

Forms of Memory and Cultural Action

A dialogue between Gabriela Golder (Argentina) and Virginia Villaplana (Spain).

By means of a series of questions, compilations and a selection of extracts around memory and cultural practices, we started an open dialogue that would allow us to get closer to those who now read these words. The following text may be understood as a free essay, an incidental music score, a conveying of shared experiences, of forms, ways of doing and viewpoints on writing and the artistic practice for two voices and different handwriting for a probable infinite grammar.

Can memory be postulated as a personal gesture, an intimate trait that is transformed into a public event? Ana Longoni. *Ejercicios de (otra) memoria*, Buenos Aires, Muntref, 2006.

Virginia Villaplana: What models do you defend in your artistic practice? (participative research with social groups, interview methodology, documentary studies) What were your beginnings like? How do you collaborate when you create the representations of the people who appear in your pieces?

The story of my life does not exist. That does not exist, there is never a center. Nor is there a path, nor a line. There are vast landscapes that insinuate that there was someone, it is not true, there was no-one.
Marguerite Duras

Gabriela Golder: My training was in film, at the Film University. I had just taken different Communication Science and Sociology classes and was quite disenchanted. I was not interested in market research, nor certain strategies, nor the dogmas, nor...

I had a special interest in Philosophy, Theology, the subjects that triggered questioning.

At that time the Film University had just been created and that is where I went. And all my energies were set on that path. Back then I wrote, did plays, sculpture and thought that film enveloped that entire world. Immediately after I started University, I came

across a class where students would watch, discuss and make video art (now that term has dissolved). And that is the path I took, to date. I finished college, obtained a “Director” degree (the inverted commas denote how peculiar I have always thought that term is), yet I have always worked with video, and by video I am including Super 8 and even other film formats. That is, I am referring to language.

From that moment, increasingly, it has all been about opening, generating doubts in me and others, starting discourses.

It becomes increasingly difficult for me to say THIS IS WHAT I WANT TO SAY, it is more about saying, raising, starting the game, taking the floor... I want to travel down that path, I want to listen to others, I want to understand certain things by means of others, I want to find the definitions of worlds among others' worlds, and in turn, I want to interpolate, to ask, to question.

I'm writing you all this from another world, a world of appearances. In a way the two worlds communicate with each other. Memory is to one what history is to the other. An impossibility. Legends are born out of the need to decipher the indecipherable. Memories must make do with their delirium, with their drift. A moment stopped would burn like a frame of film blocked before the furnace of the projector. Chris Marker, Sans Soleil, science fiction and documentary essay-film, 1982.

(And obviously...we compile)

I, like you, have tried with all my might to fight forgetfulness. Like you, I have forgotten. Like you, I have wanted to have an inconsolable memory, a memory of shadows and stone. I have struggled every day, with all my might, against the horror of not completely understanding the reason behind remembering. Like you, I have forgotten. Why deny the evident need for memory? Marguerite Duras, script and dialogues from the film Hiroshima Mon Amour, by Alain Resnais, 1959.

Gabriela Golder: So, as I usually say, I believe that my journey, my path is circular, permanently fluctuating between THE SELF and THE OTHERS and between one and thing and another thing, many paths crossing one another.

Sometimes I cannot hear the others, I need to come back to myself, shut down, look inside and make other videos and writings, and then I come back out, different. I think, I

do, and every time what begins changes, my thoughts are transformed by my creations and vice versa.

And thus the movement becomes permanent, looking inside, going out, looking outside, coming back to me...

My world fluctuates and I play with that, with the oscillation. I allow myself to be interpolated, questioned, penetrated.

Recently, after making projects that included many others narrating for me, telling for me, sharing with me their view of the world —I am referring to *Reocupación* (“*Reoccupation*” 2006-2010), *Arrorró [Argentine lullaby]* (2009), and *Dolor* (“*Pain*”, 2010)— I needed to return to me, to that that which is intimate, small and more silent. I needed to look inside to then come out again. And that is still the case.

My approaching others happens more or less spontaneously at first, I intend it to be human, or rather, like a beaver’s work, construction work. I approach someone or an organization, I ask them, I ask rather basic questions at first, I listen, I listen a great deal and I plan a next encounter, and that way I get close to other people, I tell them of my project and I do so even with some doubts.

