

## **Exercises in faith**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis exhibition support paper is to articulate the video works which make up my MFA exhibition *Exercises in Faith*, by situating them in relationship with my artistic practice and with larger theoretical discourses. In this paper I address the questions that arose while working on the pieces, reflecting on issues such as vulnerability, violence, ethics, or faith, and investigating the way in which these questions can be presented through art.

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## Introduction

The painting called *La Violencia* (1963) by Alejandro Obregón, depicts the figure of a dead pregnant woman lying on the lower foreground of the frame. The profile of her head, breast and belly, contrasted against a mostly white background, evokes a mountainous landscape. This painting is an iconic rendering of the tragedy of political violence in Colombia. The silence and depth of the picture constitute a landscape of death, in which present and future have been destroyed.

Having been born in Colombia and having lived there for many years, violence has had a strong symbolic presence in my life; it is equally present as a theme in Colombian arts and cultural manifestations throughout the years. Colombia has been immersed in a non-declared war for more than half a century. This war, which has evolved from partisan violence to a conflict fueled by drug trafficking, is an exacerbated case of a global oppressive capitalist system, in which the need for land and natural resources has translated into a total disregard for human life, let alone ecological preservation. In a global perspective, traumatic events envelop the

contemporary subject: historical tragedies like that of Hiroshima have pointed at the possibility of a global catastrophe and self-destruction; attitudes of paranoia contribute to the dehumanization of others and the isolation from one another. There is a disenchanting vision of the world that is shaped by such a history, and we as contemporary subjects are all victims by proxy, even if we have not physically suffered the direct consequences of violent actions, for violence can be invisible, embedded in the systems we take for granted and consider a 'normal' state of affairs.

The relationship of the self with the world, shaped by violence and skepticism, is the starting point of my exploration as an artist. Using video-recorded, personal performances, I carry out an investigation into the ways to inhabit the world in mourning or skepticism, into the transgressing forces that puncture all human subjects, and into the affect and violence that shape our relationship with one another.

This paper, which accompanies my exhibition, is composed of a series of questions that have arisen while working on the pieces, and some of the reflections that have emerged from them. These reflections both articulate my work and situate it in relationship with theoretical discourses. In the text that follows, I intersperse descriptions of the videos in the exhibition with the theoretical meditation on the themes that arise from my work, and on the

concepts that have provoked my thinking around the other, ethics, violence and faith in relation to art and the image.

The descriptions are meant as anchors to the larger text. They do not specifically refer to each section, but rather the text interrelates to all of them as a body of work.



Let man show his wounds, let him present himself as a wound, -this is honesty and a necessity.

Jose Luis Brea.

### **On limits**

When I was a four year-old girl playing hide and seek, it occurred to me –when the countdown was nearly finished and I found myself still standing in an open space– that I could hide from the rest of the kids by closing my eyes. Then, I thought, I would be invisible to everyone. And so I did. I was obviously found immediately, and this incident made me realize that people could still see me when I closed my eyes, and maybe that the world around me was a world that had things foreign to me, that it was someone else’s world too, and not just my own.

This episode prompts me to ask myself how we learn to connect with other human beings and with the world from the perspective of the self. When closing my eyes as a kid, I somehow located my sensorial experience of the world in the experience of other bodies; I regarded them as one and the same. That connection is now lost. This sense of loss compels me to ask certain questions: Is the separateness between self and other something one learns to perceive? Does this separateness prompt skepticism regarding one’s knowledge of what is different from the self, and what would this skepticism entail in terms of one’s relationship with the world?

Octavio Paz once wrote that solitude is the profoundest fact of human condition.<sup>1</sup> To be human is to know that one is alone and to long to realize oneself in another. The feeling and knowledge that one is alone, isolated from the world and oneself, makes one want to transcend that solitude. Since the time that we are children we try to re-establish a bond with the world, as a way to end the anguish of separation. Children, according to Paz, address this irreducible reality with games and fantasies, through which objects have a life of their own:

Through magic, the child creates a world in his own image and thus resolves his solitude. Self-awareness begins when we doubt the magical efficacy of our instruments.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps due to a premature skepticism towards the efficacy of my magical instruments, I have regarded the world as a hostile, menacing place since I was a child. Apart from some exceptionally poetic instants in which I felt an integration with the world was possible, a pervasive feeling of disconnection has been present throughout most of my life. This has been reflected in my fear of establishing an intimate connection with the people I relate to and in my reticence to surrender myself to the things that I do.

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<sup>1</sup> Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove Press Inc, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

My art practice has been the site from which I attempt to re-establish my bond with the world, and from which I explore my relationship with it; my art is made from a place of solitude. Video has been my medium of choice for almost eight years, and I often use myself in my images, performing for the camera. Rosalind Krauss has written about the narcissistic character of video, due to its immediacy and its mirroring ability through the reflection of the performer. Video, she says, provides a focus on the self, excluding any external objects. The self is also separated from any sense of past or history, and contained in a continuous present.<sup>3</sup>

Paz speaks of Narcissus's solitary character, relating him to the period of adolescence that is characterized by an extreme self-consciousness, which "can only be transcended by self-forgetfulness, by self-surrender."<sup>4</sup> In my videos, I work from a place of solitude; yet, even though I stand in front of the camera, my drive has moved often towards a connection with another that is somehow external to the self.

In one of my earlier works *Fissures* (2004), I recorded a ten-minute video of myself facing the camera, as if posing for a photograph. I sat still in my outmoded dress, so that only the subtle changes from small involuntary

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<sup>3</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October* 1 (Spring, 1976): 50-64.

