






- NATURAL DISASTERS 
- POLITICAL PROTESTS 
- CHEMICAL FIRE 
- WEATHER FLOOD 
- FLOOD OF PEOPLE 

GHOST DANCE
// NEVADA, 1890

FLOOD OF MY CHILDHOOD HOME
// PLAINFIELD VT, 1989

ITC CHEMICAL EXPLOSION
// DEER PARK TX, 2019

FLOOD OF PEOPLE / BORDER
CONCENTRATION CAMPS
// ONGOING

HURRICANE HARVEY
// HOUSTON, 2017

HURRICANE STAN
// GUATEMALA, 2015

LEAN TO THAT FLOOD SONG

ACTS OF PROTEST, LIKE NATURAL DISASTERS, SHIFT THE GROUND BENEATH OUR FEET. THIS ESSAY ENGAGES THE IDEA OF THE INTERCONNECTIVITY OF BOTH POLITICAL AND NATURAL CIRCUMSTANCES THAT REMOVE THE FOUNDATIONS ON WHICH WE STAND, LITERALLY AND METAPHORICALLY, TO CHALLENGE THE STATE OF OUR PLANET AND OURSELVES.

DESIGN BY ILSE HARRISON

Lean to That Flood Song

Laura August

TO BEGIN WITH

My family lived in Vermont for a few years when I was a child. We lived in a cabin that sat alongside a stream and was ill-suited to the winter. I remember the place for how its landscape invited wandering and imagining. The stream ran down from a mountain, where it had carved a winding path over hundreds of years. In the winter, the water froze solid, and my sister and I would ease ourselves onto the ice, wondering if it might crack beneath us. When the snow melted, the creek turned deluge, pouring down the mountain with unimaginable power. Water roared into thundering muscle, bringing down boulders, trees, mud, and debris in heavy crashing sounds. In one spring thaw, the water pulled free a neighbor's house, and we watched it roll down the mountain. There we stood, helpless in front of our home, as water somehow grew taller. As it surged, firemen allowed my mother to retrieve one item from our house. She disappeared for a moment before returning with her choice: a wooden dollhouse she had built for us. Threatened with losing our small, temporary home, she latched on to its even smaller symbol and held tight.

When we returned to the house, it was filled with a thick layer of silt, the soft dirt reminding us how quickly the floor—with all its associations of stability and ground—could vanish under the flood.

LEAN (ONE AND TWO)

For the past few years, I have been writing about mud, both as a material and as a metaphor for mixture, confusion, and messiness (political, personal, and communal).¹ Knowing this, the artist Devin Kenny writes to me: he has remembered that “mud” is also a term for thickly mixed

lean, an addictive psychoactive beverage, also called purple drank, a mixture of codeine cough syrup, Jolly Ranchers, and soda that was, by some accounts, first mixed in Houston. It causes euphoria and slowness, a kind of thick, lethargic disassociation. It's a drink that bears a significant symbolic relationship to the character of the city itself, with its thick air, traffic congestion, and murky bayous.²

In art history, though, the most familiar lean comes from the Greeks. "Contrapposto" is a pose somewhere between stasis and motion, as the sculptural body leans its weight onto one foot, twisting its shoulders and arms off the main axis. It suggests that the sculptor has captured a subject just at the moment movement begins. The introduction of contrapposto into sculpture presented a world of new emotional possibilities in figural representation. Between stasis and motion, we prepare for change, trusting the floor beneath us, even as we push away from it. This twist, in art historical terms, is the sculptural embodiment of emotional experience.

ANOMALOUS PROTEST TACTICS

In 2017, dkyk, one of Kenny's musical alter egos, began producing an album he titled *los giros de la siguiente* (the turns of the next). The record draws from a year of research into Houston's chopped and screwed DJ scene mixed with cumbia, political speech, noise, punk, and indie rock. Taking *cumbia rebajada* as its subject, dkyk bridges the Caribbean musical *mélange* with the style of Houston's celebrated DJ Screw, known for slowing music to a soporific, lean-back tempo. *Los giros* is a recovery album, a meditation on a broken relationship, a reflection of protest tactics in a specific political moment. This is a cumbia album of a broken heart, an album about resistance as survival (or maybe it's the other way around).

