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# CONSTRUCTION OF AN ALBUM FOR ONESELF

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master  
of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By María Tinaut

BFA Polytechnic University of Valencia, Spain 2014

MFA Virginia Commonwealth University 2017

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For my colleagues, who became my family during these two years, so far from home.

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For Vicente Tinaut who spent decades documenting his love for his family.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	iv
Vernacular Photography. Family albums .....	1
Definition. History and context .....	1
My family archives .....	9
Calpe 1956 .....	12
Memory and identity. Construction of the past and the self .....	21
Photo booth works .....	25
Touch .....	31
Women's Hands in my Family Albums .....	43
Bibliography .....	50

## ABSTRACT

### CONSTRUCTION OF AN ALBUM FOR ONESELF

By María Tinaut, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2017

Major Director: Gregory Volk, Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking Department.

My work focuses on the construction and validation of images assembled from fragments of found photographs, generating new narratives that hover between “reality” and fiction. *Archive and Fiction: Construction of the past and the self* is the result of two years of artwork exploring my family archives and my relationship to my family through them. I understand the family as a place of identity in continuous change, serving as a container of history and memory. Conceiving of my family albums as material allows me to approach my family history as a visitor. Mediated memory and constructed memory intertwine in the family album, a linear format that also inadvertently reveals gaps, both temporal and contextual. By understanding how photography’s authority constructs personal and family identity, I seek to undermine this authority, using photography’s “realness” against itself to create alternative narratives of within which I can belong.

*Your memory fails you right at that point where the photograph replaces your memory.*

–Lucy Lippard

## **Vernacular photography. Family albums**

### Definition. History and context

Vernacular photography is photography created by amateur and unknown photographers who capture ordinary and mundane life to represent ourselves and preserve memories of everyday life; it is a manifestation of our hunger for remembrance and a legacy to leave behind. It is both banal and touching. It is unique among art forms in that a person who takes photographs, creating images, may not consider themselves an image-maker, reinforcing the idea that photography is simply a documentation of a singular reality. Snapshots host happy accidents and successful failures capturing fortuitous moments of beauty that the operator may not have intended. These artifacts live and are left behind in domestic spaces, even when they have originated elsewhere, such as travel and vacation snapshots, class portraits, or photo booth portraits.

“Family albums are repositories for personal, social and institutional memory” artist Vesna Pavlovic says. Vernacular photography and family albums determine the conception we have of the term *family*. They are a superficial construction of the official family history. The sum of many official families’ histories write the un-official history of a place, a collective social identity constructed from within the domestic sphere. The

moment photography enters the household in the early 20th century, it generates stereotypes and modifies the idea of what a family is. Photography both constructs and reflects the status quo of each generation. Family albums present portraits of families. Their foundation is the linear presentation of socially-defined special occasions, creating an aesthetics of family happiness and togetherness. They are tableaux of family relationships. Family albums build and legitimate particular standards, yet they also determine what is left out of the family history. There are events and circumstances that never make it to the album, whether because of a particular family's consensus or a social convention. The social conventions in Spain during the 1950's ensured that occurrences such as broken marriages, sleeping in separate rooms for decades due to prohibitions against divorce, homosexual relatives portrayed as the funny forever-single aunts/uncles, etc., would never be depicted in the official family history. There is a dualism of presence and absence, an invisible interactivity between what is depicted and what is left out. By deconstructing my family album, I seek to interrogate the official family history; by exploring the gaps of this history, I hope to create new, non-authoritative narratives of family to which I can belong.

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We could say that we are our own memory; and in this I am not forgetting that memories are always –yes, it is obvious– of something memorable. *That* rainy afternoon is never just any afternoon: it is the afternoon of revelation, of encounter, of fall. And the other afternoons, the ordinary ones, where do they go? Aren't they also part of our lives?<sup>1</sup>

Kodak called vernacular photography the domestic version of history. The

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<sup>1</sup> Minero, María, *Mending Memories*, 2008



increased availability of consumer-grade photographic equipment coincided with the aftermath of World War 1, a time of great political upheaval as soldiers returned to civilian life. The social and economic forces that shaped the idea of the family unit were rapidly changing, and Kodak's advertising campaign successfully exploited the fears of a disoriented population in Europe with promises of photography's ability to preserve not only family memories, but the family unit itself. It is notable that different family albums sharing the same cultural context often feature very similar photographs. There is a cultural constructedness to them, a handful of modes of self-fashioning. When I look at vacation snapshots of both sides of my family, and at found photographs in flea markets in different locations throughout Spain's geography I notice behavioral and compositional patterns being repeated: demure women visibly self-conscious about showing parts of their bodies their husbands likely did not see on a daily basis, virile men wearing shirts and only taking them off to get into the water, acting so self-consciously about their bodies them too; or people posing with their backs turned to the sea, as if it were a monument to pose in front of.

Before the advent of social media, people thought to capture mostly only the highlights of their lives; social events and conventional subjects such as birthdays, weddings, and vacations. We developed "performative" poses for celebration, love, familiarity, etc. These poses in vernacular photographs seem natural only because we have seen them so many times. The repetitive similarity to these tableaux has accrued into a force strong enough to define this artificial reality, with its strict visual conventions and role-based costumes, as normality. This performative vocabulary has reached our

time too but it seems to be more applicable to the time prior to the invention of digital cameras, devices that allow us to capture every single second of our lives today. The images I work with come from a time in which people had to “cook the photo” by measuring light and guessing at the framing through a tiny viewfinder, working with finite number of images on each roll. Given the delay between the taking and developing of the photo, asking the subject to pose for the camera would have helped to ensure the photographer’s intended result. Therefore, taking just one picture was an event in itself, legitimizing that particular documented moment to stand out in time, separate from the many other “unremarkable” moments that form everyday life.

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“The family album arises from the photographic image, but participates in theater and literature too because of the existence of a plot and some protagonists, and above all because of the inclusion of a narrator’s voice or author.”<sup>2</sup>

There is something theatrical, inventive, and creative in the album’s layout. As with any other collage or photographic assemblage, it has an implicit narrative quality in its thread and display. “Montage didn’t begin at the movies; it began with the family album.” says D.J. Waldie in his text “Facing the Facts”<sup>3</sup>. It determines what is worth remembering, what fits inside the parameters of the narrative of a happy family. Everything that does not appear in the albums is discarded from that official family “letter of introduction”. Those memories that don’t make it to the album will be forgotten simply by their omission, turning omission into possible obliteration. Hence, the family

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<sup>2</sup> Vicente, Pedro, *Album de Familia*, 2013. La Oficina Ediciones. Diputación de Huesca

<sup>3</sup> Waldie, D., *Close to Home. An American Album*. (Getty Trust Publications: J Paul Getty Museum)

album is decisive in our processes of remembering the family we come from, and decisive in the construction of our own identity in relation to that past.