Other times it is different.

For example, when I did *Arrorró* (2009), the contacts were different. In general, I recorded at the first meeting, because what emerged did so because of the meeting. But people called me on the phone, told me stories and then I proposed to them, why don’t we record, why don’t you sing a song to me. (I remember thousands of anecdotes like that).

Even though I have read a lot about documentary making, I took a graduate course, I watch a great deal of them, etc... I still try to make a different kind of approach, more like an offer to do something together. Naturally everything that I have read, watched, etc., stays with me.

Once I was working on a project with some unemployed people who did group work with a psychologist. They were very depressed, unarticulated, not unionized or socialized. Then everything was worse, with no prospects... The question came up: what will you do for us?

And that question seemed essential to me, because it was about how they could use what I did. My answer back then was the idea of exchange, sharing ideas and thoughts. I said, I do video and I would like to show you one afternoon what it is that I do, and I'm open for questions, doubts, anything.

And that is what happened, they watched my videos for about three hours, we talked, had *mate* [Argentine hot drink] and did a physical group activity. They made a physical representation, by movement, of their work desire, what they would like to do.

I did not make a piece from that, that was the whole experience, to share that with them.

So the aim is not always to do something from an activity, a gesture, a movement, but rather to see what happens.

I am increasingly trying to open to that.

Retaining images, words, gestures, metaphors: is it a form of resistance?
Rodrigo Alonso. *La necesidad de la memoria. Ejercicios de (otra) memoria*, Buenos Aires, Muntref, 2006.

Gabriela Golder: When I did *Reocupación* (2006-2010) the process was different. I approached a group of unemployed workers that was organized and politically solid; they were activists who struggled. So things were different from the start.

Right away they felt that we were equals. They thought that it would be useful for them to talk, to be heard and seen.

At one point, one of the workers even stared at me, stared into the camera (I was behind the camera) and talked to the president, offering (with tears in his eyes) to keep working. He showed his hands and said: my hands can still work. That was a very intense turning point.

*If we show you pictures of napalm burns, you'll close your eyes.
First you'll close your eyes to the pictures. Then you'll close your eyes to the memory. Then you'll close your eyes to the facts.*

Harum Farocki

The experience with *Dolor* (Pain) was different. I was living in Canada at the time and going through a very painful personal situation. Like never before in my life, the concept of Pain surfaced. I would say to myself: I have *Pain*. I felt Pain, I lived Pain.

Shortly after that I had the need to listen, to find the self between words and images, between narrations and other experiences... I invited several women, most of whom were immigrants, to tell me what is Pain. But I asked them, in order to define Pain, to choose a text, a text that to them was Pain. And I proposed their inhabiting my home with narrations of Pain. Each of them chose a space and read. I listened and observed and then the stories of Pain populated my house. Then my Pain became part of all those pains.

In Resnais we plunge into time, not by means of a psychological memory, which would result in nothing but an indirect representation, nor through an image-memory, which would take us once again to an ancient present, but rather through a deeper kind of memory, a memory of the world that explores time directly and reaches in the past what is subtracted from the recollection. How ridiculous does a flashback seem next to such powerful explorations of time, like in Last Year at Marienbad (Alain Resnais, 1961), with the silent march on the thick hotel carpets opposing each time the image of the past.

Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I and II: The Movement-Image* (1983) and *The Time-Image* (1985)

(I think of DESPOJOS)

"Then, as usually happens even with the most insignificant dead people, they collected the memories that he could have left them, helping each other and making efforts to be in agreement. But we know this little flame, the shivering in the disturbed shadow. And the agreement arrives only later, with oblivion.... Alternative translation of Samuel Beckett's *Malone dies*, Ed Alianza, Madrid, 1973, p.57.

Virginia Villaplana: What is memory for you?

Gabriela Golder: Memory helps to create an identity for man, for peoples. Memory is conscience, exercise. My work is about recovering memory, activating memory,

inquiring. And observing, showing, making others see, insisting, repeating, insisting again, on the need to create identity from memory.

It is to assume the dialectic between the past, the present and the future.

And the dialectic aspect is also present between memory and oblivion. And then I ask myself about the strategies of memory and the strategies of oblivion.

I believe in the duty of memory and I believe in resistance from that place.