In the track "Bonds," dkyk reads a text excerpted from Micah White's book *The End of Protest*, in which the author details the lessons he learned from Occupy Wall Street.³ In particular, he considers what value a supposedly "failed" protest has. As the song begins, we hear dkyk's voice reading White's text. "Assume that human action, the form of protest, or organizational style has no significant impact on whether a movement will succeed," White writes. "Let's go further and propose

that the outcome of the revolution is not up to human will.” A synthesizer begins dkyk’s melody. He continues to read: “Now what do you do to change the world? How do you act?”

One “failed” protest White describes is the Ghost Dance—or Nanissáanah in Caddo—a circle dance performed by the Nevada Northern Paiute peoples. The dance invited spirits of the deceased to return to Earth, joining the living in a battle against the encroachment of white settlers.⁴ The nineteenth-century ethnologist James Mooney describes the Ghost Dance as an appeal to the landscape to rise up and defend its native peoples: “The Sioux, like other tribes, believed that at the moment of the catastrophe the earth would tremble. According to one version[,] the landslide was to be accompanied by a flood of water, which would flow into the mouths of the whites and cause them to choke with mud.”⁵

White’s words describe the Ghost Dance as a “ritual with political consequences,” even as so many dancers would be doomed by the genocidal land grab of white nineteenth-century westward expansion. In a massacre that year, the US Army killed more than 150 Miniconjou and Hunkpapa from the Lakota people.⁶

“A rational voluntarist would be hard pressed to explain why dancing in a circle far away from cities would be a threat to a government,” dkyk reads twice, as the soundscape becomes more jagged, the melody disappearing into a striking beat.

(“Striking” also signifying hitting, beating, hurting. “Striking” also signifying stepping *away* from one’s work, in protest. “Beat” meaning also to conquer. The melody disappears into a striking beat, I say again.)

LEAN (THREE AND FOUR)

In the United States, Sheryl Sandberg made another concept of lean widely popular among certain populations—especially women with corporate aspirations—with her 2013 book *Lean In*.⁷ In the book, she encourages women to physically and metaphorically lean their bodies forward, into the work, to claim more responsibility and be more visible.

After the sudden loss of her husband, though, Sandberg admits she might have been seeing the world through certain blinders when she encouraged women to *simply lean in to leadership*. In grief, she discovers

the privilege of her position, of her family, of her spouse. When he is gone, she loses one of the floors beneath her, a floor she hadn't had to notice before; she abruptly realizes that her lean forward was supported by very specific infrastructures of power. That is, perhaps centuries of gender- and race-based discrimination, violence, and lost opportunities were not only about a woman's reluctant posture in the board room.⁸

We colloquially use the phrase "drink the Kool-Aid" to describe someone's commitment to a toxic or cult-like philosophy, action, or group that puts them in danger. To drink the thickly mixed lean, though, is to drink mud is to lean *back* . . . back. To *lean* after loss is at once a contortion, a mode of survival, a search for stolen floor, a slowing down. To lean includes a gesture backward, an acceptance of the force of history's floodwaters, a physical acknowledgement of immense grief, a contorted dance of shared mourning. If contrapposto lets us find emotion in carved stone and cast metal, I imagine a lean to be laden with feelings, to be a slow and heavy twisting into one's weight.

In the face of the coming floods, to be clear, I am not at all interested in a Sandbergian forward lean of progress.⁹

ANOMALOUS PROTEST TACTICS (2) & SOME THOUGHTS ON HOME

In September 2018, the government of Guatemalan president Jimmy Morales declares the Cicig, the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala, unwelcome in Guatemala.¹⁰ He refuses to allow the president of the organization to reenter the country and he makes a public speech denouncing Cicig while surrounded by uniformed members of the military. Incongruously, in a speech describing his reasons for not allowing Cicig's investigation (notably of his own presidential campaign), he situates his argument in relation to a national idea of family.¹¹

Guatemala y nuestro gobierno cree en la vida, la familia basada en matrimonio de hombre y mujer, cree y quiere elecciones libres, no intervenidas.

