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**'Woman Writing' as a Curatorial Method: Narratives of Belonging in the Art
Practices of Chantal Peñalosa and Bridget Smith**

To cite this chapter:

Stevenson, C. (2022) "'Woman Writing' as a Curatorial Method: Narratives of Belonging in the Art Practices of Chantal Peñalosa and Bridget Smith" in Dormor, C. & Sliwinska, B. (eds) *Transnational Dialogues and Female Agency in the Arts*. London: Bloomsbury

On March 8, 2021, a banner appeared above the façade of the Hotel Condesa in Mexico City depicting a series of printed phrases organised in a radial pattern. The banner, created by the artist Chantal Peñalosa¹ and titled *Closer to the disappearance, from the eclipse*, formed

¹ Chantal Peñalosa (b. 1987, Tecate, Mexico) studied fine arts at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California and the University of São Paulo. Her artistic practice uses small gestures and actions that intervene in everyday life, playing with notions of labour, waiting and delay. She uses repetitious actions to suspend time and create dialogue with histories, atmospheres and objects in her home town of Tecate, Mexico. Peñalosa's work has been shown in Museo Jumex (2021) Mexico City; M HKA Museum, Belgium (2019); ESPAC, Mexico (2019); XII Bienal FEMSA, Mexico (2018); Museo Amparo, Mexico (2018); CCI Fabrika, Russia (2017), La Tallera, Mexico (2015); ZKM Center for Art and Media, Germany (2015), MUAC, Mexico (2014), amongst others and she was awarded FONCA Young Artist fellowships in 2013-2014 and 2015-2016 and the acquisition prize in the XIV Bienal de Artes Visuales del Noroeste. She is represented by Proyectos Monclova in Mexico City. <https://www.proyectosmonclova.com/people/chantal-penalosa>

part of #NoVoySola, a non-profit art project in response to and in support of the feminist movement in Mexico². The radial design of the banner referenced an 18th Century visual poem by Mariana Navarro titled 'Acrostic Decimal'. On Peñalosa's banner, she replaced Navarro's words with a collection of phrases spoken to her by men in the art world.³ The phrases, radiating like a sundial into the streets below, included comments like 'Piensas mucho' (you think a lot) and Te puedo hundir (I can sink you). Such comments reveal the complicated gender navigations that frame success within the contemporary art world, but also point to universal experiences and invisibilities of female work within the written histories of art. The original poem, by Navarro, was composed in the same radial shape for a public competition organised as part of a city-wide festival honouring King Ferdinand VI's ascension to the Spanish throne in 1747⁴. The competition, organised by a local University, encouraged members of the public to submit poems to the King. Navarro's poem won second prize and, despite its long exclusion from Mexican literary history, it is now understood to be one of the first recorded visual poems with its origins in experimental

² #NoVoySola (I won't go alone) is a collaborative project to vindicate the civil rights struggle of women and provide friendship and solidarity between female contemporary artists in Mexico. For International Women's Day (March 8 2021), they organised a series of street protests in the form of artistic interventions. <https://www.novoyola.mx/>

³ The full list of phrases used in Chantal Peñalosa's banner *Closer to the disappearance, from the eclipse*: Piensas mucho (you think a lot), Eres una mujer complicada (you're a complicated woman), Ambiciosa (Ambitious), Sólo piensas en tu trabajo (you only think about your work), Me gustaría que trabajaras en La Parisina (I wish you would work in La Parisina), Que fueras como otras mujeres (you are just like other women), Aléjate de mi círculo profesional (Get away from my circle), Yo podría destruir tu carrera – I could destroy your career, Resultas interesante por ser de rancho (You are interesting for being from outside of here), Seguro alguien más hizo tu obra (Sure, someone else did your work), Te puedo hundir (I can sink you), Insufrible (Insufferable), Eres una trepadora (you are a climber), Dejaste de ser mujer (you stopped being a woman).

