

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.

Listen to the Image.

Sofia Montenegro

Ericka Flórez

A few years ago, Sofía was making mockumentaries. A twist of fate while working on one of them damaged the footage, leaving only the audio intact. Faced with the choice of reshooting or doing something with the invisible, with what was still left, Sofía boldly opted for the latter, seemingly renouncing the former forever. Through this renunciation, she challenges the very definition of an image and its function. By stripping away the visual and narrative elements (the mimetic or illustrative aspects), Sofía unveils the image's true essence, its performative power.

Live editing

In 2017, Sofía was working on a mockumentary that tackled issues of the Caribbean and colonialism. She was also reading Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Around the same time, news broke of the discovery of the wreck of an 18th century Spanish galleon loaded with treasure that had ties to Colombia, the search for which played a pivotal role in Márquez's novel. This coincidence, that a fictional story she was reading had popped up on the news (documents, "facts"), struck a chord, chance leading Sofía to think about the blurring of this boundary between the fictitious and the real.

Inspired by this coincidence, Sofía did an artistic residency in Colombia. She uses the time to film, interview, research. After returning to Madrid and attempting to weave together the audiovisual elements of her experiences, Sofía discovered that the visual components of her archives had been damaged and only the sounds survived. Coinciding with an opportunity to create an installation for Madrid's Casa de Campo, Sofía decided to start editing the salvaged audios as if she were editing video (scene by scene, image by image), as if she wanted to listen to the images. She went on walks through that huge park, her methodology simple: she would don her headphones and listen to the edited rescued audio recordings, or, in her words, "she would allow the

present moment of what was happening in that place guide her steps”. Sofía sought to uncover the hidden connections between two seemingly disparate things, revealing what emerged from that juxtaposition.

Casa de Campo is home to a cable car, a lake, some small boats. One day she wondered what it would be like if the people on the shore could listen to the conversations of the people in the boats. When she was sharing the direction she was thinking of going with the festival organisers, she saw someone she knew getting off one of the boats. It was her uncle, who later told her that he had been a regular visitor to the park for fifty years. That moment of serendipity sparked not only that particular work but also the methodology that would become Sofía’s artistic signature in practically all her future pieces.

In this specific work that Sofía created for the Bosque R.E.A.L. festival in Madrid’s Casa de Campo, attendees had the opportunity to stroll through the park listening to the audio salvaged from the damaged documentary she filmed during her residence in Colombia. When the participants approached the shore of the lake, they began to hear a conversation. Gradually, they realised that the voices they were hearing through their headphones at that specific moment and place (near the lake) had shifted and was no recording, but rather a conversation that was happening in real time somewhere in the Casa de Campo. The conversation they were hearing, the listeners would later come to understand, was the one Sofía was having at that moment with her uncle as they sailed the lake in one of the boats, which the participants of the piece (the people on the shore) could make out in the distance.

Of everything the participants could hear through the headphones, this was the only moment that happened in real time. Everything else was pre-recorded, edited audio from the damaged film. However, the piece (the experience) constantly blurred the lines for participants, the listeners questioning whether the fact if that at some point someone had walked through the park, and if it coincided right with something that was being narrated on the audio, did that mean that it was choreographed or the product of chance? What was orchestrated and what was not? What happened spontaneously and what was choreographed? What was real, or better yet: what was fact and what was fiction?

It is as if Sofía had gone from making mockumentaries on screen to turning this paradox into a performative strategy: inviting her audience to experience this fundamental uncertainty of representation within their own bodies. This challenging of the limits between fact and fiction is one of the most vital criticisms we can make of the devices we use to come to the

“truth”. It is the question at the heart of the crisis of representation that has long preoccupied the cinematic arts, Sofía now pushing it to transcend the boundaries of the screen to translate it into something experienced in the body.

On the other hand, the accidental erasure of the visual component of her videos had catalysed this shift, which more than an installation was a way to construct a methodology that she describes as “arranging the tools and letting reality take control”. If the images are damaged, she works without them; if she has a chance encounter with her uncle, it is seamlessly incorporated into the piece. “Letting reality take control” is like saying that chance is part of Sofía’s methodology, a rethinking of how the subject’s will is controlled: letting go like someone walking through the park and taking in both life and the work, what appears, putting apriori in quotation marks. Her work has begun to focus on this, more than on themes or contents, exploring this modus operandi, exploring the flexibility that exists in the accidental.

If you think about it, these are exercises in live editing. In film, editing is traditionally done according to a pre-established script. Sofía, on the other hand, wants to make the contingency (what happens by default in a park and is visible to those participating in the piece) disrupt what has been already predetermined (the pre-established audio script). Whoever sees Sofía’s performance creates their own live film: a personal film, which is played at the same time as it is produced. This is the most critical feature of the performative character of a thing. When we think of performance, we think of real time, of the presence of the body, of the involvement of improvisation (chance, unforeseen, accident). But the actual radical nature of the performative is that it breaks with the linear Fordist model under which we have imagined all production: first you think about what you want to say, then you create it, then you release it to the public. On the other hand, taking the performative seriously (being live, being alive) implies putting the will to power (the set script) into question and listening to the unexpected.