<sup>4</sup> Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, 203.

movements -like blinking- were noticeable in the video image. The video was inspired by a photograph I found of my father's Palestinian family, dated from the early 1920's. One of my grandaunts, whom I never got to know, looked identical to me, a resemblance that triggered an auto-identification: she was my image. I had never been emotionally close to my immediate family, and my solitude turned into a sense of isolation from myself. I was longing for a world that was unavailable to me and whose only manifestation was the photograph, an image which was touching me, yet was inaccessible. When I did my installation *Fissures*, I built an adobe structure where the image of each of the family members on the photograph rested in a niche, illuminated from below. The video of myself, posing the way my aunt did, was looping in a video monitor and fading in and out. The video monitor was my niche, and my way of establishing a link between myself and my family through the formal analogies between the video and the photographs. I placed them and myself out of history, out of time, into a non-place that was our point of encounter, as ghosts.

Although my concern about our connection and separation from the world and from others has been in my mind for most of my life, it has become a pressing question since I have found myself working as an interpreter for victims of persecution or abuse. I work freelance at the Immigration and

Refugee Board in Toronto interpreting Spanish and English for refugee hearings, as well as with the Barbara Schlifer Clinic, where I interpret for women victims of domestic violence. This position has forced me to stand face to face with persons in a situation of high vulnerability. I listen to and interpret testimonies that give accounts of violence and aggression, in a setting where often questions are asked that seek to determine the truthfulness of the testimonies heard.

My work as an interpreter involves a process that resembles a mirroring. The interpreter repeats exactly what people say, using the first person. In terms of the linguistic structure, I become the other person through the articulation of sentences that use the "I" as linguistic subject. This process of identification, that is at the same time a de-identification, makes me even more aware of the insurmountable distance between myself and other human beings. The game of imitation emphasizes the distance that I will never overcome. I lend my voice to rearticulate their statements, but there is always a residue, especially when they speak of their sadness or pain. It is at that moment when I feel the distance between us grows even greater, as I show restraint and remain objective, emotionally disconnected. My partial identification vanishes, as it is evident that I cannot know someone else's pain. Another kind of response should be articulated, but it is stalled.

Addressing the question of how to write about pain and violence, Indian anthropologist Veena Das relies on philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein to reflect on the way pain inhabits the world.<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein analyses language and grammar to criticize the view that sensations are privately owned. In his *Blue and Brown Books*, he asks himself how one person's pain may reside on another's body:

In order to see that it is conceivable that one person should have pain in another person's body, one must examine what sorts of facts we call criteria for a pain being in a certain place... Suppose I feel a pain which on the evidence of the pain alone, e.g. with closed eyes, I should call a pain in my left hand. Someone asks me to touch the painful spot with my right hand. I do so and looking around perceive that I am touching my neighbour's hand... This would be pain felt in another's body.<sup>6</sup>

For Das, the language used when saying "I am in pain" is in itself the expression of such pain; it is a claim that asks for an acknowledgement of the other person. She concludes that the grammar of language is not adequate for pain, or that the experience of pain "cries out for this response of the possibility that my pain could reside in your body."<sup>7</sup> Stanley Cavell, responding to this argument by Veena Das, states:

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<sup>5</sup> See: Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the descent into the ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 49.

<sup>7</sup> Das, *Life and Words*, 40.

I am necessarily the owner of my pain, yet the fact that it is always located in my body is not necessary. This is what Wittgenstein wishes to show- that it is conceivable that I locate it in another's body. That this does not in fact, or literally, happen in our lives means that the fact of our separateness is something that I have to conceive, a task of imagination- that to know your pain I cannot locate it as you locate mine, but I must let it happen to me. ... And it seems reasonable to me, and illuminating, to speak of that reception of impression as my lending my body to the other's experience.<sup>8</sup>

Jill Bennett, analyzing Das's position, concludes that pain is an expression that longs to find a home in the body of another<sup>9</sup>. An answer to someone else's cry of pain involves a bodily response, because a cry of pain is a demand for an affective connection. This affective acknowledgement of the expression of someone else's pain –the response that is absent when I am facing the testimony of another– is one of the sentiments that guide my latest body of works.

My thesis exhibition titled *Exercises in Faith* gathers together a number of works around this question of pain residing in the body of another. In it, I have developed a series of short videos in which I perform for the camera, staging actions using my body and everyday objects to enact processes of

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<sup>8</sup> Stanley Cavell, "Comments on Veena Das's Essay 'Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain,'" in *Social Suffering*, ed. Kleinman et al., 93-99.

<sup>9</sup> See: Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

violence, oppression, destruction, reparation: the work reflects on vulnerability and on the attitudes that guide our relationship with the world and with others. My body is the site of states of grief, faith or skepticism, where these are communicated through bodily transactions. The camera is a reflection of my image, a mirroring of myself when I am recording, but also a means to let others see my actions. The video monitor becomes a repository of images/actions that will establish a relationship to the viewer, always with the separation brought about by the screen.

The consciousness of the limits and separateness from others is an integral part of my motivation as an artist. The relationship with other people is shaped by affect and also apprehension; I feel a need to protect myself from both. In my art works, I undertook to speak about violence and vulnerability, speaking from a subject-position in which I do not cross the limits of danger in my life. My political commitment does not translate into the kind of activism that would jeopardize my privileged position, my comfortable and safe life in Canada. I always have committed to a minimum involvement, a restricted, distant participation. I try to remain untouched, while life grazes me with the horror of violence and testimonies of courage, devotion, and commitment. I feel the vertigo, which arises out of the danger that I observe from a safe place, from a distance that I should want to cross yet do not want



to: for crossing the line to commit to action would mean nothing short of giving myself totally, of bringing down the limits that keep me protected to expose myself to a threatening otherness, of giving up the selfishness that keeps me comfortable, that keeps me silent.

