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Going backward is also going forward, but be careful what you imagine.

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When I woke up it was already late. Late to continue sleeping, late to wake up, it was still night and I had not looked at the clock or the calendar. I had no concept of time, maybe for a second or an hour. It had been a long time I guess, and I had stopped dreaming. It seems I had also left my imagination in the dream, as there was no more fantasy but only the reality of waking up again at night, waking up when everyone else was asleep. At night everything is heard louder and the silence deafens my panic of a desolate place. I tried to remember where I was, what I was dreaming and limited myself to just that; remembering. Remembering as the only real tool to visualize my memory, the only thing that allowed my body to go back in time. Until now I was confused, I was confused if maybe I was still dreaming, dreaming pure reality. As I walked through my room and the apartment, everything was the same, everything smelled the same, everything looked the same. I tried to start my own day without waking anyone up, walking softly without putting so much weight in my step, doing the same things I would do during the day. My awareness was pulling me further and further away from the imagination of the absent sleep, as I became aware of my body. I was searching in my own limits and blockages for a body that claimed territory of consciousness, of emotional decolonization, to recognize the nature of my own *becoming*<sup>1</sup>, far from an imagined self.

To be aware of the imagination is to be aware of one's own body. This requires a self-observation, which is not specific as to where it will lead. But it must be initiated from a thought process, in which one faces the vertigo of doubt, because the fear of failure is the fear of getting lost. It is to abandon the safe place, which is ambiguously located on imaginary lines that draw limits or borders. We live in a constant claim of sense and rational logic, established by a social agreement of sense in order to coexist and communicate with each other, so as not to get lost. Perhaps it is easier to get confused, as in the transition that can occur in a process of adaptation and acclimatization of a living being, in which the vulnerability of a body is not weakness but rather the search for its strength, not to succeed but in order to stay alive. There is a prevention when talking about weakness, we prefer to talk about success and victory. It is in this positivism that I find the danger of an optimistic society, which imagines fantasies to consume imaginaries. It is from here that I have decided to question everything, from myself to imagination, to ask myself about what I imagine and how I have been influenced by a collective imaginary. So, I propose to question myself, in order not to continue repeating myself unconsciously.

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<sup>1</sup> Deleuze, G and Guattari, F (1987) p. 259. «A *becoming* is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation or, at the limit, an identification. All structuralist criticism of the series seems irrefutable. To become is not to progress or regress along a series. Above all, becoming does not occur in the imagination, even when the imagination reaches the highest cosmic or dynamic level, as in Jung or Bachelard. Becoming-animals are not dreams or fantasies. They are perfectly real. But what reality is here?»

I had not been aware that a decade ago, I had distanced myself from me. I was hiding from myself behind projects that seemed to be taken out of a recipe book to make art, pretending to be original. I thought that because I found so much similarity with what I was doing, and what others closer and contemporary to me had done before, where the political aspects in relation to violence and nature was where we had our opinion. It is clear that we shared similar socio-cultural circumstances. With those more distant in history and territory, I identified myself, because I could recognize myself in their ideas. And I, in that distance, wanted to understand and try to decipher their ideas, I felt a bond with them. However, I was also unaware of the variants of life and cultural contexts, which dangerously created a gap, rather than a proximity. Many of them were American artists, French, Spanish, English, German, and what a peculiarity, all from colonizing countries. Later I was able to see some of their known works outside the books, where they in the end ended up as a tourist attraction in a museum. What a disappointment, to see them end up in banal and massive contemplation. And everything that excited me in books or on the computer screen, ended up there in museums safeguarding entertainment as treasures in the mercantilism of art. I think that's why now I always like to wait for the buzz to pass, because then things make more sense. They stop being simple answers of the moment and stand firm because of the solidity of their own time.

So, without realizing it I was escaping from myself trying to make art like what I saw in books, videos, and art classes, influenced and accepting to answer the question, "What are your influences?". As I saw their lives and works, more and more I felt that there was not much in mine, and I rejected myself, something the fierce classism in Colombia made even easier. While I was learning from them, I was inventing another me, searching outside myself, like an expeditionary or pretentious adventurer, digging in old library archives, lifting stones to find some secret. I was interested in establishing crossovers between art, anthropology, and nature, and I investigated the links between material culture and the colonization of nature. Thus, I developed a practice in which I explored in the spaces of production and distribution of the global supply chain, the endemic relationships of minerals and plants, exoticized, industrialized and introduced in America and Europe. My goal was to point out the possible zones where the natural is confused with the artificial, analyzing in the remnants of consumption, materials and objects fallen on the ground, which are in the interstice between the new and the used.

