

PABLO HELGUERA

**STRANGE
OASIS**

JANUARY 31 to MARCH 14

MMXV

Société Civile pour l'Enterrement de
PENSÉES MORTES

(2013)



In 2013, I was invited by the alternative space R ctangle in Brussels to develop a project. The simple space located near downtown Brussels holds a one-day exhibition, accompanied by a billboard that is on view for a few weeks.

My research on the name of the street where R ctangle is located, Emile F ron, led me to the learning about this Belgian liberal thinker who founded a newspaper titled *La Libre Pens e*.

On the eve of the First World War, there were no fewer than 250 rationalist societies scattered throughout the country, including nearly 25,000 members. The Belgian rationalists, or freethinkers, exerted a considerable influence on left-leaning parties (liberals and socialists) during the first decades of the 20th Century. Freethinkers essentially campaigned on behalf of the autonomy of human consciousness and toward secularization of the state and of civil society, including schools and hospitals. Freethinkers sometimes went so far as to replace the rituals of the Church, creating a new secular “sacred”, such as the “festival of youth.” This spirit was implemented most practically in their civil funerals, which promoted incineration and offered a resting place for individuals outside of organized religion.

The project created a social network inspired by the ideas and rituals of free thinkers and focused on burying and warding the vestiges of thought of ideologies, scientific theories, and philosophies that could be deemed superseded, questionable or failed. A special “crypt” contained a number of urns guarding the ashes of these ideas and was only accessible to those who accept to join the society, taking responsibility to become collective guardians of the ashes of one of the dead ideas. The project included a publication inspired on the 19th century Belgian rationalist newspaper *La Libre Pens e*, which was available only on printed form and for the exclusive use of those who agreed to join the society.

KNOXVILLE

Summer of 2015

(2014)



This work was produced as a result to a visit to Knoxville, Tennessee, in the spring of 2014.

Knoxville: Summer of 1915 is a prose poem by James Agee that was given greater notoriety by American composer Samuel Barber when he wrote a musical piece for voice and orchestra using this text.

Agee was a writer, journalist and poet born and raised in Knoxville. His most famous work is his autobiographical book *A Death in the Family* (1957). Agee's text is, in essence, a bittersweet family reverie, reconstructing a moment in which his life was normal and his childhood unfolding with the expected happiness. 1915 marked the last summer where his family lived together; in 1916 Agee's father died in a car accident.

The book starts with a famous paragraph:

We are talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville, Tennessee in the time that I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child. It was a little bit mixed sort of block, fairly solidly lower middle class, with one or two juts apiece on either side of that. The houses corresponded: middle-sized gracefully fretted wood houses built in the late nineties and early nineteen hundreds, with small front and side and more spacious back yards, and trees in the yards.

Knoxville: Summer of 2015 is a series of photographs with a text that considers our location in time and the ways that we project ourselves in relation to time. The photographs are contemporary representations of the actual street where Agee grew up, where he roamed as a child and lived with his family.

As someone who abandoned his country of origin, I am all too familiar with the experience of returning to the place we left — in my case more than 25 years ago, in Mexico City. There is a strong sense of familiarity in the process of return— a happiness of seeing the familiar dwellings again, colors, and smells, and yet an unspeakable sadness for not being able to recover that which has been lost—primarily, the daily life with one's family and friends, the everyday routine, and the need of living in that location. The streets and locations portrayed in Knoxville, in this case, thus become surrogate locations to reflect on the distance of time and place and the impossibility to recover and recreate the kind of life and experiences that once took place there.

The narrative passage from

Knoxville, Summer of 2015

I am speaking of the summer of 2015, in Knoxville, which as of this writing has not happened yet, in which I shall disguise myself successfully as an adult who wrote about being successfully disguised as a child in the summer of 1915 in Knoxville.

That summer evening in that city and time where I never lived, and yet I disguise to be a time a hundred years later from which I remember a past a hundred years ago, but which under a successful disguise it could look like this summer evening from which I write where I can hear my daughter singing a song from her bedroom as she plays with her toys engaged in pretend play of princesses and castles.

I am speaking of all the summers where locusts and fireflies disguise themselves as the benevolent companions of our childhood and come out after dinner, some of which we experience with our father and some of which we experience with our mother, doing a routinely and otherwise perfectly forgettable activity such as walking to the store and retaining the memory of the blue light of a sign as it shines on our father's glasses and thinking at that time that it is precisely that meaningless detail that will be the most illustrative of a time that now fades in our recollections.

But it is the smell of char-grilled meat which takes us to a summer day in an amusement park where our heart was broken for the first time, or the evening rain seen through wooden blinds of our bedroom that leads to a very green garden as the color of our rotary phone that we sat next to every

evening every summer waiting for the phone call of someone we had a crush on and who never called; and the water appeared to turn purple as did our spirit.

