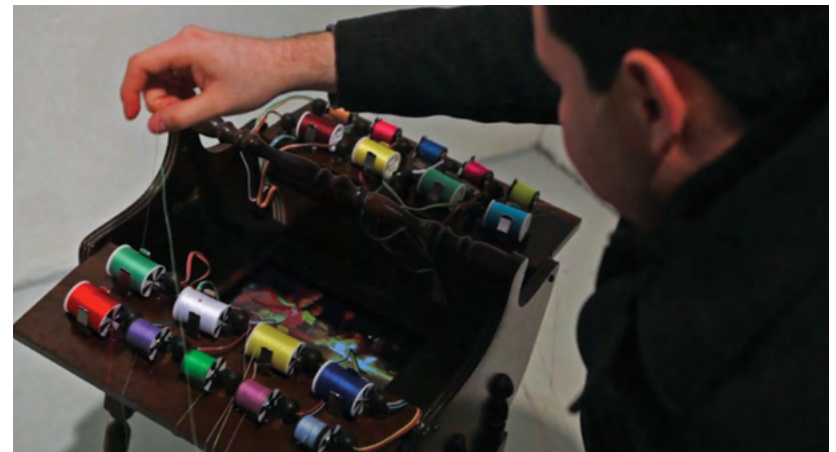
In *Sewing the Woods*, the subject is the neighbourhood of El Bosque. Surfaces are colourful in the video like the threads on the box: the yellow on the *bolis*, frozen juice treats in individual plastic bags; the red of the rooster; the blue of the girl's makeup; the patterns of laundry hanging under the sun. The sensual quality of the images emphasizes textures, smells, flavours just out of reach through the screen. There is also rubble and garbage. What lurks between those seams that stitch together this reluctant portrait?

In one of the videos, an uncle and his nephew eat some *bolis* together. He is physical, roughing up the boy a few times in just one minute. The boy laughs, although his uncle's energy is aggressive enough to make me uncomfortable. What does this way of playing suggest?

The domestic space seems to burst into the street, where people gather, where the *picó* sound systems play *champeta* without respite. Is there anywhere you can hide from the music, the noise, the sun, the surface, the display?

How much work goes into holding a picture together? Cartagena, arguably the most touristic place in Colombia, is also one of the most unequal. The people of the Caribbean coast are thought to be one of the happiest and loudest, with their celebrations, music, dancing. As the spring 2021 protests in Colombia rage on for over a month now, I watch the unravelling of the spools of thread and think about the fragility of its stitching.

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Julieta Maria is a Toronto-based new media artist with an MFA from York University.



CORREDOR

KATE MACKAY | 2013, TWO-SCREEN PERFORMANCE

Commissioned by the Images Festival, and curated by Kate MacKay for the festival's Closing Night performance. Music by drummer Hamid Drake and baritone saxophonist David Mott.

Gelis's *Corredor*, which can be translated as corridor or passageway, explores the layers of significance embedded in Latin American landscapes, and the economic, social, and political forces hidden beneath their surfaces. Her evocative images trace both natural and artificial boundaries used to define and control populations, deftly documenting the banal and the beautiful, the threatening and the benign.

Through the use of words and images, politics and poetry, *Corredor* surveys conflicted and conquered places while reflecting on the political implications of the post-colonial landscape. In particular, it investigates the Panama Canal, and the control exercised by the United States on the landscape and the psyche of the Panamanian population. Touching on the role of the notorious former School of the Americas in Panama, a U.S. military academy also known as the "School for Dictators," as well as describing the strategic use of *paja canalera*, a thorny, prickly, and invasive imported plant that was used by the U.S. Army to separate the Panama Canal Zone from the rest of the Panamanian population, Gelis's images encourage the viewer to reflect on borders real, imagined, contested, resented, or forgotten and ignored.

Kate MacKay is a media art curator and projectionist.



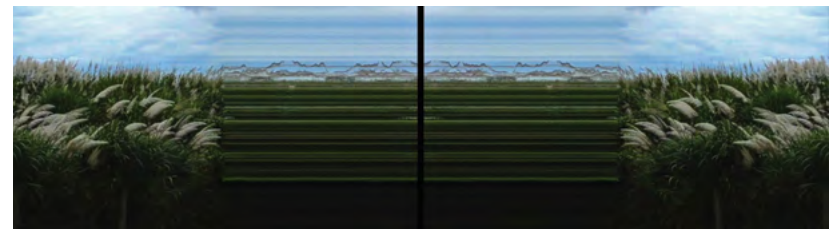
CORREDOR: THE BIG PICTURE

CLAUDIA ARANA | 2013

The effects of physical distance have triggered an exponential increase in computer-mediated communication. Nowadays we connect through digital technologies more than ever, and we can see this sociological behaviour impacting the arts just as much as any other field. We are seeing not only representations of artistic works in the digital realm, but also a great influx of new media explorations pursued by artists who, in moments of isolation and lockdown, have delved into virtual and technological worlds in ways we haven't seen before.

However, the involvement of Latin American artists with modern technologies (mechanical, electronic, and digital) is not new. Since the nineteenth century, Latin American artists have explored diverse media and conceptual aspects of a techno-culture engaged with individual and collective visions. We have seen a great variety of works examining the particular nexus of culture and politics, interrogating the effects of racialization and colonialism in cyber and new media culture.

Alexandra Gelis's work uses physical and digital elements to address displacement, landscape, and politics. In *Corredor*, Gelis investigates the strategic use of the *paja canalera* or elephant grass (*Saccharum spontaneum*), a tall grass imported from South Asia to Latin America in the early 1950s that can grow up to three centimetres per day, spreading its long roots several kilometres wide. This thorny, prickly, and invasive plant was used by the United States Army to separate the Panama Canal Zone from the rest of the Panamanian population, blocking the entrance to controlled areas. This biopolitical barrier serves as one of the many tactics imposed by the former School of the Americas (SOA), a U.S. military academy in Panama also known as the "School for Dictators," since it trained notorious human rights abusers such as Chilean dictator



General Pinochet, General Stroessner of Paraguay, and paramilitary forces in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Colombia.

Throughout the installation, *Corredor* presents physical and digital components to explore different layers of significance embedded in Latin American landscapes, while exposing political and economic counter-insurgency tactics, as well as tracing both natural and artificial grounds used to subjugate bodies and control populations. Her work invites the viewer to reflect on borders, bodies, and locations, and on the virtual, physical, imagined, or contested forces that control them.

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Claudia Arana is an independent curator, arts administrator, and cultural connector who has installed her practice in the construction of virtual and physical artistic platforms to promote the inclusion of different cultural perspectives.



BAHAREQUE / ADOBE

CLARA INÉS GUERRERO GARCÍA | 2014

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The ritual of the *lumbalú* that accompanies the transition from the here to the hereafter is the essence of the Palenquero religion. Mrs. Matilde, in a moment of intimacy, alone in front of her devastated house, with the sounds of the *leko*, says goodbye not only to her home, but to an era that is coming to an end. The scene is unusual, and in this ritual Alex and her mother Cristina, who were passing by during their creative research work, had the privilege of being allowed to record and embrace Mrs. Matilde, and to accompany her loss and that of the village in the breakdown of its traditions.

The symbolic content of the old woman singing a *lumbalú* to her collapsed house, mourning her, in a lament that transmits the sadness of the end of an era, is reflected in the pain felt in sonorous chords that betray the lost, the irremediable. Loneliness, pain, desolation, helplessness flood the atmosphere. It is no longer possible, it is over.

The sound of the radio transports the passage of time, gives contexts of reading, in an audiovisual poem that measures the end of an era of Palenque. No more *bareque*. No more freshness of traditional houses. Nothing will be the same anymore.

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Clara Inés Guerrero García is a historian living and working in Colombia.





MALA HIERBA / WEEDS

DEBORAH BARNDT | 2014

I walk into the gallery, expecting to see images on the wall. Instead, my eyes are drawn to the floor and I start to follow a series of twisted braids, snaking their way through the gallery and intersecting at various points. At the first node, the braids hold a potted plant. As I brush by it, the rhythm of chanting voices invites me into a funeral ritual. Each time I pass another of the eight plants dotting the points of connection around the room, my movement evokes more voices—the daily chatter of women gathering plants; of water. Little by little, plant by plant, I am immersed in the soundscape of the village of San Basilio de Palenque.

Alex Gelis always challenges conventional notions of art and the white cube. How? She grounds her work in the earth and in community, in this case the first town of escaped slaves in the Americas, on the Caribbean coast of Colombia. She excavates the history of the Palenqueros and of their rich biodiversity by identifying some of the 170 plants that grow wild around the town, many transported from Africa during the Atlantic slave trade, hidden in women's hair braids. The braids now map the community, just as they served as codes on women's heads marking the route to freedom, as the Cimaronnes found their way from the plantations to San Basilio de Palenque.

