

The Texts Collection is a program that accompanies and amplifies artistic practices by generating a collection of monographic texts for Hangar residents. Each artist has the possibility to commission a text about their work from an author of their choice—local or international; known or to be known—in editorial dialogue with Hangar. The intention is to produce publications on their practice in general—beyond this work or that particular work—designed for agile circulation and reedition, ensuring a long life, and contributing to expanding the networks and frameworks of artistic practices.

Through this editorial device, artists can count on a comprehensive and in-depth text that captures their ways of doing and thinking holistically, integrating different projects to build an overall view of their practices. The *Texts Collection* also provides artists the opportunity to establish a writing relationship as a starting point, rather than as the result of a project or exhibition.

Julia Calvo: Aesthetics of Ephemeral Materialism and the Poetics of the Imperceptible

Federica Matelli

Julia Calvo's artistic practice is a conceptual exercise stemming from a deeply philosophical matrix. Operating through three main channels: ephemeral installation, performance of bodies in space and the secondary qualities of material, with sporadic forays into the fields of drawing, sculpture and the audiovisual. Through these three media, this artist hailing from Madrid constructs a discourse that transcends into reflections on public space, the common, the historical, the political and the universal, moving from concrete situations and positioned in space-time specificity.

Her main interests reside in the body, space and material, and their relationships with time. These recur in her different works and in the distinct modalities and forms through which she thinks and incites us to think. Combined with an ontological reflection on the object and reality, a further axis crossing her practice is a reflection on cultural heritage—both archaeological and contemporary—and the artistic institution, including the art market: the spaces of art, its temporality and its materiality.

Her works are based on a concept of art as “objectifying” thought and pretext for conceptualising the contingency of the reality in which we live. Her works are structures of thinking that materialise, either as a reasoning on space in the form of ephemeral architectures—always in relation to the bodies that move through them— or a more general consideration of the relationship between art and time: its existence in the present or its conservation for the future.

The definition of art as “objectifying” thought connects with a series of pioneering tendencies in contemporary art that are nourished by and in dialogue with the new materialist philosophical vanguard generated by new materialism and new speculative thought. These distinct philo-

sophical positions propose that the mind can think *outside* of itself, *outside language*, that reality can be apprehended *without* its being formed by and for human comprehension. They assert that our grasp of the world does not necessarily need to be *constituted* or *mediated* by our cognitive apparatus or language, and that reality can be understood beyond linguistic or transcendental constructs. Thus, the tendency in conceptual art is reversed: the direction is no longer from sign to matter, but from matter to sign, which we can somehow do without in order to understand reality. In the same way, the artistic practices to which Julia Calvo's work belongs, lead to a desubjectification and reobjectification of aesthetics and open the road to a different interpretation of what exists, starting from materiality, both from the object (thing)-subject binomial and the matter-contingent relations binomial. A distinct consideration of matter and the relations and structure it generates leads to a reflection on the first "abstract" forms of such materiality, that is, space and time, as much for the intimate dimension of the artistic object as for the collective one. However, what seems to interest her most is precisely the point of reversal and translation between the concrete and the abstract, the material and the immaterial. She expresses this through an aesthetics of the ephemeral and a poetics of the imperceptible.

Since her early studies in sculpture and installation, her projects have taken the form of diaphanous, ethereal and ephemeral spaces. *Untitled*, 2014, produced at Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Hamburg, is an installation composed of wood and neon light, an assertion of the "status" of the work of art in the exhibition space, and of the artist in relation to artistic medium. This latter includes the public, through a critique of the concept of authorship –a nod to Marcel Duchamp and the ready-made.