(Guatemala and our government believe in life, the family based on marriage between a man and a woman. We believe in and want free elections, without interference.)¹²

Writing for *Plaza Pública*, the journalist Alberto Pradilla describes Morales's strategy:

El domingo se celebrará una manifestación bajo el lema "Guate por la vida y la familia" convocada por sectores conservadores. El martes está prevista la tercera lectura de la Iniciativa 5272, que impone mayores penas a las mujeres que abortan, prohíbe enseñar diversidad sexual y veta, aún más, el matrimonio igualitario. Con este guiño, Morales viene a decir: "Si estás a favor del modelo tradicional de familia y contra el aborto, eres de los míos y estás contra la Cicig". Los sectores afines al presidente tratan de ubicar el debate en términos ideológicos que trascienden a la lucha anticorrupción.

(On Sunday, there was a demonstration under the banner "Guate pro-life and pro-family," organized by conservative parties. Tuesday, there will be the third review of Initiative 5272, which would heighten penalties for women who have abortions, would prohibit the teaching of sexual diversity, and would veto marriage equality. With this wink, what Morales is saying is: "If you believe in a traditional model of family and are against abortion, you are with us and against Cicig." The sectors affiliated with the president are trying to locate the debate in ideological terms that transcend the anticorruption fight.)¹³

The equation is uneven: Morales seems to say that investigations of (his) corruption are not welcome, because Guatemalans believe in heteronormative homemaking. In effect, his response to a threat is a gesture of tightening, again around the symbol of home.

Never mind that nearby, a memorial for forty-one girls burned to death in a state-run "safe home" is tended every day by the mothers of the girls.

A FEW WEEKS BEFORE Morales's speech, the artist Inés Verdugo installed a small house-like structure made from blocks of sugar at Concepción 41, the convent ruins in Antigua. Titled *Dulce Hogar* (*Sweet Home*), Verdugo's structure was immediately swarmed by bees, who remained eating the *panela* (and dying below and around the house)



Ines Verdugo, *Dulce Hogar*. Sugar and wood. © 2018 by Inés Hogar.
 Photograph by Byron Mármol. Courtesy of the artist and Fundación Paiz.

through the month it was on view for the Paiz Biennial. As the structure deteriorated, it became more and more foreboding, the carcass of something built to fall apart, a sweet home turned bitter, a humming sign of impending dissolution.

From its first moments, the most startling aspect of Verdugo's sculpture was that sound. On opening weekend, it was still possible to enter the house and stand there looking out as bees crowded around your body, pushing their way to the sugar, their wordless droning like a physical shiver. Visitors whispered among themselves, telling each other that the bees could sense fear. In the following weeks, rain washed away the *panela* and dead bees piled up on the floor. The house disintegrated in water. Home symbols are unstable.

AFTER JIMMY MORALES'S SPEECH, the streets around my home are cordoned off by riot police as people begin marching from across the country to the city, overwhelmingly in support of Cicig's investigations. We await a violent altercation, or a response from the government, an acknowledgment of the people's protest, but none of those things come. Every September that I have been in Guatemala, there are national

protests to coincide with the day of independence, and every year my friends and colleagues make the same lament: they know even as they march and chant and dance in circles and light fires and burn effigies of politicians that very little will change for the better.

That is to say: the marching is not only about the visible *success* of a protest. It is, perhaps more significantly, a communal emotional experience, an acknowledgment that something is not right, a shared physical movement, a visible note to the future that things here are very wrong. Failed protests also make meaning for their participants, opening imaginative portals to other ways of being, specifically in collaboration. Protests work against inertia; they are gatherings that honor affinity and care, making visible the ways in which our lives are interwoven. A failed protest is still a celebration of what it means to be involved with one another in the shared struggle.

To move together, my protesting community knows, is to dance as to a shared beat, as to a shared beating, as if the floor beneath us is also shifting, as if our definition of home is necessarily, importantly unstable, and as if our feet are sinking into and pulling out of the mud left behind by the floods of change.

TO FLOOD/TO FLOOR

In a series of photos and video from 2015, Manuel Chavajay documents the abandoned structure of a house on the shore of Lake Atitlán. *Casa Hundida (Flooded House)* is about the larger relationship between humans and the lake, a central theme across Chavajay's practice. Together, we talk about human disregard for the rhythms of the natural world, how our species has a remarkably short memory in relation to geologic time.