The installation titled *Weeds* honours the medicinal and edible plant seeds that made the long journey, first across the ocean and then around the Spanish colonies. The *conquistadores* would have called them *mala hierba* or “bad herb,” because they didn't value either the knowledges or practices of using these plants as food or for healing. Just as the seeds were hidden, so too the sacred knowledges were often kept secret; they represented a subversive power, an understanding of the spiritual force in all living things, whether plants or humans.

Alex understood that when she was invited to record the funeral rituals for a famous Palenquero actor, Evaristo Márquez, as his family mourned his passing during nine days and nights. She knew that the songs passed down orally were sacred. And though they trusted her to film the proceedings, she chose to reveal only their sounds. The original idea of a three-channel video installation became an eight-channel installation of pure sound.

This is another way that Alex challenges the predominantly visual, Eurocentric gallery space. She draws on new media technologies to create immersive

multimedia experiences. Near one wall of the gallery, she has installed an old water pump; when I draw down the handle, I activate video projections on the wall. Here I learn the names of the ninety plants she studied (ten of which she found in Canada). Appearing in Spanish, Palenquero, and Latin, this text-based part of the exhibit combines both western scientific knowledge and ancestral knowledges. This also subtly reveals a contestation of historically situated knowledges: The classical identification of plants was developed by the Swedish botanist Linnaeus, who also classified people into racial hierarchies.

The dialectics of colonial power and resistant knowledge permeate the installation, as the braids and the plants scattered throughout the floor map of the town challenge the territorial control technologies that empires use to manage populations. Biopolitics also frames the other multimedia work of Alex Gelis, and underlies her arts-based dissertation research. While acknowledging the hegemonic power of capitalism and of commodified plants, she always privileges the everyday resistance of people and plants. After experiencing the multi-sensorial installation of *Mala Hierba*, we begin to see the *malesas* [weeds, or bad plants] as *bonesas* [good plants]. In our minds, in our bodies, in our spirits.

Deborah Barndt is Professor and Coordinator of the Community Arts Practice (CAP) Program in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University.



ESTERA / MAT

PAOLA CAMARGO GONZÁLEZ | 2015

Estera is a web documentary by Alexandra Gelis that articulates a series of materials from her fieldwork (videos, drawings, photographs) made in San Basilio de Palenque and La Bonga from 2013 to 2018. The centrepiece of the website is a three-minute, two-channel super 8 recording of the work of two artisans: a traditional doctor and a farmer and mat weaver.

The map of San Basilio de Palenque, the plants, the artisans, the mat, and the most common mixtures of medicinal plants are the five navigation categories chosen by the artist. The design of the page allows users to move easily from one category to another. Using a metaphor that comes from biology, these links function in the manner of a rhizome, with roots that extend through various nodes. The map shows the patios of houses where different types of plants used for medicinal purposes grow. Palenque is a place where medicinal plants grow without domestication in spaces such as terraces, rooftops, riverbanks, and, of course, in the bush.

After accompanying Alexandra on two of her trips to the area in 2014, I can say that her gaze on plants has been her gateway to the environmental history of Equinoctial America. In particular, the artist has worked on the concept of “migrated plants,” or plants moved out of their native environment. Among them are so-called “weeds,” which, according to the artist, given their characteristics of aggressive and even invasive growth outside their habitat, become ideal elements



for the control and transformation of territories. Migrated plants, as demonstrated by her research in Panama and San Basilio de Palenque, have been used as technologies to control territories, both by those in positions of power, as well as by those in a condition of subjugated resistance.

FROM THE ROOT

In *Estera*, as in her previous research on plants and territories, Alexandra begins her fieldwork by observing migrated plants, and from them she opens her reflections on biopolitics. In this case, *Estera* is directly linked to the forced migration of people in Colombia. On an outing to collect plants, the teacher Alejandro takes us along a road near his house and tells us that this road led to La Bonga, his birthplace, where he lived all his life until 2001. That year the paramilitaries came to his community and ordered all the inhabitants to leave in less than twenty-four hours.

The weaver, who makes a mat from the roots and vines of medicinal plants as Alexandra films, has mastered a trade and also has firsthand knowledge of the Colombian armed conflict. The video on La Bonga included in this website allows us to hear part of his story. Five years after the event, the village of La Bonga and its surrounding areas were declared a zone of forced displacement.

The worsening of the expulsion of the civilian population resulted from factors such as the strategy of territorial expansion of the paramilitary groups; the deficiencies in their demobilization processes; the regrouping and rearmament of some of the demobilized men; the military offensive of territorial recovery by the state in compliance with the Democratic Security Policy; and the massive and indiscriminate planting of anti-personnel mines by the FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia]. The combination of these elements has prevented the level of forced displacement from decreasing since 2003, in correspondence with the decrease in the main modalities of violence. Thus, between 2003 and 2012, a total of 2,729,153 people were displaced.

The displacement of the inhabitants of La Bonga is not an isolated event in the recent history of the country. As we can infer from the weaver's account, from the year 2000 this phenomenon worsened, due to a confluence of macro-social factors. Although Colombia has one of the highest rates of internal displacement in the world, some survivors managed to return to their land years later. When Alexandra asked the teacher why he had not returned to La Bonga, he answered: out of fear. The installation of fear in bodies of all genders, ages, and origins has been one of the most effective micro-policies of control. But despite paramilitary violence, the inhabitants of La Bonga managed to maintain links to their land through some crops and through the name of their new town: La Bonguita. This case seems to teach us that home is not only the place where we live, but above all the place where our roots are.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

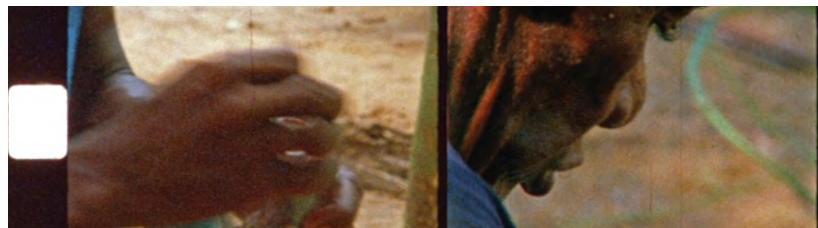
At first glance *Estera* offers us the illusion of seeing ethnographic material from the 1960s. This apparent game of going back to the future is well realized by the artist, thanks to the use of a super 8 camera from the last century that provides an interesting mix of colour, sound, and texture. The images progressively reinforce the idea that we are experiencing something old-fashioned: Two screens show the hands of artisans performing ancient crafts, such as preparing a syrup out of tree bark, and weaving a mat.

What makes this story of displacement different from other victim narratives has to do with what I call “an uprooting with roots.” As he says in the La Bonga video, Alejandro visits his native village once or twice a week because he has crops there, a fact that surprised me. How could he be in a situation of displacement and at the same time still have crops in La Bonga? Here displacement impels a double movement: The bodies had to move and leave a territory (uprooting), but the roots of their crops continued to hold strong (rootedness), as a symbol of a home that the paramilitaries did not manage to destroy completely and to which the legitimate owners of the land could return, at least temporarily.

The need for some men to return to La Bonga at least once a week, after walking four hours, or two hours by donkey, also made me think of the image of the *paja canalera*, a migrant plant that Alexandra studied in Panama. The roots of this plant can extend up to fifteen kilometres each. In the case of the displaced people of La Bonga, they have extended their roots into the outskirts of San Basilio de Palenque.

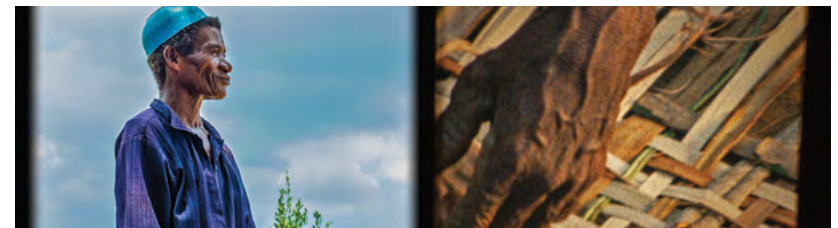
Estera allows us to see three artisans who resolve their relationship with territory and technique in different ways. In this regard, it is worth recalling an excerpt from Richard Sennett’s *The Craftsman*:

It is possible that the term “craft” suggests a way of life that languished with the advent of industrial society, but that is misleading. “Craft” designates an enduring and basic human impulse, the desire to perform a task well. Craftsmanship covers a much wider range than skilled manual labor. Indeed it applies to the computer programmer, the physician, the artist.



