

WHEN AIR TOUCHES: CICATRIX OF TIME IN THE ARTISTIC PRACTICES OF TERESA MARGOLLES AND MARIA JOSÉ ARJONA

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From the Latin word 'tempus', comes the term 'temperare', which means to mix. This gives us words related to weather such as 'temperature', but also expressions related to human affections like 'temperament'. By looking at the etymological composition of these words, we will look at the practices of two contemporary artists: Teresa Margolles and Maria José Arjona. Thus, to observe how time, weather, temperature, temperament can be experienced in a single flux and create new areas of intersection between fields otherwise considered far apart.

By bringing in some theories from Performance Studies, Neo-Materialist Theories, and Haptic Studies, we will look at the

space-time generated by artistic practices –with a corporeal and performative background– to observe how matter, even the invisible one, constitutes memory and remembrance.

The visual installation *Aire* (2003) by Teresa Margolles explores the invisibility of transtemporal traces, while the process-oriented work *The White Series* (2008) by Maria José Arjona investigates the visibility of material traces on the scene. These are two antithetical works that share a common interest on memory and cicatrix of time, grasping its atmospheric materiality. It is about feeling materially what circulates in the atmosphere and makes us fall into other temporalities.

INTRODUCTION

The term ‘tempo’, which comes from the Latin word *tempus*, is used in Italian –as in other Latin languages in slight variants, such as in French, Spanish, and Portuguese– for both weather and chronological time. *Tempus* is a word that can be traced back to the Indo-European root *tem-*, which means ‘to cut’ and ‘to separate’. It therefore suggests a scanning of events, like fragments. The verb ‘temperare’, meaning ‘to mix’, also belongs to the group of Latin words with this common root. From this etymological background come many terms from the meteorological field such as ‘temperature’ and ‘temperate’, but also words suggesting states of mind such as ‘temperament’. It is not a coincidence that these words share the same etymological root, as weather is a phenomenon that involves both the passage of time and a mixing of matter through the continuous motions of the air and the flow of our affective interactions.

According to Steve Connor (2010) the time of weather is a time without history, i.e. without progression: a “pure fluctuation”. However, the hypothesis of weather as the result of pure indeterminate fluxes, seems to ignore the variety of rhythms that mark, for instance, the passing of the day and night, the transition from one season to another. Bronisław Szerszynski (2010) claims, indeed, there are patterns in weather that cannot be ignored and, instead, are more to be experienced *kairologically* than chronologically: “it lies, that is, not in the succession of events but in the attunement of attention and response to rhythmic relations” (p. 24).

This is a world that is quite like the one imagined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *Millepiani. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980). They imagine a space ‘smooth’ rather than ‘striated’, composed of events, intensities, and sounds. While a ‘striated’ space is homogeneous and volumetric since it is made up of things with definite shapes, each in its assigned position; a ‘smooth’ space has no defined dispositions, rather it is the result of continuous variations.

The eye, in a 'smooth' space, does not look at things, but wanders among them, finding a way through rather than pointing straight at a fixed target. In other words, a 'smooth' space requires a perceptive involvement with the surroundings that is not optical but haptic. An intensive space that is made in the becoming of continuous rhythmic condensations. Through this approach, Tim Ingold (2012, p. 81) invites us to fill the air with matter itself to rethink a time based on mixing and densities. An intensive rather than extensive time. Hence as words suggest – *tempus* (weather-and-time), temperature, and temperament can be tied into a common flow and create new common grounds between fields otherwise seen as separate.