I am speaking of disguising ourselves as every single one of those people that lived those summers with us and who are no longer experiencing summers, or any other season anymore; who have disguised themselves successfully as ghosts.

The sweet pale light of the sun on the grass as we hear the green echoes of children playing in the distance is a disguise for art; the summers evenings of another become comfortable for us because we don't have to engage in the pain of our own, and as those buildings recede in time with every new tenant and the layering of new events and summer evenings, we slowly and successfully disappear, maybe only to be imagined and described by those a hundred years from now who may chose to wish to disguise as ourselves and imagine how it must have felt to be present at that summer evening in Knoxville in 2015.

SUITE RIVERENSE

(2014)



Suite Riverense references the cultural and linguistic border between Brazil and Latin America; in particular the region of Rio Grande do Sul, where I visited and traveled through frequently over the course of two years (2010-2011). Inhabitants on the border between Brazil and Uruguay speak a dialect known as *Portuñol Riverense*, a mixture of Portuguese and Spanish that results in new words and phrases that don't exist in either of the original languages.

Over the years I have been interested in the way in the parallel histories of Latin American countries, and the role that language has in integrating or individualizing regions. At a time where the need for communication between Portuguese and Spanish speakers often generates the pragmatics of a freeform mixture of these languages that is commonly described as “Portuñol” I partially wanted to bring attention to the fact that a more established form of this dialect already exists as a cultural reality in parts of the world. Furthermore, the existence of “invented” languages that result as hybrids is something that I find defines interdisciplinarity in the visual arts: systems of communication that merge and coalesce often out of necessity or from simple usage.

Meanings of Words

- imbaruiá [imbaru'ja] - to create confusion
- iscangaiá [iskarŋa'ja] – to dismantle
- mishuruca [mifu'ruka] — small or worthless thing
- se bandiá [se ban'dja] — to change sides
- trilegal [tɪle'ʎal] — marvelous, great
- yapa [ˈʒapa] — gift that is given along with a bought item; joke
- negaciá [neʎa'sja] — the chase of the prey
- taréco [ta'rɛko] — worthless or useless item
- recauchutá [rekawtʃu'ta] — to improve physical beauty artificially
- ñeñeñeñ [ɲeɲe'ɲeɲ] — incessant chatting or whining

PUNITIVE EXPEDITION
(A Topographer's Tale)

(2002)



P*unitive Expedition (A Topographer's Tale)* is an installation consisting of 12 stereoscopic post cards that narrate the punitive expedition of General Pershing in pursuit of Pancho Villa; who attacked American soil in 1916 in retaliation to the US government involvement in the conflict of the Mexican Revolution and its support to the presidency of Venustiano Carranza.

The project was developed in 2002, during the US invasion of Afghanistan and the pursuit by the Bush administration of the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, Osama Bin Laden. As it is well known, Bin Laden eluded capture for more than a decade, hiding in the mountains of Afghanistan and was only captured during the presidency of Barack Obama in 2011.

This project was intended to promote a reflection on the parallelisms of history as well as making a commentary on US foreign policy when it comes to understanding the complexities of geography in foreign lands. The installation is a series of stereoscopic postcards (which would have been typically used and available in 1916 and function as a basic technology to optically see a repeated 2-D image in three-dimensions). The postcards include the narrative of Pancho Villa's attack to Camp Furlong, New Mexico, his escape into the rugged Sonora desert, and the failed attempt by General Pershing to capture and kill Villa (Pershing was ultimately forced to march back to the United States, with empty hands, only adding to the heroic legend of Villa). The nondescript desert imagery in reality corresponds to historic photographs of the desert of Afghanistan.

VITA VEL REGULA

(2013)



On February 28th of 2013, at the Renata Bianconi gallery in Milano, Italy, I presented a work entitled *Vita Vel Regula (Rules of Life)*. The work is a game for 50 participants, to be played only once. It consists of each participant receiving 16 sealed envelopes labeled with specific opening dates and instructions. The game started on March 1, 2013, and will end on November 23, 2097, or with the passing of the last participant. I am not likely to live to see the end of this project.

I have invited 25 participants, all of them younger than me and who are likely to outlive me, and with whom I currently share a strong family, personal or professional relationship, to participate in this project. The 25 remaining participants will include those who attend the opening of the gallery that night.

The first envelope, containing a set of instructions, is due to be opened the day after the opening, March 1, 2013. The second envelope will be opened twice the amount of time after the first envelope, the third envelope twice the amount of time than the second, and so forth. As the days space between each other between envelope and envelope, the waiting times become months, years and then decades. The 12th envelope is due to be opened on May 27th, 2019, the 13th on August 13 of 2030, the 14th on January 16 of 2053, and finally the 15th on November 23, 2097. My daughter Estela, the youngest participant who is now 3, if alive then, will be 88 years old. The 16th envelope is due to be opened at the time of my own passing.