Besides the fact they are all artisans, is there anything else in common between the masters of La Bonga and Alexandra? I think so, because for them their craft is inseparable from community. Their hands have a virtuosity achieved after countless hours of work, but that virtuosity only makes sense as part of the social life of the community. One works for others, to give others something that they may need, that may be useful to them. We all need a syrup and a mat, and to learn how to edit ourselves.

Paola Camargo González is an art historian, independent curator, and expert in the processes of symbolic reparation for victims of the armed conflict in Colombia.



CERCA-VIVA

ALEXANDRA GELIS | 2016

CERCA-VIVA is a two-channel video installation that talks about the presence of the *retamo espinoso* in the savannah of Bogotá and its surroundings. It is also known as *Ulex europeus*, the gorse or common gorse. It's a flowering plant that arrived in Colombia in the 1970s. It was initially used as a living fence in order to divide private property. Over the years it became an increasingly pervasive invasive species, endangering the conservation of water in the savannah, as well as eliminating other species.

These “spontaneous plants” adapt to places where they are needed. They heal territories that have been damaged or destroyed. They are also rooted where the population needs them. In Europe and Asia, the *retamo* is a native species, a medicinal plant that helps with migraines and heart problems.



KEEPING IT DISTANT FROM UP CLOSE: HOW TO SEE CANCER

CARLA GABRÍ | 2020, COLLABORATION WITH CARLA GABRÍ
[CREDITED AS CARLA GABRIELA ENGLER]

This essay is a shortened version of a video essay made by Carla Gabrí and Alexandra Gelis for the video symposium Taking Measures: Usages of Formats in Film and Video Art, organized by Fabienne Liptay, Laura Walde, and Carla Gabrí.

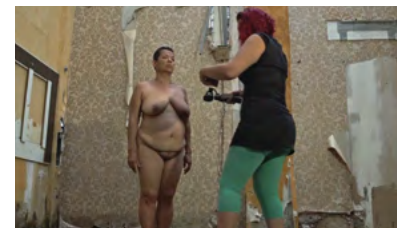
1. SCALED BODIES

In July 2016, Cristina Lombana, the mother of Alexandra Gelis, felt a small lump in her breast. In February 2017, she had her first biopsy; the result was cancer in the left breast with a lump of three to four centimetres.

Alexandra began working on a series of artworks and artistic interventions surrounding her mother's illness and subsequent healing. These works—like most of her works—are ever-changing. They are shown in different configurations and formats, depending on where and when they are exhibited; sometimes they are re-edited or their footage is recycled. They grow, vanish, reappear, or remain unfinished, along with the topic they are dealing with.

Radiotherapy was shown in cinemas, as well as in gallery spaces. The last time I visited Alexandra in Toronto was in fall 2019, just before she installed a show at the OBORO gallery in Montréal called *Doing and Undoing: poems from within*. For this exhibition, she exhibited *Radiotherapy* life-sized, the projection touching the exhibition floor, creating a virtual extension of the exhibition space while letting the viewer face a naked, cancerous body on a human scale.

At eye level and in equal measure, the body on the screen forms a specific relationship with the viewer's body through what Mary Ann Doane calls the “real” space of cinema: the concrete, material environment of the spectator's experience . . . [which concerns] the scale of [the] image that is ‘really’ there, no matter how thoroughly and inevitably it is haunted by absence.”



In this “real space,” the two bodies facing each other are similar yet different—one covered in clothes, the other fully exposed; one presumably healthy, the other ill. While the viewer is standing in a clean, white exhibition space in Montréal, Cristina stands in the ruins of Casa Barco in Panama City in a burned and abandoned nursing home. Two opposite bodies in opposite spaces, joined through scaling.

It’s an attempt to reconfigure something otherwise invisible: the body of an ill, elderly, hence marginalized, South American woman, affected by an illness that remains mostly invisible. It’s an avoided body. Acknowledging the precarious state the body is in, Gelis captures the body, stuck, not just in an abandoned place, but also in a temporal loop, with a lightweight, hand-sized super 8 camera. Digitally transferred, the image is transmitted to other spaces, circulating, providing access, turning the exhibition room into a place for sharing and for witnessing the experience of having an ill, scarred, and abandoned body.

This tension between sharing and witnessing is also triggered by sound. From afar, the installation is quiet; Cristina’s words are written in bold letters onto the film image, remaining inaudible. But while standing in front of the screen, on the marker on the floor, one starts to hear, even to feel her voice.

Looking down, one can see that the floor marker is a copy of one of Cristina’s tattoos that serve as position markers for radiotherapy. The marker is an extension of the ill body that reaches out of the screen into real space, inviting but also targeting the viewer. Looking up, directional speakers mounted on the ceiling issue sound. The vibrations of the sound waves touch the viewer’s head, neck, and shoulders. The viewer’s gaze—looking down, then looking up—mirrors the liturgical gestures in the film image itself, when Cristina repeatedly points to her neck, her chest, and her breast, touching the radiotherapy markers tattooed onto her skin. This echo of Christian practice reframes the portrait in the context of faith and hope for a miraculous cure.

These shared moments dissolve as suddenly as they appeared. Whereas the body on the screen remains stuck, not just in an abandoned place but also in a temporal loop—“four dots that will be with me forever”—the viewer moves away, and Cristina’s voice is gone. The viewer’s ability to step away makes it all the more clear that on the other side, there is no such escape.



2. HAPTIC TOUCH

Across the room there is a second film titled *Exits and Entries*. Rather than creating closeness through distance, this film appears like a visual diary. It offers a collection of snapshots, showing the many facets of battling cancer: losing hair, knotting a wig, coming out of surgery, applying balms, attending therapy, entering the hospital. The film follows not a chronological but a circular course: Exits and entries are overlapping; every step forward is also a potential step in the opposite direction.

Gelis shot with whatever camera was available at a given time, ranging from her personal phone to a DSLR, a GoPro, or a Bolex. She bridged the aesthetic differences by re-shooting the footage onto 16mm and developing everything by hand. As a result, the film image looks grainy, and always marked by scratches, dirt, water stains, and fingerprints.

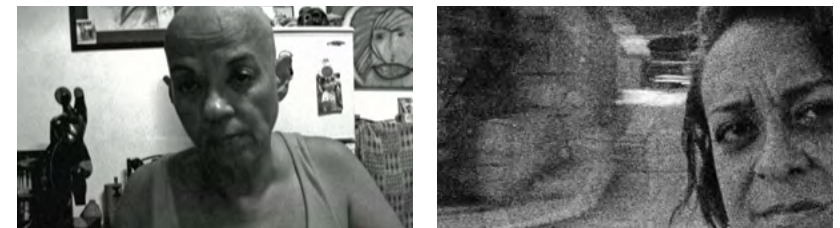
We both learned to touch.

The skin of the film appears touched. It shows hands touching skin, hair, clay; then there are the hands you only know are there because you see that they touched the emulsion of the film. Hands that feel their way forward within the realm of the visible and the invisible, inside and outside the film—*exits and entries*—emblematic tools for searching out an illness that might be visible to medical scans but not to the human eye.

You try to touch because your eyes can't see.

Looking at the images, it seems as if the camera doesn’t know where to look either: ever searching, out of focus, scanning the room, the skin, looking for visible scars in the cancerous breast that aren’t there. The closer the camera gets, the more it loses sight; the grain of the film image overlaps with the skin pores, the emulsion of the film with the dermis of the skin. As Laura Marks might put it, the film appeals less to “optical vision” than to “haptic visuality.” It’s a desire to access a memory that might be invisible to vision, but is remembered by the body. Hence the attempt to “express the inexpressible” through “bodily and other dense, seemingly silent registers,” such as touch.

As a Colombian/Venezuelan artist who calls Canada home, Gelis lives between cultures and makes intercultural work. Despite moving within a visual



culture of ocularcentrism and working with film, Gelis reconnects her family's traumatic experience to their culture of origin, re-centring embodied, non-visual knowledge. The result is a film that you touch with your eyes, making clear that just because you can't see something, doesn't mean it isn't there. Your body remembers.

3. CONNECTIVE MEMORY

There is a third work in the exhibition titled *Sewing the Woods*. It's a re-modelled Priscilla sewing box with a screen inside. On each side of the sewing box, there are eighteen thread spools mounted—each of them with a binary code connected to an image sensor. Pulling one of the threads sets a video in motion. There are eighteen videos, audiovisual testimonials from Cristina documenting her self-reflective approach to having cancer. The testimonials are short—fifteen to eighty seconds each—showing Cristina in different settings, offering fragmented memories of the past.

The connection between binary code and image sensor is an intentionally delicate one. If the thread is not pulled carefully enough, the image gets stuck or might not play at all; if the thread is pulled too slowly, the video only moves frame by frame or in slow motion.