⁴ The poetry competition was organised by University professors as part of a city-wide festival celebrating Ferdinand VI. Festivals were a defining part of life in colonial Mexico City. They were organised by the authorities in order to celebrate the expansion of European horizons and to glorify the Spanish empire. Spectacle and government-sponsored revelry were used as colonising agents and as a way to bring diverse groups of people together to promote shared values. See Curcio-Nagy, L (2004) *The Great Festivals of Mexico City: Performing Power and Identity*, UNM Press: New Mexico

literature in Mexico⁵. Alicia V. Ramírez Olivares (2010) writes that the poem has existed only within the written histories and records of the festival, and therefore little is known about Navarro and whether or not she wrote with any consistency. Also, because of the radial design of the poem – in the shape of the sun – the poem has been dismissed as a simple visual image intended only to praise Ferdinand VI. Looking beyond the surface, however, Ramírez Olivares (2010) argues that Navarro’s poem holds a much deeper meaning. She draws on Julia Kristeva’s (1978) writing on linguistics to explain that the poem must be understood in relation to the social and historical context of its making. Therefore it is not simply a visual image in the form of a sun, rather it is a form of expression that allows Navarro to play with poetic and visual form. In an acrostic poem, the first letter of each line spells a word and that word is generally the subject of the poem. Navarro’s poem spells out the phrase: *Augusto Coronado del sol* or *Augustus crowned with the sun*, the final letter ‘L’ appearing in the middle of the poem. Through its form, Navarro inserts her own female subjectivity into colonial society through the placement of the poem in a radial image suggesting that she herself controls the wheel of the circle, almost like a roulette; the woman has control of the world that includes the new king. (Ramírez Olivares, 2010)

Navarro’s visual poem is an intimate and yet radical gesture performing female agency to make it visible and heard. Similarly, Chantal Peñalosa’s banner weaves the textual and the visual to demand recognition for female subject positions within multiple his-stories and to claim belonging in the public space of Mexico City and beyond. On one level it is

⁵ Women in colonial Mexico were not permitted to be educated. According to Alicia V. Ramírez Olivares (2010) women in colonial Mexico were simply ‘a subject without intelligence’ (p. 1). Intelligence was reserved only for males, and therefore an educated women was seen as monstrous or anti-female. However, many women in religious sects, because of their close proximity to books and their ability to engage in self-reflection, ventured into poetry and it was these women who cemented a female presence within the genre. Much of this literary work was written anonymously, which explains Navarro’s exclusion from Mexican literary history.

demonstrative of the gender disparities within the contemporary art world, but on another level, the radial design inserts female subjectivity or agency, enabling women to control the circle and un-silencing their voices. This is a recurring strategy in Peñalosa's work, where she carefully inserts her own experiences and observations into written histories and everyday life in her home-town of Tecate, Mexico.

Over the last 18 months, I have been in regular contact with Chantal Peñalosa through an email exchange. I got in touch with her after seeing her work on social media via the gallery that represents her: Proyectos Monclova, in Mexico City. The work I was interested in was a set of prints depicting clouds in the sky, with titles of places, dates and times underneath them. Through our email exchange, she told me that the photographs captured various cloud formations seen from the Mexican side of the border and then again from the American side. The prints reminded me of an exhibition I visited at Focal Point Gallery in Southend, UK by the British artist Bridget Smith.⁶ The exhibition drew on Smith's childhood memories growing up in Southend-on-Sea, a seaside resort full of faded vestiges of escapism, fantasy and long summer nights. Similar to Peñalosa, Bridget Smith also uses images of the landscape to frame her experiences of home.

⁶ <https://www.fpg.org.uk/exhibition/if-you-want-to-talk-about-light-you-have-to-talk-about-waves/>
Bridget Smith (b. 1966, Essex, UK) is a British artist working with analogue and digital photography, video and site-specific installations that explore the real and imagined in social and architectural spaces. She creates spaces where the 'unreal' and fantasy emerge as intense aesthetic experiences, using light, colour, pattern and scale. Her work addresses our conflicted desire to feel connected and to be transported and she draws on her experiences growing up in a seaside town to make connections between society, the landscape and the wider universe. Smith's work has been shown at Victoria & Albert Museum (2013), Bromer Art Collection, Roggwil (2013), Stanley Picker Gallery, London (2012), Peer, London (2010), Two Rooms, Auckland (2008), Musée D'art Contemporain, Val de Marne (2007) and De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill (2006) and she is represented by Frith Street Gallery, London. <https://www.frithstreetgallery.com/artists/31-bridget-smith/>