My videos establish this conflicted subject-position by establishing formal strategies that speak to limits and containment, while at the same time alluding to the fragility of the boundaries that keep one safe. In my life, I hide behind indifference, behind logic. In my videos, these limits are given expression in the form of clean, formal arrangements that foreground the minimal qualities and containment of my performed actions. This control over the form and the actions becomes a kind of violence that holds together forcefully what would otherwise burst open. This is an attempt at having some semblance of control when trying to convey things that are not easy to fathom, such as the nature of violence.

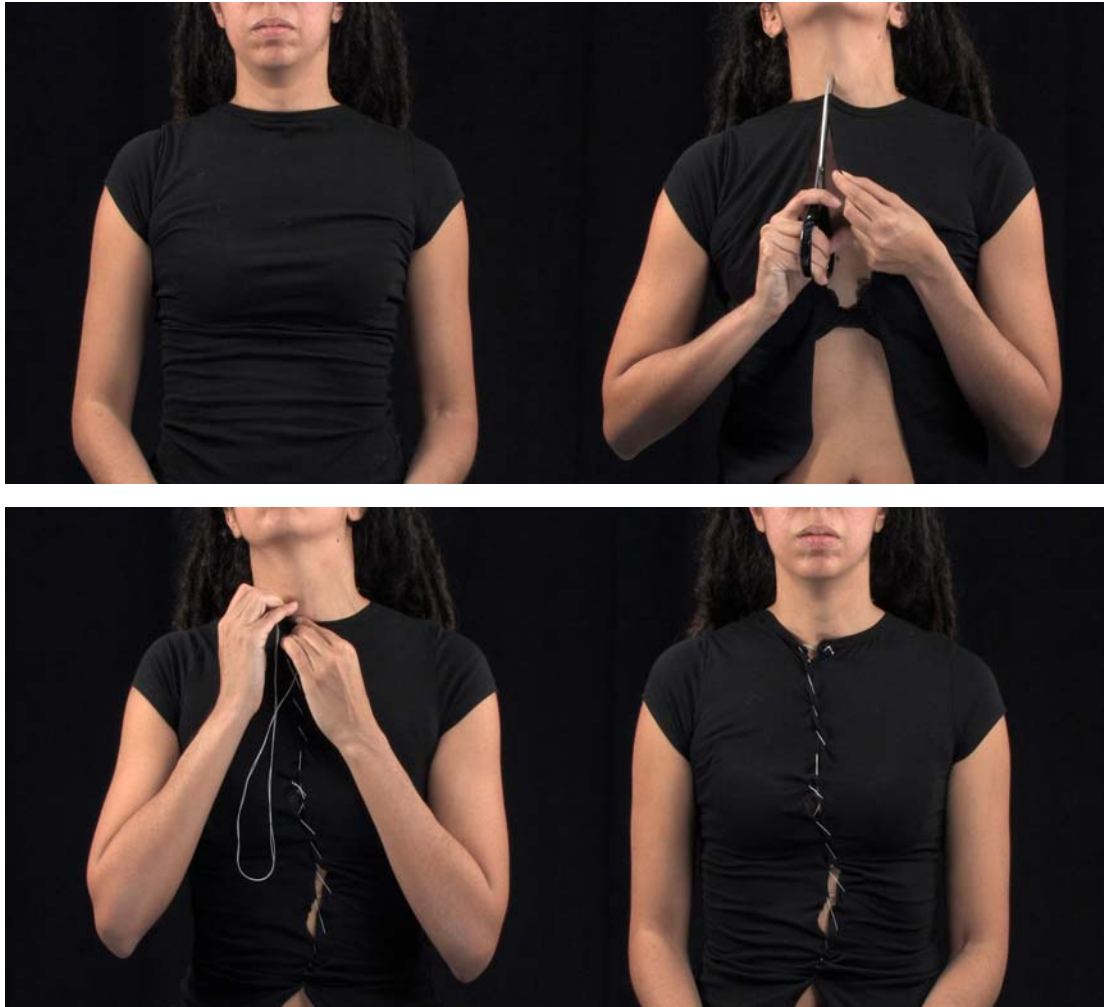
Violence, when happens dramatically, bears relationship to what happens unmelodramatically and repeatedly.  
Veena Das.

**Cut (Digital video loop, 8 min, 2010)**

*I sit in front of the camera, wearing a black t-shirt, with a black background. It is a medium shot of my torso, from my navel up. I am facing the camera, but my mouth is the only part of my face that enters the frame. I do a vertical cut of my t-shirt with a pair of scissors, upwards in the direction of my neck. I put the scissors down and then I pull a needle and thread and start sowing the shirt in the same direction. The action is performed blindly, without moving my head.*

*In this video, the gesture of rupture and healing is grounded in the banal activity of cutting and sewing; external references are kept to a minimum. The motionless neck speaks to a disconnection between body and head, suggesting an emotional detachment of the subject from herself and from the operations performed. The subject's lack of eye contact with the hands makes the cutting and sewing awkward and clumsy. The activity, which is associated with the feminine, is not executed cleanly.*

*The video presents the action in its real duration, without editing. It asks for an engagement with a repetitive process, but it is a repetition that is not mechanical; it is charged with affect.*



**Figure 1.** *Cut*. Video still. Digital video loop, 8 min, 2010

## On ethics

What does it mean to be confronted with vulnerability? What is our relationship with others and our responsibility towards them?

Judith Butler, in her book *Precarious Life, The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, speaks about our vulnerability and exposure to others. This vulnerability, according to Butler, is an essential characteristic of being human. Our body is not totally ours. It is socially constructed. It has a public dimension. For Butler, it is marked by others in ways we cannot control:

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well.<sup>10</sup>

Butler suggests our own self is foreign to us because part of us is constituted by traces of others. When we lose another person, we also lose who we are. For Butler, this foreignness to ourselves is the source of our ethical connection with others. Hence, Butler advocates for a politics that recognizes the fact that our fate cannot be separated from one another, and that recognizes vulnerability as essential to human life. This politics would not advocate for actions that are aimed at appearing immune by suppressing

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<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 26.

vulnerability through violence, as in the case of the war waged against Afghanistan after the attacks of September 11.