A new fiction is possible every time we take up the album, every time the narrator and the generation shifts. This narrator, who is as embedded in her generational conventions as the previous generation's narrator, adds to the content and builds a new meaning from the space between her personal experience and the current standards of normativity. This generational shift often reveals the unknowns within a seemingly seamless narrative; and incomplete knowledge of the original context create the foundation for new re-reads of the content. The "original" content we have at hand is in itself an edited construction of "reality"; what one can add as narrator or playwright will always be an artificial creation as well. However, it seems like vernacular photography comes closest to "truth". As the photographer Lisette Model stated:

"The snapshot is a specific spiritual moment. It cannot be willed or desired to be achieved. It simply happens, to certain people and not to others... We are so overwhelmed by culture and by imitation culture that it is a relief to see something which is done directly, without any intention of good or bad, done only because one wants to do it."<sup>4</sup>

For Model, the snapshot is a form of photography at degree zero. She believes that there's some kind of innocence in the making of it. Yet, photography has a great authority in constructing "normality", regardless of the amateur's non-intentionality. People tend to photograph in ways that they've seen photographs before, so there is a certain laziness of the eye; they photograph what has already been photographed. This

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<sup>4</sup> Model, Lisette. Untitled statement."The Snapshot", *Aperture* 19, (1974)

contributes to the accrual of the status quo, the accumulation of “normal” images. Nevertheless, my grandfather, though he was an amateur, had a good eye for photography, and some of his images are ripe with formal potential. Even if his photographs were taken during the same special occasions that convention dictated, they reveal his particular eye, not anyone else’s.

Valencian artist Miriam Blasco talks in her MFA thesis about “reading the album” as a synonym of “reading memory, because the album supposes a testimony of a family’s transit”, subjective and official at the same time.”<sup>5</sup> There is a lot of fictionalizing memory within this reading memory. The boundaries between mediated memory and a photograph’s memory fade away by processes of remembering and memory making. Photographs, especially those printed on paper, legitimate memories. As Roland Barthes once said, when we look at pictures, we sometimes forget they are a medium of representation and we think we are contemplating reality itself. Although photography is a “lie”, these objects suspend vivid moments in time. To take a picture is to build up a window with some walls around it. There is a choice being made in the framing and the cropping, and all that fits in that ultimate rectangle exists in relation to everything else left out. This act of framing “reality” shows me that everything is fiction, construction, and social convention, but somehow we have faith in those images we create. We believe in them even when they negate or contradict our own experiences. There is something phantasmagorical and theatrical to the album. We can project new histories, modify their narratives every time we reorganize the archive, disregard some character

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<sup>5</sup> Cano, Miriam. (2015). *Deconstrucción del hogar. La familia y su biografía como material de creación* (MFA thesis). Retrieved from Riunet Database. Universidad Politécnica de Valencia.

or make what seems to be like a secondary character the protagonist by resituating the story's parameters, suggesting a new way of seeing "reality" itself.

The boundaries of reality and fiction are explored in a book by Elvira Navarro, in which she fictionalizes the last days of Adelaida García Morales, writer and ex-wife of the Spanish filmmaker Victor Erize. Navarro never met García Morales and she only used an anecdote about her and a photograph of her to generate a whole new narrative of 128 pages. In an article responding to the fictionalization of his ex-wife's life, Erize writes:

"Truly accomplished fictional narratives do not deal with the true-false dilemma; but from the fictitious they aspire to accomplish a solid and long-lasting bond with the plausible. They are not characterized by seeking inspiration from the real *necessary*, but by communicating for themselves – without the help of a trait external to them- a background of truth." <sup>6</sup>

Elvira Navarro, who only got in touch with García Morales's widower a few days before releasing the book, defended herself saying that truth in fiction has nothing to do with reality even when practicing a realistic literature.

Within my family albums I see both authoritative reality and suspicious fiction. In response, my work seeks to unfold alternatives to explore that which is forged from the push/pull forces between the poles of truth and invention: identity. My material consists of my family albums as well as collections of found photos from flea markets, unrelated to my personal biography. Novelist Elizabeth Strout says that "the work of fiction writers

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<sup>6</sup> Erize, Victor, "Una vida robada," *El País*, October 3, 2016, Babelia section, National edition.

is to speak about the human condition with authenticity.”<sup>7</sup> In the end it does not matter if you recognize a relative or if you simply project your personal history on the image of a random person you can relate to, applying to them family ties, conventions or loves. Anonymous images, I find, have more potential; I can interact with a mysterious and suggestive image, assimilating it and making it mine even if its origin, context, or meaning remain unresolved to me. I can relate my own experience to them and connect unknown histories to my own history, stimulating my empathy. Other people’s photographs become a substitute or a pretext for constructing one’s own personal history and memory. Gail Pine’s (vernacular photography collector) interest in snapshots was born out of the loss of her father and through him the loss of a large part of her own familial photo history: “My collecting creates a new family for me to replace the broken one, complete with their own strengths, imperfections and idiosyncrasies. In every picture of a man standing hands-in-pockets I search for the image of my lost father.”<sup>8</sup> As Catherine Zuromskis says in “Ordinary Pictures and Accidental Masterpieces: Snapshot Photography in the Modern Art Museum”:<sup>9</sup>

“The anonymous quality of these images is precisely what makes them appealing, opens them up to a broader interpretation. ‘Where did this incredible picture come from? ‘Let’s hope we do not find out. Much of the appeal of the best amateur snapshot is that, alienated from its source, it stays a riddle.”

The less we know about snapshot’s particular history, the more compelling they are and the more stories they incite; there is a sense of discovery and re-discovery of the known

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<sup>7</sup> Strout, Elizabeth. Interview with Óscar López. *Página dos*. Radio Televisión Española, September, 27, 2016

<sup>8</sup> Walide, D., *Close to Home. An American Album*. (Getty Trust Publications: J Paul Getty Museum)

<sup>9</sup> Zuromskis, Catherine, “Ordinary Pictures and Accidental Masterpieces: Snapshot Photography in the Modern Art Museum” *Art Journal*, Volume 67, 2008. Issue 2

and the unknown, as if they present a mystery to be solved.

### My Family Archives

During my first year of college I would go to my grandmother's house once a week. Almost ritually after lunch, I would search through drawers and closets, looking for I-don't-know-what-kind-of-secrets or curious objects that would keep me entertained while she napped. One day I found a bag with my grandfather's cameras and hundreds of negatives from the mid 20th century. My grandfather had passed away years before but every week when I put the key in the keyhole, I hoped he would still be there, waiting to welcome me in. Finding his treasure of cameras and photos created a new emotional bond between us; the photographic documents he created of our family history were artifacts of the past, and yet they ignited and illuminated my memory of him. The tangible quality of all these photos and negatives sliding between my fingers somehow added to the disorienting feeling that my memory of my grandfather and my family was not fixed or stable at all; instead, these memories were inextricably linked to the present and my changing perceptions of them.

I have spent 4 years scanning these negatives with my father, putting together an archive, arranging them by date and place. They are black-and-white photographs from the 1940's, 50's, and the 60's, snapshots from a middle-class family living in Valencia (on Spain's Mediterranean coast) during Franco's fascist dictatorship. Some characters appear repeatedly throughout each decade, while others appear and then disappear depending on births and deaths in the family. Some of those people portrayed, like my

father, are still alive, but because it has been at least 50 years since these pictures were taken, they seem to belong to a different life and world, and there is surely a distance in time. When I look at my family albums, I am continually astonished at the mundanity of many of the images, the continuance of daily life regardless of the larger political backdrop. I want to embody those images. When I see a man diving into the water, a kid making sand castles, a woman resting in the shade under a tree on a hot summer day I think: “I want to be them!” “I want to be there!” and mostly “I want to belong there”.