In Chavajay's photograph, a *cayuco* (wooden canoe) floats in green waters within the frame of the abandoned house. The roof of the building is missing or perhaps was never there. Open squares for windows frame the foggy vista of the *volcán* behind it, of the lake, of another structure on the far bank. Mudslides happen here, too, Chavajay tells me. During Hurricane Stan in 2005, the massive rainfalls washed homes off the mountains, filling them with mud, burying people in moving earth.



Manuel Chavajay Moralez, *Casa hundida*. © 2015 by Manuel Chavajay Moralez.
Video still. Courtesy of the artist.

Over and over, we build what we imagine could be possible, and watch it wash away.

There is room in this cycle for both hope and despair.

WHEN HURRICANE HARVEY hit Houston, photographer Keliy Anderson-Staley's home flooded. As she and her family evacuated, she photographed the living room full of water, her couch piled with belongings in one last effort to keep them dry. I return often to that photograph, a representative image for what happened to many of my community members' homes. At Anderson-Staley's home, photographs hang on the robin's egg blue wall behind the sofa, and the floor is covered in green-brown floodwaters. The floor disappears, as if it has been pulled from under her.

WHEN I MOVE TO Guatemala City in June of 2016, I bring with me three suitcases of books, a few items of clothing, some records. I line the books up on the floor. They are at once a lifeline to my language, a familiar world of ideas, and my only piece of furniture. That first week, a pipe breaks in the apartment and the floor floods. The books



Keliy Anderson Staley, *Our Living Room*. © 2017 by Keliy Anderson Staley.
Courtesy of the artist.

are soaked, become heavy with water, eventually dry into wrinkled clumps of pages, stained by water and unreadable. Friends tell me I have learned my first important lesson from Guatemala: never put anything I care about on the floor.

The next year, the artist Hellen Ascoli moves from Guatemala to Madison, Wisconsin. We correspond regularly, charting each other's journeys to the new places we live, feeling the boundaries of each other's unfamiliarities. As winter starts, Ascoli walks around a nearby lake every day. The docks, their floating surfaces an unsteady but constant floor, moor

her, and she sends me photographs of them. In previous installation work, Ascoli has built her own floors, even in harsh environments. She thinks of the floor as making and holding space, signifying that she has been physically present. We were here, a floor reminds us: here we stood.

In October, as Madison prepares for the coming freeze, cranes arrive to pull the docks from the lake. Ascoli writes to me that her new floor has been moved. What happens, we wonder together, when we cannot find a standing place?

After my books are flooded, my Spanish improves. That is to say, *encuentro otras palabras y construyo un base nuevo, ubicado en la gramática, en un no-lugar entre idiomas. Mi español raro no tiene piso, pues hablo siempre en círculos, como una corriente de agua. Con el no-lugar de mi lengua, descubro donde quedarme.* That is one thing that happens.

WHITE NOISE

In his project *The Ghost Variations* (ongoing since 2012), the artist Omar Barquet takes the structure of a symphony to organize six movements. Within each movement is a subproject he calls a fugue, an experimental collaboration with sound and installation to think through the phases of a hurricane:

emulando sus intensidades y desplazamientos como un esquema de forma espiral, reflexionando principalmente sobre la percepción de tiempo y la vida, a través de los ciclos de transformación del paisaje y la naturaleza caótica del pensamiento.

(Emulating [the hurricane's] intensities and displacements like a spiraling sketch, [*The Ghost Variations*] reflects on perceptions of time and human life in relation to the cycles of transformation within the landscape and the chaotic nature of thought.)¹⁴

For his fourth fugue, called *El naufragio* (*The shipwreck*), Barquet holds an open workspace in collaboration with the sound artist Nicolás Duarte at Asociación Tupac in Lima. He describes *El naufragio* as a visual and sonic representation of stories told by fishermen from Quintana Roo placed in dialogue with J. M. W. Turner's 1805 painting of the same title.



Record of performative action *El naufragio (The Wreck)* from *Ghost Variations Project*. © 2014 by Omar Barquet. Wood, cords, water, electric cables, lightbulb, and pulleys, with sound intervention. Created during a residency in TUPAC, Lima, Perú. Courtesy of the artist.