Because of its design and its posthumous conclusion, *Vita Vel Regula* will be my last art work.

Speech read on March 1, 2013:

Ladies and gentlemen of 2097,

After having spoken at so many events throughout my life, I have never spoken at an event where the audience doesn't exist yet.

This is because tonight event is not only for us in this gallery. It is also for a hypothetical audience, most of which have not yet been born. They will be closer to the generation of our grandchildren, or of our great-grandchildren, if we are lucky to have descendants. It is almost certain that not a single one of us present tonight will be alive on the evening of November 23, 2097, exactly 84 years after today. My own daughter, who is three years old today, if still alive, will be 88 years old then. We are a lifetime away from that point. It is difficult to imagine what the world will be like, if it will be a happy place, if it may have become irreparably destroyed by our wasteful society. But in the same way that we can't know what the future holds, and what we could learn from those hypothetical audiences of the future that will watch the video of this event we are making now for them, it is also interesting that we are often equally ignorant about those who lived in the past. I often think of it when I look at a XIXth century portrait of a great-great grandmother that my family has, la abuela Luisa, of which I know practically nothing other than she was the grandmother of my grandfather and lived in the city of Zacatecas, Mexico. She left no letters or objects and there are no photographs of her other than that painting. Historical records and witness accounts often help us to piece together the past, but it never provides a full insight; so those who lived say in the 1920s are equally distant to us now than we are from those people who will exist in 2097.

So this recorded message from us is to them. There may not be a magic insight we can convey to you (and now I speak to those of you, on the other side). What you may find most paradoxical is that our time may be most readable to you than to us, who are living it now. But in any case, how great it would have been to us if the voices of the past had consciously attempted to speak to us directly, if my abuela Luisa would have written me a letter for instance. And tried to make specific efforts to reach out to us and let us know what mattered to them the most. This is what at least we can do for you, the future audiences. We can write to you, we can speak to you now hoping that you may listen later. We can attempt to salvage the natural boundaries of human lifetimes by employing a bit of artifice, in the form of a conceptual artwork, something that we invented and that may not even exist by the end of this century. But it is important, also to say that we are also writing and speaking to another hypothetical, and not-yet existing audience, which is ourselves, in ten, twenty, thirty years. We may find that we were very different people now from what we became later, that we may have forgotten who we once were. It is thus not only the potential of a conversation with you but with those who we may become along the way. This is why I have created this game to be played once, consisting in 15 envelopes which will be opening over the years by the living and willing participants. Each envelope is dated and scheduled to be open in twice the amount of time than the previous one. The gap will thus first be a few days, then will be months, then years, and finally decades. One envelope is scheduled to be opened at my own passing, hopefully several decades from now if I am lucky. After I am gone, and hopefully you outlive me, I will continue to speak to you from what is contained in those envelopes, should you chose to continue your promise to keep them and open them at the indicated time.

I will ask the visitors at tonight's event to write a private note to the audiences of 2097, who will go in a time capsule that will be opened on

that date, hopefully, by this hypothetical audience that may humor us in doing so. I also hope that the second to the last opening of the envelope in 2053, roughly 40 years from now, we may come together one last time to open that envelope, the last time that I may be able to join you. Were I not able to come or be alive then, I would ask those of you who can to do so. I wish I could say I will be there in spirit, but I don't believe in that which is not tangible. I do believe in art, I believe in its perseverance and in the perseverance of ideas, and I believe in the constancy of people and the bonds they create, which is what compels me to propose the current collective experience. So let's celebrate that bond that we have now created. Lets take a photograph that you, the audiences of 2097, will be able to see, knowing that we took it for you, so that you know how we looked, how strangely we dressed and spoke, how innocent perhaps we looked, but that we were here for you, and for our descendants, to open that last envelope with the things that we wrote tonight, and as you open that last envelope, you will bring, finally, to completion an experience that lasted 84 years ago this evening, at a small art gallery in the city of Milan.

The
PARABLE CONFERENCE

(2014)



In January of 2014, I started sending letters via regular mail to various individuals in New York. The mysterious letters stated that there would be an event on October 18, 2014, which he or she was invited to attend. Those who accepted started receiving further letters, also personalized and narrating stories only meant for that reader —always in the format of a parable, and always with a subject connected to art and the art world. More participants joined as the time for the performance got closer, and those who agreed to attend on that special day also started receiving letters, the number almost reaching 400. Each attendee to the event received a completely different set of letters, and the stories and topics discussed in them finally came together until the arrival of that final event, which took place at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). Participants were invited to dress in formal attire, arriving to a wedding-style banquet where they were placed in carefully curated tables with hosts trained in their respective biographies that greeted them and facilitated conversations. After those initial introductions, the audience experienced a performance where the various parable narratives came together.