In this essay, convening *Performance Studies*, *Neo-Materialist Theories*, and *Haptic Studies* we will focus on the practice of two contemporary artists: Teresa Margolles and Maria José Arjona. The space-time generated by artistic practices, with a corporeal and performative background, enables us to understand how matter constitutes memory and remembrance. To fully realize that we are dealing not only with voice, words, and writing, but also with water, mud, chemical agents, skin, dust, and paint falling off the wall of a room. Everything that is involved in the making and un-making of the material world that surrounds and shapes us. It is about another idea of matter, more extensive and sentient. It is about feeling what is material in the atmosphere and makes us fall into other temporalities.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2012, p.75) argues that the exclusion of material air from the atmosphere in the aesthetic field and its abstraction in meteorology have thus contributed to the persistence we face in a worldview that appears anaerobic. Therefore, to overcome the dichotomous view of the atmosphere that opposes the meteorological to the affective as if they were two complementary opposites, it is necessary to fill the atmosphere with material air. In this sense, it means recognizing that our world is not crystallized in fixed forms, rather a becoming of continuous



Fig. 1 Teresa Margolles, *Aire*, 2003, Galerie Peter Kilchmann. Retrieved February, 22, 2025 from <https://www.peterkilchmann.com/private-views/5301347520b8588939f6a9/14881-teresa-margolles-aire-air-2003/>

mixes. It is therefore to claim the need to push the boundaries of studies towards a transdisciplinary crossroads that allows us to rethink the immateriality of emotions, affects, and aesthetic atmospheres, about our being bodies and our ecological knowledge of air.

The artistic research of Teresa Margolles and Maria José Arjona are quite different from each other. *Aire* (2003) by Teresa Margolles is a visual installation in which the artist works with the invisibility of material traces belonging to anonymous subjectivities and past times. In contrast,

the work *The White Series* (2008) by Maria José Arjona is a durational performance in which the artist works with materials whose traces are highly visible and are transformed and contaminated throughout the whole performance. Through different approaches, both artists work on time and memory, grasping its atmospheric materiality. Aiming to investigate perceptions beyond the visual, we will focus on the tactile dimension of both experiences. We will expand the concept of skin from the human body to the skin of performance-scenes. In this way, we will grasp the cicatrix of time that emerge from the continuous movement of matter, which reaches us in *trans*-temporal forms.

Thinking with the installation *Aire*, allows us to rethink the installation medium as the 'choreography of an ecosystem'. The aesthetic format involves the visitors' bodies to operate also as compositional principles within the dispositive. In an apparent emptiness of a museum room, two air conditioners release vaporized water that was used to cleanse the bodies of victims from violent deaths. The sensitive experience and the intimate skin contact with the cooled air open the possibility of thinking in political terms about relationality, possible alliances, flows, or blocks. Therefore, one can perceive the presence of invisible traces of waste materials that encounter the skin and reveal our being completely exposed. In an ever-changing ecosystem, suspended matter requires us to suspend ourselves too. Thus, suspending the privilege of thinking of ourselves as living and autonomous bodies, to instead abandon ourselves to total exposure and vulnerability. *Aire* is an agglomerate of temporalities; such that illusory amnesic stratifications constantly re-inscribe the space. It is about a constant motion, both on an imaginative and material level in the air cycle emitted by the air conditioners. A motion that is so fast and impalpable that appears in a state of immobility: a still space-time which, quoting the scholar André Lepecki (2016, p.15), becomes a form of resistance against the historical flux.



Fig. 2 Maria José Arjona, *Untitled* from *The White Series*, 2009, long duration performance, *In-Transit*, Haus Der Kulturen Der Welt, Berlin-Germany. Courtesy of the artist.

The White Series is a process-oriented work by Maria José Arjona and consists of three consecutive performances: *Untitled*, *Remember to Remember*, and *Karaoke*. It is a performance that takes place over ten days, whereby the artist reflects on body temporality and the ephemeral nature of memory. Through a series of repeated gestures, such as blowing, writing, and singing, Arjona produces visible traces that imprint themselves on her skin and on the skin of the performance-scene. In the repetition of gestures, including writing with white chalk the phrase “remember to remember”, Arjona explores the act of remembering as a space of impressions that then fade away.

The artistic practices of Teresa Margolles and Maria José Arjona explore temporalities that come back in the form of invisible traces, in the case of *Aire*, and instead of visible

traces in the case of *The White Series*. It is an invitation to experience the cicatrix of time. An agglomeration of temporalities is therefore activated. A density that speaks of a time that is more intensive than extensive, as it is formed in the continuous condensations between materials, contact surfaces, weights, affections, and noises. It is a time that touches.