Partiendo de algunas narraciones que me fueron compartidas por familiares de pescadores de la zona de Punta Allen, Q. Roo, he elaborado una propuesta de instalación escultórica que aborde el choque, la tensión, inestabilidad y la náusea de un naufragio. Por intuición, decidí experimentar la acción alcoholizado, lo cuál me hizo pensar en los marineros, el azote del oleaje, el perder del balance, generando un agotamiento al llevar el cuerpo a un límite y finalmente, naufragar.

(Starting with the stories shared with me by friends of fishermen in the Punta Allen zone of Quintana Roo, I made a sculptural installation that touched on the shock, tension, instability, and nausea of a shipwreck. Intuitively, I decided to make the performance-experiment while drunk, which led me to think of the mariners, the lash of the swell, the loss of balance, creating an exhaustion that takes the body to a certain limit and, finally, leads it to be wrecked.)

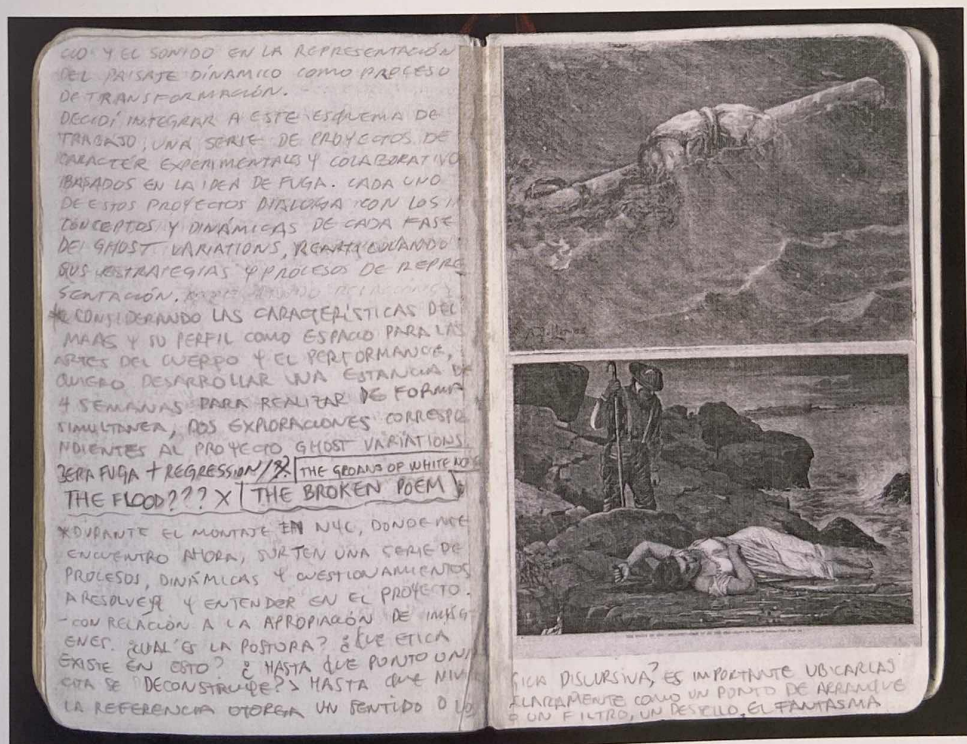
To understand a wreck, to hear the sound of a storm, Barquet looks to the instability of the body in an altered state. Seen alongside the percussive improvisations of the musician Santiago Pillado-Matheu, Barquet's performance included the breaking of found chairs that he had built into a ship-like abstract installation. The sensation, as he describes it, was one of enormous sound. In his notebooks kept while planning the performance, he writes, "The groans of white noise, the Flood???"

TO FILL

A flood is, at its heart, a filling. To fill abundantly, excessively, to the point of breaking. To fill with sound, with water, with people, with wreckage, with possibility, with emotion.

To ward off floods, humans build levees.

We block "floods" of other humans with walls, thinking this will stem the tide: see how we return to water metaphors to describe and dehumanize how others move across the same landscapes we ourselves have made perilous?