What happens when we travel and try to capture what we experience in the streets and we observe by their side? Is it possible to obtain an overall image? [...]

With hope in their faces, the street vendors approach the few cars passing by [...]

Old women, a man with a kiln, gipsy families with or without cars, peasants with carts, young girls by themselves or sitting in a group by the side of the road [...] Where are their villages? Don't they have a job? Does the long road compensate them after possible buyers for a few marks?

Places and worlds that don't appeal to the media fall into oblivion. The lights go off and in the dark remains that which needs the urgent attention of the public: Poverty, abandonment and fear of the Estate terror. The image in the film follows the path of the journey, the geographic line that runs through southeast Europe, from Berlin through Poland, Check Republic, Slovakia, Rumania and Bulgaria down to the Black Sea. The trip continues in a cargo ship towards Odessa (Ukraine) and from there covers the coast all the way to the southeast corner, Istanbul. We see streets, markets, towns, cities and varying architectures. The encounter with peoples and places generates filmic miniatures. Almost imperceptively, they compare the old with the new, insinuate and clarify.

Some of the still photographs alternated in the film have been taken behind the windshield of the moving car. The car becomes an extension of the camera, which is visible in the unclear image [...] There is a need to photograph [...] situations parading at full speed —precise observations of everyday life that becomes blurry in its fleeting march. After Perestroika and the fall of the wall, the borders of the Eastern states seem to have opened, although they are in reality more insurmountable. Enormous territories have become blank areas in the political map, abandoned regions, cast into the economic crisis unleashed by the industrial and agricultural reform. New power structures have emerged, which are ambiguous, ignored or denied by the international community and which now make the search for vital resources even more difficult. [...] We see the new nomads (teachers, lawyers, peasants, craftsmen) doing business by the numerous border crossings, on the side of the big and small streets, in the ghost towns of rural areas, at markets and bus stops and in the noisy cities of Odessa and Istanbul.

Ulrike Ottinger, Southeast Passage. A trip to new blank zones of the European map. 2000. Documentary film-installation structured in three parts: the first one travels from Berlin to Eastern Europe; the second and third ones are two urban excursions: Odessa and Istanbul.

Gabriela Golder: ... this passage is quite surprising to me. It is like describing the images of a piece that I would like to create —my family, on both sides, comes from that area (from Bessarabia, from Odessa; my father studied in Moscow a few years before I was born). All the stories, the images, the sounds (Russian in arguments, in stories, in lullabies) and later the other stories, communism, the fall of the wall (I think of the fall and the intimate dimension that it had in my own family...). A journey that I once thought of embarking on with my father, who spoke perfect Russian. Returning, inquiring, circulating around vestiges...)

Virginia Villaplana: What kind of poetic dimension do you find in the collective and the personal memory? What is the social dimension, in your opinion, that can be carried out from the art sphere?

Gabriela Golder: In my work I can find two more or less clear categories. Collective memory/personal memory and the others/the self, or listening to the others and looking inside (as I said before, everything is increasingly mixed together)

As regards the collective memory, we can talk of *Vacas* ("Cows", 2002), *Bestias* ("Beasts", 2004), *Multitud* ("Multitude", 2008), *La lógica de la supervivencia* ("The Logic of Survival", 2009), *Arrroró* (2009): *the memories of others but also my own and so many crossovers*. *Diáspora* ("Diaspora", 2006): the collective aspect, immigration, women's work, but all of this in my body, so again, the crossover.

Each picture shows a past but deciphers a future. Chris Marker. La Jetée, 1962.

With regard to personal memory, we can think of *Vacío* ("Void", 2005): my memory, my reflection, my discovery; *En memoria de los pájaros* ("In Memory of the Birds", 2000): mine, that of others, collective memory; *Reocupación* (2006-2010): the memory of workers, the memory of work, but also that of construction/destruction of a nation's project; *Concierto Diurno* ("Daytime Concert", 2006) and its single-channel version *Doméstico* ("Domestic", 2007): women's memory (what did it mean to them to smash dishes), gender and violence. I also think of the book I wrote with teenage girls in Bad

Ems, Germany: *Private Motions-Public Space* (2004), including their stories, their drawings, their pictures, their problems as teenagers, as women...