The Parable Conference is probably the most ambitious literary and performance project I have undertaken. The project constituted a nearly yearlong effort to engage, individually and intimately, each one of the audience members in preparation for an event that unfolded in only one hour. The project was meant to offer a tribute to mail art and to the lost practice of regular correspondence by engaging spectators long before they took their seats in the theater.

What is presented in the current display is some of the letters and objects sent to those who participated, as well as a variety of

objects and responses that these participants sent in return, none of which have been exhibited before.

I regard the project as an attempt to address the question of who is our interlocutor in time, and how that which we choose to include in a conversation is transformed when the message has a tangible physicality instead of it being virtual messaging. In a larger sense, *The Parable Conference* is an exercise of indirect reflection. The literary format of the parable is never meant to be direct or journalistic, but literary and symbolic, and in this particular case an important model of departure were the philosophical parables of Soren Kierkegaard. In the context of the art world, the parables offered reflections on how and why we make, collect, and exhibit art, and how art impacts our lives. Linger always in the project is the question of the interlocutor, and the question of who is truly listening to us and what happens when the message that we send out into the world does not find a recipient.

VIEDRIERA

(2014)



E*l Licenciado Vidriera* is a short story written by Miguel de Cervantes, originally published in 1613. It narrates the life events of a law student who at some point in his life drinks a potion that makes him delusional—making him believe that he is made out of glass. Because of his imaginary condition, he thinks of himself as extremely fragile, often requesting to be carried around in a hay cart. But for all this eccentricity, Vidriera is often more lucid than any of his supposedly sane critics, and his observations about the world around him are not only trenchant but also revealing of the contradictions and flaws of the society of his time. The character of Vidriera is often mentioned as a key precursor of Cervantes' Don Quijote, who also despite his madness often offers observations that function effectively as a social critique and a lucid representation of the world around him. *Vidriera* was drawn from a performance that is a tribute to Josiah McElheny.

Nuevo Romancero
NUEVOMEJICANO

(2014)



Nuevo Romancero Nuevomexicano is the first chapter of a four-year residency at Site Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico. This first chapter was presented as both an installation and a series of performances as part of the Site Santa Fe Biennial, *Sitelines: Unsettled Landscapes* in 2014.

In 1915, folklorist Aurelio Macedonio Espinosa published the *Romancero Nuevomexicano*. The romance is a narrative folk ballad that “typically implies a personal or tender quality”. It is a musical form born in Spain in the fourteenth century, and outlined conflicts such as the tensions between moors and Christians, in conflict or in love. They used to refer to past or current events.

Espinosa, who had heard from his grandfather about these songs, traveled throughout the whole region of Nuevo Mexico to record various versions of 10 songs in the old Spanish style of the “romance”. In his book, Espinosa adds, “since the New-Mexican region has always been isolated, abandoned and forgotten since its first colonization in 1598, and since it was never in direct contact with the Mexican or Spanish culture, I believe that the romances that the inhabitants of New Mexico go back to a period before the XVIIIth century- they are the Spanish romances of the XVIth century. Romances would eventually be replaced by the corrido in the XIXth century, but as Espinosa’s compilation shows, the original romances were still being remembered and sung by many New Mexicans at the beginning of the XXth century.

Nuevo Romancero took the title of Espinosa’s seminal book to do a similar compilation of stories that deals with the New Mexican past- in particular with what is known as the “Mexican Period” of New Mexico, which comprises the time from the Mexican

independence (1821) to the battle of Santa Fe where New Mexico fell under American control (1846).

This project included digging a variety of little-known stories about New Mexico as well as the real-life characters that played an important role in its history. These included the last Mexican governor of New Mexico, Manuel Armijo (1793- 1853) who surrendered to the United States during the US-Mexico war without a fight, and Gertrudis Barceló, also known as Doña Tules (circa 1800- 1852), a saloon owner and master gambler who played a key role as power broker and businesswoman in Santa Fe during her time.

The installation of *Nuevo Romancero* included a recreation of an 1830s illegal casino (at the time in New Mexico, there were dozens of illegal gambling establishments). Visitors who enter the space can play a variety of illegal card games of the period, such as Spanish Monte, 31, and others. The winner of the game usually is awarded by having his or her cards read. Behind each card there is a divinatory message — each card in the Spanish deck has a divinatory value — as well as an association with one of the many stories about the political and biographical history of New Mexico.

The project considered the idea that each of the stories referred in the cards have the characteristic of a romance- a dramatic story with historical veracity that exemplifies the harsh realities in love, war, life and death.

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212-365-9500

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210 Eleventh Avenue, New York, 10001, (212) 365-9500, www.kentfineart.net