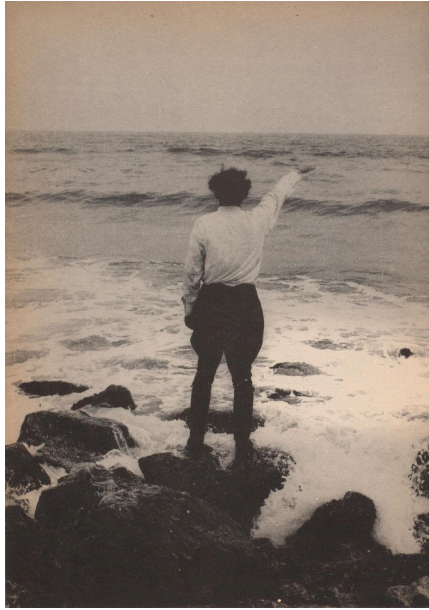
Some people think photography is written in past tense. This is what I believe: It allows us to live two lives. The first one in the past and the second one in the future, allowing us the certainty that we can travel in time to those places we have never visited. Photography allows me to live the other lives, to know better those who are gone, to be introduced to those I’ve never met, and to be reunited with those I feel like I’ve met. I aim to deconstruct my family albums to understand my family genealogy and my own relationship to those characters, to reach a source of self-knowledge and figure out what I am in relation to them.

And yet this temporal distance is so acute it has the power to transform me from family member to external observer. The distanced observer I have become is intrigued by how banal daily life could exist in such a political setting after the civil war. The aftermath of 40 years of the dictatorship has generated much controversy, not only in terms of official, public memory about what and how to remember, but also in a more private plane, in the families. During the war (1936-1939), the country was divided in two, the Republican faction (democratic, named Republican for supporting the Spanish Second Republic, in opposition to a monarchic form of government) and the Nationalist



or rebel faction (fascist). My family lived in Valencia, which was republican. My great-grandfather was a military doctor who spent the three years of the war in a hospital train going back and forth from Madrid to Valencia transporting wounded soldiers. After the war was over he was sent to prison by the fascists. Many years later, he was released from prison, but was denied the right to practice as a doctor. During 4 decades, the Spanish forcibly learnt to silence a pain; they learnt to live under repression. My family, like any other, is full of secrets and of everything left unsaid. My father does not want to remember that the last time he saw his grandfather standing was at his communion, physically devastated from the years spent in prison. A tacit agreement not to remember was established in Spain after Franco's death in 1975. To document something is to give it power, all the authority of "reality" that photography confers. The political context is then, if not deliberately left out, ignored when putting together snapshots. This is a symptom of the desire to remove the power of fascist regime from the domestic setting, the private realm in which the family retains some control, even when living under a dictatorship.

Many artists have revisited the era of their parents' generation, using it as a reference point to map out the context of their own origins, but also to create a personal and autonomous world in reaction to that inheritance. We find an example in Anselm Kiefer's *Occupations* (1969), a provocative series of portraits of the artist making the Nazi salute wearing military clothing, in different historic locations in Europe. These photographs would not be published until 1975 and were certainly controversial due to the inter-generational conflict in Germany regarding how to remember, and what, of the country's recent history.



Anselm Kiefer's *Occupations* (1969)

Older generations say that those who were born in Spain after 1975 had a pampered childhood, in comparison to the scarcities of the generation right before, during the dictatorship. I am part of a generation of Spanish artists who have been given *everything*. My generation's overall well-being within a stable democracy, in comparison to the previous generations' privations caused by political upheaval, reminds us that we who visit the past, do so as mere spectators.

#### Calpe 1956

Three years ago I was looking at some negatives my father had just scanned and sent me. I had not started working with this source material yet. Flicking through some images I saw one that really drew me in. It captures the precise moment in which a man

stretches his arms in the air, diving into the water from a rocky area. I called my dad to ask him who that mysterious man was, who for one moment flew over the Mediterranean Sea. We cannot see his face; only his back. There are pictures of my grandfather taking self-portraits with his younger brother before and after that one, wearing the same swimming suit as this person's, so my father and I agreed he must be my grandfather's brother, a peculiar person who spent many years living abroad and whom I never met. But we do not know the man's identity for sure. I like thinking the diver is no one, that he could be anyone.

Since the very first moment I saw it, I was obsessed with this picture, with this man that merges with water. The title of the film roll it belongs to is "Calpe 1956". This reference became for me a symbol for the entire family archive. It is an homage to it. I would write it insistently almost to invoke that image and that time in a gesture of longing for that time I never experienced. This single photograph encompasses two recurrent aspects in my family albums: summer vacations by the sea and the 1950's. At the time that I saw this photograph, I was thinking a lot about what graffiti means: to create an alter-ego, to choose a name, to tag that name in public spaces. Although I had quit graffiti a couple of years before, I started tagging again with that, *Calpe 1956*. Rather than using a standard name to tag, which is often pretty generic and repetitive, I decided to use a reference to a place (Calpe, a beach town near Valencia) and a date, now unrecoverable in the past (1956). In spite of its specificity, it is nevertheless more elusive than any random stereotypical graffiti name; it appears to be a tangible trace to follow but it does not lead the person who reads it anywhere. At that time, people who read Calpe 1956 would ask me about its meaning, "What happened in Calpe in 1956?"

Probably many things happened, but I know a man was photographed diving into the water on a sunny summer morning. This photograph is the proof. *Calpe 1956* has also made it to my paintings and my studio walls several times with variations on dates.



Original image of *Calpe 1956*



*Picture of my great uncle, Diego Tinaut whom my father and I agreed must be the mysterious diver*



*Calpe 1956 (2015) and Der Traum, Calpe (2015)*



View of my studio in Valencia (2015)

My desire to animate this image, attempting to give continuity to that precise moment my grandfather's camera captures, led me to make a piece based on it for my Candidacy Show in April of 2016. *Calpe 1956* is formed by six images joined together in

a single 18 ft x 28 inches print. Part of this piece hangs rolled up on top of a wall so that it is not possible to see the whole sequence. The images simulate what seems like 6 stills of a man diving into the sea. By cropping out the single image of the diver, and repeating it in six different locations within the static frame, I created the illusion of motion. This sequence, while appearing to follow a linear narrative, is all fiction. The action of the image does not resolve and this character does not get closer to the water in the next frame. There are only framing changes in the content. As the viewer's eyes scan the images one by one, from top to bottom, it is easy to notice that my attempt to animate this image is too simple to be believable or real. Like the viewer, I do not have access to the previous and the following moments before and after this one photo was taken. I attempt to materialize how I imagine witnessing that action, and split the image I picture in my head, into separate frames. The piece is a record of the fact that my mind creates images in the same way that a film camera does, materializing time into something physical by dividing motion into separate frames.