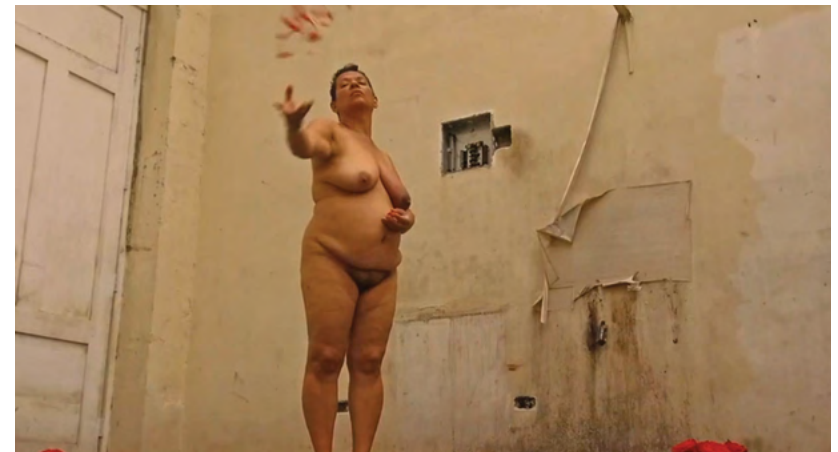
Chronology collapses into a scatter of moments: hair loss, biopsy, wig, radiotherapy, feeling a lump, hair growth, healing, biopsy—progress turns into regress and vice versa—*doing and undoing*. Randomly pulling thread after thread entangles the viewer with Cristina's personal journey and with shared memories. What begins as an intimate moment between mother and daughter turns into a connective tissue, a place for compassion, grief, and healing.

When I was twelve my father was diagnosed with skin cancer. I remember the night he came home, in pain, because something had struck his thumb. His thumb never fully recovered; there were months of bruising and inflammation



until doctors finally discovered that the impact had hit a hidden basal cell carcinoma. His thumb was amputated. I remember the first time I saw his hand. Touched it. I watched, as he learned how to hold a pen, how to write, how to button his own shirt. Seven years after the diagnosis, they declared him cancer-free. I remember how I told Alexandra that I had healed from this experience. But when I encountered her exhibition, I realized that bodies might heal, but they don't really forget. So, I found it emblematic that when I stood up and left her work, the threads were already tangled around my feet, causing me to drag the threads with me across the room.

Carla Gabrí is a visual artist and film scholar, with a special interest in trans-disciplinary research.



VEN ACÁ

SINARA ROZO-PERDOMO | 2018–2020, COLLABORATION WITH JORGE LOZANO

More than four million Venezuelans have left the country to date—the biggest mass displacement since the Syrian war—and 168,000 of them have found new homes in Colombia. Leaving Venezuela was not a choice for thousands of young Venezuelans—hunger, lack of medicine, political persecution, and the urgency to support their at-risk families drove them away from their homes and forced them to put their future on hold.

Addressing this crisis from an interdisciplinary perspective, the exhibition *Ven Acá* by Alexandra Gelis and Jorge Lozano took place in Bucaramanga, a city near the border of Colombia and Venezuela. Migrant journeys begin in Cúcuta in hopes of reaching Bucaramanga, then migrants are faced with the choice of staying or moving on to Ecuador or Peru. The stretch of road leading to the city is particularly tough, as it crosses an inclement tundra at nearly 3,500 metres above sea level. Many have died of hypothermia crossing the highlands. Venezuelan migrants call themselves *caminantes*, which loosely translates as “walkers” or “wayfarers.” The only truth their heart knows is that they can’t keep putting their children to sleep on an empty stomach. And so they walk . . .

Ven Acá is a multidisciplinary, participatory research and creation project. The artists used an empty store in the city centre of Bucaramanga to display printed pieces, interviews and interventions (actions), video performances and photo books. The exhibition utilized video dialogues with ten women from Venezuela,

whose stories and interventions are a direct representation of the political and humanitarian crisis. Gelis and Lozano followed these women and recorded conversations in the intimacy of their hotel rooms, their workplaces, and the streets. *Ven Acá* originates as a word game (play) between *Venecá* (a discriminatory name for Venezuelans) and *ven acá*, or “come closer,” inviting the audience to get closer to the stories and realities of the ten women.

Ven Acá became a public intervention through moving images, testimonies, and performance, allowing gatherings to rethink local conflicts caused by the Venezuelan exodus. It created a space to converse and to negotiate new imaginaries that questioned dynamics of abuse and discrimination against Venezuelan immigrants. It also proposed artistic strategies that transformed the function of art and its exhibition spaces to reframe these conflicts.

Sinara Rozo-Perdomo is the co-founder and director of aluCine Latin Film & Media Arts Festival.



VEN ACÁ

JORGE LOZANO | 2018–2020, COLLABORATION WITH JORGE LOZANO

Venezuela's economic collapse, beginning in June 2010, resulted in an unprecedented mass migration. Four million people left, many on foot, walking into Colombia on their way to rumoured work in Peru or Chile. We were in Bucaramanga, Colombia, home to many of those displaced by political violence; we were working on a project that collapsed because the sponsor was afraid for our safety. We proposed instead to work with the hundreds of Venezuelans that locals felt had arrived as an invasion. They were sleeping in the parks, selling candies or coffee on the street to survive. As a Venezuelan, Alexandra also felt that discrimination; at times she was treated as a prostitute.

We met ten women who became close to us. We shared our stories, and asked if they would work with us, to tell us about their lives and families and travels for a ten-monitor installation. One of the women had become a sex worker in Colombia in order to support her children. She used to work in another city, Cúcuta. The paramilitary thought that her friend, one of the prostitutes, had passed on a sexual disease, so they gathered up all the other sex workers and executed her in front of them. This woman gave us a videotape of that killing. She left Cúcuta, but it was hard to make a living.

Through our sponsor we ensured that the women were well paid. We rented a house and put up the monitors, then invited the women to manage the gallery and act as docents, talking to people about the show, about video installation, and about



their experiences. We wanted to bring the subalterns, people who never had access to galleries, to be the managers of the space, and to speak about their own lives.

The gallery became a hub as the women did workshops, sometimes with children. The house was in front of a park, and in the park there were a lot of Venezuelan migrants, so there was a deep connection with the street. At night we projected images of migrant Venezuelans walking with their children, with their few possessions, sometimes without shoes, for twenty hours through a high mountain where the temperature is ten below zero. So many died on that walk.

When people came into the gallery we gave them a Venezuelan bolívar, which had become nearly worthless. We asked them to write comments about what they felt about the show on the bills, then we installed those bills in the window of the gallery. Sometimes people came to the gallery just to read the messages—like a Chinese wall where people would read personal news. It provoked a lot of discussions. Our space was always full of people. Venezuelans would come in to see other Venezuelans, sharing information about what they had gone through, how creative they were about surviving. They were questioning the racism of the Colombian system, and the injustice of their own government.