Butler also speaks of the dehumanization of the “enemy” produced by the media and public discourses, so that his or her vulnerability is not portrayed. The fabrication of the face of terror, or the face of evil, stands in for the face of human beings, as, for example, in the media portrayal of Muslims. We tend to regard others based on these personifications or characterizations that prevent us from acknowledging their vulnerability.

In a case of extreme dehumanization, Maria Victoria Uribe, relating the terrors of partisan violence in Colombia during the 1950s, explains how the groups of perpetrators established a disturbing relationship with certain sets of signifiers. One of the characteristics of these signifiers was the use of certain names of animals as aliases, and the way the perpetrators animalized their enemies. The borders between the animal world and the human world were made diffuse through the use of these animal signifiers, and this was often manifested through the themes of birds. The perpetrators would often use names of bird species as aliases, and would also name their victims after birds or other domestic animals, so that they could hunt them. The way in

which the other was conceived would materialize through the use of these words.<sup>11</sup>

In our global era, there is a general air of paranoia and uncertainty, a human condition that has been addressed by Arjun Appadurai and Liisa Malkki. In her study of violence between Hutus and Tutsis, Malkki suggests that violent measures allow people to construct ethnic differences. According to her, it is through violence that abstract ethnic categories are marked in the bodies of others. Appadurai states that where there is social uncertainty, violence can become a mechanism to define the others. Maria Victoria Uribe, commenting on this belief that violent procedures can take place in order to construct differences, affirms that this argument is not viable. She writes:

In a conversation that we had on this topic, Bruno Mazzoldy argued that this argument would amount to introduce the suppression of the other as a method to establish the parameters of otherness. The study of the Colombian case confirms that occurs the opposite of what was argued by Malkki and Appadurai, because in the massacres, the people precede violent acts, and is only through them that they become undifferentiated flesh.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Maria Victoria Uribe, *Antropología de la Inhumanidad: un ensayo interpretativo sobre el terror en Colombia* (Bogotá: Editorial Norma, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 107, my translation.

The technologies of terror, according to Uribe, seek, on the contrary, to dehumanize people and turn them into an undifferentiated mass in order to facilitate their destruction.

Aside from these extreme cases, dehumanization is also present in the everyday. In my work as an interpreter in hearings for the determination of refugee protection claims, it becomes clear that for refugees to speak the truth is not always the best way to obtain a positive result. One has to be able to fit a profile of what is considered a truthful claimant, and to speak with precision and clarity about traumatic events that have no such coherence.

Reflecting on human otherness, Emmanuel Levinas introduces the concept of the face as the face of vulnerability, as an ethical demand upon the self:

To expose myself to the vulnerability of the face is to put my ontological right to existence into question. In ethics, the other's right to exist has primacy over my own, a primacy epitomized in the ethical edict: You shall not kill, you shall not jeopardize the life of the other. The appearance in being of this ethical peculiarity (the humanity of man) is a rupture of being. It is significant, even if being resumes and recovers itself.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Butler, *Precarious Life*, 132. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 87.

Levinas defines the Other as an infinite being that confronts us and which one cannot contain, and is thus an absolute exteriority.<sup>14</sup> When Levinas speaks about the face and its vulnerability, he is calling on the ethical imperative that we have towards the Other, towards the fragility of the Other. Yet it is perhaps most interesting that he also speaks about the temptation to kill when confronted with this Other:

The face of the other in its precariousness and defenselessness is for me at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace, the “you shall not kill.”<sup>15</sup>

Referring to this quote, Butler asks why the first impulse when confronted with vulnerability would be the temptation to kill: “Why would [...] the agonized vocalization of another’s suffering prompt in anyone a lust for violence?” Butler concludes that “it must be that [he] threatens to kill me, or looks like he will, and that in relation to that menacing other I must defend myself to preserve my life.”<sup>16</sup>

Is violence simply the result of an impulse to preserve our lives? After living in Colombia for all those years, I do not think it is. There is a certain

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<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 55.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Butler, *Precarious Life*, 134. See Emmanuel Levinas, “Peace and Proximity,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 167.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.



pleasure around inflicting violence that is not accounted for in this interpretation. There is also the interpretation by Appadurai on ethnic violence: a desire to define the other, an attempt to understand the incomprehensible presence that ruptures being. Butler speaks of our humanity, but the foreignness to ourselves is not only human, it is tainted with inhumanity.

According to Slavoj Zizek, the “human person” is a mask that hides the inhuman core of the Neighbour and his subjectivity. A humanist ethics, like that which Levinas advocates, avoids this monstrosity of the Neighbour: the Evil behind a familiar human face. All humanist ethics, according to Zizek, are blinded towards the real<sup>17</sup>.

In any ethics, one has to draw a line between those who are included and those who are not. If I love humanity, I would hate whoever threatened humans (or those I deem human, according to my own definition). Where do we draw such a line? Zizek states that only an inhuman ethics (an ethics that addresses an inhuman subject) could be universal.

In my work I include in my exploration the inhumanity that lurks in all of us. Shifting roles in my performance, I not only explore our vulnerability and our endurance, but also our capacity for destruction. In my video *Bird* (Fig. 3),

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<sup>17</sup> See Slavoj Zizek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (New York: Verso, 2009).

I reflect about this process of dehumanizing the other, as described by Uribe, and aim at doing the opposite: by having the bird as main focus, I humanize the animal, who serves as a metaphor for our treatment of life. For, in the larger scale of politics, there are people who count as human and those who do not, those who can be killed with impunity.

