



Fig. 1. Yeni & Nan, *Transformation: element earth* (1983). Installation view of *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*, September 15–December 31, 2017 at Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Photograph by the author.

Mud Canción

Laura August

*This is the song of the mud,
The pale yellow glistening mud that covers the hills like satin;
The grey gleaming silvery mud that is spread like enamel over the valleys;
The frothing, squirting, spurting, liquid mud that gurgles along the road beds;
The thick elastic mud that is kneaded and pounded and squeezed under the hoofs of the horses;
The invincible, inexhaustible mud of the war zone.*

— Mary Borden

*Not always so politically overt, dirt is packed with demonstrations of clay's incipient power
to usurp, or at least mess with establishments.*

— Ingrid Schaffner

Overture

Let us imagine, for a moment, that two geographies, which seem to have very little in common, can be linked by physical matter. That, despite their differences in latitude and longitude, in political history and language, that they might be bound (at least for an imagined instant) by something as subtle as the seasonal pattern of rain, as insidious as the unplanned sprawl of urban development, or as seemingly unremarkable as mud.

First: Exposition

In August of 2017, the world was briefly transfixed by the image of Houston drowning in the floods of Hurricane Harvey.

After the rain stopped, the media left, and cleanup began, many Houstonians were faced with the problem of what to do when everything—furniture, homes, cars, roads, neighborhoods—was saturated with water. Water, mixed with chemicals and debris, seeped into the soil, making a toxic ubiquitous mud. The mountains of damp furniture, carpet, and Sheetrock sitting in front of gutted homes bred microorganisms that also sank into the soil, and Houstonians were warned not to let their children play in mud or standing water because of the poisons that lingered there. “Submerging a city means introducing a new ecosystem of fungal growth that will change the health of the population in ways we are only beginning to understand,” James Hamblin writes.¹ The wet afterlife of Harvey was an unimaginably enormous pile of festering garbage, a muddy wasteland, and, simultaneously, completely normal. Indeed, in the days and weeks after Harvey, the sun shone and there was no rain and eventually the soil dried. The immensity of the city meant that Houstonians could spend entire weeks without crossing into flooded neighborhoods. Life returned to its routines, or recovering became its own routine. In many places, the only indicators of the disaster were the sweet putrid smells that lingered like permeable boundaries of rotteness in the air.

Mary Borden, “At the Somme: The Song of the Mud,” *Current Opinion* (October 1917).

Ingrid Schaffner and Jenelle Porter, *Dirt on Delight: Impulses That Form Clay* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2009), 30.

¹ James Hamblin, “The Looming Consequences of Breathing Mold: Flooding means health issues that will unfold for years,” *The Atlantic*, August 30, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/08/mold-city/538224/>.

Development: Melody

We often describe the complexity of a political moment as a landscape. With this metaphor, we compare the act of surveying the many events and effects of politics to the act of overlooking a field or lake, of trying to make sense of the parameters of the earth that surrounds us. Indeed, in many cases, our uses of metaphor place the human body as the central object in an assessment of something ostensibly unrelated to (or at the very least outside of) our bodies. That is, in order to understand scale or movement or significance, we foreground the body, even in our imaginative linguistic structures. A political landscape is often described as being shaped, as shifting, or as being confronted, but in any case, it is often understood as a relationship between a body and a ground. Body and ground are, simultaneously, two of the most embattled sites in the current political landscape of the United States. The legislation of health

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care, the deportation of people, and the widespread effects of climate change made body and ground seem newly vulnerable in 2017. Hurricane Harvey only briefly registered in a news cycle of environmental disasters and human rights abuses. As Houston filled with

water, the president of the United States pardoned Joe Arpaio, a former Arizona sheriff convicted for criminal contempt after refusing to cease his targeted detentions of Latinos. At the same time, the Mexican government organized trucks of food and supplies to be sent across the border to Houston. At the same time, “Dreamer” Alonso Guillen drove 100 miles to Houston with a boat to help with the rescue efforts; he and a friend drowned in the rapidly rising flood waters. These are political landscapes.