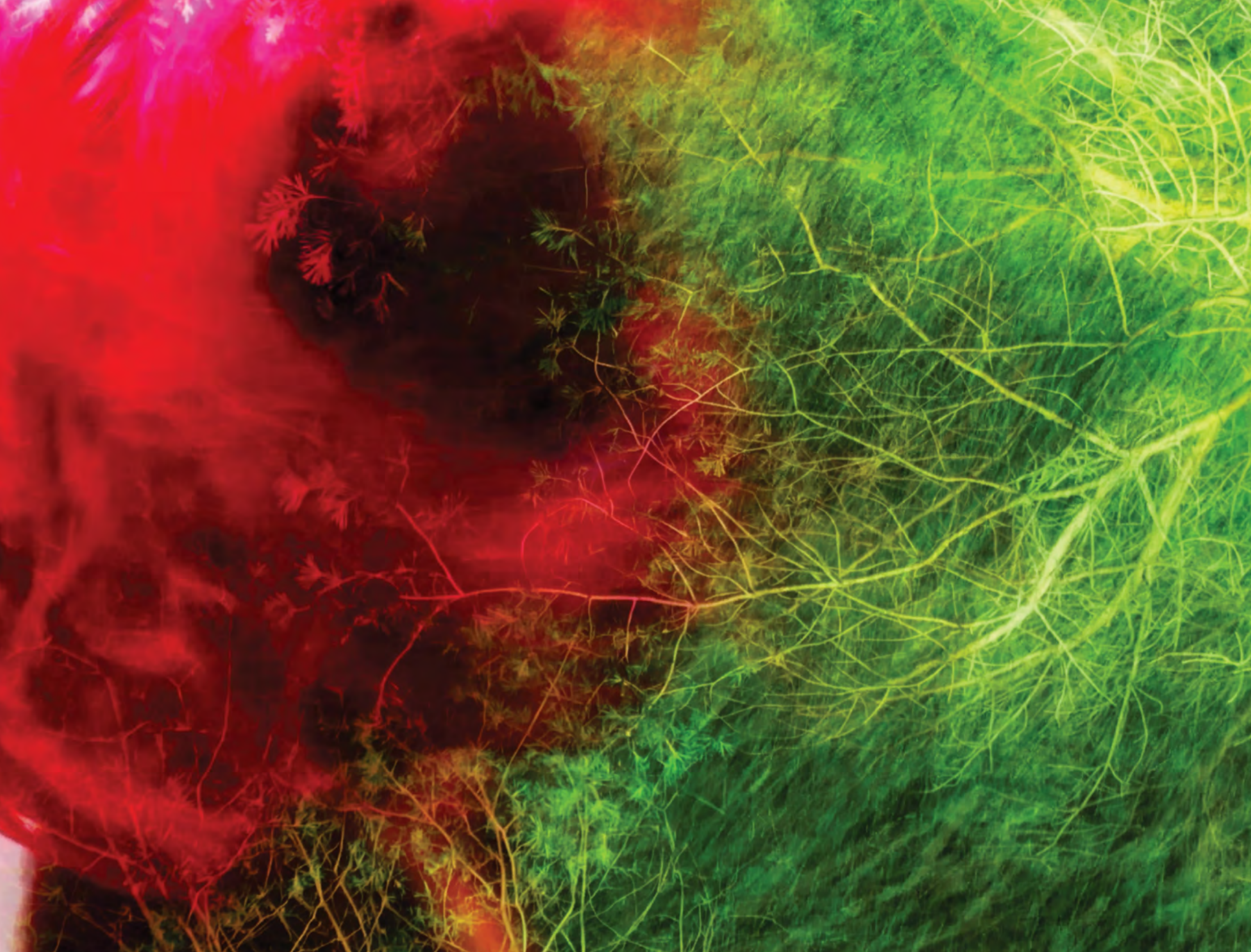
Ven acá means “come here,” but the two words together became a phrase that Colombians pejoratively name Venezuelan women: *Venacá*. Lesser people.

The videos are made out of interviews, images of these women in the streets, and shots of what they had come through to get to Bucaramanga. Alexandra and I retraced their steps back to the frontier, then we visited all the safe places along the road where they walked. We met new travellers, and told them where they could go to find refuge. We connected with lots of people who became friends. It's not just about making work—it's about how we live with one another. These people become family; Alexandra stays in contact with them, and helps them economically when she can, though they never ask for money.

When Colombians came to the installation they cried; they didn't know this was happening. They thought they had been invaded, and now they felt terrible about their racism. The installation was really powerful; it changed the perception of people. So many things happened, every day was an event. It was the creation of a new community.













CONVERSATIONS



ALEX'S LEGACY IN THE LEGACIES PROJECT

DEBORAH BARNDT | 2015-2021

A drone camera floats above Turtle Island [North America]. Flashes of hot pink are sighted over a cornfield in rural Ontario, a meadow of goats in the Gaspé region of Québec, a Haudenosaunee longhouse at Six Nations in Ontario, an urban forest farm in Toronto, a community garden in Guadalajara, a *milpa* in Michoacán or the Yucatán states of Mexico.

The pink hair is the dead giveaway, so we know that Alex Gelis must be working her magic down on the ground. But a telephoto lens or maybe even an Osmo camera is needed to zoom in on Alex in action, as she creates an intimacy with people, plants, and animals alike.

When I began to work with Alex and her doctoral program at York University, I realized she was the perfect partner for an intergenerational and intercultural exchange around food sovereignty that became the Earth to Tables Legacies project. In 2020, we launched our multimedia educational website: earthtotables.org, with Alex as co-director for ten videos and eleven photo essays.

We describe our methodology, our way of working, as “pollinating relationships,” and Alex is a pollinator par excellence. Her capacity to connect immediately with Legacies collaborators and to gain their trust has been critical to our project, as she opens up deep conversations on important and complex issues. Here are a few snapshots:

PHOTO #1: MUSKOKA, ONTARIO.



From their first contact in 2015, Alex shared with Dianne the special communion they both feel with plants. When Alex’s mother was in treatment for cancer in Panama, Dianne offered her chaga mushrooms from the farm.

PHOTO #2: MICHOACÁN, MEXICO.



We're crowded into the back seat, riding back from a day of filming Isidro in the *milpa* [cornfield]. Alex puts the camera in Isidro's hands and shows him how to frame the landscape we are whizzing by. Mentoring him as well as many other young people to become documenters of their own lives.

PHOTO #5: MAKING VIDEOS.



The true embodiment of our intergenerational and intercultural relationship, Alex the artist/teacher shows me again and again how to frame images and capture sound, download and organize footage, plan and edit videos, create hyperlinks, upload images to the website, etc. She has been my patient and generous mentor in all aspects of our project—from the technical to the aesthetic, from the personal to the political.

PHOTO #3: GASPÉ, QUÉBEC.



Determined to get a good shot of Adam milking the goat in a dark barn, Alex awakes at five A.M. for two days in a row to shoot and reshoot ... the perfectionist at work! Later she captures the intimacy of Anna with her daughter Katherine holding a baby rabbit. The intimacy and tenderness is vintage Alex.

We keep learning and laughing and loving. All central to Alex's special way of working.

PHOTO #4: SIX NATIONS, ONTARIO.



While filming Chandra explaining the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address, Alex hears the drumming and singing of an original song in Mohawk emanating from the bedroom of Chandra's daughters. Grabbing the moment, she invites them to be filmed, providing the music for this video.

INVISIBLE FORCES: AN INTERVIEW WITH ALEXANDRA GELIS

MIKE HOOLBOOM | JANUARY 2016

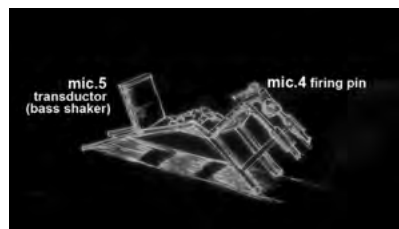
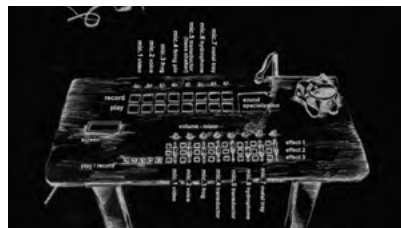
ALEXANDRA: I was born in 1975 in Caracas, Venezuela. My father is Venezuelan; his family came from Catalonia and Cuba. My mother is Colombian, from Cartagena, a modern port city on Colombia's Caribbean coast. My mother's father, my grandfather, was a famous sculptor who travelled to different countries making huge monuments. During Venezuela's oil boom in the 70s, he moved his family there to make art. I was conceived in a black and white darkroom lab. After that I had no more options—I had to be a photographer. *[laughs]*

My parents loved photography; it was common to have labs at home, in the bathroom. They also shot a lot of super 8 that I'm trying to recover. The first film memory I have is a super 8 screening in our living room that showed the wedding of my parents at the sacred mountain of Sorte, also called "María Lionza's mountain." María Lionza is a mixed Indian and white "unofficial Catholic saint" with a great following in Venezuela and South America; she is also Mother Nature, and is called "Queen of the Three Powers." My parents had already exchanged vows at a civil ceremony but my grandmother was into spiritism (a mix of Black, white, and Indian traditions), so they made a new ceremony in this sacred mountain.

I come from a family of artists; either they're visual artists or they worked in radio. My grandfather was one of the founders of the art school in Cartagena (where I'm really from). I used to go there as a kid, always encouraged to draw and paint.

MIKE: Did you imagine you might be an artist when you were older?

ALEXANDRA: I was scared to be an artist because I came from a family of well-known artists. It was a trauma for me. *[laughs]* I was more into photography. I've



had a camera since I was three years old. My first photos are amazing, because I was so little and everyone looked huge.

We moved from Caracas to Puerto Rico because my grandfather was invited to do architectural restorations in the old churches of the colonial section, which are very similar to the ones in Cartagena. I'm always moving. This is something that is part of my life and work. My parents separated when I was five; my father moved to Venezuela and I moved to Cartagena (Colombia) with my mother. When I was eight I started flying between the two countries by myself. Perhaps it's no wonder that today I'm researching migrating plants.