What is more performative than the sun?

The Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid is home to a central garden surrounded by walls dotted with windows; stepping into the garden means knowing that works of art are on display on the other side of those windows. While legally a public space, the garden is not advertised, nor used, as such. When she was invited to do an installation at the museum, Sofía began to walk and spend long areas in that space, once again “letting herself go”, a mindfulness that opened her to a subtlety: she noticed how the sun was reflected in different

windows as the hours of the day ticked by. She charted the sun's journey on paper, like an observation guide, which she printed and handed out to participants. She restored the garden's status as a public space, arranging with the museum's directors so that anyone who entered or was near the museum would know that they could enter free of charge to enjoy the garden. People who wanted to experience Sofía's work had to spend time there and, if they wanted to (why not?), even lie down on the grass and bask in the sun—a privilege few knew existed. Most of all, Sofía invited them to sit and observe something that is so imperceptible or faint: how the passage of time (the movement of light) affects space.

Sofía creates instances in which the participant in a piece embodies the same methodology that the artist herself used: letting oneself go. We usually think of contemplation as a depoliticised activity, but with Sofía's work it turns into the precondition for a willingness towards a new perception. Establishing a willingness to listen through contemplation involves a key trigger, which is, first, to question the will to power that the Western notion of the modern subject (which is the centre of all agency) has given us. By eliminating or suspending the idea of aim or will (and letting oneself go), the artist who creates the work, and the spectator who enjoys it, compromises their will to power, to always be in the know, to be in control.

Cultivating a willingness to listen also implies dismantling the notion that everything is a means to an end. Our instrumental rationality lies at the root of the malaise afflicting our culture: a space is a container for content, an image as a vehicle to convey a message, time a commodity to be controlled for productivity's sake; instead of being used as a tool to see, light serves only to illuminate something else. Sofía's works stand as instances that disrupt such reductive thinking: space is contemplated for its own sake, not treated as a means to an end. Light is highlighted to be experienced and not seen, not as a tool for seeing. Spaces are created to perceive and contemplate the passage of time. In Sofía's work, contemplation becomes a tool for retuning our senses and cognitive faculties toward an epistemology that views all means (space, light, time, subject, image) as ends in and of themselves.

Capitalist logic is predicated on the instrumentalization of time, space, and the Other, because everything is geared towards control and productivity. Against this backdrop, Sofía proposes that art's role is not so much to manufacture *products*, but rather to produce *gestures*, small *interventions* on that which *already* exists. Here, the gesture seems to be one of pointing, like someone saying: I am looking with you, I provide this planar view of the sun's motion to aid your contemplation. It is as if the artist were saying:

my role is to point out the poetic operations the world already produces, not to churn out more objects for the universe of merchandise. With this piece, people will get to enjoy a space they did not know was theirs, a space to do nothing, or to look at what typically goes unnoticed, to see the upside-down side of things. A space to watch the sun's journey, to see the sun as an object of contemplation rather than one of mere utility. It replaces the will to dominate (to control) with an attitude of listening to the subtle.

I imagine the artist becoming aware of this choreography that the sun performs in spite of herself. I imagine her discovery that there is nothing more performative than the sun, in the sense that it is always the same, yet different. And it's as if that observation amplified Sofía's need to foreground all that performativity can reveal: the questioning of the power of the author through the elevation of chance and accident. A shift away from the representation's logic toward a making-live of embodied presence. A dislocation of linear thought.

Living the time of spaces: narrative without anecdote

On another occasion, again at the Museo Reina Sofía, in the context of the exhibition *Magia Natural* (which explored 17th century theatrical technologies and the interrelationships between magic and science), Sofía reimagined the museum's very architecture as a cube that could be converted into a camera obscura. For a time, she peered through the museum's windows not to see what was *inside*, but rather to observe the world *outside* its walls. Through one window, she noticed a nearby hostel. Sofía left the museum and walked towards it. At the hostel, she discovered a woman who had been living there for seven years, who even went into lockdown there during the pandemic. Remarkably, the window of this woman's room looked out directly on to the museum, which she had never visited. The artist became fascinated by "the invisible stories unfolding around the museum". One afternoon, Sofía went to watch the sunset from this woman's window as she recounted what she had seen happening at this building, this institution, from her window. The artist audio-recorded their conversation and transformed it into an audio guide for the museum. The work's description reads:

"The performance began on the museum's terraces, listening through headphones to a conversation between Sofía and Vivian, a woman who has lived and worked opposite the museum for seven years. As they talk, it is understood that they are watching the building from a nearby window,

discussing the sky and the reflections on the museum's reflective surfaces, and the things they've seen happening around the museum. While listening from the terraces, participants seek out the windows where these voices may be coming from. They were then invited to leave the museum, cross the street, and visit the building opposite, going up to the sixth floor. This is the hostel that opens onto the museum terraces. Vivian walks around the museum every day with her dog. Participants were invited to enter a dark, smoke-filled room with a background melody playing. Sofía would slowly raise the shutter to allow rays of light in, gradually revealing the full view of the Reina Sofía framed in the window. Finally, she opened the windows to clear out the smoke, rendering the image increasingly clearer". In this way, the participants slowly perceived the very scene they had previously heard in the audio.

