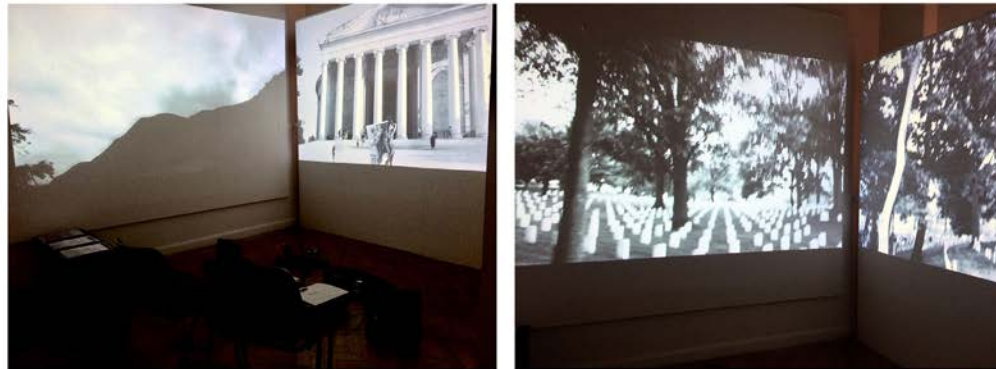


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Towards Attunement as Research Method in My Poetic Forensics Project

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THIS ESSAY AIMS TO ARTICULATE HOW ‘ATTUNEMENT’ as a method functions in my proposed notion of *poetic forensics* as investigative art practice. Described as “palpable and sensory, yet imaginary and uncontained” by K. Stewart (2011:445)—whose influence I will often return to in this paper—my explorations with attunement are developing as part of my PhD project *Poetic Forensics: Investigative practice-led research on my politically disappeared father and notions of body, peoples and land* (Daza-Paris, in draft). I experiment with the idea that there can be a referential dynamic, through attunement between *body*, alluding to the corporeal body, a disappeared body or even a body of land and history; *peoples* referring to the peoples of the land; and *land* broadly entailing nature and, in my work the nonhuman.

Attunement is situated within the emergent field of non-representational theory (Thrift, 2007), and with attunement, things matter, as Stewart (2011:445) writes “not because of how they are represented but because they have qualities, rhythms, forces, relations, and movements.” Nagatomo (1992) has used the term *attunement* to discuss the relationship between our sensuous, diverse world and the multidimensional self, body, energy and mind. Attunement emerged as an experimental method to engage both in my *practice process* of performative interventions¹ and in my *practice documentation*, or registers of the project.

Facing Image:
(Not so) Casual Conversations.
Testimony X-1,
Theorem 2018
Installation
©2018 Livia Daza-Paris.
Photos: L. Daza-Paris.

The artworks referred to in this essay, are experimental moving-images and personal writing material that disrupt familiar representations of the unsettling subjects of political disappearances. In my practice, there is an investigative intensity that infuses the process as well as the resulting artworks, conferring a forensics to the poetics of attunement that is obliquely deductive—in practice—while being elusive to quantification and resistant to prescriptive results and representational thinking. Indeed, the intangible qualities that attunement as a method presents, makes it possible to conduct my investigation adjacent to—what Weizman (2017:20) eloquently identifies as—the “threshold of detectability.” It allows me “to hover between. . .[what is] identifiable and [what is] not” as Weizman (2017:20) writes, and that for me becomes a way of understanding through *sensing in attunement* what has been made undetectable by an erasure of history.

The essay suggests, with examples from my practice, how attunement to tenuous evidence and to witnesses beyond the human might take place. Examples of my work with the camera and with personal writings are woven into the analytical text as testimonies, and they respond with plasticity to the sensorial quality of attuning to the emergent events and participants, human and nonhuman. Haptic spatiality and haptic visuality are introduced in the text as relational expressions of attunement that can be observed with my camera work. Organized as *case testimonies*, the artworks mirror common legal practice in relation to evidence (e.g., the common legal expression ‘Exhibit A’). Considering that there is a sensitive political dimension to this project, all testimonies have anonymous signifiers identified by variables, for example: *The Daughter Said. Testimony V-1*.