*Pain unfolds into the recesses of the ordinary*

*Veena Das*

**Plant (Digital video loop, 10 min. 2010):**

*On a black background, I take a small houseplant with its pot and top it over. I break the pot with a hammer, hitting it continuously until it becomes scattered pieces. After a little while, I start organizing the pieces and the soil, like solving a puzzle, into a two dimensional arrangement that resembles the original. The video presents the action's real duration, without editing.*

*The action addresses pain, but it is held back. There is a rational, logical activity applied to what is chaotic and vulnerable. The solution is not satisfactory or dwells in the mourning of the lost object, the lost quality.*

*The destruction, and putting back together of the pot, soil and plant could be seen as an effort in defining what is other. There is a lack of faith that drives the piece. At the end, it leaves you occupying a world in which loss and death that cannot be overcome.*



**Figure 2.** *Plant*. Video stills. Digital video loop, 10 min. 2010.

## On Violence and Representation

There is a certain overpowering feeling in confronting the subject of violence directly, and some theorists have spoken to this condition. Zizek, for example, states he decided to study the subject of violence looking at it sideways, because the “horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims inexorably functions as a lure which prevent us from thinking.”<sup>18</sup>

Theodore Adorno’s statement that one could not write poetry after Auschwitz participates in this implication that some things cannot be addressed or represented. However, there is also a generalized sense that, if there *is* a language to address the unrepresentable, that language would be art. Zizek, in his book *Violence*, states that Adorno’s statement needs correction; it would be prose, not poetry, that is impossible after Auschwitz as “poetry is always, by definition, ‘about’ something that cannot be addressed directly, only alluded to.”<sup>19</sup>

In *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art*, Jill Bennett writes about how art can be a site where the unrepresentable might be addressed. Through her investigation into the role of contemporary art that deals with trauma, she argues that the language of art is transformed when it

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<sup>18</sup> Slavoj Zizek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008), 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

seeks to express the unrepresentable<sup>20</sup>. For her, politically progressive art needs to confront issues like AIDS or the Holocaust. This would not constitute a moralistic or instrumental use of art, as long as it maintain the capacity for transformation, and challenge, rather than abide by, established conventions.

These criteria are grounded in the belief that, in order to address the incommensurable, something other than cognition or reason has to be at play. Zizek quotes Wallace Stevens when he says that an artistic description “is not a sign for something that lies outside its form.”<sup>21</sup> Bennett, rather than focusing on the “aboutness” of art, analyses the operations in artworks that engage the viewer in an affective way, through forms of perception that produce an encounter with something “irreducible and different, often inaccessible.”<sup>22</sup>

I suggest that this focus on the formal or operational aspects of art rather than on its contents is not unlike Ludwig Wittgenstein’s understanding of ethics as part of a transcendental realm that cannot be expressed in what we say, but in how we say it, and therefore partakes in aesthetics. Bennett suggests that the difference between art that is moral and art that is ethical

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<sup>20</sup> See Bennett, *Empathic Vision*.

<sup>21</sup> Zizek, *Violence*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 10.

resides in this transformative aspect of trying to find form for that, which is beyond thought.

This otherness that stays beyond language is often sought through sensation. Bennett speaks to the notion of affect as that which can be communicated empathically through the work. In writing about the difficulties in trying to represent a traumatic event as subject matter, Bennett refers to Deleuze's notion of "the encountered sign" as "the sign that is felt rather than recognized or perceived through cognition."<sup>23</sup> Affect, for Bennett, is this empathic quality that is triggered by certain art works.

I find I am particularly sympathetic to this vision in my artistic practice, in the sense that I do art that I feel addresses what cannot be presented by reason. This is manifested in perceptual and formal characteristics in my work. I have always had a concern with language and its limitations: the incapacity of language to make sense of the experience of life or to account for the irrational. Whenever I have used words in my pieces, I have tried to emphasize their sensual character rather than their meaning. In previous pieces, I have worked with text in such a way that it loses part of its capacity to communicate as a set of signs: at times the text is sensually charged, appealing more to the senses than to the intellect. All of these strategies are

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 7. See: Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (1964; new York: George Braziller, 1972).

attempts to destabilize meaning, but are also attempts to release new ones, which are communicated at an aesthetic level. I have often stripped away the context for the work, rendering it covert with relation to the subject that sparked it. In *Forced Appearances* (2008), which I produced after reflecting on the phenomenon of forced disappearances in Latin America where people are secretly killed or imprisoned by agents of the state, I focused on the process of making an image –a portrait– appear through different methods: by burning, by drawing with soil, or by trying to link together dispersed fragments of the image under water. Save for the reference to the portrait, which is reminiscent of the kind of identity picture used by Chileans to look for their relatives, and the title of the work, there is no other reference to the specific historical event. All that remains are operations of mourning and reconstruction of memory.

For this exhibition, I have chosen to focus on carrying out performances for the camera as processes of oppression, destruction and reparation. What I am communicating is a certain sensation based on the treatment of bodies, of matter. Violence is conveyed through the images, without any strong historic references that could contextualize the piece, and exploring the possibility that truth could be revealed physically, that it could be addressed to the body. My reflections follow Veena Das's position regarding



the means by which pain inhabits the world, rather than being contained within subjects. As such, I use time and actions to speak to the body of the viewer through the sensorial realm in a way that is not overwhelming, but that I hope will lead to a reflection about what the work implies.

Although I am speaking about violence and vulnerability, and I have interactions with victims of violence, I have chosen not to include testimonies or stories from people who have been subjected to violent acts. There is a certain risk in including these kinds of stories, for they can produce an over-identification in the viewer. This concern has been raised by some of the authors I have been researching. Bennett warns about an over-identification when confronted with affect coming from a character or a specific subject, which could lead us to take a moral approach when confronted with art. We would feel sympathy and compassion, thus confirming our humanitarian role, and condemning the subjects that act in this cruel fashion. We could forget that we have our share of responsibility and our share of inhumanity.