Installation view of *Calpe 1956* (2016)



*Seascape, Valencia 1956*

Just as with the picture of the mysterious and adventurous diver, I marveled at this image the moment I saw it. The damage and deterioration in the original negative with their particular scratches and scrapes, together with the film's grain, make it a bit blurred. The composition is simple, almost like two color fields; a body of water and a sky that touch each other and blend in the horizon, far off in the frame. There's no visible shore in this picture, neither of the land that the photographer stood on to take the photo, nor the far shore that eventually must be on the other side of all that water. The absence of any solid ground suggests that there's simply no room for land; the water that fits inside the camera's frame is only a small part of what must surely be infinite. Other pictures from the same film roll provide me with some clues of where it may have been taken, a cliff area near Valencia.





This endless seascape inspired my piece *Untitled (Patria elegida)* which was shown at my Candidacy Show, in April 2016.



Installation view of *Untitled (Patria elegida)* (2016)

*Untitled (Patria elegida)* is an image of the open sea printed double sided on fabric, then mounted as a flag pole. The title could be translated in English as *Untitled (Chosen homeland)*. In this piece I appropriate the use of flags as symbols of national identity by using that signifier together with a photograph from my own family archive. With this flag I reflect on my condition of displacement in the USA, and on the distinction between given and chosen homeland. Simple symbols that are instantly recognizable, flags not only represent large groups of individuals, they also have the power to claim land, creating a tiny piece of country wherever they are planted. In contrast, my flag is an image of the sea, understanding the sea as opposite to land. The sea is a starting point, a possibility, where solid ground ends. With this flag, I do not claim land, nor even water. I claim the importance of my and my family's relationship to the Mediterranean

Sea and its consequent history in the construction of my identity. With this flag, I pay tribute to this fluid representation of the homeland I choose to have, to the sea I would always long for in the cold days of my childhood, growing up in a city in the middle of country and travelling very often to the Valencian coast to visit my family. It is important for me to title this piece in Spanish, my first language. Although one can learn second languages, and even learn to think and feel in those new languages over time, some words seem more charged in one's mother tongue. The mother tongue feels particularly important to use when referring to origin, to a place one feels bonded to. Rather than a statement of patriotism or pride for one's country, this project emphasizes the malleable meaning of *Patria*, and chooses to fill that symbol with a personal definition of it. My homeland (and my home) is the countless days by the Mediterranean Sea, inseparable from my family memories. Now that I live in Richmond, so far from "my" sea, I fool myself every time I hear a train horn sound. I want to believe it is a ship horn and that I am close to the harbor, taking a walk across the breakwater with my siblings after a beach day when we were kids.



Installation view of *Untitled (Patria elegida)* (2016)

Everything's mine but just on loan,  
Nothing for the memory to hold,  
Though mine as long as I look

-Wisława Szymborska

### **Memory and identity. Construction of the past and the self**

Identity reconfigures and reframes every time you are dislocated. In my work I “return” to places I never visited, travelling distances that are not miles but years, creating an access key to this world that ended in the 1950’s. I reflect on the conditions of my existence created by my current location and era in relation to the images I work with. I have been using the same source of images for two years now, and the archival materials function as a point of departure for self-discovery in the present-tense. I realize that I’ve skipped an intermediate generation between the archive and myself: my parents. All the work made these past two years sprang from impulses that were partially escapist. It grew from a not-very-courageous attempt to unfold my family’s history, driven by an absolute desire to belong there, trying to see if I the person I am could fit in through some of the cracks I have created. When I started working with the archive, it seemed easier to deal with people who only exist in images today than with my parents, who are still alive. “Is this an escape to the past and from the past?” I asked myself. I think about the poem “Shadow Place” by the Spanish poet Ana Rossetti<sup>10</sup>

Sometimes, yes, sometimes, memory – clearer than the January moon- watches,  
Attracts, rescues, and does not allow  
The past to pass by

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<sup>10</sup> Rossetti, Ana, “Shadow Place” in *Incessant Beauty*

I am aware that I have deconstructed my family archive as I've pleased, keeping only that which interested me; creating images that are at once accessible and elusive, queering them, erasing part of the characters' identities to make them more ambiguous, more abstract, less idyllic by that generation's definition of that term. The appeal of this source material lies in its very distance from my own life. This irretrievability allows me to bypass the uncertainties and frustrations in my relationships with my living family members, moving instead towards a version of a utopian resolution. In her book *The Future of Nostalgia* Svetlana Boym talks about "longing for continuity in a fragmented world"<sup>11</sup>, echoing my own fantasy. Linda Hutcheon & Mario J. Valdés in their article "*Irony, nostalgia and the postmodern*" say that "nostalgic distancing sanitizes as it selects, making the past feel complete, stable, coherent, safe from the unexpected and the untoward, from accident or betrayal – in other words, making it so very unlike the present."<sup>12</sup> This statement resonates with my own unconscious impulses that led me to skip my parents' generation when investigating my family albums, and create this work in another country 4000 miles away from my home of origin and choice. María Isabel de Castro and Lucía Montejo in their book on literature in the Spanish transition to democracy *Tendencias y procedimientos en la novela española actual (1975 – 1988)* say that: "Sometimes the past is explored not only to find one's own identity and to give meaning to the present, but also to create an autonomous world, personal, which its reference point is located in one's inner being."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Boym, Svetlana, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Paperback, 2003)

<sup>12</sup> Hutcheon, Linda and Valdés, Mario J., *Irony, nostalgia and the postmodern*, (University of Toronto, 2000)

<sup>13</sup> De Castro, María Isabel and Montejo, Lucía, *Tendencias y procedimientos en la novela española actual (1975 – 1988)* (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia,

These themes are explored in the work of the Spanish novelist Soledad Puértolas (Zaragoza, Spain 1947), whose books capture the mundanity and slipperiness of living. The characters in her books do not seem to be anyone in particular, and sometimes we do not learn their names until the very end of the story, if we ever find them out at all. Even her protagonists seem like secondary characters in a larger picture, trying to understand their relationship to others within the disconcerting world surrounding them, attempting to make sense of their lives. “These characters have a unique need for memory, because only memory allows them to return home”<sup>14</sup>. These characters engage in self-reflection and introspection that show the capriciousness of memory; this disorientation is the action that drives the narrative, rather than relying on a more conventional narrative arc of spectacular external events. In her characters’ lives, memory is the key to the articulation of self-knowledge; it involves recalling, constructing, interpreting, and shaping. Memory is a site of possibility in which to find subjective meaning; it is both a refuge and a burden.