When I speak of testimonies and evidence, I do not intend to present definitive hard truth, although I anticipate that

¹ *Performative interventions in this research come not only from a disposition to engage in performance practice from my movement background, but are also as intentional as returning to the value that classical Greek performance attached to participation in civic life (Denzin, 2014). An example of my performative interventions is in my work The Family Visits (Livia Daza-Paris, 2019; Project Anywhere, 2018).*

through my process of attunement, approximations to truths from *what has been made disappeared* may become strong signifiers. The imperfect testimonies presented in this paper are in the form of the more conventional art registers of moving image and personal text. Yet, the way that I have processed the material, reflect what Weizman (2017:45) describes as the “failings and shortcomings of memory—in the silence, confusion, or outright error. . .[as] paradoxically, it is testimony’s imperfections that bear witness to the fact of violence.” Perhaps these artworks as they aspire to bear witness to non-official history, expose the complex trajectory of my research as it encounters such paradoxes in the imperfect form that evidence and testimonies take.

Attunement processes in my practice draw from the Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT) of body movement and poetic imagery—and such processes may alert to the emergence of testimonies on a denied history of state violence in rural Venezuela during the 1960s Cold War era, and in particular to the political disappearance (Amnesty International, 1993) of my father Iván Daza.

The Daughter Said. Testimony V-1

To admit all that is in these words, even those I imagine, those I do not know? Worlds that insinuate their existence, that plead to be taken into account. The worlds of those who have been disappeared, my own father disappeared. . . disposed. But, it is me who pleads to listen (let me whisper), with my whole-self. And then, there is this tender wish in me, as if I could transform it all in the same way as in the Russian story from my childhood where the wolf, the crow and, the waters confabulate together to restore the torn and scattered body of prince Iván to life.²

I cannot remember my father. But I do know, that just like the man from my childhood story, his body was also torn and scattered, and his name was Iván.

² *From the Russian folktale Ivan Tsarevich and the Grey Wolf (Afanas’ev, 2012).*

In considering attunement as method in my research, I began to notice this riddle: if there is a referential dynamic between notions of body, peoples, and land on the politically disappeared, and if that dynamic results in artworks, could the artistic research present such artworks as testimonies and evidence? This overarching concern involves the ambiguity of considering the resulting artworks from attunement as both registers of witnessed events and as testimonies themselves. It also proposes that the artworks could be *material inference* for evidence about *who* and *what* has been *made disappeared* by oppressive geopolitics. This premise, as Weizman (2017:20) writes, represents in my research the inherent “tension between testimony and evidence—material and linguistic practices, subject and object—and the complex interdependencies between [state] violence and the negation of evidence.”

This comment by Weizman concerns how in this research such tension is intensified by its meandering along the edges of what could be known, as many of the human witnesses to the Venezuelan state violence perpetrated during Leoni’s nominal democratic term (1964-1969) are no longer alive. I have found through my research that a military ambush preceded the subsequent political disappearance of my father, Iván Daza, in a remote territory between the Andean foothills and the sugarcane fields of the northwest Lara State, in Venezuela. The absence of evidence about this event and the lack of documents prompts a recurring question for me: in what sense could my artworks be considered testimonies to such an event? The artwork is not intended to take a hierarchical position over human testimony, rather, as Hamdan (2016:n.p.) has commented, they “seek to amplify their silence, questioning the ways in which rights [continue not to be] heard today.”³

POETIC FORENSICS

To explain how attunement became a method in this project, it is important to mention the empirical process within

³ In the course I took with Forensic Architecture collaborator Lawrence Abu Hamdan in 2018, he gave a link to his private video with this description.

its complex context. Outside the limits of the hard material evidence of forensic science, poetic forensics proposes a perspective that a poetic ‘activity’ is possibly useful in suggesting another kind of knowledge production. Furthermore, poetics in my work functions in the sense of *poiesis* from ancient Greek: bringing into being what did not exist before. But it also pertains to igniting the imagination in integrative ways. Forensics is related to its Latin origin *forensis*: to speak a notion of truth in a public forum.

Attunement as a method emerged in my poetic, non-linear investigative practice while proposing to attune to possible witnesses beyond the human to covert events, and asking the question *who else is witness?* And, poetic forensics proposes to participate in a perspective about forensics within investigative contemporary art. It does not try to figure things out; rather, it guides me through attunement to *enter* into what is happening, and to what announces itself as a testimony.

In this process and supported by my practice in SRT, I let my mind and body wander on the extensions of my matter, including its subtle energies with the environment, while investigating the circumstances surrounding my father’s disappearance. It may be that something emerges, attuned in lively ways to referential dynamics between me and the world. My initial work with attunement (before I was even familiar with the concept) began through my senses, my body and the environment. Later, the video camera was incorporated into the practice with the intention to document *possible evidence* from the revelatory encounters and, in an effort to generate, what Kathleen Stewart (2007:5) refers to as “possibilities that come into view.”