INVISIBLE TRACES | AIRE BY TERESA MARGOLLES

When entering *Aire* (Air, 2003), one may be impressed by the emptiness of a relatively small museum room that can be accessed by passing through a semi-transparent plastic strip curtain (Figure 1). The curtain ideally divides the hall entrance from the outside, creating a minimum of visual interference and physical restriction. The visual artist Teresa Margolles invites people to enter a space where, on the respective sides, two air conditioners are working, releasing slightly cooled air, whose presence is immediately perceptible in contact with one's skin and breath. Reading the text that introduces the installation at the entrance of the room, we find out that the water used to cool and humidify the air through the two air conditioners was previously used to sanitize the bodies of victims of violent deaths. Through the air conditioners, material traces are dissolved in the air: the presence of death pervades the space without us being aware of it.

Margolles –since her involvement in the artistic collective SEMEFO [1], which was founded in 1990 in Mexico City– mainly focuses on social issues related to violence, femicide, gender discrimination, and drug-related deaths, particularly in the violent context of Ciudad Juarez, which is situated on the border between Mexico and the United States. She aims to work with what remains of bodies. Margolles collects the material wastes from city morgues, or directly from the streets where violence occurs, to transport them to the antiseptic white cube of art galleries and museums.

Margolles' work, having a performative and conceptual background, questions epistemological and perceptual modes in the representation of death and violence. If Gaston Bachelard (1943) understood the vapor cloud as a "reverie without responsibility" (p. 185), Margolles gives back a contextual, political, and affective specificity to the experience of vapor (in *Vaporizaciòn*) and air within its invisibility (in *Aire*).

The installation dispositive involves visitors' bodies to operate as compositional principles as well within what we can define a 'choreography of an ecosystem'. When entering *Aire*, one steps into an immersive installation where one experiences a spatiotemporal specificity from which emerges an undefined assemblage of affects and perceptions. In this way, visitors' bodies inevitably expose themselves to the environment, becoming entangled in it. They inhale transparent air but at the same time opaque – as it carries with it unknown matter.

The idea of an autonomous and individualized body is thus challenged, with the attempt to shift from the idea of self-subsisting entities to the extremely dense field of relationships that contains and modifies them. On this point, Jane Bennett, which is one of the most influential Neo-Materialistic theorists, opens interesting perspectives. In *Influx and Efflux: Writing Up with Walt Whitman* (2020), she focuses on the daily flows through which external influences enter our bodies, infuse and confuse their organization, and then exit, transforming into something new. The dynamic of "influx and efflux" recalls the omnipresent tendency of external elements to enter, muddy the waters and exit to take part in new waves of encounters (vibrant and/or "dead"): Impression-and-Expression, Ingestion-and-Excretion, Immigration-and-Emigration — different names for the in-and-out, the comings and goings, as exteriorities cross (always permeable) borders to become interiorities that soon exude (Bennett, 2020, p. 10).

Precisely the "and", with its role as a conjunction—in the middle—marks the suspended time during which what has

entered produces difference through a transformative and dislocating power.

Destabilizing the boundaries between solid and defined identities, chemical agents, patches of fabric, skin, and dust circulate in the air and come in touch with visitors through their breath. It is about tactile and visceral encounters, then, to think of human subjectivities as already dispersed, dissolved in and with the environment in which they find themselves.

Aside from breathing, the skin—as the largest sensitive organ—becomes a site of contact as well, invoking principles of dependence and porosity. Concerning the condition of inevitable exposure, philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (1992) introduces the neologism “ex-peau-sition” resulting from the insertion of the word “skin” (in French *peau*) into “exposure”. Skin resonates as the boundary between inside and outside as if it were a seismograph of symptomatic and pulsional traces. It is about the idea of an ontology of ‘trans’, in that, we go beyond the classical ego/other opposition to reconnect with the outside, which is meant as the true conceptual center of a thought of touch. By focusing on the tactile encounter with matter that floats in the atmosphere of *Aire*, we can think about relationships as transcorporeal as Stacy Alaimo suggests (2008, p. 238), highlighting the multiple horizontal crossings, transits, and transformations. In this way, we try to undermine the idea of clear and precise boundaries of human corporeality.