Also *Postales* ("Postcards", 2000) and *Rescate* ("Rescue", 2009), two Net Art pieces. *Postales* raises the issue of movement, translation, a personal diary and love stories. *Rescate* (2009) is also a very personal piece, completely blended in turn with collective memory. *Rescate* (2009) talks of words gone missing, of words in books gone missing, of words written by writers who were assassinated, missing or exiled. Of words recovered.

And I played with these words, gave them visibility, opened a dialogue (it is also an interactive piece, a video installation).

I have just finished a piece I made in San Paolo, in an abandoned hotel from the early 20th century, where something happened that was quite interesting, something like engaging in a dialogue with the thousands of possible stories lived in this hotel. Recover the memories. What would it be like to make a video about this place? It is all fiction, but everything could have occurred. I allow myself to create stories from possibilities or from the possible stories embedded in the walls, the furniture, the beds... And that movement always emerges, swinging between what is visible and what is imaginable.

So it becomes memory, so it becomes the construction of memory and from there, ludic swinging —sometimes.

I believe that the social dimension can be massive, since it is about raising thoughts, doubts, thoughts again, conscience, visibility, reflection, space. Because it interpolates the other, because it interpolates the situation.

In general I never tell myself, today I will make a piece on collective memory, or today I will make a more intimate piece. I place myself within the space, life runs through me, I let it pierce through me, I think, I think a lot, I get closer, I look around, I think again and I do, I do and I keep thinking. My process involves doing and thinking permanently and simultaneously.

There is a belief that where information is abundant, there is a superabundance of memory. However, the present shows us that is not the case at all. Information is not memory. It does not contribute to memory, but rather works only in its own interest. And its interest is for everything to be immediately forgotten to then assert the unique, abstract truth of the present and then assert itself as the only one adapted to that truth. The more the facts abound, the more the feeling of its undifferentiated equality imposes itself. And the capacity also expands to transform its endless juxtaposition into the impossibility to conclude, to read in the facts the meaning of a story.

Jaques Rancière, Film Fables. Reflections about fiction in film, Barcelona, Paidós, 2005, p. 182.

Virginia Villaplana: What should we do to prevent memories configured by new technologies in poetic-resistance dimensions from being reduced to mere technological effects?

Gabriela Golder: In my path, memory, the search for memory, inquiring, they all have to do with an encounter. I meet with the others, listen to them. They ask me questions and new elements are born, many of which were unimaginable.

So technology is used as a tool (in the past I used to pay more attention to the specific “language” created with these tools). In the case of *Arrorró* (2009), created with an almost entirely digital platform, emotion is the first thing to emerge, the most powerful part of the project. Even I was surprised, as the project grew, by the emotion emanating, by what happened with the participants, with the recipients.

In the same way, if we look at any other piece, we could consider each of them in detail.

I think of *Rescate* (2009), both in its web format and the installation version, where the words appear “on stage”, on the screen. My voice names them and rather because it names them, they appear. I think of the reception instance and the human voice, in this case my voice, which is much more powerful than any other media or technological device. And without the voice, this piece ceases to exist. The voice and the register of this voice, the exhaustion, the repetition, the effort, a state, that is the most powerful part of the project.

I can't help but express the existing tensions between the need to take from the past images, teachings, going back to reread, to re-say, to change, and the possibility of a different future. A different "to come" (l' à venir used by Jacques Derrida), a different future, a different thing to be accepted that is not foreseen or foreseeable. How to get out from that past that, unresolved, repeats itself traumatically. Will we never learn? This afternoon, a far-sighted character in a film (The Air I Breathe, Jieho Lee, 2007), talked about his capability to accept that a foreseen future, a future that has already been seen, was then an inalterable future. Only the unknown gives us the possibility, or not, to change something that is to come. Laurence Rassel.

Virginia Villaplana: What relationship do you propose between memory and story in your artistic practice?

Gabriela Golder: My work contains, in particular, a reflection about memory. And indeed it contains stories, but always through memory. I am interested in the narration, the re-signification, the collective creation, the meanders, the uncertainties.

Story and narration, that's it. Story and narration and thousands of layers, filters, sounds in the far. That is what I collect and compile.

Virginia Villaplana/Gabriela Golder, December-January 2009-2010