In my early dance training studies, especially with Joan Skinner and her Skinner Releasing Technique, I found myself learning *about* and *through* a poetic kinaesthetics; a movement and imagery-based process of discovery. In its multidirectionality and awareness to everything *that happens* while being rooted in improvisation, I came to intuit that SRT is akin to attunement. It is an intriguing notion that this improvisational movement background with SRT might have something new to

offer to the practice of attunement, and it indicates directions for deeper experimentation in further research. SRT imparts motion towards an attunement practice that opens possibilities to grasp meaning from what happens at once in real time in relation to what has been politically silenced and denied. But as suggested by artist Francis Alÿs (2015:150), “how does one narrate a concept that can only be enacted in time?” This idea is very much part of the conundrum in narrating my work as it goes beyond notions of movement as practice, gravitating instead to non-prescribed and non-predetermined experiential processes of discovery and connections guided by attunement as method.

HAPTIC VISUALITY AND HAPTIC SPATIALITY

Haptic visuality manifests in my work from my very wish to know by *touching* what may have been felt by my father and mother as they moved through various environments in their effort to escape the deadly persecutions of the state. I attempted with the camera to capture such haptic knowing. If you had walked into the space where my work was exhibited for *Theorem* (2018) at Ruskin Gallery in Cambridge, you would have seen a life-size moving image installation from two different channels that met at the corner of the walls, as conversations of parallel testimonies. The installation intended to create a kinaesthetic disorientation in the visitor, and in this way, form an engagement in haptic spatiality resonant to my own proprioceptive processes that guides me through my investigative art practice.

Attunement was involved in each stage of the work presented at *Theorem* (2018). From the recording of the images to the video editing and, finally, to the immersive format of the exhibition, I aimed for coherence in the sense of attunement being felt throughout the research and then also in the artworks’ outcome. This is akin to what dancer Lisa Nelson (2001:8) describes as “shift[ing] constantly. . .from what was before me to what was inside me, from sensing to making sense.” Such occurrences took place through a series of performative actions exploring notions of presence in absence while

in attunement to my own proprioceptive relations with space, body and fragments of the history I seek to understand. The camera work expresses a haptic quality, attuned both to external landscapes and inner landscapes. The installation included a cluster of three works with the gathering title (*Not so*) *Casual Conversations. Testimony X-1, X-2 and X-3* (Daza-Paris. 2019).

These moving image works are from Washington D.C., and Lara State, Venezuela where I conducted investigations and discovered histories and evidence of state violence, implicating both the US and Venezuela in the area where my father was politically disappeared. Documentation of the investigation took place in an ad hoc style of “guerrilla documentary filmmaking” (Solanas and Getino, 1970-71).⁴ Later, when viewing the footage, I realized that I had recorded in a kinaesthetic state of attunement with qualities of haptic visuality and spatiality while the camera became *a witness* to the emergent and challenging circumstances. Significant to mention is that there was just one take of any given recording, and real-time conditions were maintained as much as possible throughout the editing process. The scenes in Venezuela from *Testimony X-2* recount a 1960s narrative of geopolitical violence, while the camera work, edited without corrections, discloses a constant shifting of sensuous environments, textures and lives in attunement to what is nascent, hopeful and flickering as unfoldings that emancipate a story of death and disappearance. We also hear a voice recounting US and Venezuelan governmental implications of state violence from recently declassified 1960s documents that I found in the US NARA archives. These moving images, intend to bring attention to something that has remained dynamic and vibrant, and that seems to evoke a *poetic of testimonies* from human and nonhuman witnesses (Williams 2018).

⁴ I was introduced to “guerrilla documentary filmmaking” by Montreal filmmaker and social activist Magnus Isacsson. I sourced the expression from filmmakers Solanas and Getino (1970-71), who developed the “influential notion of Third Cinema [and guerrilla documentary filmmaking]...which rejected both the Hollywood production model and the European auteurist tradition and called for an anti-imperialist, revolutionary cinema made independently and cheaply by collectives using a variety of film techniques in artisanal contexts” (Monaco 1991:506).

Fig. 1:
(Not so)
Casual
Conversations.
Testimony X-2
©2018 Livia
Daza-Paris.
Film stills
(composite)

The work captures different things meeting and suggests that “new forms of life,” as Thrift (2007) indicates with his non-representational theory, join together towards further meaning: a sinuous path with rocks and tall grass, the faraway mountains, a chicken passing through between spaces, the soft waves on the river, a shovel lying on shallow waters. Moving through the maze of the investigation was mediated by the relations between me, the camera, the environments, and the human and nonhuman witnesses to the story. All these spawned possible relations on the unattainable worlds of my father’s disappearance. An attentiveness to multiple events while a contemplative quality in attunement is maintained, juxtaposing what often becomes in my practice an outer body quietness with an intense inner awareness.