I see myself reflected in Puertolas’ unsettled characters. Fragmenting the images within my family albums becomes a very fertile ground to create fictional narratives tied to a factual component, just as Puertolas uses moments of introspection to replace narrative markers of action. By playing with the fluidity and fragmentation of the still image, I create points of fracture within the archive. These fractures provide just enough space for the foundations of new narratives. To quote Tamara Townsend: “Memory cannot settle all questions in the search for meaning, but when meaning derives from

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1990)

<sup>14</sup> Townsend, Tamara, *Memory and Identity in the narratives of Soledad Puértolas* (Lexinton Books, 2014)

personal experience, memory helps characters to navigate the murky river of life.”<sup>15</sup>

Another female writer who has influenced me and the way I inhabit the world around me is Marguerite Duras (Saigon 1914 – Paris 1996), whose novels and plays are full nonlinear narratives. Combining fiction and autobiography to create an undefinable genre, her fictional world is grounded in the space between contradictions, where fragmentation builds an unstable unity. She exploits her inner self; emptying herself of personal experience, she reinvents and renews herself on the page. Her adolescence in the old Indochina provides a backdrop for many of her works. She returns and revisits this past life of hers, like a person who gets on a train and gets off a few stops ahead, already in the past. She insistently rewrites the same stories decades later, with different approaches to them. Intertwining reality, fiction and invented memories, her work conceives of entangled construction of the self that seems more reflective of lived experience than just one of the stories alone. This accumulation of perspectives and sequencing of memories feels cinematographic; she jumps from one scene to another like a camera. These scenes are a collection of stills. Hélène Cixous described her as a *blind who sees*. “She has a sense of touch that creates visibility”<sup>16</sup> she said. The images she creates are so tangible, so physical. In her novel *Blue Eyes Black Hair*, she tells us about the blue of the sea, calmed, framed by a window in a claustrophobic hotel room where two strangers cry and talk night after night. A cigarette consumes itself silently, forgotten on a bedside table. Its smoke travels the room, like a plague, like the idea of death that barks in the protagonist’s head. There are many inconclusive gaps in Duras’ narratives, echoing the incoherence of lived experience. Her works remove the

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<sup>15</sup> Idem

<sup>16</sup> Helene Cixous, À propos de Marguerite Duras, interview with Michel Foucault. *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault* 89, 1975

expectation of resolution found in more conventional narratives; there is no need for her to share too much, and nor is it possible. Within those infinite silences in her pages breathes the uncertainty of life, finding a solitude that is nevertheless shared between the author and the reader. This uncertainty is explored in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, whose protagonists are known only as *she* and *he*, withholding precise identification in favor of a more elusive intimacy. Some topics are recurrent and fundamental in her novels, such as the lacked but longed for maternal love, the perplexity of life, and the feeling of loss. When she writes, she does not speak; she rather murmurs a stream of consciousness that cuts after every paragraph like a succession of images in her (and our) head. Michael Foucault coined the term *memory without memories*, perfectly describing the consciousness from which Duras' writing arises. A process of forgetting is activated in her work; it is a transmittal from a consciousness that erases its own traces as it streams by. Experiences are forgotten only to be later remembered from a different perspective, in a different way, and from a different place. This process allows recreation and reconstruction to cohabit with what we are told is real.

### Photobooth Works

The invention of modern photo booths was central to in the process of democratization and popularity of the photographic image in the early twenties. It is a format that exists halfway between professional photography and an amateur practice. It allows people to take their own picture without the need of a professional photographer or a photo studio, becoming both the subject and creator. The resulting

image has highly consistent formal characteristics: the limited space, the background (either a curtain or a wall), the standard flash lighting that never seems correct, the specific portrait framing of the subject/creator's head and shoulders, and the complete exclusion of any superfluous content, creates a precise image, used for the rapid identification of the subject. Yet for all its efficiency in creating an easily legible identity, it is also an accumulative and performative medium. The absence of a photographer telling you how to pose gives you the freedom to perform the appearance or image of yourself you want to present yourself as, in just four seconds. The principle of succession creates a sequential narrative to follow similar to that of a film negative. Its fascination relies on the solitude embedded within its process, and the idea of *extimidad*, an untranslatable term from Spanish that refers to people's desire to publicly exhibit intimacy. "Photo booths are private spaces inserted in public spaces."<sup>17</sup> Its particular liminal qualities of public/private display are further reinforced by the fact of its chemical process; because it is printed directly on positive paper, which creates no negatives, the photograph becomes a singular precious object.

For the past few years, I have been working on an ongoing project that simply consists of having my picture taken wherever I encounter a photo booth, documenting and mapping out my movements through space. The pattern of my movements is both repetitive, such as my many visits to photo booths in downtown Valencia, and random, such as the photo booth I visited only once in Berlin. The process also documents physical changes in me over time: different haircuts, different outfits, and different moods I happen to be in when I chance upon a photo booth. Last year I began to

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<sup>17</sup> Vega Pérez, Celia, *Orígenes del fotomatón en España (1888-1929)*, Universidad Complutense de Madrid. October 2014

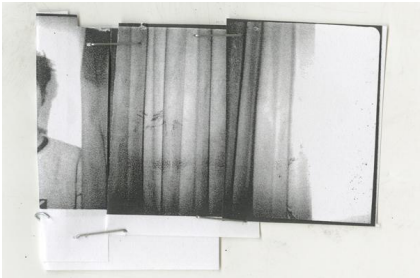


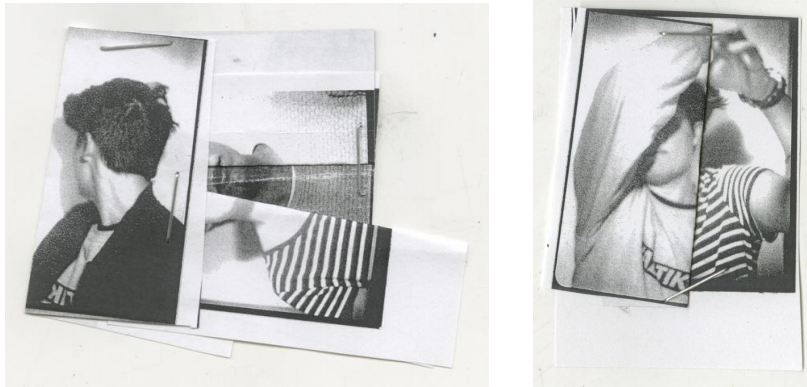
experiment with ways to expand the capacities of the photo booth's highly constricted format; I would get my picture taken holding other photo booth snapshots, create short movies using its additive quality, or just use it as a regular still camera to photograph objects I would stick inside the booth:



Inside of photo booth in Richmond, where I hung other photobooth strips to have them photographed.

I recently made some collages based on different photo booth photos of myself, exploring the progress of time visible on the human face, the infinite mutations in one's body, and the nature of self-portraiture:





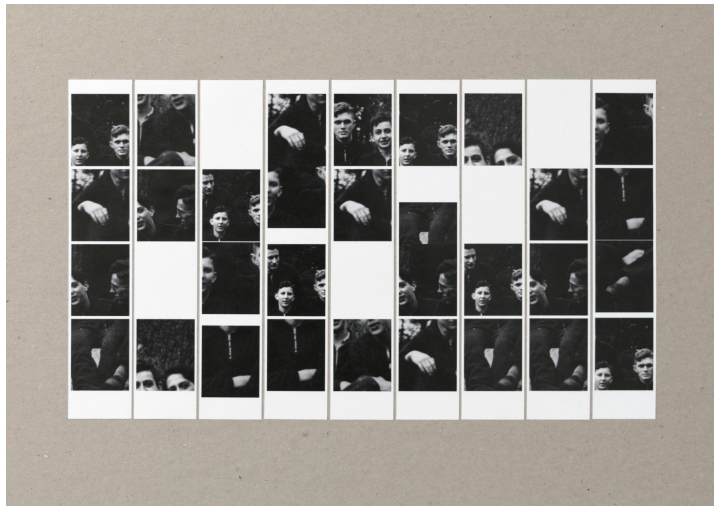
Oscar Muñoz (Popayán, Colombia, 1951) is another artist exploring the possibilities and limitations of the representation of the self through photography. *Game of Probabilities* is a twelve-part work which shows multiple configurations of the artist's portrait. He combines black-and-white with color ID photographs, taken through a number of years, highlighting the physical transformation these photos document. This work circumvents the impossibility of photography to archive more than one precise moment by manually collaging them together to generate a compendium of a singular self.