I was saved by the works of Latin American artists and some texts by Gerardo Mosquera in "*Walking with the devil: Art, culture and internationalization*"<sup>2</sup>, because I could locate myself in my own artistic

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<sup>2</sup> Mosquera, G. (2010), pp. 149-71.

geography. A work that I also quietly remember is «*Tropical Zincphony*»<sup>3</sup>, a video by Donna Conlon. In this video a solitary mango falls and moves over an endless number of zinc tiles, then it is hit by a group of many mangoes that reiterate the noise of those tiles. While watching it I remembered some trips in some villages in Colombia, where unexpectedly something fell on the roof of where I was, and so I was scared by lemons, mangoes, oranges, tangerines or some monkeys jumping on those tiles. Also "*Natural Refuge*"<sup>4</sup>, another video by the same artist, where in a series of moments she lifts fallen objects on the ground, revealing the mystery of that diversity of invertebrate animals hidden under a piece of garbage. That for me was so close to my own landscape, that the simplicity of these videos made me feel closer to my own life, to my own games while walking, without pretending more than to reveal those common experiences of living in the tropics.



Still from video "*Tropical Zincphony*" 2013



Still from video "*Natural Refuge*" 2003

Then I left Colombia, wanting to stop making art for art's sake and to find in other possibilities the relationship between art and life. As a migrant now in Norway, from the distance I began to involve my family in the process of making a work together. With indications by WhatsApp and long phone calls, we started the production of a work, responding to an invitation I had received before leaving Colombia. The group exhibition "*Never Spoken Again: Rogue Stories of Science and Collections*" is a traveling exhibition curated by David Ayala-Alfonso. For my work for this project, called "*Sugar Crash*"<sup>5</sup>, my mom, my brother, my sister and some of my nieces and nephews helped open empty soda cans, which I had left filed in the house after collecting for several years. As a family they went to visit other relatives in other towns, looking for sugar cane to use as a mold, to shape the aluminum sheets. A cousin who lives in the sugar cane area of the country explained to us how to make a rack to load sugar cane on top of pack animals. That project moved away from the romantic idea of an artist working in his workshop and ended up in an unexpected family activity, a long-distance family expedition.

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<sup>3</sup> Conlon, D & Harker, J. (2013)

<sup>4</sup> Conlon, D & Harker, J. (2003)

<sup>5</sup> Rojas (2021)

That was my first long-distance collaborative project. The work is composed by a wooden trestle that emulated the function of a pack animal. Wooden trestle usually has the name of animals, such as donkey or goat. On top of the wooden trestle was an "angarilla", an object you put on top of the mule or horse for transporting sugar cane from the fields. We made one with wood from the guava tree, with which they make the rods that cattle ranchers use to herd cattle. On top of the "angarilla" there are hundred apparent sugar canes, made from the aluminum foil of the containers for soft drinks and energy drinks. The work traces the complex history of sugarcane and connects it to its contemporary repercussions, in which sugar returns to former colonized territories in the form of branded consumer products.



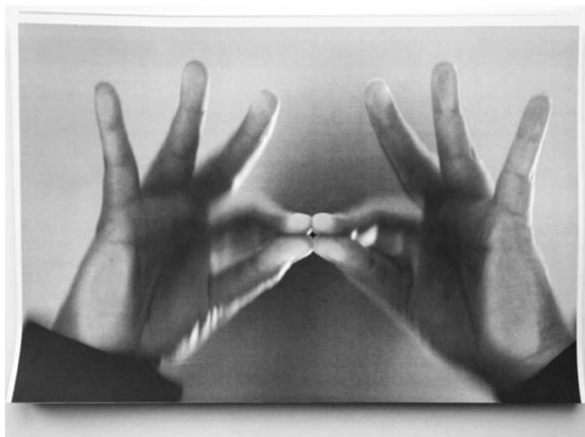
Reyes Santiago Rojas, *"Sugar Crash"* 2020

Living in the same distance, I also started to become obsessed with the idea of disappearing. The absence of a body is made evident by the imprint left by its work. In his photographic series "Towards black", Audun Sørsdal disappears. This work from 1982 problematizes the idea of painting, but for me it is more than that; it is not only limited to a pictorial, performative and photographic problem but also records the disappearance of himself in his work.