Already in these early works, the physical aspects tended towards a *minimal* decomposition into qualitative elements, leaving the pieces suspended between the material and the immaterial. This contributed to the creation of floating and unstable atmospheres, characteristic of her projects up to the most recent studies on ephemeral installation and public space. A study of light as an impalpable element of ambience, as well as colour composition, appears in another work –*I'm Feeling Good* produced at the Centro Párraga in Murcia in 2015. This work presents us with edible foam –another unstable and inconsistent element– and light as central components through which to explore the different possibilities of visual language. Specifically, the relationship between colour and the perception of light lead us through an exploration of the correlation between three-dimensionality and flatness through forms that magically appear and disappear, that is, dematerialise:

"Glass, transparencies, and lights un-realise the space towards a true airy materialism of the ephemeral". (Julia Calvo)

Transience, fragility and material inconsistency –concepts connected to temporality– direct her reflection towards time, another recurring, central theme of Julia's work. This is intended both in the sense of the duration of the existence of specific works and their "temporary" exhibition, and in a more historical sense, to cultural heritage and its permanent conservation. As is the case of *Azulina Fatigua*, produced in La Lamosa, Cuenca in 2018. The artist affirms that her intention was precisely to establish a reflection on the use of architectural spaces that today house exhibition venues. Moving from sculptural language, she proposes a dialogue between the historical value of the building's chapel and its valorisation today, converted into an exhibition space for temporary displays of contemporary art.

On the other hand, *Pabellón de los artistas reunidos*, exhibited in the framework of the SWAB fair in Barcelona in 2018, presented a fabric structure forming a small space located in a passageway of the fairground. According to the artist, the piece sought to activate a critical gaze on the part of the public and to reflect on the ephemeral architecture that becomes part of the urban landscape, as in the case of the pavilion in which it was exhibited

"...[reflecting on] the context of the fair itself, specifically on the space and temporality with which these events are conceived and the sort of ephemeral architecture that houses them. In this way, the piece indicates the controversy of artistic production as commercial object, while paying homage to the art fair and its tradition throughout history. The installation on display is a scale replica of the *Pabellón de los artistas reunidos* created for the 1929 Barcelona International Exhibition". (Julia Calvo)

In response to this type of art-market driven show –expressing the presentism characteristic of contemporary commodity culture in which everything is obsolete and fleeting from the start–, Calvo produced another project entitled *100 gramos de Historia* (2022).

This work reflects on the mechanisms that purport to reveal the common cultural and historic heritage of a people, and to enhance the value of the remains of past civilisations, through the exhibition and conservation functions of archaeological museums. These institutions and their devices originate with an intention that is precisely the opposite of the ephemeral

installations of commercial fairs. Rather, they propose to eternalise archaeological objects taken from their places of origin through an act of decontextualisation, and hence thwart the death of the civilisations to which they belong. Through a contrast between these two typologies of exhibition, she proposes a reflection on the dualism between “places” and “spaces”: the first being inhabited and shaped by the contingent relationships between objects and subjects; the second concerning the universalising abstractions aimed at eternally dilating spaces and places. Considering the museum institution as a symbol of modernity, the ephemeral installations of the art world are historically an expression of a postmodern abandonment of the metanarratives, or grand narratives, and of the universal histories in a Lyotardian sense.

Her interest in temporality also leads to performance as a medium bestowing interactivity to the installations and, hence, activating them. Calvo’s projects expand the artistic genre of sculpture in the direction of installation and performance. By the latter I refer not only to the interaction of bodies with the structures she creates, but also to the *agency* of the structures themselves as well as the objects within them. All of these act on the bodies of the visitors, implicitly conditioning their movement. Such devices are “quasi-objects” –in the words of Michel Serres– objects that generate relations with and between the subjects that circulate around them, transforming us into “quasi-subjects”:

“This in-betweenness on the side of the object leads to a new consciousness of the inherent objectness of our world. Not only does the object have a life of its own, but our lives as subjects depend on it.”¹

And the body becomes a bridge between physical “quasi-objects” and metaphysical “quasi-subjects” in a philosophy of the *in-between*:

“It is very exactly the abandoning of my individuality or my being into a quasi-object that is there only to be circulated. Strictly, it is the transubstantiation of being into relation. Being is abolished for relation. Collective ecstasy is the abandoning of the I’s for the tissue of relations. This moment is an extreme danger. Everyone is on the edge of his or her inexistence. But the I as such is not eliminated for all that. It still circulates, in and through the quasi-object. This thing can be forgotten. It is on the ground, and the one who picks it up and

keeps it becomes the only subject, the master, the despot, the god”.²

This is the case of the installation *Impasse*, an ephemeral architecture constructed in the parade ground of Montjuic Castle in Barcelona, 2019.