Impalpable corpuscles thus insinuate themselves into the visitor's body through senses beyond sight. This challenges any sense of security in one's ability to maintain distance from potential contamination by these waste materials and at the same time undermines the supremacy of the visual in the gallery space, thus denying the possibility of maintaining a “safe” distance. Air as subtle matter thus becomes a zone of contact with the corpse: what we consider most abject, as Julia Kristeva reminds us in her essay *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1987). Death is very close but unassimilable. It is an inevitable physical proximity that at the same time provokes

a detachment caused by the sense of disgust that ensues. It is inextricably linked to our living bodies and reminds us as individuals of our mortality (Bacal, 2018, p. 3).

Aire asks us, then, to suspend the privilege of thinking about ourselves as living and autonomous bodies, and to abandon ourselves to a total exposure and vulnerability. One takes part in a state of indeterminacy, or rather, suspension. Infinite corpuscles suspended in the air require those who encounter them to suspend themselves as well: to deprive themselves temporarily of the privilege of forgetting their breath and death.

In contrast to soil, air is not a cemetery as it does not stratify, rather it disassembles and reassembles matter. Thus, the endless particles that Margolles leaves to dissipate through the continuous motion of air conditioners are lifted and come to us in transtemporal form. Amnesic traces of other temporalities slip and move toward us creating new tempo-

Fig. 3 Maria José Arjona, *Remember to Remember from The White Series*, 2009, long duration performance, In-Transit, Haus Der Kulturen Der Welt, Berlin-Germany. Courtesy of the artist.



ral densities. A kind of friction is perceptible about something orbiting and circulating in the air. Chemical agents, patches of fabric, skin, and dust –take part in the making and un-making of the material world that surrounds and constitutes us. Illusory amnesic stratifications reinscribe space– that is crude, in its apparent emptiness. As Klaus Biesenbach (2002) reminds us, in *Aire* we visualize the “physical memory of the last washing” (p. 36) of bodies in the morgue.

In *Aire*, therefore, an agglomeration of temporality is activated. A density that is about a time that is more intensive than extensive, as it is made in the continuous condensations between matters, contact surfaces, weights, affects, and noises. It is mostly a continuous flow of micro-movements, imperceptible perturbations that, paradoxically, manifest themselves as a still time.

Everything appears suspended and still. Hence, in this ecosystem, visitors' bodies also operate as compositional principles. The “body [is] emptied of chronological time and fully immersed in its weight” (Tomassini, 2018, p. 39). “The darkness of the gaze” (Tomassini, 2018, p. 39) as Stefano Tomassini describes it, validates an experience that leads us to a shift from the utilitarian logic of seeing to a sensitive system of intensities. Facing the apparent stillness that can be perceived in the room, new economies of attention are activated and the “formal boundaries of presence” (Di Matteo, 2024, p. 160) appear blurred.

Andrè Lepecki, in *Exhausting Dance* (2006), introduces immobility and some of its practices into contemporary choreographic forms, reading them as practices of rupture and undermining the hegemonic economy of mobility upon which the idea of dance is based. Lepecki, taking up the concept of *still act* proposed by anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis, attributes to stillness a force of resistance against historical flux (Lepecki, 2006, p. 15; Seremetakis, 2006, p. 12). He calls for its interruption, a suspension, questioning the economies of time. *Aire* is an indeterminate space-time, calling for stumbling into other temporalities. A contact between bodies that reactivates a past that is not passed.