Audun Sørsdal. "Mot sort" – "Towards black". 1982

I was already disappearing from the city where I grew up. I had to manage be myself without feeling the need to reinvent myself. I made myself lighter, without so many heavy materials that demand long work processes taking up space. I began by finding in my body and my own memory the possibilities of idea and material, perhaps in the empty spaces of my own anatomical symmetry. I began to scan my hands and wrote a poem:



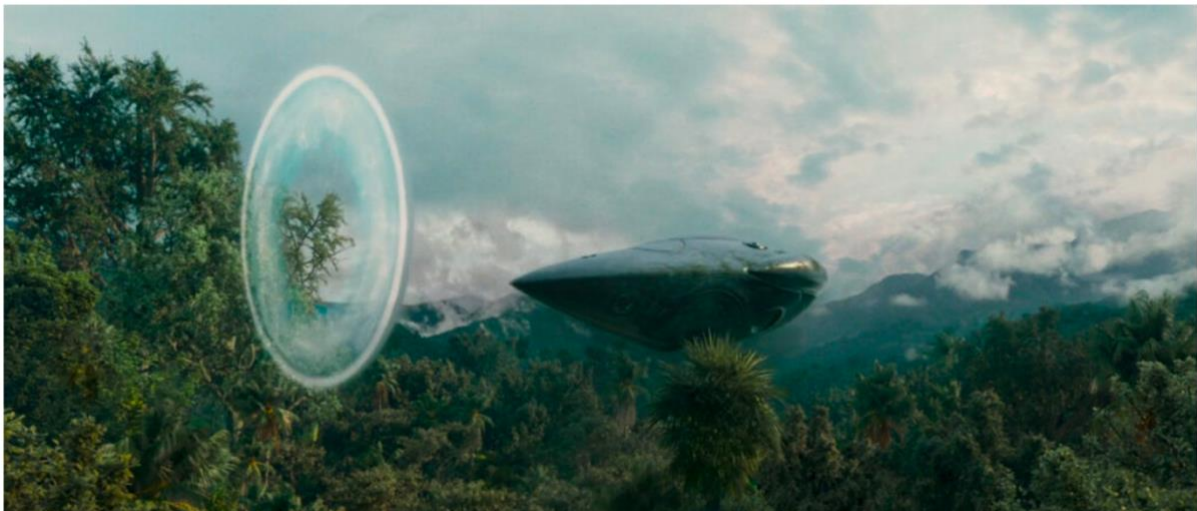
#### Search

If you want to see the stars in my hands, we need a scanner.  
I'd have to turn around and be on my back.  
We don't have eyes behind to show you what I see.  
I would have to reproduce it and still place my body on my back to scan my hands.  
Stars are only conceptual shapes with several points.  
But a star is a point, a distant point  
that by diffraction of the light and the optics of the lens the light is expanded  
Thus, we name this geometrical phenomenon  
Stars  
A star is a very distant point  
Maybe a planet, a sun, a constellation,  
or something beyond.

In a movie theater in Oslo, I saw a film that was as if Bogotá was visiting me in my distance. In the film by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, "Memoria"<sup>6</sup> from 2021 I saw so many familiar places, which, for any Bogotano like me, are well known: the Copernicus sculpture next to the planetarium, the campus of the National University, scenes of the tropical rainforest, the military uniforms, the rainy Bogotá.

<sup>6</sup> Weerasethakul (2021).

Definitely a film with a sound dimension. The story resonated strongly in the protagonist's search for a specific sound that she carried in her memory and wanted to find in the real world, apparently emphasizing a mind of synesthesia. Beyond these commonplaces and the plot of the film, for me the ending was the most intriguing. In the calm of that tropical rainforest on the screen, the framing seemed to leave us in the calm contemplation of nature and the sound of the landscape. But through the mist, unexpectedly a portal to another dimension opens, and from the trees and bushes a UFO rises to enter the portal and leave. A fictional escape, which seemed to reveal a hidden secret that questioned the reality of the place in an imagined fantasy. Definitely an unexpected ending, was that portal perhaps a form of border between reality and fiction? That scene left me with that question, building on my already suspiciousness and questioning of the origin of my own imagination.



Still from the film *"Memoria"* 2021

I like titles and indexes of books, because when I read them, it confronts my own imagination with the reality of the text. Just as I like titles and indexes, I also like movie endings, although I am never looking for a happy ending. One of these endings, in the Colombian movie *"La Estrategia del Caracol"*<sup>7</sup>, directed by Sergio Cabrera in 1993, motivated me to start a search for plants in movies. It is the story of a community of people who live in a tenement in a house in Bogotá and are about to be evicted. But beyond its plot, at the end of the film, a silent character caught my eye. In the last scene the shot opens and in the center, there is a plant on a horse cart or "zorra" (common name in Colombia for such a vehicle). Around all the characters, in the background you can see the city and the top of a hill, the new place where they are going to live. All the national elements and characters, a cyclist climbing the hill on a bicycle, evoking the victories and national pride of Colombian cycling, a donkey, a tiger stamped

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<sup>7</sup> Cabrera (1993).

on the tent of a truck, carrying disassembled houses, a priest, a lawyer, a musician, a transvestite, a flag, a guitar, trucks, and each character representing somehow the national population. A voice-over ends the film wondering about the future, but, in the center, the plant, a Dieffenbachia or commonly known in Colombia as "Lotería".