Although Tecate, Mexico and Southend-on-Sea in England seem like an unlikely pairing, I was interested in the ways in which these artists activate female agency, via their creative practice, to open up spaces of belonging within everyday life, particularly in two locations marked by transitory populations and shifting identities. Similarly to Navarro's poem, Peñalosa and Smith's practices may be read via Kristeva's (1978) concept of 'woman writing' as a subversive and regenerative force signifying traversal spaces for female agency. Chantal Peñalosa lives along the Mexican/American border, where life can change dramatically depending on the political situation in America. Bridget Smith is from an English seaside town, marked by regeneration and populations of summer revellers who inhabit the place during summer, and then vacate at the end of the holiday season. In her article *Transnational Embodied Belonging Within 'Edge Habitats'*, Basia Sliwinska (2015) says that art practice offers a spatial figuration in which to think through 'what it means to be at home and where this 'home' might be' (p. 306). Her article describes the practices of two artists who have moved from their homes into new cities, becoming territorially unfixed, and carving a sense of belonging in a place that is not their own. Peñalosa and Smith also explore notions of home through their practices, although they are both rooted in the place they have grown up, and to the home that they know. Through my dialogue with them, I focused on drawing out the connections to home and place that form the basis for their work. Marsha Meskimmon calls these 'epistemic locations' (2020: p 2) or places of knowing that emerge from somewhere, with their own particular politics. Both Peñalosa and Smith create 'situated and embodied forms of critical and creative engagement that acknowledge epistemic location' (ibid: p. 2) and in doing so, they forge new connections that extend beyond a simple geographic location or national identity. For Peñalosa, this means paying attention to the sensory and bodily rhythms of life and memory as they play out along the

Mexican/American border. For Smith, it is occupying affective and nostalgic spaces within abandoned places of seaside reverie.

This chapter documents the conversations between these artists and me, as curator. I think of these exchanges as an ongoing curatorial project with no exhibition, no catalogue, no opening and no closing. Rather, they are sets of exchanges that re-centre the role of the curator from an authoritative organiser to an interlocutor, a conversation partner, listener and addressee. Through the practice of 'vulnerable listening' (ibid p. 2), I draw on histories of feminist curating to create meaningful connections between these artists' practices that resist dominant hierarchies and geographies found in the globalised contemporary art world.⁷ Rather, I call these *transnational dialogues*, demonstrating fluid and non-authoritative understandings of belonging and home, and 'a way of inhabiting the world in solidarity and kinship'. (Ibid, p. 4)

Transnational Dialogues and Curatorial Practice

The global turn in contemporary art, necessitates careful use of the term 'transnational dialogues'. As Quemin's (2012) geographical analysis of the art world illustrates, the organisation of globalised contemporary art is driven by the art market, which tends to prioritise North America and Western Europe surrounded by semi-peripheries and

⁷ Alain Quemin (2012) notes that since the end of the 1960's the global art market has proliferated into a vast international network. He states that actors in this network consider national borders to be negligible; it is viewed as globalised, culturally diverse and invested in cultural debate. Through an analysis of artists exhibiting in major galleries, museums, biennales and art fairs from 1970 - 2010 Quemin reveals that, in fact, the geography of the art world has a clear 'centre', 'semi-periphery' and 'periphery'. The 'centre' comprises the USA (and possibly Germany) and the 'semi-periphery' comprises much of Western Europe. The 'periphery', or those countries with the least representation, exist outside of the USA and Western Europe.

peripheries. Furthermore – and as Meskimmon (2021) notes – both the global turn and the art market have ‘tended to occlude feminist theories and practices while reinstating Eurocentric hierarchies under the homogenising sign of ‘globalisation’.’ (p. 5) In this context, transnational dialogues that connect and seek to understand difference have great potential to open up different typologies of art, however, the application of the term transnational in relation to multi-national or global art, shouldn’t serve to reinforce binaries between the USA/Eurocentric centre and the peripheries. As Meskimmon argues:

‘Decolonising feminism’s approaches to art history and theory, and integrating the important insights derived from transnational thought and activism, means more than bringing art from a worldwide catchment into the Euro-US marketplace. Engaging with the multidimensional intersections between gender, sexuality, the global and the local (amongst other differences) requires a profound change of direction in the production of art’s histories and theories.’ (2021: p 5)

The curatorial project recorded in this chapter – one that prioritises vulnerable listening and conversation – evades traditional notions of curatorial practice grounded in authoritative communication and instead draws on decolonising forms of feminist curating. In written histories of curatorial practice (see O’Neill 2012), the role of curator is primarily that of mediation. It is a position that has accelerated rapidly in the last 30 years, from an unnamed carer of objects to an autonomous creative practitioner, working within and independently of, the gallery or museum. Curation emerged as an authoritative means of mediation in the late 80’s and 90’s, in tandem with the global turn in contemporary art. It is here that the independent curator appeared and, by the middle of the 90’s, curating began to take central stage as a form of critical practice in its own right. Characterised by distinct styles of

authorship, mainly through the production of group exhibitions with thematic narratives, independent curating set out to name, categorise, author and frame contemporary art and cultural production, often in relation to dialogues surrounding the global, the national and the local. The steady detachment of curating from the internal systems of museum custodianship resulted in a ubiquitous visibility of curatorial practice and curators holding the same position of authority as artists, often working as a co-creator or cultural strategist.

In her article, *Curatorial Materialism. A Feminist Perspective on Independent and Co-Dependent Curating* (2016), Elke Krasny offers an earlier – and different - take on the history of independent curating. Going back to the 60's and 70's, she locates an emergent form of curating that went beyond the confines of the art world and into social and political contexts, resulting in the transformation of modern art into contemporary art. She points out that many of the curators working in this context who profoundly shaped new models of artistic production, were feminists, feminist artists and female historians, activists, thinkers and public intellectuals. This, she argues, is fundamental to understanding the emergence of feminist curating which not only transformed the discourse of art history in the 1960's and 1970's, but also produced new modes of independent curatorial practice.

Krasny (2016) defines feminist independent curating as a cultural practice synonymous with political and economic struggle. For her, independent curating foregrounds a relationship with the world, where the curator takes a counter position in relation to disciplinary discourse and dominant categorisations, producing trans-disciplinary cultural production that confronts the complex conditions and experiences of art world institutions. For Krasny, independent curating is intertwined with feminism's legacy of struggle for political, social and economic independence. Feminist independent curating therefore is a strategy that

intervenes in the methods of production and infrastructure of the art world, exposing its inner workings; its social relations, divisions of labour, inequalities, access to resources and the conditions and distribution of cultural production. And it is a practice that invests in the 'profound awareness' of human co-dependence, emotional and cognitive labour that is involved in curatorial work. Feminist independent curating takes a multitude of forms. It doesn't have a written history, rather it is practiced through shared sets of modalities, strategies and intentions that appear and intervene in the discourse of contemporary art.

A feminist curatorial practice also seeks to carve out new spaces, or temporary spaces within established infrastructures, making visible these social exchanges. These opened up spaces can be understood as material and 'emotional spaces, discursive spaces and spaces of emerging knowledges' (Krasny, 2016: p. 103) where curatorial practice is enacted within the networked and equal labour of exhibition technicians, researchers, archivists, historians, artists, funders, government officials, and so on. She calls this 'curatorial materialism'; a curatorial practice conceived within the material interactions and struggles inherent in contemporary cultural production.

Returning to Kristeva's (1978) concept of 'woman writing', the term 'woman' is understood as a heterogeneous space inclusive of individual difference. Woman writing, therefore is 'experimental political praxis' (Meksimmon, 2021: 6) unfolding in time, creating space for female agency and all of the 'synergies, affinities and overlapping interests' (Ibid: 6) contained within. My correspondence and dialogue with Chantal Peñalosa and Bridget Smith can therefore be seen as a form of woman writing itself; a transnational feminist approach to curating contemporary art that seeks to unravel, to connect and to intervene.