Susan Sontag, in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, also speaks of this process of identification. When speaking about “the imaginary proximity to the suffering inflicted to others that is granted by the images,” Susan Sontag states that the link between the faraway sufferers and the privileged viewer is simply untrue:

So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be an impertinent response. To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may [...] be linked to their suffering as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others...<sup>24</sup>

On a personal level, I am at times caught in the emotional wave of sympathy towards the people I interpret for, towards the people that are featured in the news as victims. We all want to feel innocent and impotent, extent of responsibilities. We like to believe we are good, moral people, and construct this inner self that is full of humanity and compassion, even if it is a fake, imaginary construction.

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<sup>24</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 102-103.

*Violence is a touch of the worst order, a way a primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying ways, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another.*

*Judith Butler*

***Bird (Digital video loop, 3 min, 2010)*** is a close up of my hand holding a canary, while it moves, trying to free itself from the grip. It is a helpless situation. The bird is forever trapped in an endless loop in which it does futile attempts at escaping.

*The video reflects on fragility, beauty and violence, questioning the limits of our ethical relationship to one another and to the world. What does it mean to confront what is vulnerable? Is there a certain pleasure in the domination of others? What does it mean to have infinite power?*

*This video presents violence as a physical sensation. The flapping of the wings is a mute voice, a material voice. It is also the thrill of having someone's heart trembling in your hand, someone's pain in your hand.*



**Figure 3.** *Bird.* Video still. Digital video loop, 3 min, 2010.

### **On Violence and the Image**

I read some time ago a story about a group of anthropologists who wanted to approach an indigenous tribe. They and the tribe established a relationship without actually meeting each other by exchanging gifts that were left on a certain neutral place. Before the set date for the encounter, the anthropologists decided to leave a photographic portrait of themselves, so that the members of the tribe would recognize them through their image. When the encounter finally took place, the anthropologists were killed; not familiar with photography, the members of the indigenous tribe had taken the offering of their image as a death threat.

The tribe's reaction reveals how there is an inherent violence in the photographic image, in the flattening of three-dimensional beings into two dimensions, in the turning of a living body into something inaccessible, separated from the corporeal world.

Although it remains set apart, the image (and I believe this includes the moving image and other images that are not even visual) is a presence that touches you. In *The Ground of the Image*, Jean Luc Nancy calls the image the *distinct*: what remains apart, at a distance, what one cannot touch. However, the image reaches to you bearing an intimacy that is brought to the

surface, an intimacy that has been separated from the continuity of homogeneity and made distinguishable as it is thrown towards you.

In film, the spectator seems to have an even more evident investment in the image due to the element of time, which is also present in the digital video medium. I remember a tale told by my father concerning the projection of a feature film in the first movie theater created in a small town in the region of Magdalena, Colombia. People were confronted with the reappearance of an actor, who had been killed in a previous screening of another film, and who this time was playing a different role. This caused a riot in the theater, because people were under the impression that they had been deceived. How could someone that was dead suddenly be alive again? Although this episode was caused by the public's lack of familiarity with the filmic image, mistaking the events for "real" events, film does facilitate an identificatory relationship with the image.

Rosalind Krauss, theorizing about video, dismissed the actual technological and material factors behind it as constitutive of its medium. Instead, she described the medium of video as a psychological condition, namely narcissism, based on the mirroring aspect of video. This aspect, which involves the temporal concurrence between the subject and object, brings an illusion of fusion or an investment of the self in the image:

The self and its reflected image are of course literally separate. But the agency of reflection is a mode of appropriation, of illusionistically erasing the difference between subject and object.<sup>25</sup>

Krauss's comments speak of a strong subjective identification that arises from the temporality of the image and the presence of the body. Yet her description is focused on the experience of the one who performs for the camera, bracketing out the relationship between the viewer and the video image when the viewer is not the one who stands in front of the device.

Rather than pursuing this identification in which the subject fuses itself with the object, I am more interested in the paradox of the feeling of closeness that is traversed by an awareness of separation, and that renders the image as other. Just as the other touches me while remaining at a distance, I would like my images to have the same effect on the viewer.

In my videos, I try to create an intimacy through gestures that speak of the precarious, liminal situation of the body within the world. At the same time, I create a sense of separation by de-contextualizing the objects I use, by framing them against a plain background and emphasizing the staged character of the actions performed. The camera I use is still, recording the

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<sup>25</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October* 1 (Spring 1976): 56-57.

actions like an “objective” witness. I arrange a scenario of a world with minimal referents that does not present specific characters or narratives: a rarified, isolated world.

Time is an integral part of the relationship that I establish with the viewer through my process of performing the actions. Time allows for a connection in which the viewer is drawn into the scenario, into the process. As such, I am interested in time as a dimension that is imprinted on the materiality of life, on the changes of state. I use the temporal dimension of the video as evidence of the ineffability of life, as a path towards death or transformation. Time makes us vulnerable; it is what brings a catastrophe upon us and what allows for healing.

I use time as source of subjective experiences of delay, irreversibility or repetition. In many of the videos in this exhibition, the presentation of the full time the action takes, without editing, is an important factor of the work. In this era of instant gratification, in which durational time is marginalized, it speaks of a vulnerability that demands from the viewer an engagement with an action that slowly unfolds; it demands openness and disposition to accompany the process. In some of my videos, like *Plant* (Fig. 2) or *Head* (2009), which involve the breaking of objects and rearrangement of the pieces in a flat plane, the viewer might be intrigued to know what the *final image* will



look like; the viewer will be wondering what the result of the process is. In other videos, like *Bird* (Fig. 3), repetition conveys a sense of helplessness and absurdity. Repetition in this case is accumulative; it is meant to create a weight that becomes heavier with each loop.