Omar Barquet, *Logbook Ghost Variations* pg. 35. © 2013 by Omar Barquet. Paper notebook, 26 x 20 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

In the news this year, specifically among conservative sources, migrant caravans are described as waves, pouring, surging, and flooding into the United States. One source suggests that a flood of immigration from Central America is orchestrated, and I wonder if that writer has ever witnessed how impossible it is to truly harness water.¹⁵

And yet.

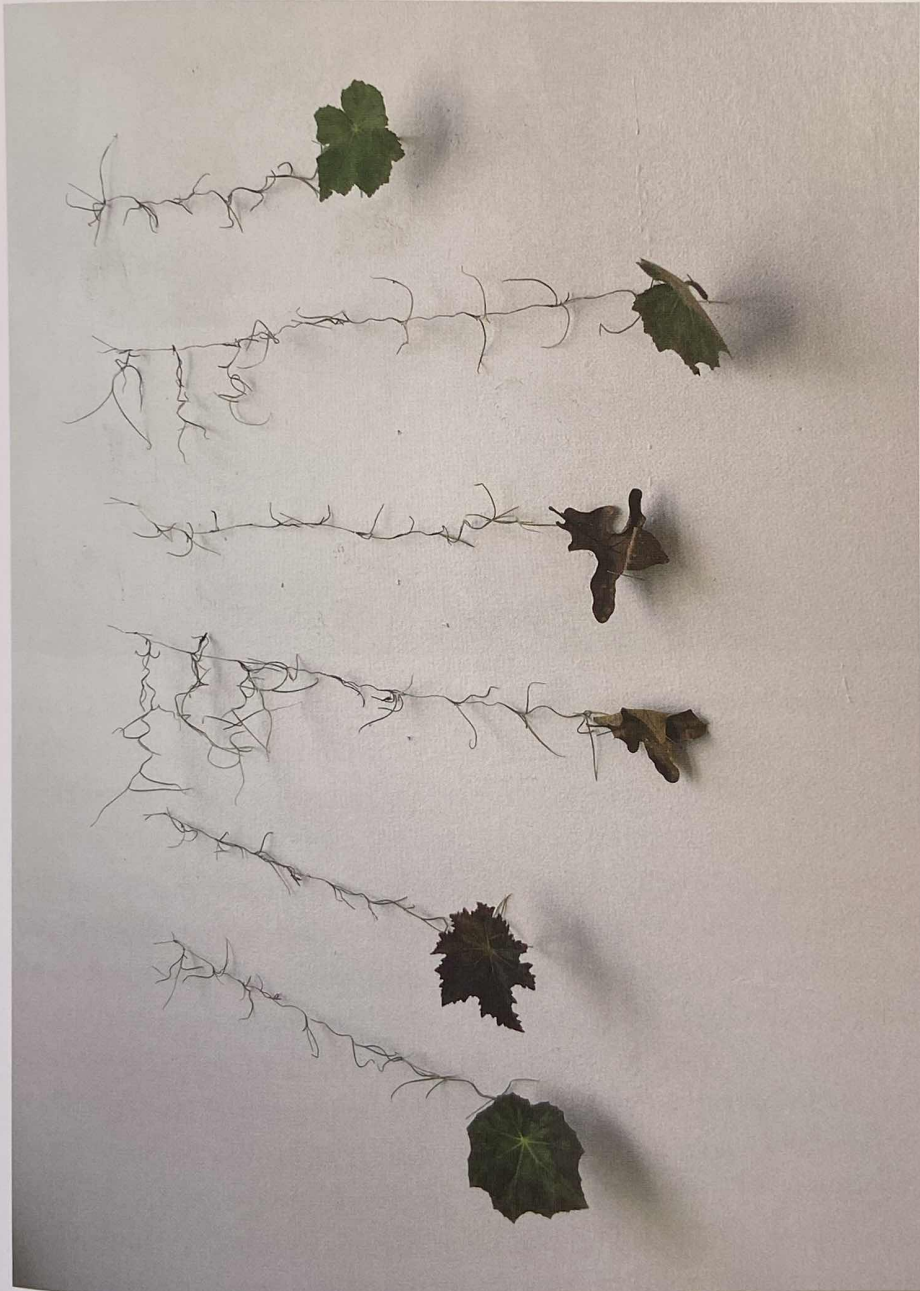
UNSETTLEMENTS

In 2018, the Houston-based artist, poet, and translator JD Pluecker begins making object poems. Thinking of the objects as poems with no words, Pluecker includes things and detritus from sites around the city that are personally and local-historically significant. These sites are marked by violence around race and gender, by family legacies and losses, and by JD's own coming to terms with their particular city. They install the found things on the wall, extending onto tables or corners or the floor, petals and vines connecting to rope and feathers and stones and weirdly bodily rubber molds and bits of furniture. Even without written words to describe these individual histories, the objects remain intimate and specific. JD calls them *The Unsettlements*, and they grow to include rituals, investigations, book objects, and public activities, a reckoning with whiteness and with trauma, an engagement with the dark spaces upon which family history is built.

Unsettlement #1 is among the first object poems JD made. Six thin lines of Spanish moss are arranged in a vertical grouping, each ending with a leaf. The piece has the rhyme scheme AABBA, JD tells me. The As are leaves from a begonia their grandmother grew, which the family still tends. The Bs are oak leaves they collected from the cemetery where their grandparents are buried. In a corresponding photograph from the cemetery, we see a small body of water, a puddle surrounded by grass, reflecting the sky. At Forest Park, the headstones keep sinking in Houston's boggy earth, JD says. They are pushed up and propped up and then sink again, small floodings pulling them downward.

It strikes me that the words for flood and floor are so close. Floods come from many directions, and we often imagine them as tsunamis—iconic giant waves—that tower above and pummel from the sides. But I am more intimately acquainted with those floods that rise from the