In the following sections, I document my correspondences with the artists through a written conversation, revealing their 'practices of knowing, imagining and inhabiting' (ibid: 2).

Chantal Peñalosa: The Border is Also an Atmosphere

Chantal Peñalosa is a Mexican artist who lives and works in Tecate and Tijuana, two cities located along the border of Mexico and the USA. In my first email correspondence, I asked about her photographs of clouds in the sky. She responded that almost every work she makes is the result of a performative act. The sky prints were a result of observing a cloud that passed through Tecate Baja, California and wondering how that same cloud would look on the American side of the border, in Tecate California. She walked across the border, identified the cloud and photographed it. The sky prints are a series with variations: some days the waiting time to cross the port of entry at the border was longer due to crowding, some days it was faster because there were less people.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE (Figure 1.Stevenson_Cloud Prints)

With these images, Peñalosa is interested in mutability, or whether the same thing looks different or not from one side of the border to another. The cloud is an object to test this mutability or to focus on a point of view between two countries that are in constant negotiation.

I guess this is one of the main characteristics about borders.

When I referred to the border as an atmosphere, it was because the border cannot be reduced to the image of a wall or a line between two countries. There's a more complex situation beyond this and it can be found in everyday life, it's made up of culturally shared situations. (Peñalosa, 2020)

Peñalosa's art practice is comprised of small gestures that intervene in everyday life in border cities. In our email exchange⁸, she told me that for as long as she can remember, she has felt the air change when she's crossed the border. She set out to record this with the help of chemistry researchers at the University of Baja California in Tijuana. The researchers helped her detect the variations of chemical components present at the intersection of Tijuana and San Diego, and then developed a series of distillates with the information taken from the air. The scents they detected registered everyday aspects of daily life, spreading in both directions, from foods that are cooked and eaten to ways of treating the environment, and certain types of vegetation.

That's why I think that the border is atmosphere in both a literal and metaphorical way.
(Peñalosa, 2020)

Looking at her sky prints, I am reminded of Trinh T. Minh-ha's opening line from her book *elsewhere within here*. 'The time now is small, mobile, portable, I, light blue' (2011:1). She says that blue is the new colour of fear: a virtual boundlessness. But beneath this virtual boundlessness, this expansive sky, walls are being built, borders closed, movement curtailed

⁸ I have engaged in email correspondence with Chantal Peñalosa since August 2019. Through this section I use italics to denote sections of dialogue copied from her emails.

and nations sealed. The idea of globalised, transnational expansiveness sits just above material and immaterial barriers of fear, insecurity and exclusion.

I am intrigued by Trinh's description of blue in relation to fear. Later in the chapter she writes about the American and Iraqi wall built in Adhamiyah to separate the Sunni and Shia Muslims. The wall was constructed by the Americans out of concrete blocks, but was quickly adapted for everyday use by the local inhabitants. Sections were moved to create passages to create more direct walking routes to the shops. And a group of artists – Jamaat al-Jidaar – painted sections of it blue, so it appeared as though one was looking through it to the sky beyond.

I ask Peñalosa about her experiences growing up in a border city.

My relation to the border has been very close since I was a child, the house in Tecate where I grew up is just three blocks from the border fence (now a wall), and all my life I have seen how this border has been modified, for example, since the 90's this wall has had variations in sizes and materials, but also the methods of surveillance and politics of deportation has been changing throughout the years.

Those kinds of images and situations are common for me I can say they are part of my imagery and I have a reflection about this in the relation to the kind of images I produce.

As an inhabitant of the border I'm not very interested to replicate this in my work, because these are the same images you will find all the time in the news and the mediatic forms that are usually used to refer to borders.

In recent years the interest in this border has increased because of Trump, so art functions as well as a political agenda. For me, it's very clear when I see artists from other places going to

the border to make projects or even when institutions talk about it in a very elemental way, as if life over there could be reduced to a few images.