Fig. 4 Maria José Arjona, *Karaoke* from *The White Series*, 2009, long duration performance, In-Transit, Haus Der Kulturen Der Welt, Berlin-Germany. Courtesy of the artist



VISIBLE TRACES | THE WHITE SERIES
BY MARIA JOSÉ ARJONA

Maria José Arjona (Bogotá, Colombia, 1973) is an artist and performer born during the Colombian Civil War, who explores human fragility through an intense and symbolic visual language. By using an artistic language rich in visual metaphors and gestures, Arjona deals with physical and psychological strength as part of her suffering to transcend notions of pain, tension as well as violence. Along with these ideas, she explores the concept of time as a fluid and material dimension, related to the notion of duration as a process. Many of her works are process-oriented and focus on the flow of time. *The White Series* (2008) consists of three interconnected performances: *Untitled*, *Remember to Remember* and *Karaoke*. This work is interesting in the way the artist explores identities that emerge or dissolve in real-time, allowing visitors to reflect on the temporality of bodies and the fleeting nature of memory.

The White Series took place over ten days, in which the artist took advantage of this extended temporality to produce, in each phase of the work, different bodies having specific sensitive zones. In *Untitled* – Arjona, white-dressed, enters the white space of the gallery holding a cup containing a small wand with a small circle of wire at one of its extremities. Arjona approaches one of the walls and methodically starts blowing soap bubbles very softly. As soon as the bubbles reach the white wall, they burst into red spots (Figure 2). Each new splash that stains the untouched wall contains a story of violence that is made visibly audible. It is precisely in the discrepancy, claims André Lepecki “in this friction between innocent act and violent result that a sonic reverberation inevitably comes across as walls visually scream as a slashed body” (Lepecki, 2012, p. 84). It is like that for each bubble, with its ethereal and delicate quality, there is a suspended scream about to explode. It is interesting to see how through the act of blowing, air

enters and leaves Arjona's body and produces unexpected visual results. Blow, as the most aerial, light, and least palpable bodily expression of touch, at the moment it touches the white wall of the room, becomes heavy by transforming into red patches, a layer of raw matter that refers to the most visceral world. A visible trace remains.

In the second part of *The White Series*—entitled *Remember to Remember*—we find Arjona, dressed in white, with her naked back, scrawling with white chalk on the gallery walls, for several hours a day, the same phrase: “remember to remember” (Figure 3). The wall is tinted with the vivid red stains of the previous action, blown by the artist and now dried. As Arjona writes “remember to remember” with white chalk, she turns the red of the wall into a faded pink; still visually, the phrase tattooed on Arjona's back is repeated and reflects its reiteration on the wall. A repetition that enhances the resonant power of the refrain and soon begins to take the form of an order. In this way, the traces that mark Arjona's skin, such as the red patches and the tattoo on the back of her head, expand into the spatiotemporal body of the scene. As André Lepecki states, we can open the concept of skin to broader meanings, considering the same time in which the artistic practice takes place as a “vertiginous membrane of time, always on the edge of the moment, incorporating and expelling virtuals and actuals, and thus permanently re-aligning pasts and futures through its many actions, desires, inventions, expressions, gestures (whether intended or not)” (Lepecki, 2012, p. 79). In this way, he goes on:

Cicatrix of one another, body and time suture the nervure of the present in the dissonance all friction produces. By creating a body-time, an artist assembles, defines, and stitches together surfaces of sensation, provisional sensorial organs identifying as well as producing zones of aesthetic and political intensification (Lepecki, 2012, p. 79).

The scene then becomes a privileged place where a set of forces, impulses, and affections emerge.

What gives Arjona's works a strong political dimension is the way in which Arjona, by producing in front of the audience a cicatrix of time, reveals an accurate "archaeology of violence" (Lepecki, 2012, p. 82). In this archaeology, a systematic mixing of visibility, corporeality and sonority becomes essential. It is as if Arjona's rhythms, profoundly informed by her specific way of focusing while performing, the careful choices of materials, and especially colors, invoke a specific zone of temporality.