ground up. Such floods disconnect us from a steady state, sweep us off our feet, fill our structures until we are forced to seek higher ground, to swim or paddle out, to be ungrounded. Floods take away our floors, erase our markers, loosen our grip, require a new nimbleness, a dexterity as we move together over a surface we cannot predict, cannot even see. Marching together, we also become an unruly flood.



JD Pluecker, *Unsettlement #1*. © 2018 by JD Pluecker. Courtesy of the artist.



Untitled. © 2018 by JD Pluecker. Courtesy of the artist.

IN THE END

The noise of the flood is by turns cacophonous, quiet, rhythmic, repetitive, and unbearable—music that can lead us to dance, just as the water moves the earth beneath our feet, and just as we lean in relation to all its muddy possibilities.

“To survive, we need to relearn multiple forms of curiosity,” write the editors of the collection *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*.¹⁶ They cite “Marrow,” Ursula Le Guin’s poem about listening to a rock and being unable to force a word from it: the stone speaks when it wants, but it *does* speak. Multiple kinds of listening are necessary, they argue, to face what comes next, to hear what the earth and its movements

tell us. Floods are only one symptom of our violent "lean forward" to extract, crush, blow apart, and conquer this land for financial gain.

Many of the artists in my orbit in recent years have been thinking of other ways of listening, especially to the natural world. Gabriel Rodriguez Pellecer invents a machine for hearing the thoughts of the sun; a large metal bowl that he holds to his ear channels the rays of sun into *pensamiento*. Ascoli weaves a textile to the dimensions of her body and then carries it to the high plateaus of the Cuchumatanes in Guatemala, holding the weave around her and reaching it up, connecting to the sky, an antenna to talk to her slain brother. Mario Alberto López builds microphones tuned to the slight vibrations of plants and then translates these sounds into a series of drawings. There are many more.

And what if we listen to a flood as it rolls over what we imagined possible, following or fleeing its unsettling waters, shimmying and dipping to its pummeling rhythms?