Sometimes

These images generalise a lot. (Peñalosa, 2020)

She tells me that she is more interested in other images that speak to the complexities of everyday life along the border, which is in continuous flux depending on the relations between Mexico and the United States. It is in the everyday practices of life along one of the most contentious borders in the world where one can find the most poignant and volatile meanings.

Sometimes minor objects can tell a major story. (Peñalosa, 2020)

I ask her how she connects her practice to the history of Border Art, or the history of artists using their art as a political means to address the social and economic complexities of life in cities along the Mexican/American border⁹. I am interested in the idea of time in relation to her description of life alongside the border and how so much of her work addresses the lived experience of time that never unfolds. The border is always in flux, but there is no end in sight. It will never stabilise. Does she locate her work in relation to those artists who have told similar stories through their work?

She explains that her first encounter with Border Art was in her first year at art school where she was introduced to the binational event InSite, that took place between 1994 and

⁹ Border Art refers to a contemporary art practice rooted in experiences of living along the Mexican/American border. It emerged as a term in the 1980's to describe sets of art practices that interrogate experiences of borders, 'race', ethnicity, national origins, surveillance, home and identity. Although artworks have been made in relation to many kinds of contested borders, the term Border Art that I use here refers specifically to the history of site-specific art made in relation to the US/Mexico border.

2005 around San Diego, Tijuana, Baja California and other places. Recognised artists converged to create projects that were later labelled as Border Art. Although she was too young to witness the actual projects, the organisers created an archive of the projects; one copy was to stay at the American border, and one at the Mexican border.

Mexico is a very centralised country, and so shortly after the archive was created, the Mexican copy was transported from Tijuana and installed in Mexico City. This made Peñalosa think not only of herself and the influence and history of border art, but also of younger generations. What happens when artists can't find traces of what has come before? What approaches much they create when that history is taken away?

Travel to Mexico City from Tijuana is a three-hour plane journey and one must have special permission from a museum to see the projects. Peñalosa did this and photographed each one. She then placed the framed photographs alongside their title in several of their original sites and abandoned them.

What I kept for myself was the documentation of the installed images, as a gesture to reactivate a history that I did not have the chance to witness. People have been writing about border art for over two decades, but this history has been mostly orally transmitted, tending to get lost and forgotten along the way. (Peñalosa, 2021)

She recalls one day she was standing in her Aunt Lupita's garage, gazing at all of the storage boxes inside, containing things like tools and Christmas tree ornaments – all the things that wound up there from some previous time when they were inside her house. It made her think of border art, particularly the art forms created on Mexico's northwest border. They all have the appearance of garages. Last year, she decided to make her own garage with this history of border art. She invited students from the Universidad Autonoma de Baja

California in Tijuana and worked collaboratively with them to study the art forms that make up the history of Border Art.

For example, they looked at pre-Hispanic civilisation to see repeated elements that then become aesthetic tropes within Border Art.

She explains that most houses on the border and in the United States have garages, spaces originally intended to store a car, but increasingly they are used to store objects that are not in use, or a place for objects that do not go inside the house.

I used this metaphor where the “house” functions as the official art history so, in my garage, remains fragments from the border art that remains in a stand by, waiting while history decides what will happen with all these pieces of work with a lack of recognition. This garage is a counter archive that questions or problematizes how the construction of art history is made with its criteria of inclusion or exclusion. (Peñalosa, 2021)

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE (Figure 2.Stevenson_CP Unfinished Business Garage)

In our most recent exchange, Peñalosa writes to me about her current exhibition at Best Practice, a gallery in San Diego. The exhibition contains a number of works made in relation to her life in Tecate. She says:

I think art is not a space to reproduce reality but instead a space to invent it. For example, a lot of projects I made are situated in Tecate Baja California, but I think that the place that I show as Tecate, is the construction I made of it. If someone travels to Tecate in search of the

things I present in my work, they would probably not find it as they are, not in a literal way and maybe that person would end up disappointed.