“These spaces imprisoned people who were considered subversive in each of the phases when the Castle exerted coercive, symbolic and physical power as a fortress in the city of Barcelona. In the middle of the parade ground, a central space of passage and circulation, two scale reproductions of the original dungeons serve as monument, as passageway, an aestheticized container of questions that refer to the confinement, the gaze, and the disposition of the thinking body, subject to all these coercive actions”. (Julia Calvo)

As she herself explains, the wooden and polycarbonate installation presented a contemporary reinterpretation of the eighteenth-century dungeons of Montjuic Castle, now a museum. She alluded directly to the Panopticon designed by the philosopher and jurist Jeremy Bentham –and analysed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*–, as well as to the educational and coercive function of modern architecture which constrains bodies, directing movement. In this specific case, she referred to the prison and its role in transforming disciplined bodies into self-disciplined bodies

The restrictive power that inhabitable constructions exert on bodies is also investigated in the version prepared for the Fundació Suñol of *Sit tibi terra gravis* (2021). “May the earth be light on you”, a Latin tombstone inscription wishing the dead not to return to the world of the living. The text poetically evokes the anguish produced by the thought of the weight of the sepulchral earth pressing down on the body that lies beneath. In my interpretation the phrase beseeches: may your body not remain in the earth, but rather disappear as soon as possible and, in its transit, may you not suffer. May you decompose quickly.

The project presents an ephemeral architecture composed of delicate glass tubes coloured with the powders of various ancient minerals within, which fully reproduced the aesthetics of ephemeral materialism and the poetics of the imperceptible that characterise her work. This site-specific glass intervention leads visitors through the room, highlighting the relationships that compose the space: interior-exterior and inside-outside, subtly translating into included-excluded. These dualisms become fluid in her installations.

1 Antony Hudek, “Introduction//Detours of Objects”, in Antony Hudek (Ed.), *The Object* Cambridge: MIT and Whitechapel Gallery, 2014., p. 23.

2 Michel Serres. *The Parasite*. Paris: Grasset, 1980. p. 169. Translated by Randolph Burks and Lawrence Schehr.

The fragility and transparency of glass serve to generate reflections concerning the dichotomies inside/outside, included/excluded: the glass structure ceases being a border and becomes an interface between visitors and the powders contained within –undefined materials– and between the users themselves. Its fragility also questions the relationship between the body and the medium: to what extent are the structures we dwell borders, limits, unperceived boundaries? Where does our freedom of movement end? A fragile structure, the body crossing it must remain vigilant and aware in relation to it, which makes us think of the continuous and involuntary interactions we have with the invisible and intangible in everyday life: dust, light, what accumulates day after day, the anonymous materials of the daily cycle –as Reza Negarestani³ would say– those elements that also forms part of our heritage because they silently shape our reality.

At the same time, it can be interpreted as a metaphor for the hidden positions between the lines in our logic and in our language that implicitly condition us, disallowing us true freedom. The theoretical basis of these works refers directly to the writing of Michel Foucault, and in general to the structuralist mission to reveal the hidden configurations of Western culture. It evidently derives from a conception of space as a construct that directs the gaze, including some things while excluding others. Through her projects, Julia Calvo attempts to cancel this duality: the “other space”, the alien space, appears in her work. The given is not exposed to the duality of space –inside/outside– but is shaped within it, through the constitution of the “xeno-space”, an estranged place, foreign, alien to our habitual conceptions, a zone of renegotiation of possibilities.

