



**Project
Space**



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Ana Luisa Bernárdez Notz and Sebastián Rodríguez y Vasti

Hands that gather and forget

September 8th – October 2nd, 2020

In The Mind's Eye

Every December, Ana Luisa Bernárdez Notz and Sebastián Rodríguez y Vasti return to Venezuela, where they are both from, to visit their families. On these trips, they take photographs; two separate individuals, two different families, one same country and one similar practice. These trips are overrun with emotion: of home, loss, comfort, fear. *Es como una anticipación,¹* an anticipation, that the minute they land, something will be taken away. Photographs reconcile this loss and offer a way of addressing it.

Due to the pandemic, the artists tell me they anticipate they will not be returning this coming December; and again, like the anticipation of leaving, the future holds an emptiness. Yet, in this moment of the pandemic, some of us have been gifted time.

What questions have we finally asked, and answered, with this time?

What can be created with the space made available by this collapse?

Bernárdez and Rodríguez have disinterred their archives for their exhibition, *Hands that gather and forget*, in the Project Space.

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*"The archive is inaccessible,"*¹ Ana Luisa keeps saying to me. The collection of photographs, taken during trips spanning 2015-2019, is inaccessible because of its vastness. It is overwhelming. In Venezuela, Bernárdez and Rodríguez take photographs with a near absentmindedness, a kind of compulsion. They record instances and people while immersed in the moment, then later forget some of the photos were even taken at all. As a consequence, the number of photographs accumulate and sit.

These images are something brought back, something to hold onto.

The forced slowness of a pandemic encouraged Bernárdez and Rodríguez to pause and dig through their collection, arriving at pictures of forgotten moments. They would not have paused without the lull in travel. The archive would have kept swelling, only now, they have turned to look.

The large number of photographs is akin to the largeness of memory; Where does it all go? How can we keep track? We acquire experiences, emotions, and pains over and over, in excess. Eventually, our memory becomes so full it begins to escape us, or we escape it.

In the Project Space, the images hang, printed on silk organza, to form a falling cloud. They drip with a ghostliness, and we, the observers, must approach this ghost and try to access it. We are invited to turn and look, much like the artists themselves have done. We enter each photograph, a scene, first as a whole, then one-by-one. Each image carries a consequence.

We see two cats, lounging on one another in a tender familial embrace. We see an elder staring back. We see a man and a woman, arms wrapped around each other, walking through an airport.

¹ Ana Luisa Bernárdez Notz, in discussion with author Maria Isabel Martinez, August 2020.

Hanging amidst the printed fabric are blank ones — what to make of those? I'll offer this: If you ask me about memories of my childhood, it would be something like opening one of these blank sheets. Where did it go, and yet here it is.

Although the work is rooted in documenting personal moments, Bernárdez and Rodríguez resist an individualistic narrative. They do this first by working together and merging their archives, and second, by offering something beyond themselves. The Venezuelan migrant crisis looms over the installation, much like the cloud of pictures hanging looms over us. It is something not directly named, yet immensely present. “The circumstance in which [the photographs] are created is not a pleasant circumstance.”¹ Ana Luisa and Sebastián are separated from their life in Venezuela due to an ongoing socioeconomic and political crisis; they are two individuals within a mass exodus of Venezuelans from their home.

When dealing with loss and grief, one might experience an urge to relieve it, or otherwise make the sensation more intelligible. Sebastián describes the act of taking photos as, “A device, or a response, or a meaningful action that allows me to deal with a feeling, and to solve it, or to address it.”² It has been said before: *the personal is political*; here, political circumstances pervade personal experiences. It creates ripples, waves, across shores and continents. *Hands that gather and forget* is about fractures — of proximity, memory, and the self.

The transparency of the silk organza operates to make us aware of the fractures, to soften them, and to call us towards the breakage. As an observer up against the printed silk, one has to wonder: Who are these cats? Whose grandmother could that be? I might assume them to be relatives of the artists, and I might begin to reflect on what it means to be away from such meaningful relations. What becomes of the experience of closeness when loss is around the corner?

Clouds, like memory, like grief, are difficult to access from where we stand. These photographs, first as a digital archive, then as floating silk, challenge us to move towards the

² Sebastián Rodríguez y Vasti, in discussion with author Maria Isabel Martinez, August 2020.

difficult. “There is something within me that is particularly sensitive to this sort of attack, this sort of pressure from the outside world,” says Sebastián referring to the political and social conditions in Venezuela. “I have a relationship with images in general and this just hits right on the spot.” ²

Hands that gather and forget is an invitation to visit this spot and to reflect, much like the artists have done, on what survives a loss. Or better yet, how to survive a loss.

-Maria Isabel Martinez