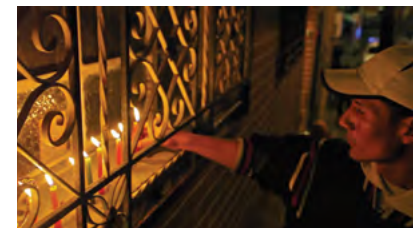
I went to high school in Cartagena and later on in Bogotá, the capital of Colombia. The school was split between lawyers and artists, so I went back into the darkroom at thirteen years old. I had outstanding professors in that school (Abdu Eljaiek and his son Esteban). Then I did a Bachelor of Visual Arts in the Jorge Tadeo Lozano University in Bogotá. My practice was a mix of photography, sculpture, and installation (very similar to what I am doing nowadays, using multiple sound channels and visual layers).

MIKE: What kinds of pictures were you making?

ALEXANDRA: Mostly portraits of people close to me. I travel a lot, but I'm very respectful with my camera. I turn on my camera if I have a relationship with the person. I learned when to turn the camera off and on; this is something I deal with all the time.

I was always aware of the camera and the respect required to find a good frame. But I'm more aware of these questions in Canada. Here I'm always asked, Why are you making pictures of these people? When I go to a community I usually get asked to make pictures for them. If I travel somewhere and develop a strong relationship, I always make a meaningful portrait for the family. I've done this since I was a kid. I give a special portrait to people who open their houses to me.

During my last two years of art school I started working for a program at the Bogotá Museum of Modern Art. We had a study group that gave workshops mainly to street people living near the museum. This was during the 90s when the guerrilla movements and paramilitary groups were very strong. We also travelled a lot to small towns doing exhibitions, showing films, and giving workshops.



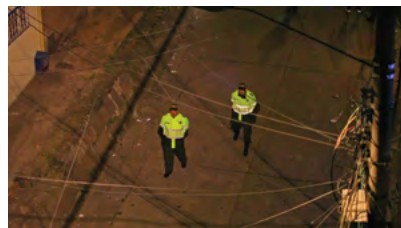
Here is a memory. We were in a plaza on a Sunday afternoon with two hundred people. We were in five groups working with kids and elders, all painting. Either the guerrillas or the paramilitary forces used to control those little towns but we couldn't talk about them—they were an invisible force that was always present. Their eyes were on top of us. That experience helped me to read invisible forces and navigate extreme situations. I love to go into communities that have emerged out of violence, or work with street kids and gangs. There's a big need for these communities to talk, to have an open space to express what is happening inside.

MIKE: Were you sympathetic with either the guerrillas or the paramilitary troops?

ALEXANDRA: No, but I have had many experiences travelling through the country and meeting those people. I had direct encounters with the troops, but above all with the victims of these groups. Through my fieldwork in communities I have been able to hear the experiences of victims. I have encountered dozens of stories associated with pain and the loss of loved ones and their land. I'm not looking for these testimonies, but they are all over the country.

For example, in my most recent research on "migrated plants" in San Basilio de Palenque I was interviewing a mat weaver, a person knowledgeable about medicinal plants and the area's vegetation. In the middle of the interview he began to tell us that he was displaced by violence fifteen years ago. The history of this displacement is a unique case, because many people continued to maintain their crops in their birthplace (La Bonga), even though they now live a few hours away. Paola Camargo, an art historian who is writing about this work, called this "the uprooting root." The roots of the crops are cared for and remain in the same place, while the life of the community is developed elsewhere. There are thousands of stories like this in Colombia. After Syria, we have the largest population of internally displaced people.

I have problems because I don't look completely Colombian (whatever that means), and I've had pink hair for more than twenty years now. They always ask if I'm German because I'm tall and have light skin. If you're German you must have money and that makes you a target. Kidnapping used to be very common. So I have to say, No, I'm from Cartagena. I don't have much of a Cartagenian accent



because I worked with my mom doing radio. I am a friendly person and in scary situations like the one mentioned above I feel my smile saved my life.

MIKE: You said earlier that you felt comfortable being in places that had known violence. Why do you feel at home there?

ALEXANDRA: This is something I ask myself a lot. I'm coming from a special moment in Colombian history because during the 90s the country was gripped by the narco wars. It was a war between the drug cartels and the United States who were looking for a way into South America. The U.S. remapped the country militarily and used the excuse that they were trying to control the drug market. This was called Plan Colombia. But the reality was that they were killing anti-government opposition members, bombing guerrilla armies, fumigating our jungles with glyphosate, and burning down farms they suspected of growing marijuana or coca. They supported the paramilitary who went to small towns to massacre people, "cleaning" a countryside rich in natural resources so that multinational companies could come and exploit our mining resources. In return the drug cartel declared war on the government: bombing police stations, hotels, markets, planes, buses, etc. Millions were internally displaced and thousands more were "disappeared," mostly working class people, the Afro-Colombian population, First Nations, human rights activists, journalists, you name it! Madness run amok.

MIKE: Were the guerrillas a left-wing opposition?

ALEXANDRA: At the beginning they were left, but by this point their aims were about power and money. Both government officials and guerrillas were involved in the drug trade. It is a very complex situation to properly explain here. The United States Army and multinational companies were also involved. There is a similar situation happening now in Mexico. Plan Colombia was an important test case for the U.S. in how to control and exploit resources.

MIKE: Were American troops directly involved?



ALEXANDRA: There has always been U.S. military involvement in Colombia. You often saw troops. I remember one military base close to Cali that caused a great scandal. Using the excuse of creating a school for poor kids they built a military base instead. That was the area where I had one of my worst encounters with armed men.

I was in Juanchaco with my friend Adriana, travelling with my camera, taking photographs. The tides in the Pacific rise twice a day, in an area that stretches nearly two kilometres, and we lost track of time and became trapped on the jungle side of the beach. The only way back was through the jungle because the beach was under water. When we walked into the dense forest we were met by four men in military uniforms with no markings. After looking at us they told me, "Oh, you're German and have a camera. Are you a journalist?" Journalists could send messages out of the country so they were routinely kidnapped. These men could have been guerrillas. I said, "No, I'm from here," smiling and smiling. They said, "Why are you walking here, you're crazy, this is a dangerous area." We had no boots because we were just spending a day at the beach. In the end they gave us their boots, and after a very long conversation they led our way out of the jungle.

Murder and kidnapping were so common at that time. Why was I drawn to those situations? During the 90s I was in Bogotá when many drug lords were charged and extradited to the U.S. It was common to find out that someone from the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) had married a Colombian in order to learn where the drug dealers were. Double agents were everywhere. The drug cartels fought back and were also fighting with each other. The Colombian coke mafia declared war on the U.S. by bombing police stations, government buildings, and their own enemies, all in the main cities in Colombia. They were multi-billionaires with armies at their disposal, they had everything. They would pay a million pesos to kill a policeman in their war against the state. The 90s was a moment of bombs; I have lots of memories of leaving school and having a bomb exploding behind me.

MIKE: Did you see the pictures you were making in relation to these political struggles?



ALEXANDRA: We were a population born into war. Even if you were against violence, the violence was always there. My portraits were about people and friends and communities that were learning how to live again.

In 2012 Jorge Lozano and I went together to Rincon Del Mar, a small town controlled by the paramilitary for many years. Before when I travelled in that area, all their stories were about magical encounters, the power of devils and ghosts, fantastic tales of animals and plants. Now that we've gone back everything has changed: People are speaking about their traumatic experiences because they have a need to talk about it. They want to understand what happened. We were approached by a woman who wanted us to record her denunciation of her two brothers' assassination by the paramilitary. It was an unplanned situation, and her courageous narrative became the basis for our video *D-Enunciation*.

I started making video when I was at the art school in Bogotá. My first videos were shot on Super VHS and edited with two VHS decks. I made three short pieces in the school, including a video of the first pride parade in Colombia in 1996. I knew many people in the march, a small gathering in the main streets in Bogotá, controlled by a lot of police. My studio was in the red area, the dangerous zone of downtown Bogotá. I shared a studio with two of my school friends in a neighbourhood filled with prostitutes, trans people, and drag queens who had become sex workers. We all met there.

When I finished art school I was twenty years old and decided to move to Venezuela. I was working with installation and photography but the only thing I took was my camera. I did many workshops in museums but I didn't like Venezuela. I can't say it was an empty place, but I had come from a very intense political moment in Colombia, and it was difficult for me to connect with people, so I created a second world on the web. I married a musician and computer programmer and we ran a web design company. After my camera was stolen, I just made work online, even taking photographs of virtual post-punk worlds. We created a community between Spain, Venezuela, and Argentina, hacking things together and teaching each other how to create the web.