My piece *Possibility of a group portrait* continues this exploration of the potential within this deconstruction, a signifier of the multiple ways of looking at a thing. In 2016, I made a body of work based on an image found in a flea market in Munich a few years before. A group of adolescents casually pose while sitting on a bench, wearing what looks like a track suit school uniform. Some of them look distracted, focusing on the other kids in the shot, while others look directly into the eye of the photographer in front of them. This direct gaze transforms the viewer from distanced observer to the role of the spectator, not visible in the frame but part of the scene nevertheless. Borrowing the precise framing and sequencing of a photo booth image, I deconstructed this image to later reassemble it by pieces. This fragmentation creates an analytic gaze that annuls the sense of camaraderie floating in the air, typical of those “boys’ clubs” that are so common in schools, but which often seems illusory or repressive. Replacing the unbroken picture of idyllic childhood, I assemble a new image that consists of fragments, black gaps, and repetition. With this treatment, the field of any image is not stable; the distance between these boys and the viewer changes as I crop and re-size the fragments, revealing a close-up of a pair of hands or the full-body shot of the boy next to him, dis-orienting the viewer in space. Through this work, I propose that the sum of the parts is never enough to get the totality of the experience.



Above: original image Bottom: Possibility of a group portrait, 2016



## Touch

I started thinking about my thesis project around the same time the United States presidential election was happening in late October and early November last year. During that time, my feelings and those of my friends were shared: a tiny inkling of hope within a huge fear of the political and social upheaval that awaited us. It was hard not to lose our minds in such a tumultuous and hopeless state. For my thesis project, I wanted to make something significant and ambitious, a project in conscious dialogue with the city that eventually and almost incidentally became my home. During the time of the election I was thinking a lot about public space, particularly the space my body occupies in the specific city I inhabit, and what it means to be part of a society.

One particular use of public space in America I find is the constant bombardment of aggressive advertisements in display units spread all over the city, particularly those of advertising law firms. With slogans such as “Find Out How Much Your Injury is Worth”, they entice passersby with fortunes won by suing your boss (and ruining their lives in the passing). As though scars could be quantified in dollars, the United States’ advertising strategies seem to embody the rawest and most violent facet of capitalism.

Graffiti is probably one of the most direct ways of interacting with the urban landscape. It claims space, a space we are told is public but that is nevertheless not ours. My graffiti background informs how I perceive my relationship to the cities I have lived in, for longer or shorter periods of time. There is something strategic about graffiti writers’ moving through the city. Tags, flops and pieces spread out through the streets

around corners like street poles or bus stops. They serve as reference points to navigate the urban map. Having these ideas in mind, I first thought I would advertise an image on a billboard, employing a divergent logic to these usually commercial platforms. However, billboard locations are not particularly compelling in Richmond. They are designed to capture a driver's attention and do not seem to interact much with passersby. The unaffordable cost of these billboards too had me consider buses' billboards as a potential option. These buses billboards, moreover, fulfill better the function of image dissemination across the city, travelling through several neighborhoods each day.

My primary concern, when deciding on an image for the bus billboard, was that a diverse and heterogeneous public could experience the work. I eventually selected the image below, legible yet not over-determined, so that each viewer could project their own memories or ideas upon it.



The image presented is simple and direct; in it, two hands touch. We do not know whose hands those are or where they are coming from, only that they find each other. This image represents a moment of intimate connection between two people, a consoling gesture of touch. Given the political and social moment it seems crucial and necessary to reclaim a gesture like this that urges solidarity, and reaffirms the belief in the possibility of understanding and coexistence between people.

This image is decontextualized from my family albums. In the original photograph, we see a woman (my grandmother) sitting on a chair with a half-smile on her face and both hands resting on her lap. She holds her husband's gaze who looks back at her behind a camera, three feet away from her. This image's particular context and origin are abstracted when cropped out. The new image I created can be interpreted in different ways. It can be read as one person's hands touching each other, in a gesture of holding oneself together, self-recognition, and self-protection of one's

body. Another way of interpreting the image is as a moment of connection, two people's hands closing the gap between their bodies. The flexibility of the image's legibility allows for the audience to project themselves in the space of the image, whether it is the hand being touched or the touching hand. After so many months working with this cropped image, I find it difficult to relate to its original context. The whole image now seems rigid and artificially stiff, as though my grandmother's whole body is a prosthesis for the hands, which now, in the cropped image, have a life of their own.



Original image of my grandmother (1955)

The cropped touching hands' image was installed on a public transit bus in Richmond and has been travelling through town for a five-week period. During this time, while riding the bus, I have been able to explore the city, going to neighborhoods I had never been to and interacting with people outside the VCU community. The realization



of this project, particularly the unexpected conversations with other passengers, has been transformative. I am white and privileged, but I am also a foreign woman (Spanish) in this country at a time when anti-woman and anti-immigrant forces have access to unprecedented media technologies to spew their hate-speech, as well as renewed access to presidential power. I am “the other” that these passengers and bus drivers engaged in a conversation, as we shared this intimate moving space of the public bus.



Touch travelling through Forest Hill (top) and Oak Grove (bottom)

After riding the bus several times, I realized it was not possible to bring the essence of this project into the gallery in a direct and literal way. I refused the idea of showing standard documentation of it, because I did not believe the display of an illustrative photograph could encapsulate the whole experience of what was happening on the streets. No photograph could accurately convey the shared experience with these Richmond residents. This project was conceived of as a public art project but that quality changed as soon as it started traveling the city. The bus passengers' lives continued running their courses day after day, going to work, running errands, going back home. These hands stopped being "Art" and became something closer to a backdrop, quietly inserted into the landscapes of people's everyday lives. Maybe that is the consolation of this piece, providing a fortuitous encounter with something that will not threaten us, demand from us, or impose on us. Instead, the image simply exists, silently present, on the margins of extraordinarily regular people's lives. This simple, non-intrusive way of occupying space projects a desire for co-existence, a safer space and the possibility of healing.

The piece I presented at the Anderson Gallery is a fragment of the reality happening on the streets. On a wall, a sentence reads:

"A woman inquires about the image's origin to see if there is room for her in those hands".

Just as *Touch* transformed the commercial platform of the bus billboard into a non-commodified backdrop, I wanted to make a similar gesture of subversion in the gallery.