Fig. 1

In *Testimony X-3* peripherally inspired by Kurosawa’s opening upward shots in *Rashômon* (1950), I recorded through the leaves of the trees in the Arlington cemetery, capturing shimmering lights and shadows attuned to what may be latent in the surroundings of the investigation. A haptic visuality through the camera relates this tension through multidirectional and kinetic approaches that guided me through the experience. These activities in concert, constitute what I have come to recognize in my practice as *haptic spatiality*. Broglio (2008:62), has described haptic spatiality as “a way of seeing analogous to tactility,” and, he claims, this haptic spatiality considers diversity as integral part of environments and this in turn, facilitates orientation and navigation through physical and multisensorial contact with the world. Observable as well as nonobvious external forces, such as gravitational and multiple directionalities, are accessible ways of knowing the world and one’s own position within it. This perception of external forces is intriguing within my practice and, it interplays with my approach of haptic visuality and spatiality as related to attunement.

In *Testimony X-3*, my own physical and emotional states are transferred through the images’ instability recorded at the pounding rhythm of my steps. The overexposure and the erratic framing further contribute to accentuate the atmospheric disorientation of the encounter, as *the nature of truth* is obliquely suspected. I attempt to present through my work’s aesthetics, these disruptions and blurs as they come to reference memory gaps analogous to the uncertain qualities of testimony (Weizman, 2017:45). These insights on the recorded event are highlighted through the process of editing which weaves what is already there, as well as reveals evidence of such disturbances, suggesting something else might have been going on in the story, with possible complicated layers of political information. Stewart (2011) writes, “these things require a kind of haptic description” and, with my camera work, I aimed to capture temporalities at play in their meaningful proximities.

Fig. 2:
(Not so)
Casual
Conversations.
Testimony X-3
©2018 Livia
Daza-Paris.
Film stills
(composite)

As I walked through the impressive Arlington cemetery, the audio of a later conversation with the archivist is superimposed and displaced in time, while connected by the counter layers of emotions. His statement, “What would you expect? These *things* were happening,” exposes the conflicting human rights perspectives implied in the ethical concerns that underlie this art-led research.



Fig. 2

Amidst the tombs in the cemetery were old trees with identification labels. I went to one of them—as if “pulled by a force field” as expressed by Berlant and Stewart (2015:n.p.)—and the label read *Tilia Tomentosa* (Silver Linden), which startled me for two reasons: firstly, because if you add the letter ‘r’ the word *Tormentosa*

would result instead, meaning torment; secondly, because *Tilia* is a nerve-calming medicinal plant. What do I mean when I speak of the nonhuman as witness, and of a referential dynamic between human and nonhuman? That particular attunement moment is concerned with how I experienced the tree, but dare I say, it is also about how the tree experienced me. Is the *Tilia* sensing my *complicated grief*?⁵ Are we witnessing each other witness the surreal contrast given to the *value of life* between our two different countries? This encounter at the highly designed Arlington cemetery hints at Weizman’s (2017:54) commentary about buildings *sensing the human* from their perspective, and about buildings “acting as . . . political sensors to be read.”

CONCLUSION

Throughout the research, I have kept *the imperfect and distorted footage*, intuitively knowing that I would use this blurred and overexposed material in the editing as it echoes the difficulty of obtaining official documents confirming any information on my father’s death and disappearance. This approach gives the artworks an aesthetic of *perceptual approximation* as they are textured, nuanced and, at times, seemingly unreal—in many ways paralleling the investigative process itself. Weizman (2017:45) refers to the “disruptions and blurring in the video images,” that may mask part of the evidence, as being analogous to the memory gaps of human testimony. In a similar way, these works, with their inherent characteristics of destabilized frames and frequent blurs, bear witness to the theme of this research embedded in the fact of political violence that has been denied; to amplify Weizman’s statement discussed at the beginning of this chapter. There is more to be explored on the nature and shape of testimony as it emerges from attunement processes, but in a preliminary sense, the artworks created from such a method thus far suggest a *form of testimony*, as Weizman (2017:45) puts it, “for what is missing, distorted or obscured”—undertones of the fragmented story that I investigate.

⁵ *Complicated grief, results from sudden ruptures of reality, incidents of violence, trauma and disappearances* (Stroebe and Schut, 1999).

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