In 1999 Hugo Chávez came into power in Venezuela and for a year I was hired to take official photos of him and his campaign. Venezuela was a country where no one talked about politics. But from then on, politics became the main



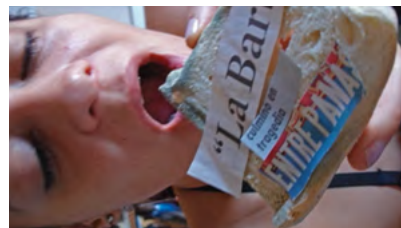
point of every conversation. Before Chávez Venezuela had too much money, and it all came from oil. The money stayed with the oligarchs, the top families. The country had an unreal economy, because apart from oil, they didn't produce anything. And the exchange rate was artificially high—one American dollar was the equivalent of two bolívares. When Chávez was elected he changed all that, though the big families didn't like it, and the conflict started. I was in Venezuela during the first five years of Chávez, before the second elections. I worked on art/social programs for elders and kids. When the second campaign began he destroyed all those programs because he needed money.

What an intensive life Chávez had! He worked all the time and never slept. It was the best moment of the country, when the majority had a voice. Later everything changed, and the hate movement began, the main families were against him as well as the Americans and that mattered a lot. When workers at the big oil company PDVSA went on strike, the U.S. parked a ship near their offices and deleted all the company's computer systems. Oil production stopped for a month. Chávez invited open-source programmers from around the world who came and reprogrammed everything. Open-source computers became very important for the country; the country really supported this movement after that.

One day in 2005 I was watching music videos on TV and they ran a commercial for a video art workshop by a Colombian (Jorge Lozano!). I hadn't made a video in so long and felt trapped in this weird country, so I wanted to go. At the next aluCine Festival (dedicated to Latino-Canadian media artists) a video of mine was selected. I came to Toronto for the first time in May 2006 and never went back.

I fell in love with the bikes in Toronto and the feeling of security. I came from Venezuela where there are so many gangs and arms. Simón Bolívar used to say, "Venezuela is my army and Colombia is my university." It's exactly like that. I was coming from Chávez and social troubles and gangs, but here I can walk through the streets until three in the morning and nobody's going to touch my bum or yell at me. It feels safe. I was able to breathe. Coming here gave me the space to go back to my art, to memories and experiences I had in my life, to open my backpack and see what was there.

MIKE: Can you talk about your beautiful short movie *Borders*?



ALEXANDRA: I moved into "womansion," a wonderful house of powerful queer women. I was lucky to spend the first years of my life in Canada living in this house. All of us were into art and activism, performance, and music. The queer movement. This entry point allowed me to understand the power of women here. I was coming from a different perspective of what it meant to be a woman. Many see the macho presence in South America as the one always in control, but the reality is that women can also take control, but we fight in different ways with very unusual and creative strategies.

The group of women I lived with were fighting from a performance, from a video, from a music perspective. Many were attending the Ontario College of Art and Design. My movie is a portrait of six of them who self-identified as women. I invited them to my room with white walls to take photographs of their skin borders. I felt we were living in the borders between genders; we didn't want to be enclosed on one side or the other. I made more than five hundred photographs for each of them; the entire video is made out of these pictures. The photographs show the edges of their bodies and the marks they have, their tattoos and scars from accidents and operations. At the same time I was having a conversation with them—what does it mean to be a woman here? I asked them to talk about their life through their body, and through the marks they revealed.

Borders shows a grid of these powerful women, mixing bodies and stories. The sound in the video comes from the spaces in our conversation. The moments when you are connected directly to the unconscious, when the unconscious speaks. So for example: ah, em, uh, hmm . . . this is the sound of *Borders*. In the single-screen version you see just the grid, and the sound between the words. In the installation version, I have six audio players carrying the stories of the individuals.

MIKE: Have one of the six subjects gender transitioned since you photographed them?

ALEXANDRA: Oh yes, two of them have transitioned, including my dearest friend and sister/brother Joce Tremblay. The twins Joce and Natalyn Tremblay were my family; I used to go to their family farm. I can say that spending time with their family was a truly Canadian experience.



MIKE: **Much of your current work is located in Panama.**

ALEXANDRA: When I moved to Venezuela my family moved to Panama. The Panamanian government had invited my grandfather to organize an art school. And my family was having problems in Colombia. My grandfather's car was sabotaged and he was almost killed. If you were well known or had money you could be kidnapped. They were afraid so they moved into the Panama Canal Zone, a military space that was given back to Panama on December 31, 1999. It had been the biggest American military base in the world.

My family moved back to Panama and saw well-maintained spaces, huge houses, a beautiful land full of animals that had been well taken care of. They wondered, Why don't Panamanians live here? Years later I came to Panama after receiving an invitation from the United Nations to give a video workshop about environmental protection. The UN expected the workshops to produce a series of videos about the land, water usage, and scarcities, but instead all the videos were about political and social issues. This is what the youth were thinking about, this is the need they had, and I wasn't going to censor them. The UN said it was OK, that they were open to continuing. Through this work I became connected to the people in Panama. In 1989 the U.S. invaded and many military weapons came into the hands of gangs in the country. Panama City is still full of guns and groups of youth fighting each other. In the 90s there were fires across the country that destroyed many poor towns and these populations were moved into the old colonial houses in downtown Panama City. The rich owners moved to different areas of the country. In these houses it was common to find ten families living together, and downtown became increasingly dangerous. Then the rich wanted to return to their newly designated heritage zones and those families were evicted. In 2007 the local government invited me to do a workshop in this area, and many of the video portraits I've made are part of this neighbourhood.

Whatever work people make in the workshop belongs to them, I never include their work in mine. Together with Jorge Lozano, we've helped to produce many of their videos. And of course our work is influenced by these encounters. We were working near the Panama Canal, surrounded by hundreds of passing ships, but the workshop participants never spoke about them. There was also a lot of *paja canalera* (elephant grass), a plant that appeared to be wearing a military



uniform. It was an invasive species that grew everywhere, up to five metres high. I found out that it had been planted by the U.S. Army to separate areas of the Panama Canal Zone (where my family was now living) from the Panamanians, as a living barrier. You cannot cross the plants because you could be hurt; the plants cut you. The plant is native to Vietnam, and was introduced during the time of the Vietnam War in order to train American troops. One of the biggest problems they had in Vietnam was how to cross these plants. Today the plant is everywhere.

I started shooting in the School of the Americas, the military school where all the dictators of South America were trained by the U.S. Many military experiments were conducted there. After years of protests the school was relocated to U.S. soil. I went into the school and made one of my largest projects, called *Corredor: The Big Picture*.

For years I travelled through Panama, through military bases, recording the presence of *paja canalera*. I searched for archives but all of Panama's archives had been destroyed so I started making my own. I made recordings of the social tide, the marches, and the environmental movement. *Corredor* is an archive of how people resist that plant and resist power. At the last moment I found an American promotional film made in 35mm urging people to come to the School of the Americas. It said, You should be proud of being a soldier fighting for the freedom of the world. The last version is a mix of those images plus the documentary. It runs for one hour on two screens, and in the middle is a real-time projection of the Panama Canal, showing ships crossing.

MIKE: **A *casta* was a hierarchical system of race classification created by the Spanish in South and Central America during the Spanish colonial period (from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries). Does it still operate today?**

ALEXANDRA: The *casta* system tried to calculate and name degrees of whiteness. For instance, if you mix Black and white you get a *mestizo*. We are still really aware of differences of race and colour. However, it is more accurate to talk about class.

MIKE: **Are there hierarchies of beauty and power based on skin colour?**



ALEXANDRA: Completely. Even though we have very mixed populations, “white rules.” In Colombia, Venezuela, and Panama there is an enormous Black and Indigenous population, but the general feeling remains: the whiter the better. I’m the whitest in my house, in my family. It’s considered a good thing. But I wasn’t really conscious of it. If I have a child it could be Black, or it could look like a person from India. I am a mix of Spanish from my father and Indian, white, brown, and Black from my mother who actually has very distinctive Black features.

MIKE: **Does whiteness make you safer?**

ALEXANDRA: Overall I live my life without feeling insecure. I trust people and that is why I just love to work with and within communities. Without doubt, skin colour generates cautions or affinities between humans. But that is only at an initial stage. No amount of whiteness can keep you safe for long or maintain systemic privileges. I usually do not work with white communities. Instead, I work within communities that have lived and suffered the presence of white people in their territories. In that case, rather than making me feel safe, the colour of my skin could act against me. However, after arriving in a community, things do not depend only on your skin colour; they depend on who you are and what your work ethics are. Communities have also learned to be more cautious about associating colour and identity.

Moreover, there are prejudices associated not only with the idea of race, but also with gender. Being a woman creates a safer space for me. To be a woman with a smile. When I am in Panama or in other communities I become someone who may represent any of the female archetypes: the protector, the mother, the best friend, the wife, the bride. I’m a strong woman who works with them one by one, and gets into risky situations, but at the same time I can look and be very feminine.