"Remember to remember" becomes an imperative for an ethical posture dealing with memory, but also a call to an urgent call to reorganize our political and affective bodies. "Remember to remember" becomes a refrain that resonates in multiple dimensions: grammatically, it is a phrase structured like a mirror, doubling infinitely. Words that, in their repetition on the wall, become increasingly imprinted.

Through the resonant refrain that activates the matter of memory, we reach the last piece that composes *The White Series*: after several days of Arjona's silent work, this last piece is titled *Karaoke* and consists of repeatedly singing a song, again and again, for hours, until Arjona's voice naturally falters (Figure 4).

Arjona's work, in the different stages, is based on the repetition of certain gestures: first the blowing of bubbles on the wall, then the writing of "remember to remember" and finally the repeated song. The repetition leads to imprinting the action as if it were a cast. At the same time, the act of repetition is never the same; it has a transformative capacity. It is somehow a process of fading, as the same blow, the same chalk, the same voice suggest to us. Remembering is a cyclic process, of returns, remembering also means forgetting. Remembering is only part of the process that also involves forgetting.

In *The White Series*, Arjona constructs a calibrated dramaturgy of time in which, through simple gestures and by tracing her feeling-movements on the wall of the room and her body through visible signs, she explores the act of

remembering. It is an experience that becomes circular, which allows scars of time to emerge and imprint themselves on the experience of the present bodies. It is meticulous work through which Arjona segments time into endlessly repeated gestures of which traces are left. Visitors are involved in grasping the fragmentation in a temporal continuity. A fragmentation in which we—as bodies ourselves—take part. Having lost unity, we have no other choice than to embrace fragmentation.

CONCLUSION

By looking at the artistic practices of Teresa Margolles and Maria José Arjona, we have tried to contaminate the notion of atmosphere and rethink it beyond the distinct disciplinary categories of aesthetics and meteorology. As the words ‘tempo’, temperature, temperament suggest, they can be linked into a single flux and create new meeting zones between spheres otherwise considered far apart. The analysis of Margolles’ *Aire* and Arjona’s *The White Series*—two works that have different approaches but that are both time-based—allowed us to investigate perceptions that go beyond the visible, to dwell deeper on the tactile dimension of experience, which usually remains under the surface.

It is an invitation to perceive the friction about something that lives out in the world, and that circulates and remains in the air. Both works, in an antithetical way, acknowledge how much material constitutes what we call memory and remembrance. *Aire* is an installation that works on the invisibility of waste materials from the washing of violently dead bodies that now circulate in the air. *The White Series*, on the other hand, is a durational performance, composed of several parts, in which the artist works with matter and with the visibility of traces that are imprinted on artist’s body and the wall of the room. Traces that imprint them-

selves and then dissolve on each other over time.

In the analysis, we called upon the skin, as a sensitive organ that operates as a seismograph of sensations. We started from the focus on human skin to go beyond corpomaterial boundaries and look at the skin of the artistic space-time: a sensitive, porous membrane in which affective energies circulate and stimulate, those who pass through the artistic work a state of perceptive alertness.

The potential of artistic space, with the expansion of time, sensibilities, and space itself is thus to perceive the invisible acting on the visible and vice versa, cultivating presence to the things around us. We do not need to look only inside—toward a sense of self—to feel ourselves present, but at the same time we need to look outward, toward what we perceive from space and things that are also present.

There is a compression of temporalities —left to sediment— that are lifted into the air, embodied by bodies, blending between echoes, resonances, rhythms, and diffractions. Recognizing how much of the material constitutes what we call memory and remembrance is an invitation to re-think an idea of time that exceeds linearity and progression. It is a constant motion, what Nietzsche (1885) referred to as “ruminating”. Despite recursiveness, and iteration, moments of clarity can exist. One can talk about time-and-weather, not because one has nothing else to do or say, but in a way to say and feel it.

When air touches, to touch means also “to move, to upset, to affect” (Nancy, 2021, p. 10).

NOTES

¹ SEMEFO stands for ‘Servicios Médicos Forensicos’ (Forensic Medical Services), which comes from the name of the civil institution responsible for the collection of corpses and their transfer to the morgue.

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