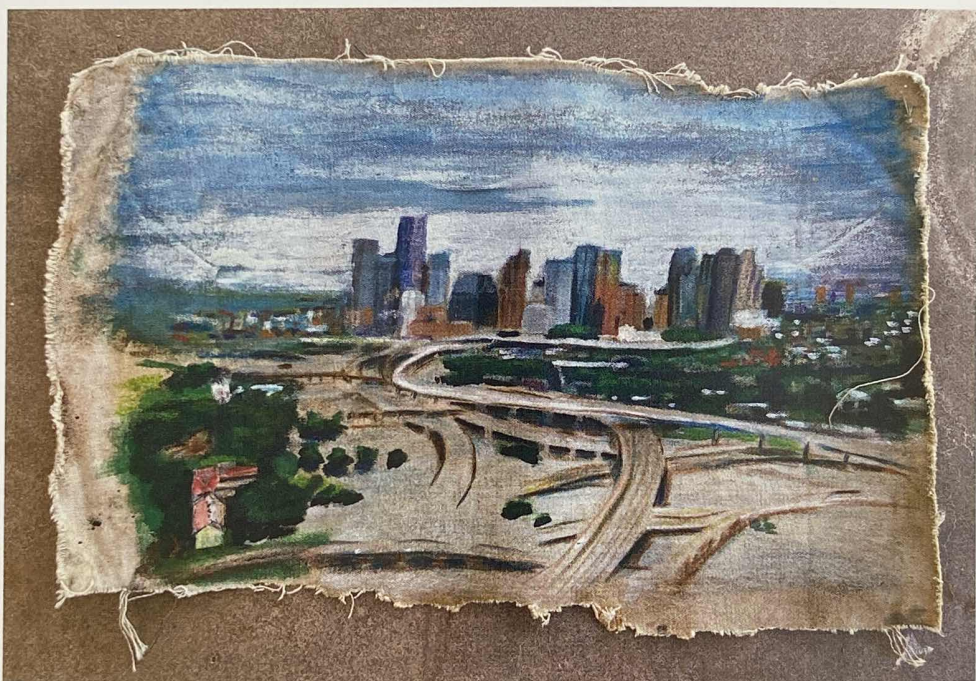
This is something the ghost dancers knew: there is power in circling together, appealing to the rains and the mudslides and the living landscapes that surround us, embracing movement as a productive unmooring, a dance, and a shimmer.¹⁷ The music of the flood might be a white noise, an epic crash, a holding, and . . . also . . . at last . . . a quiet. That flood noise lingers in devastation, in reconstruction, in social surfaces soaked through; it comes in a shudder and a smell. The music of the flood might be a way of describing our entanglements with the world around us, our inability to make sense of them, our precarious footing even as we keep moving to that beat, as to a beating.

Homes hold a special place in our shared imaginary, I think. As they did for my mother, decades ago, they symbolize certain kinds of stability, even when their symbolism fails the reality of what they hold, neglects the ways they may crumble or wash away. This disconnect between the image of home and its lived decrepitude is at the heart of many battles over national identity, xenophobia, immigration, environmental collapse, and civic values.

We gather at my home in Guatemala City after protests, for meals, to listen to records, or when visitors come to town. I certainly participate in a romance with home, as someone whose home is embodied in everything I do, as someone whose home is a *personaje*, a named character who lives with me and offers respite for others.

And yet, as I write this, a chemical cloud hangs low over Houston. A fire in Deer Park rages at a petrochemical plant, and its smoky trail hovers above our homes as poisonous runoff seeps into nearby waterways and the ship channel. A man stops in front of my apartment building and fires a shotgun into my neighbor's home nine times before speeding away. I gather with my neighbors behind the building, hugging their children to us, breathing in the toxic air, a light drizzle covering our skins with chemical rain. We choose to gather—in our homes, in our scholarship, in our visual practices, in our readings, in our politics—knowing, even as we gather, that it will not save us from the future. We know, too, that gathering holds us in the unstable present. Jorge de León paints Houston flooded, again, just weeks before Harvey hits.

We see the floods coming because they have already come.



Untitled, from the series *En los prósperos días*. © 2017 by Jorge de León. Courtesy of the artist.

IN THE END, which is likely where we are (which in this writing is exactly where we are), flood noise—which is a shared, expectant listening, an embodied dance to the water as it washes over us, a failed resistance, a movement toward other futures, a march in solidarity even as we are told to shelter in place, a yowling shriek we make at our most vulnerable moment—might be the most important thing to make, might be the only thing to be made, even (and especially) as we are washed away.



MORE

CITY *than*

WATER

A HOUSTON FLOOD ATLAS

EDITED BY

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