I like the idea of art as a place to re-signify what we usually see and know, so there are multiple levels of how work can be unrooted even from its reality where it came from. (Peñalosa, 2021)

The exhibition, titled *'There's something about the weather of this place'* speaks to the entanglement of politics with the air and the climate. Peñalosa writes that since she was a kid, she has heard people in Tecate say 'Look, the Gringos are throwing ice to make it rain' whenever airplanes would leave contrails in the sky. She tells me she remembered this phrase recently, and remarked on how it circulates as a colloquialism or a local politics, when contrails are actually a global phenomenon. The idea behind the colloquialism is that the US controls all of the power in the world, including the weather and the formation of the clouds.

She also made a series of blank canvases during the wildfires in 2019 in California and Baja California. She tells me:

There is a phenomenon of extremely downslope winds affecting this region during fall every year that causes a lot of wildfires, sometimes this wind carries out ashes from one side of the border to the other.

I put white paint on the canvases and left them in my garden to keep some of the ashes flying in the sky over the fresh paint.

Doing this project reminded me a lot of the beginning of our conversation and I guess this expanded the idea of why I mentioned the border as an atmosphere before. (Peñalosa, 2021)

Bridget Smith: Blueprint for a Sea

As mentioned, my first encounter with Bridget Smith was at her 2015 solo show at Focal Point Gallery in Southend, a seaside town along the Essex Coast in England. The exhibition, *If You Want To Talk About Light You Have To Talk About Waves* coalesced around the colour blue, in the form of diminishing horizons and huge, abandoned spaces. Against the backdrop of the Southend pier, with its casinos, bars and fair ground rides, Smith's work was agonisingly nostalgic.

In my exchange with Bridget Smith, I was most interested in knowing more about her relationship to the colour blue. Indeed, blue was the starting point for my conversations with both artists. I wanted to understand if colour could be used as an anthropomorphic material; if it could be invested with meaning across different places and contexts.

Chantal Peñalosa's sky prints speak to me of the same blue Trinh T. Minh-ha describes: a light blue fear. The blue in Bridget Smith's work, however, is different. It is strange and unsettling, seductive and melancholy.

The idea of using blue...it draws us after it. It has this sense of infinity. And I was interested in this idea of interior space reaching out into infinity. Colour is quite interesting because it does change over time. It changes its meaning over time.

Blue has this push pull between dreaminess and reality. (Smith, 2020)

In Smith's work, blue speaks to the indeterminate. It's a powerful and emotional trope within her work and it reminds me of Derek Jarman's heartbreaking narratives in his book, *Chroma*. Blue is the colour Jarman writes about as he is dying of complications as a result of the AIDS virus. His peripheral vision is diminished and he keeps seeing flashes of blue behind his eyes. *O Blue come forth, O Blue arise, O blue ascend, O blue come in.* (Jarman, 1994: p 197) He can feel the material decay of his own body, and he reaches out to the blue beyond.

Bridget Smith's work speaks to the universal and the expansiveness of lived experience. She grew up in Southend, a place characterised by economic decline and regeneration. As she explains, in this landscape, there are some things that change and some that stay the same. Growing up in such a place means that one is always stuck between changing seasons; between memories and anticipation of something to come. It is a transitory feeling or a feeling of being in two places at once.

She tells me that when she was younger, she took a job as a ticket collector in a cinema.

I saw the beginnings and ends of films and I saw the cinema with no one in it. And the curtain was like a colour field, almost like an illusion. An in between. There was this sense that something would be revealed, but it's not revealed yet. I had a very strong feeling of being alone in these spaces and their scale and the aesthetics of these controlled environments. (Smith, 2020)

For Smith, the empty cinema stands in for a lot of narratives. It's an abstract kind of space, or a space of reverie. And like Southend itself, it's a space that exists between time. Colour, too, is something that exists in a transitory and transnational space. It can't quite be pinned

down, it depends on light and distance, and, while it is loaded with meaning, its meaning remains elusive. She explains that blue is perhaps the most interesting colour because blue is what happens in the earth's atmosphere, before it becomes completely black. She uses colour to transport her viewers and to take them with her into the memories of these transitory spaces. The blue of her work is an attempt to capture their emotion and their seduction.