Several critics such as Rosalind Krauss, Fredric Jameson and Bruce Kurtz have commented on the temporal qualities of video that link it to the present; they argue that video has no memory and is detached from history.<sup>26</sup> In my videos, although they would seem to create a sense of present due to their de-contextualized character, time is imprinted materially in the objects through their transformation, as an image of their own memory and their own vulnerability. There is also the absence of any other external references to history in a specific way (to the real world, political, etc). These references could be seen as truths or falsities within the work. What I present escapes such judgment. The truth that they convey is of a different order, similar to the one alluded to by Jean-Luc Nancy.

Jean Luc Nancy speaks of the relationship between truth, violence and the image. Violence wants to be truth and set an example, be a *monstration*; violence shows itself as image. The *result* of the violent action is not separable from the exertion of violence itself.

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<sup>26</sup> Christine Ross, "The Temporalities of Video: Extendedness Revisited," *Art Journal* 65, no. 3 (Fall, 2006): 82-99.

The violent person wants to see the mark he makes on the thing or being he assaults, and violence consists precisely in imprinting such a mark. It is in the enjoyment [jouissance] of this mark that the 'excess' defining violence comes into play.<sup>27</sup>

My videos are a demonstration of small acts of violence for the camera that appear to have no context or motivation. In their de-contextualization, they are their own truth. The aim is to show the actions and their affect, maintaining everything else to a minimum. In this sense, they address the relationship between violence and the image. It is not clear what impulse drives the action on my videos, but the result is always violent, even in the videos where the reconstruction of what is broken could come from a place of mourning and healing.

The cohesion and formal unity that are the characteristics of these videos also evoke violence. The aseptic character of the images I produce speaks to containment and emotional detachment as a frame for the actions. I am interested in this tension between immobility or unity and the violent disruptions that take place within the frame. The "objective" form is in fact deeply subjective. The unity and homogeneity of the settings speak to an objective violence, an invisible violence, that controls the form.

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<sup>27</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 21.

*The aim of art is to prepare a person for death.*

*Andrei Tarkovsky*

***Tierra /soil, (Digital video loop, 3 min, 2010)***

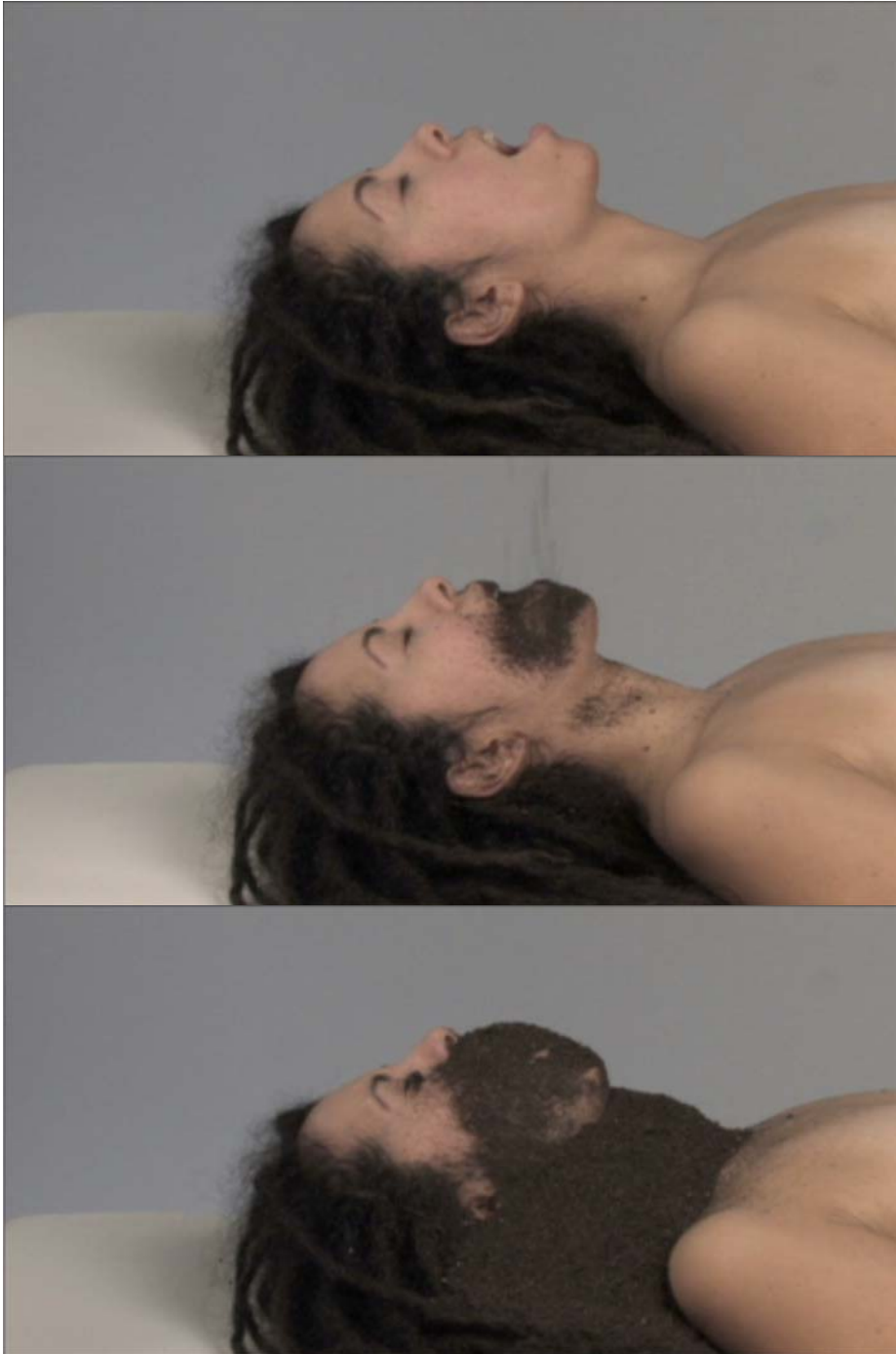
*Tierra/soil is a piece that shows the profile of my face lying horizontally, with my mouth open, on a white background. Soil starts pouring down from the upper side of the frame and filling my mouth gradually.*