Within these non-places, these undefined “zones” of non-identification, she highlights the spatial relationships rather than making statements about the objects that inhabit them, which are thus stripped of an anthropocentric gaze and thought, distancing the physical identity of an object from the human self.

Moreover, due to this, the time that passes in this “zone” is intimately connected to the objects and their materials, rather than to the phenomenological experience of the subject: the ancient minerals turned to dust that reside within the glass tubes. Objects and material structures impose a rhythm on the body and hence a time on the being. As Amy Ireland lucidly explains in her essay *Temporal Secessionism*:

“Rhythm is the expression of identities in space-time. Everything

3 Reza Negarestani. *Cyclonopedia*. Segovia: Materia Oscura, 2016.

that exists, exists in a continuum of material explanation. From minerals to the mind, all individualised things have a rhythm, fields of speed and slowness, like small packets on trapped intensity”.⁴

And Graham Harman, speculating in his *Object-Oriented Ontology* on the best way to think about time and its relationship with space and the human subject, reminds us that it does not matter whether we consider these to be absolute or relative, stable or relational. Rather, in the equation it is necessary to introduce another variable: objects that also generate or can generate space-time and so determine us.⁵

By contrast, these same conditioned bodies are liberated in another piece, *Utopia*, performed during the LOOP Fair in Barcelona in 2021. This fifteen-minute performance staged a non-place and the form of possible bodies in relation to it. Conceived from the etymology of the word “utopia” which derives from the Greek *ou-topos*, literally “no-place”, an unreachable place that cannot be described as a specific site. A possible non-place. What would be the form of bodies in this place without definition or identity? Freed from the human image, utopian bodies are freed from a determined form and can dialogue in space. Their movement, their rhythm has acquired a new form of language and their abstract appearance becomes their deepest and non-identitarian sense. In this non-place there is no predetermined structure of communication, the expression of bodies transforms into an alternative form of communication. Through movement, this performance expresses the creation of *Utopia*, a world where social relations are not marked by distancing nor conditioned by the construction of cultural spaces, loaded with meaning and implicit grammar. Rather, they take the form of an inorganic or post-organic body, which is shaped by the rhythm of space and the “outside” that crosses it, and of the foreign objects with which it collides in its dance, expressing an idea of the Deleuzian individual not so much represented by a stable and transcendental ego, but rather, ontologically becoming from a non-predetermined context, capable of “de-territorialising” itself in order to become with the world.

The introduction of interactivity in her work enables the perception of physical space. This haptic and sensual approach hinges on the textures of materials and consequently the most physical of the senses –touch. This

4 Amy Ireland. *Filosofía-Ficción. Inteligencia artificial, tecnología oculta y el fin de la humanidad*. Barcelona: Holobionte ediciones, 2022. pp 87.

5 Graham Harman. *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures*. Winchester: Zero-Books, 2010.

comes to the fore either when there is contact or the absence of contact with the materials, through an impossibility in dematerialisation. Together with the bodies of the dancers who move across the set of *Utopia*, the fabrics and fibres which make up their costumes take centre stage. These serve as a somatic-linguistic prostheses that erect a new post-human communicative code. The costumes were conceived and patiently sewn by the artist herself, over hours and days in her studio in Hangar. I consider the process of creating these eccentric artifacts as part of the work. According to a completely Deleuzian logic, they are the expression of an aesthetics of becoming that –akin to the figure of the fold that distinguishes the French philosopher’s theory– dissolves the concept of inside/outside subjectivity without resorting to transcendence. What is a *pliege* according to Deleuze? It is a virtual continuum that is updated by its differentiation from a disjunctive synthesis, it is a molecular modulation, a visual rhythm... Like a fold in a cloth, where we see a concave and a convex part, two “different” parts from the same matrix, which define the open areas of an inside and an outside, becoming one in the other: the art of folding and unfolding, like a weaving time.

Likewise, in the project *Entelquia* (2022) she stages different non-linear situations with the aim of investigating new utopian and possible existences. She speculates on the correlation between subject and object through unrecognisable bodies in search of parallel languages that do not distort the reality of the subject. This is in line with the title, which in Greek literally means the “way of existing that has in itself the principle of its action and its end”.