She calls them: *Sites to be transported and sites of transmission.* (Smith, 2020)

The first work of Smith's I encountered at Focal Point Gallery was *Blueprint for a Curtain*, a series of fifteen, large cyanotype prints on sheets of curling paper cascading down the wall. Smith works carefully with photograph and cinematic processes, often exposing their technologies as if to puncture their capacity for illusion. Cyanotypes, a photographic process that has been in use since the 19th Century, were initially used for the purpose of producing blueprints, notes and diagrams. The chemicals and light involved in the process results in a Prussian Blue colour field, embedded in the paper. Prussian Blue is a deep, visceral kind of blue. It doesn't seem to have a beginning or end. Smith's work is an attempt to make sense of this expansiveness. It almost feels as if she is trying to contain it, by bringing it in to the interior spaces she inhabits: the empty cinemas and the seaside town. *Blueprint for a Curtain* is a blue colour field with a ruched cinema curtain printed across it. It reminds me of my own childhood visits to the cinema, when the projector turned on at the start, throwing its light to the front of the room. The heavy, velvet ruched curtain would all of a sudden appear transparent in the light, before lifting to expose the cinema screen.

In her other cyanotype prints, Smith uses the image of cinema seats. Both the curtain and the seats double as ocean waves; a dual reading of interior and exterior spaces and looking out at expansiveness from a material space.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE: (Figure 3.Stevenson_BS_Blueprint for a Curtain)

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE: (Figure 4.Stevenson_BS_Blueprint for a Sea)

I am drawn to the way that Smith talks about her viewers. She mentions repeatedly what she wants her viewers, or 'the viewer' to see, or to feel. She tells me that she started off as a painter, but then came to the end of her painting and wanted to do something more figurative. I wonder if she means she wanted to do something more immersive, to create a different, more intimate connection with her viewer. The work that she creates now positions the viewer – me – as if I am the only person looking. It's as if she wants me to stand where she has stood, at the back of the empty cinema, at the edge of the Southend pier, and feel the expansiveness and the emotion that she has felt. Her processes and her use of colour fix me, the viewer, in that space. Looking at her work in the gallery by the sea, I am aware that I'm examining the reverie, and her memory, of Southend.

INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE: (Figure 5.Stevenson_BS_Mechanical Wave)

In the entrance to the gallery, two synced videos played a loop of a penny pusher arcade game. Titled 'Mechanical Wave', the continuous hypnotic movement recalled the ocean and – similar to Peñalosa's work – notions of delay and waiting.

Peñalosa writes that Bridget Smith's work reminds her of a fragment of *The Mariner* by Fernando Pessoa where the characters are having a conversation about the sea:

FIRST – Outside of here, I never saw the sea. There, from that window is the only place where the sea can be seen, and you can see so little of it. Is the sea in other lands very beautiful?

*SECOND – It is only in other lands that the sea is beautiful. That which we see always gives us longings for the one we shall never see.*¹⁰

Conclusion

I set out to create a curatorial project with no exhibition, no catalogue, no opening and no closing. I was interested to see what might transpire through the practice of 'vulnerable listening', rather than naming or authoring, and, drawing on histories of feminist curating, how a project might evolve through methods of friendship, dialogue and exchange. By doing so, I wanted to expand the notion of curatorship and its histories and methods, embracing heterarchical modes of organisation in the form of dialogue and written correspondence.

¹⁰ *The Mariner (A Static Drama in One Scene)* was written by the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) in 1913.

Transnational, feminist dialogues in the arts – like the ones written in this chapter - have the potential to form new ‘epistemic communities’ (Meskimmon, 2021: p 2) that recognise multiple centres and move away from binary relationships between local and global, national and international. Epistemic knowing is embodied knowing; it is situated and informed by the politics of place, but mobile and transversal. Art practice offers up a space where the imagination can ignite knowledge, enacting and envisioning new ways of inhabiting the world. Within this space, it is possible to conceive of the curator as one who makes connections and seeks solidarity and friendship, rather than naming worlds and tying them down. Writing, with and through art practice, is one such method; ‘Woman writing’ (Kristeva, 1978) carves a space for voices to emerge over time and across distance.

In the process of writing the art practices of Chantal Peñalosa and Bridget Smith, I am connected to the sky, the sea and the land. I am reminded of home.

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