I wrote to the director of the film, asking him about that plant. I asked him if it was a conscious decision to have the plant on the wagon in that last sequence, because, being focused so on the center of the scene, in a big general shot, it is not a coincidence, is it?

He answered me: *"The plant in the "zorra" is certainly not a coincidence. Nothing, or almost nothing is in a film. The idea I wanted to convey is precisely that for the tenants the plant was like another person and that they were not going to leave it at the mercy of strangers. The idea of the film is that a house, a tenement, is a cell of the city, a whole, and that by taking the house the plant symbolizes their respect for nature. It is no coincidence"*<sup>8</sup>. And it is no coincidence that, in that silence of the plant, so much tension was concentrated for me, I was so curious about that small element that, as the shot opened, became even smaller.



Still from the film *"La Estrategia del Caracol"* 1993

I continued to look for plants on film. During the process I tried to turn the bed and the sofa into my studio, from where I would go on an expedition looking for plants on the screen. Making my practice almost an obsessive time waster. It was like a productive "praise of laziness", but also a "Praise of laziness"<sup>9</sup> in reference to Mladem Stilinovic's statement in 1993. I put into practice his proposal

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<sup>8</sup> Extract from conversation with Sergio Cabrera and Reyes Santiago Rojas, 03.11.2022

<sup>9</sup> Stilinovic (2011), pp. 147-49.



"Knowing about laziness is not enough; it must be practiced and perfected". This is not only an excuse to do laziness, but also a political position that comes from Stilinovic's subtle irony and subversive humor, questioning the concept of work. I was watching any kind of genres, formats, some series, good or bad movies, without filter, rather randomly. Whatever showed up, or came at the suggestion of other people, because in my conversations I was trying to ask them if they remembered any plants in a movie. So, it appeared: Natalie Portman, looking out of the window watering the plant of the killer friend, in Luc Besson's 1994 film *Leon*. The tricks of Méliès, where a plant appears and disappears. E.T. the alien botanist who resurrects a plant. The tree in *The Virgin Spring*, A talking plant in *Don't Die Without Telling Me Where You're Going*<sup>10</sup>, among many others that I organized in categories of plants, gardens, trees, and flowers.

Making mistakes is expensive and dreaming is free. These are the remnants of trial and error. I stopped the *Film Herbarium* project because I wanted to change that way of doing things. I stopped because I needed to question that need I had to accumulate, archive, and collect. I think there is a historical need, a need to keep memory active, in places for collective memory such as museums, ruins, archives, libraries, newspaper libraries, films, family albums, oral tradition, immaterial heritage, digital memory capacity, etc. We resort to them to think about the present, to recognize ourselves as individuals, in intimacy or collectively. We turn to these places to find something about ourselves. Reflecting on these resources for memory makes me wonder about the purpose of these archives, their origin, which does not escape from an origin of "imperial violence" as Ariella Aïsha Azoulay makes clear in *Potential History*<sup>11</sup>. She says that the "archive is a synergistic machine of imperial violence, through which this very violence is abstracted and then extracted from the passage of time". We grow on the foundations of a historical construction that has imagined our identity and future for us. We think we must look into the past to build the future. But perhaps the fear that we have, or that I have, of freely imagining the future is the fear of risking disappointment, a sense of approaching failure, error, and disillusionment.

Without totemic adorations, I then began to search in myself, in my own memories. I remembered when I broke my head. In the house where I grew up. There the custom was to dry clothes on the terrace, then take them downstairs and put them inside a metal barrel waiting to be ironed. It was a comprehensive task with the clothes of the 9 people who lived there. School uniforms and overalls from the family cheese shop, some had to have their collars and sleeves starched. I remember we mopped

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<sup>10</sup> *León: The professional*, dir by Luc Besson (distributor, 1994)/*Les illusions Fantaisistes*, dir by Georges Méliès (1910)/*E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, dir. by Steven Spielberg (Universal Pictures, 1982)/*The virgin Spring*, dir. By Ingmar Bergman (Janus Films, 1960)/*Don't die without telling me where you're going*, Dir. By Eliseo Subiela (Facets Video, 1995)