By spray-painting this sentence on the gallery wall, I borrowed from the stylistic vocabulary of graffiti, sneaking into the institutional space a gesture that was more unruly and unregulated.

I felt nervous every day I went to ride the bus because I did not want to make anyone around me uncomfortable; with my camera and my continuous getting on and off the bus, I didn't necessarily follow the commuter rhythms of the other bus riders. The very first time I rode it, something moving happened. I was sitting next to the door, in front of a woman of color in her mid-sixties who was accompanied by her husband. They were carrying some groceries and I figured they would have been running errands that morning. I was surprised and incredibly honored when she asked me what was I doing with that camera. I told her the image traveling with us on the side of the bus was my thesis project and that it was a photograph of two touching hands. Curious and intrigued by my answer, she asked about the image's origin, saying: "What's the image's origin? Where does it come from?" Like me, this perfect stranger had the same impulse as I did when looking at my family albums; we both wanted to be able to belong in that image. I wanted to tell her that the origin did not matter, that the touching hands image was just there for her to see it on her way back home but in that moment of unmediated intimacy between strangers, I could not articulate the feeling of kinship I felt between us. We exchanged some other words and then said goodbye. I was certain we would not see each other again. She got off the bus a few stops later but I kept looking in her direction, even as the doors between us closed, me still in my seat inside the bus, and her outside, with her slowly-moving husband. I could see her examining those huge

black and white hands we had just been talking about, confirming that the story I had told her was true. She does not know that our short conversation was a moment of intimate connection for me; despite our apparent differences, it was a connection made spontaneously.

This encounter became a symbol of the experience of riding the bus with Richmond residents. It became the main, and almost only, element in my thesis show. In the installation, the sentence is written both in Spanish and English. The sentence was originally felt, thought, and articulated in Spanish one night I was writing down some thoughts following my experience of riding the bus. I could not forget the look in that woman's eyes as she asked me about the image's origin. "Una mujer me pregunta por el origen de la imagen, para ver si hay cabida para ella en esas manos", I repeated insistently in my head. The sentence inspired a longer text written in both languages and printed on a thin newsprint that had the hands image on the other side, continuing its dissemination to more Richmond homes:

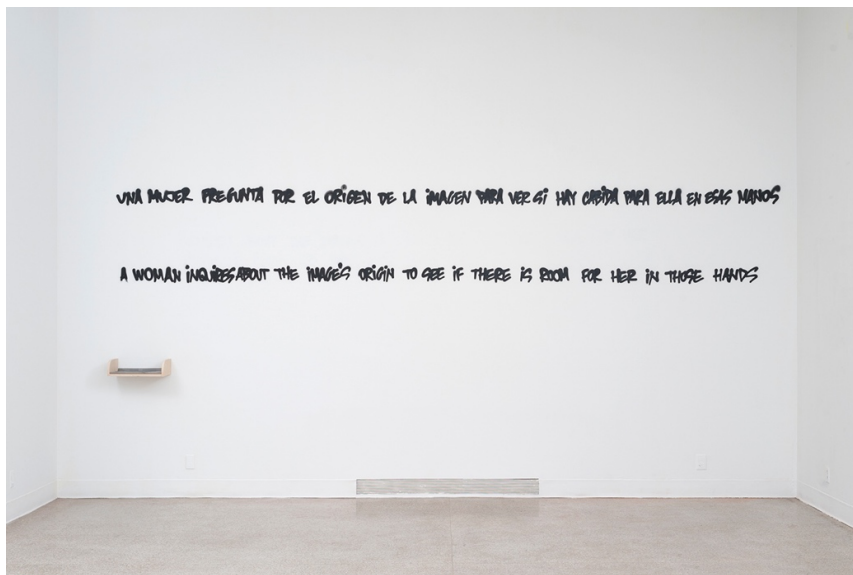
*On a bus two hands touch.*

*The Richmond public transportation network has a fleet of 150 buses that transport hundreds of people of different classes, ages and genders. Every morning I leave the house searching for one bus that bears a black and white image of two hands touching—a moment of intimate connection. These hands neither advertise nor sell. The image's importance relies on the persistence of its gesture. I arrive at the Transit Plaza and wait for bus 266 to turn the corner. The context of this public artwork determines its meaning. It is the people who provide that context, entering a moving public space through the image of a simple embrace, which separates and connects at every stop. The bus's assigned route changes daily. I introduce myself to a different driver each day.*

*I ride the bus with her or him for a few hours, as it travels the city.*

*I peer through the image on the windows. I explore the urban landscape through the cracks between the fingers. I reevaluate my relationship to Richmond as I share the small space with the city's residents.*

*This is the essence of the project: A woman inquires about the image's origin, to see if there is room for her in those hands. I converse with a work-bound father and daughter about politics, borders, our shared fears. Every time that I ride this bus I ask myself what it means to encounter an image of two hands that touch while travelling the city.*





Installation view at the Anderson Gallery

The platform of public transportation as a vehicle for public speech was used in a project with very different intention in Spain only a month ago. A transgender rights group made a series of posters that read: “There are girls with penises and boys with vulvas. It’s as simple as that”. The ultra-catholic group HazteOír’s (Make Yourself Heard) response to this act of public advocacy was denigrating and ironic. They planned a nationwide tour throughout Spain in buses painted with the slogan: “Boys have penises, girls have vulvas. Do not be fooled. If you are born a man, you are a man. If you are woman, you will continue to be one.” Thankfully, Madrid City Council took action before it started traveling the country and the bus was ordered off the roads for breaching municipal rules on outdoor advertising. This hate campaign, rooted in intolerance and discrimination towards transgender children, was nicknamed “The bus of shame”. The president of HazteOír, arguing that the group has a right to protest against “laws of sexual indoctrination”, appealed for their right to freedom of speech and claimed the slogan on the bus states only “a fact of biology that is studied in schools”.

The group said the ban was illegal and acquired a new bus with a slightly altered slogan: “Do boys have penises? Do girls have vulvas? Do not be fooled. If you are born a man, you are a man. If you are woman, you will continue to be one.” The Mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau, made it clear that the bus would not be welcome in the city as it constituted hate speech, writing on Twitter: “In Barcelona there is no place for LGBTQ-phobic buses. We want our children to grow up in freedom and without hatred.”



Bus of the campaign that intended to travel nationwide in Spain

The organization’s intentions to “educate” people extended overseas, taking the bus to the streets of New York, one of the most liberal cities in the US. It circulated near the United Nations headquarters and midtown. The English slogan omitted the words “penis” and “vulva”, probably hoping they would get away with it. The text on the side of the bus read: “It’s biology. Boys are boys...and always will be. Girls are girls... and always will be. You can’t change sex. Respect all. Sign now to defend Freedom of Speech.” The campaign in the US was supported by the National Organization for Marriage, known for their anti-LGBTQ campaigns.