These are altered spaces where, due to the disruptive capacity of the action and movement of bodies, anything could happen or manifest itself, causing a situation of alienation or estrangement, seen as a chance to form new possible realities. What *Entelequia* stages is the space to form and transcend the human subject, the construction of coherent knowledge beyond a series of non-linear events represented by the movement of bodies and objects in space.

The study of the perception of physical space –“the site”– through interactivity continues into some of her more recent works focused on the construction of public space in urbanism. Keeping in mind the duality of human nature between the individual and the universal, she interprets urban space as a place of bodies, an individual place and, at the same time, shared. Also considering what has been said before, public space produces subjectivity, a subjectivity conditioned by a spatial production that is actually in the hands of capitalism, as explained by authors such as David Harvey

or Henri Lefebvre before him.

On the other hand, the video *100 gramos de historia* intersects a critique of urban planning of public space through a self-reflexive historic gaze. Leaving aside the human body, it proposes a reflection on the concepts of place and time from the perspective of conservation of archaeological heritage and the gaze of desolate peri-urban zones. The project builds itself up from a case study that places us in an industrial area on the outskirts of Sabadell –Can Roqueta– constructed on ancient lands formerly plowed by farmers, and whose subsoil once protected the largest necropolis in Europe, now preserved in the Archaeological Museum of Sabadell. It is currently unknown if this material history is still hidden underneath the buildings of the industrial area. Based on the discovery of this necropolis, Julia Calvo invites us to think about urban settlements themselves –those that have been planned– and the industrial areas that have been abandoned or lack activity. The space that has mutated following the pace of progress has been consigned to cold industrial buildings, empty spaces, uninhabited, containing only machines and the actions of the workers who move about them. The case of Can Roqueta is an opportunity to reflect on the mutability of cities, in the contrast between dwelling a place, the movement that we generate moving through it, and how it is transformed when uninhabited. It raises questions such as: What is the meaning of occupying a space and what consequences does this have on the history of a place? What will happen to abandoned or lifeless urban areas such as industrial zones? What will the archaeology of the future look like? Jussi Parikka gives us some clues in his book *A Geology of Media*, when, concerning industrial legacy and its impact on the land, he invites us to

“...address how fossils, whether of humans, dinosaurs, or indeed electronics, infuse with the archaic levels of the earth in terms of their electronic waste load and represent a “third nature” overlapped and entangled with the first and the second.”⁶

Industrial areas are another kind of interzone, of non-places, found on the edges of cities. They are dead, uninhabited spaces, which have become detached from the activity within the city. On the other hand, moving from this last observation, the artist draws a parallel with another type of “funerary” site, the Archaeological Museum, a comparison that finds its nexus in

6 Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media*. University of Minnesota Press, p. 119. The first nature is nature untouched by humans, the second nature is the sphere of production of consumer goods, while the third nature would be hybrid and composed of the first two.

the metaphor offered by the Necropolis. If the industrial area is a territory that lacks life, as it was never destined for this, archaeological museums are like cemeteries of objects torn from their sites of origin. Thus decontextualised, deprived of their original identity, they turn out to be mere fetishes for the enchantment of a civilization, against the fear of extinction, loss, disappearance. Hence, she proposes a rethinking of the causes that lead to the preservation of heritage and raises questions about the limits of historical and cultural legacies: What is heritage? Is it necessary to seek new models that include intangible heritage, temporary heritage or heritage that has not been separated from a specific site?

Calvo interprets territory through a continuous dialogue with what goes unnoticed, the energies, actions, and forces that cross it and converge in different dynamics, gradually altering the place. These modifications are made visible in the video, which chronologically reflects how the succession of events has been changing the site where Can Roqueta is located, a forgotten place.

This text was originally written in Spanish

Translation by: Giuliana Racco

This translation was kindly supported by Institut Ramon Llulll