*Closeness to the earth implies being close to life and death, to the visceral. The landscape is source of ideas of identity, dreams of belonging, but also nightmares when confronted with the side of it that partakes in the real; when one gets too close, blurring the boundaries that keep one safe.*

*Land has been a recurrent source of conflict and death, An image evoked with this video is that of mass graves, despite the clean setting and white background.*

*In the video, I take the soil trying to engage in minimal movement or expression. The openness of the mouth, however, gives a sense of willingness to receive the dirt. It is a situation that is not resolved, as the soil keeps falling and accumulating.*

*The soil comes from above, as a kind of fate.*



**Figure 4.** *Tierra/Soil*. Video still. Digital video loop, 3 min, 2010.

**On faith.**

Since childhood, the world has always seemed to me a menacing place. Although I have had a relatively easy and uneventful life, my infancy was marked by thoughts about vulnerability and death. I would sometimes go to sleep fearing not waking up the next morning. I expected to be swallowed up by nature and die in some fatality, whether at the sea or whenever we took the highway to go to another city.

The conflict in Colombia, my country of birth, did not help me overcome my feeling of a menacing world. Numerous internal wars have occurred and are still unfolding. One phenomenon that has been persistent in Colombia's recent history is the collective killing of unarmed and helpless people by armed groups, mainly in the countryside. Other facets of violence have been the kidnappings and the selective killings of members of the political left, and the strategic assassination of union leaders by paramilitary groups. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, different armed protagonists in the conflict, including drug dealers, detonated bombs in several Colombian cities.

Although I was not physically affected by any of these actions personally or in my immediate family circle, the thought that a harsh reality

would enter my world and shatter it at any second was always present. The accumulation of traumatic history affects all of us, knowingly or not, influencing our perspective on life.

On a personal level, I remember characterizing myself during my teenage years as someone lacking faith; I would say I did not engage in gardening because, although –in theory- I knew that a seed would turn into a plant, I did not believe this deep inside. In such a melancholic state of isolation, how is one to relate to faith? What role does art play in the process?

In a passage of Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin, referring to Holbein's painting *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1522), raises the question of why one may lose one's faith when confronted with that picture. The painting depicts Christ as a corpse, stretched horizontally and enclosed in a narrow casket, with no other images beyond it. His image is not beautified, his expression and body still bear the marks of suffering, with no trace of divinity. Julia Kristeva, in her beautiful text about Holbein's painting, emphasizes the unadorned representation of the corpse, the horizontal proportion of the canvas and the isolation of the figure amongst the characteristics that produce the feeling of anguish on the spectator when looking at the painting; one is confronted with an image that has no promise

of transcendence.<sup>28</sup> Kristeva states that perhaps it is Christ's isolation, rendered by the composition of the painting, what most creates the feeling of melancholy.

In other paintings of the dead Christ seen throughout the history of the visual arts, He often retains his beauty and serenity, and is accompanied by mourners. Holbein's Christ, on the other hand, is alone, and does not depict the glory of the beyond. This configuration could bring to the mind of the viewer the anguish of the consciousness of her own death, or the times in which a lack of meaning pervades her life. Rather than arguing for a lack of faith driving Holbein's art, Kristeva seems to suggest that it is art in itself, its form, what gives meaning to the non-meaning of death:

Did Holbein become the painter of a Christianity stripped of its antidepressive quality that derives from the identification with a rewarding beyond? At any rate, he leads us to the ultimate edge of belief, to the threshold of nonmeaning. The *form* (of art) alone gives back serenity to the waning of forgiveness, while love and salvation take refuge in the execution of the work.<sup>29</sup>

In *Black Sun, Depression and Melancholia*, Kristeva reflects on the ability that art brings to overcome mourning through sublimation of the lost object. For Kristeva, beauty, or the beautiful object, is an imaginary

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<sup>28</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Holbein's Dead Christ." In: *Fragments for a history of the human body, part one*, ed. Feher, Michel (New York: Zone, 1989).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

construction through which we transcend the grief of separation. Art, with its unsettling ability, its multiple connotations around the sign, can provide the means for the subject to “imagine the nonmeaning, or the true meaning, of the Thing.” She asks:

Is beauty inseparable from the ephemeral and hence from mourning? Or is the beautiful object the one that tirelessly returns following destructions and wars in order to bear witness that there is survival after death, that immortality is possible?<sup>30</sup>

I believe art can be the site of imagining the possibility of overcoming mortality, of striving towards some kind of transcendence. But it can do so only by addressing what is mortal, precarious, for we are only able to search for infinity in our finitude. While some of my former works, like *Fissures* (2004), conveyed a sense of transcendence, in my recent videos I conceive existence as the feeling of the contingency and fragility of the body. There is no access to the divine; to be alive is to bear wounds. Everything is destined to disappear, and this infinite loss is manifested in the consciousness of the limits. Meaning is sought in the exploration of matter, of the tangible, and through the senses. Time is a ruthless force that imprints its marks on the body, which bears the physical memory of its past and the irreversibility of its situation.

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<sup>30</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Rondiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1989), 97-98.



In these explorations, is there a way to find faith? Is it in the constant pursuit of failed actions at recovering? Is it the beauty that is found in the ephemeral? Is faith located in the act itself of making art, hoping to find meaning in the absurd? I doubt my images; I am not a believer; but I keep exercising my faith.

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