How do I challenge traditional masculinity? When I lead the workshops I’m always in high heels and a dress that I design myself. In the most dangerous places I appear super-femme. That’s how I play with those roles.

LIST OF WORKS

- 2006 *28 de Noviembre*, 2:52 minutes, video
- 2008 *TO superpose TO control*, 4:45 minutes, video animation with large photograph
- 2009 *English for Beginners*, 2:30 minutes, video
- 2009 *Bordes / Borders*, 3:13 minutes, single-channel video installation
- 2010 *One Dollar Click*, 2:19 minutes, video
- 2010 *Intersecting Fields*, two-channel video installation, five-channel video installation
- 2010 *La Casa de Olga / The House of Olga*, 12 minutes, video
- 2010 *Conchitas / Conches*, 6 minutes, video (made with Jorge Lozano)
- 2010 *San Rafael*, 4:27 minutes, video
- 2010 *La Casa de María / The House of María*, 12 minutes, video
- 2011 *Bridge of the Americas*, 2:08 minutes, video
- 2011 *Casiteros*, 3 minutes, super 8 projection and two-screen installation
- 2011 *Raspao / Snow Cone*, multiple components and electronics, manned vehicle that captures and broadcasts video and sound recordings
- 2011 *Corredor*, six-channel video installation
- 2011 *MATE V.01 a conversation with Roberto*, interactive sound performance for electronics that captures, processes, and amplifies sound data in maté drinking ritual
- 2012 *Cooling Reactors*, 1:47 minutes, video (made with soJin Chun)
- 2012 *MATE V.02*, interactive sound performance for electronics
- 2012 *Raspao / Snow Cone*, mobile sound sculpture with electronics
- 2012 *Autorganizaciones: 24h informal economy news*, collaborative web-based video documentary, autorganizaciones.com
- 2012 *Afectos Descentrados*, sound sculpture with electronics
- 2013 *Cosiendo el Bosque / Sewing the Woods*, video and sound sculpture with electronics mounted in a sewing box
- 2013 *Corredor*, live performance with two-screen video and live sound
- 2013 *Corredor: The Big Picture*, four-screen video installation with eight-channel sound
- 2013 *Muebles sonoros + Los Personidos*, video and sound sculpture with electronics and hip hop (made with youth from the neighbourhood of La Perseverancia in Bogotá, Colombia)

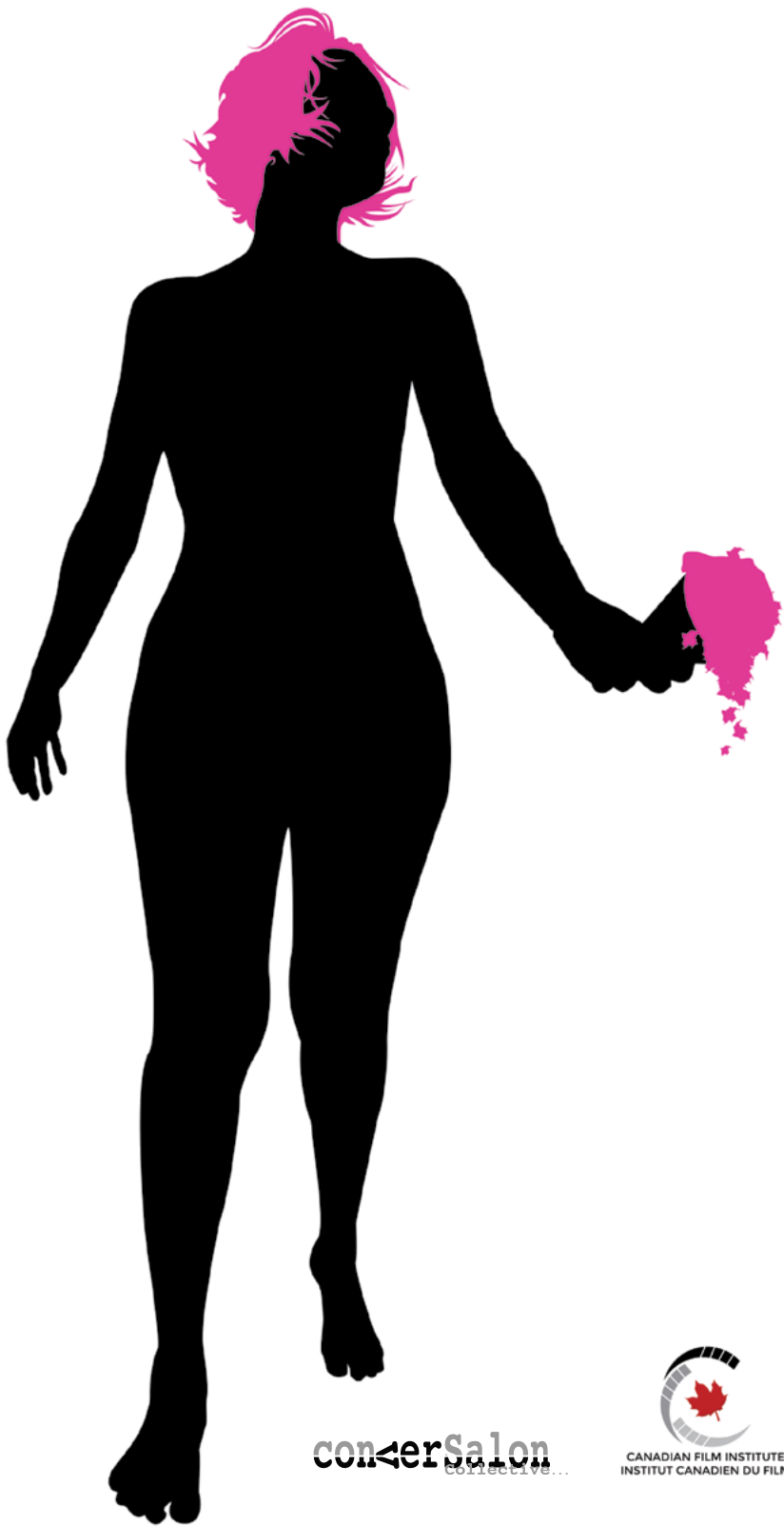
- 2014 *Rayado en Queer*, 1:51 minutes, video
- 2014 *Babareque / Adobe*, interactive video and sound sculpture with electronics
- 2014 *Rhizomatic Directed Simulation*, 6 minutes, super 8
- 2014 *Weeds / Mala Hierba*, immersive six-channel audio with plants and braided hair installation
- 2015 *Camaras encendidas en la Perseverancia*, video (made with youth from the Perseverancia neighbourhood in Bogotá: William Aponte, Germán Aponte, Carolina Aponte, and Henry Salazar)
- 2015 *Axion*, 4:13 minutes, video
- 2015 *Kuenta*, 19:15 minutes, video (made with Jorge Lozano)
- 2015 *Synthetic Feathers*, 3:53 minutes, video
- 2015 *D-Enunciación*, 18:30 minutes, video (made with Jorge Lozano)
- 2015 *Walking in Circles*, 3:54 minutes, hand-processed super 8
- 2015 *Estera / Mat*, 3:40 minutes, two-screen super 8 projection
- 2016 *Estera / Mat*, online interactive documentary, estera.migratedplants.com
- 2016 *CERCA-VIVA*, video installation
- 2016-ONGOING
Cacao: A Venezuelan Lament, multi-channel video and sound installation (made with dancer/choreographer Victoria Mata)
- 2017 *How to Make a Beach*, 4:13 minutes, video (made with Jorge Lozano)
- 2018 *PRIDE Colombia 1987–Toronto 2017*, video and photo installation
- 2018 *Raíces Fúlcreas / Prop Roots*, 4:38 minutes, super 8 two-screen projection
- 2019 *Thoughts from Below*, 23 minutes, hand-processed 16mm (made with Jorge Lozano)
- 2019 *The Island*, 6:09 minutes, super 8
- 2019 *Radiotherapy*, 1:04 minutes, super 8
- 2018-ONGOING
Doing and Undoing: poems from within, interactive, multi-channel film, video, and sound installation
- 2018-2020
Ven Acá, multi-channel video installation (made with Jorge Lozano)
- 2020 *Entradas y Salidas / Exits and Entries*, 10:30 minutes, 16mm
- 2020 *Salida Nacional: Corte de Pelo*, 3 minutes, 16mm
- 2020 *Alerta. Alerta. Alerta.*, 2:10 minutes, video
- 2020 *Keeping it Distant from Up Close: How to See Cancer*, 16:37 minutes, video (made with Carla Gabri [credited as Carla Gabriela Engler])
- 2021 *Drift in*, 5:33 minutes, hand-processed 16mm (made with Jorge Lozano)











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