<sup>11</sup> Azoulay (2019), p. 43.

the floor to get all the clothes out and spread them out. For me, the sight of so many clothes on the floor was a great pretext to jump and fly like superman. I jumped so many times and without realizing it, in one of them I went straight to the edge of a eucalyptus trunk where we were sitting. For some people it was traumatic, and for me too, but now 33 years later and with a scar on my forehead, I understand that it was not. It was shocking, yes, it was a reality check and a warning to stop dreaming because it could kill me. That was the first warning I received to stop imagining TV fantasies. When reality hit me in the head, I understood that there was nothing more to imagine. My imagination had kept me asleep most of my life, I had dreamed so much and imagined so many things that reality took its toll and had already compromised my life. I could only pay by living or enduring what some call the harsh reality. But no, it's not hard, it's just real. I believe we pay for liters of intoxicating beverages, movie tickets, sports, music shows and millions of pages, connections of many gigabytes, television fictions, all-or-nothing trips, substances that activate altered states of consciousness. We pay to get away from the world to entertain ourselves, to simply escape from ourselves.

I put in question what I would ask myself when writing this text, whether imagination is dangerous? Because to question imagination it is to question capitalist optimism. I decided to give back everything I had accumulated. To return the stones to the river, even if it is not the same river from which I took them. To return the memory, the souvenir, to lighten the luggage in order to travel light. Looking for myself in the drift, I decided to stop, I decided to face the panic of doing nothing, to face the panic of unproductivity. I had to stop fantasizing about possibly impossible worlds that only exist in the imagination. I decided to stop collecting and accumulating. I stopped representing because it took me away from the reality of facing my own boredom. I decided only to point out what really activates unimagined emotions. I decided to confront myself, to confront my whole family, love, my education, everything that brought me joy. Because all this was pure colonization of my emotions, of my thoughts and of my actions, and perhaps only by being conscious could I free myself from it.

From here, from this point, I decide whether to move forward, stop or go backwards. This is the moment of thought that leads from word to action. What happens in the middle, in the interstice between before doing or stopping? One way to identify that place is found in the morphology of language, where the use of a prefix conditions the action of a verb. It is placed before the root of a word and changes its meaning. Un or dis: To undo, disassemble, dismantle. The space in the middle, between the prefix and the verb (-), is a place between the action of starting or going back. It is suspended, it seems static, but that place is where processes, tests and experiments happen before moving forward or stopping. That addition to a word to refer to its inverse form is not simply a grammatical signal. It is

outside semantics, it is a way of signaling a return, a contrary action, as a way of returning to something that is already active, but which paradoxically is a dichotomy. For this reason, my pendular oscillation shifts in the need to do and to stop doing. It is right there in that middle point, in that state of rest, in the interval, where the need to demonstrate it is potentiated.

At the limits of my body, I try to find the maximum amount of what it can contain on the surface. The amount of matter that can contain and occupy the space of my hands. It is a dialogue between materiality and the capacity of my own body, to move towards the reduction of excess material, where the consciousness of myself is now my material. As Agamben interestingly states: *"the truth criterion of art has been displaced to such a degree into the minds and, very often, into the very bodies of the artist, into his or her physicality, that these latter have no need to exhibit a work except as ashes or as a document of their own vital praxis"*<sup>12</sup>.

It is there, in the actions of one's own body, where I can begin to not depend completely on the material but move towards a dematerialization. I seek little by little to minimize, diminish, and slow down the excess of responses to passing satisfactions, not only of things, but also of imposed ideas in order to capitalize bodies and emotions. My work now goes in the direction of finding a small particle, like a seed that germinates, or reducing everything like a grain of sand, until the sand turns to dust.



Sketch of line with sand from my pockets

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<sup>12</sup> Agamben (2016) p. 246.

My problem is now to face the empty space to exhibit. With an almost imperceptible material, like a handful of sand, which I intend to spread grain by grain on the walls of the place the work will be installed. I first presumed to get sand from some Pacific Island that will disappear in the future due to environmental change. Kiribati, for example. But blindly I kept losing myself in my imagination, contradicting myself. I had ignored that little pile of sand I brought in my pockets after a last trip to Colombia. I kept looking outside my own place, my own life. Until I understood that it was that material, that sand from the terrace of my house that I would use for this new project. On my last trip back home, I was shocked to suddenly see my own home reduced in the middle of two tall buildings built by our neighbors after I left. My family's house seemed to be lost, it was being crushed in the middle of two new buildings, just as I am feeling now, suspended in a place in the middle.

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