Something similar unfolds in Sofía's project for the La Papelería space (*Vacío, destellos*, November 2023). The artist pierces holes in the enclosure, letting outside light in. That is all there is to see inside. Just like her piece that sought to turn the Museo Reina Sofía into a camera obscura trained on the outside world beyond its exhibition space, here the pierced enclosure does not frame images from without, but simply admits its light. It is the light itself that reveals the small subtleties of the interior space. Again, the work is not a product but a gesture: pointing, directing our attention. And just like in her other pieces, it underscores the minimum, the practically unnoticed, the easily overlooked. The spatial gaps are made visible, and by perforating the architecture, she prompts you to look at the other rooms. In the second room, the holes draw the gaze upwards. An audio component relates to the flash of lightning that can be heard but vanishes before you have time to turn to look in another interplay with the invisible, as if the sound were the lingering reverberation of a disappeared image. As if the accidental erasure of her last mockumentary had forged an awareness in the artist of the phantasmagorical instability of the image.

As if, with her background in audiovisuals, she decided to relocate the locus of narrative power. The narrative, more than a story to be told, becomes an awakening of perception to the spatial-temporal dynamics that seem still yet resist stasis. The work becomes a fundamental line of questioning: rather than the instrumentalization of image to represent a narrative, it probes the very nature of looking itself, of attending. How is an image created and what fixes it in time? Is an image only that which is set? Where do we direct our gaze? How are images formed from what we hear? What is visible and what is invisible?

A year prior, in another space (Can Felipa), Sofía again directed our attention to the inherent drawings and choreographies produced by the sun's movement through architectural spaces (*Ya ha salido el sol*, October 2022). The artist's spatial intervention crafted a narrative without story, without history, anecdote or explicit content, instead offering an experiential reckoning with the *sine qua non* condition of all narrative (the passage of time). Certain areas of the space were closed off, while others that were previously closed were opened. Some windows were covered with a translucent paper that transformed the sunlight across the building's interior into gradients. One zone was shrouded in darkness, while a corner was precisely illuminated. The spatial distribution kept spectators from looking out, and an audio component synchronised with the visitor's path through zones of shifting light intensity and colour. Sofía recorded the audio in Bilbao during her residency there, applying, like she has on other occasions, her methodology of talking walks and letting herself go. For this piece, she tasked herself with going out each day to watch the sunset. These recordings were then edited to reflect the evolving ambient soundscape over the course of a sunset: the emergence of certain animal calls at one hour, their receding as others take over, the fading of human and urban noise into nightfall. Nature gives us this gift, this passage of time reflected in the change of light, the change of light affecting sound. Again, by eliminating the external image (what we see through the room's windows), Sofía compels us to listen to the image, to experience how sound sparks images within us. What spectators could see inside the room was an empty space with lighting that subtly transformed over the course of the day. Through this erasure of the anecdotal and figurative in the image, Sofía elevates the performative dimensions of the image itself.

It is a commonly held belief that artists see what others overlook or see things beyond the obvious. Instead of merely making us look again, look better, look at the invisible or perceive subtleties, Sofía's works are crafted more from attentive observation than from attentive listening to what the spaces have to say. Her art invites us to endow our gaze with the immersive power of listening, as if the visible could be heard instead of seen. Listening engages the whole body, making us part of what we hear, unlike the gaze (looking requires distance). Through Sofía's work, seeing transforms into an experience akin to listening. Cultivating contemplation in her art is about fostering a new kind of attention.

The strategy is reminiscent of Tony Conrad's *Yellow Movies*, where he applies cheap house paint on flat surfaces, inviting viewers to observe how time affects the paint's tonality. By calling them "movies", he plays

on their dual nature: flat, photosensitive surfaces and the cinematic use of photosensitive materials and light to tell a story. When the narrative elements—the images and sound—are stripped away, what remains front and centre is the medium's essential condition: time. By removing their role as instruments, our attention is drawn to their purpose as endless resources. Hence, de-instrumentalization is crucial: we stop taking their mechanisms for granted.

Sofía insists on erasure and the methodological importance of emptiness, repeatedly saying, “I don't want to add content”. And this radical gesture of erasing subject matter reveals the mechanism as a gesture. Emptying the image of content removes the burden of having to convey a message or mimic reality. Only through de-instrumentalization can we truly observe and focus on the basic mechanisms that create meaning. It is a paradoxical game: to experience what makes narrative narrative, I must strip it of narrative, and so I can experience the passage of time in my body in a more direct and obvious way. In order to experience space as volumetric thought, I need to perceive it as empty, without instrumentalizing it as a container of content. To how an image is produced, I need to eliminate it. To look again, I need to eliminate the visible. If I eliminate the image, I can begin to perceive the light that produces it. If I eliminate the image I can begin to listen to it.