Situations of hatred like this, amplified by the results of the U.S.A 2016 presidential election, in which the republican candidate Donald Trump displayed a completely shameless attitude of misogyny, transphobia, xenophobia and almost any other kind of phobia, only strengthens my firm belief in tolerance and equality and reaffirms the life-or-death importance of these values more than ever. The bus campaign that was mounted by HazteOír, defended by their promoters as a “creative project”, threatens human dignity and the physical safety of transgender and non-gender-conforming people. Thankfully, the organization HazteOír is a minority in Spain, and the Madrid City Council reacted fast to it, recognizing the violence of its message. The bus that travels the city of Richmond, Virginia with an image of two touching hands acquires new meaning in relation to the context of this other bus envisioned back home. The embrace of “the other” is emphasized; it is a symbol of solidarity.





## **Women's Hands in my Family Albums**

*Women's Hands in my Family Albums* is an archival project I started to think about at the time of the 2016 presidential election too. I had been looking at my grandfather's negatives for some time when I began to focus my attention to those photographs that included portraits of women. These images sparked my interest in exploring the representation of women in the recent history of photography, particularly in relation to the context of my family's albums.

Like the other images I've worked with for the past two years, the political context is that of a middle class family in Valencia in the 1950's and 1960's, living their everyday life under the shadow of a fascist dictatorship. Francisco Franco's National-Catholicism reversed the secularization process that had taken place under the Second Republic (1931-1935) when the autarchy was established in 1939 after the civil war ended. Franco's regime constituted an enormous setback in terms of women's rights and dignity; the progressive laws established by the Second Republic were declared void. The model of the traditional Catholic family, based on the total subordination of the wife to the husband, was enforced by repressive persecution and systematic humiliation, reducing the women's private sphere to housework, family care and motherhood. Women's access to the public spheres of education and professional life were also abolished or restricted. Simultaneously, hypermasculinity and patriotism were extolled.

Sección Femenina (*Women's Section*) was the women's branch of the Falange Española, a fascist political party that ruled the country's social morals. Its founder, José Antonio Primo de Ribera, was in opposition to women developing their creative talent, declaring: "Women never discover anything. They lack creative talent, reserved by God for virile intellects. [Women] can do no more than interpret what men present to us."<sup>18</sup>

Sección Femenina's propaganda taught women to look down on themselves, no matter how intimate the interaction:

"If your husband asks you for unusual sexual practices, be obedient and do not complain. If he wants to have you, submit humbly, always keeping in mind that his satisfaction is more important than a woman's. When he reaches climax, a soft moan from you is enough to show any source of pleasure you may have experienced."<sup>19</sup>



*Guide of the good spouse* in *Revista Para la Mujer (Magazine For Women in English)* used by Sección Femenina to indoctrinate and suppress women in the 1940's. It reads: 11 rules to keep your husband happy. Be the wife he always dreamed of.

<sup>18</sup> Constenla, Tereixa, "Con un gemido basta," *El País*, May 10, 2009. National edition

<sup>19</sup> Idem



9th rule. Listen to him. You might have a dozen important things to tell him, but when he gets home it is not the best moment to talk about them. Let him talk first, remember his topics are more important than yours.

This repressive atmosphere was the rule. And yet, despite the pervasive propaganda that attempted to insinuate into every aspect of a person's life, with a goal of total control over each individual's thoughts and actions, there was a man on the opposite end of this reality— my grandfather, a man who I had the pleasure to know for the first 14 years of my life.

I remember seeing him wake up early to make breakfast for his wife and grandchildren whenever we visited them in Valencia, or seeing him do the dishes after lunch, day after day. He was soft-spoken, caring and respectful. I feel thankful I never witnessed a single moment of machismo in that house. I have seen my family's history in decades of negatives and there is one thing that remains constant throughout the decades: the devotion this man felt for his wife, plainly evident in his documentation of their life together. Of all the things a man could take pictures of, he chooses to take them of his family and his love for them. His photographs are clear evidence that my

grandfather's moral values were antagonistic to the fascist imposition.



Self portrait of my grandparents (circa 1950)

My grandmother was able to get a degree in business management and worked all her life. She was also an amateur painter, and he was always very supportive of her creative talent, despite Primo de Ribera's poisonous opinion of women's creative aptitudes. There are pictures of her painting, writing letters, bathing my dad, reading, travelling, etc. and also many pictures of other women close to the family, such as relatives or my grandmother's friends. Who takes a picture of a woman ironing in the Spain of the 1950's? My grandfather does.



Woman ironing (1955)



My grandmother writing letters (1955)

Revisiting these 1950s artifacts while simultaneously experiencing the US election season of 2016, the commonalities between Franco's regime and Trump's grab for power were particularly evident, and I felt an urgent desire to rescue these images and relocate value in what matters to me here: women. In these new cropped images, the viewer's gaze is focused on the sense of touch. Idiosyncratic moments of labor,

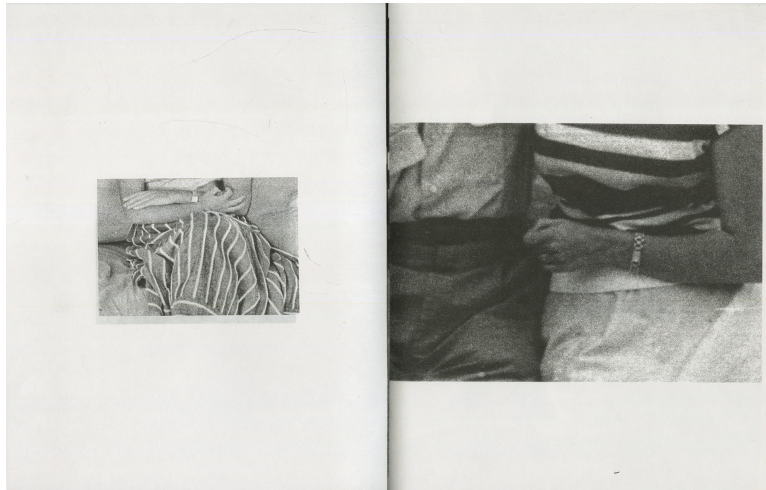
leisure, maternity, and rest are hinted at, but by cropping the image and removing the context, the viewer is asked again and again to simply focus on a moment of touch, a visceral reversal of Helene Cixous' statement: "She has a sense of touch that creates visibility" when talking about Marguerite Duras. Here the sense of touch creates an open-ended visibility; it is my grandmother's hands if not her friends' but they could be anyone's<sup>20</sup>. They can be my hands, my mother's, my sister's, my friend's, they can be my father's, my brother's, and I believe, they are also my grandfather's. His hands and his eyes are present in those images in the way he interacts with the subject.

This collection of images materialized in a 32 page long risograph publication of 100 signed and numbered copies. It was published by GenderFail, a zine press that focuses on the dissemination of queer and trans people and people of color.

Women's Hands in my Family Albums encapsulates the idea of extending touch through dissemination. There is manual labor in the making of it, folding almost 1000 folds, one by one, to put together this publication that has gotten to many homes in the US and also in Europe. There is also a sense of touch in the viewer's hands, flicking through the pages. Many different hands touch and caress the anonymous hands on the pages with their particular risograph texture. It is, again, a moment of intimate connection.

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<sup>20</sup> Helene Cixous, À propos de Marguerite Duras, interview with Michael Foucault. Cahiers Renaud-Barrault 89, 1975



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