Let us extend the metaphor of the political landscape—the centering of body and ground—to one relationship characterized by ambiguity and dissolution and unknowing and antagonism, one perhaps best described by mud. An actual matter—mud is essentially broken-down stone or organic matter mixed with liquid—mud is also one of our most potent metaphors in English. When a relationship or concept is unclear, it is described as muddy. When angry language is used to hurt or to destroy someone’s livelihood or

reputation, it is called mud-slinging. When something is difficult or impossible to understand, we describe it as being clear as mud. Each of these metaphors take the body’s physical relationship to mud—how it feels under our feet, in our hands, smeared across us—as a familiar category of experience.

Perhaps because we understand mud’s ambiguous and often-changing material properties through touch, the matter often appears in creation narratives. Mud’s thick relationship to life, its smell of death, its rich organic matter makes it a living material: humans shaped from clay come alive, and mud is the bed from which plant growth emerges. And yet, before we ascribe too much static strength to mud, remember that it also is endlessly unpredictable, moving, dissolving, drying out. The K’iche’ Maya origin tale, the *Popol Vuh*, tells the story of the gods unsuccessfully building a human from mud: “Thus there was another attempt to frame and shape man by the Framer and the Shaper . . . Of earth and mud was its flesh composed. But they

saw that it was still not good. It merely came undone and crumbled. It merely became sodden and mushy. It merely fell apart and dissolved. Its head was not set apart properly. Its face could only look in one direction. Its face was hidden. Neither could it look about.

At first it spoke, but without knowledge. Straightaway it would merely dissolve in water, for it was not strong.”² An experiment in building a human, the muddy prototype washes away in the rain, and so the shapers try wood and iron before eventually developing a prototype from corn. This parable is especially interesting not because it describes the use of mud to make a living being, but because *mud fails*. Its propensity for dissolution becomes a problem. The human made of mud comes undone, crumbles, is mushy.

“THIS PARABLE IS ESPECIALLY INTERESTING NOT BECAUSE IT DESCRIBES THE USE OF MUD TO MAKE A LIVING BEING, BUT BECAUSE MUD FAILS.”

Second: Exposition, Exhibitions

In the exhibition *Radical Women*, on view at the Hammer Museum at UCLA in the fall of 2017 as part of the Getty’s Pacific Standard Time initiative, the curatorial team created almost a whole room of muddy work from the ’60s,

² Allen J. Christensen, ed., *Popol Vuh: Sacred Book of the Maya* (New York: O Books, 2003), 78.

'70s, and '80s. Ana Mendieta lies face down in the wet earth for her *Siluetas*. Silvia Gruner rolls, head over heels, along a wet sandy beach. Celeida Tostes is covered in slip before being enclosed in a ceramic vessel from which she breaks free. Venezuelan artist duo Yeni & Nan smear their faces with mud and then stare ahead at monitors, unblinking, while the mud dries (Fig. 1). Other parts of their performance *Transformation: element earth* (1983) include lying prone and plastering each other with mud, which—the wall text tells us—serves as an analogy for relationships between skin and body; between geography, landscape, and body; and between earth and body. A floor installation of light boxes by Vera Chaves, *Epidermic Scapes* (1977/1982) underscores this tension between body and earth. In it, closely cropped detail photographs of the artist's skin are blown up to become topographic maps: they read visually as landscape forms made of skin.

But muddy work is not just historically bound to these decades, as several recent exhibitions and biennials prove. Simultaneous to *Radical Women*, a career retrospective of Anna Maria Maiolino's work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles features a whole room of unfired clay objects (Fig. 2). Part of her *Modeled Earth Series* (2017), Maiolino's rolls, coils, and balls are made by hand and arranged on a table, on the floor, or in the chicken wire that is installed along one of the museum's walls. In her wall text, curator Helen Molesworth writes, "These shapes aim to be more than primitive forms, recollections of food, or products of domestic labor; in Maiolino's hands, each work rehearses a kind of mitosis—splitting, reproducing, and ultimately coming together to form a new body. Once Maiolino begins to create *Rolinhos* (little rolls), they move off tablets, tabletops, and cutting boards, and begin to stand, stack, climb up walls; shifting from units to beings." The metaphorical association of mud with living body is so naturalized that Maiolino's sculptures come alive even in Molesworth's description.

Opening two weeks before Maiolino's retrospective, the Annabeth Rosen retrospective at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston opened shortly before Harvey struck. In the artist's compilation of clay forms—fired, some broken, piled upon each other in precarious unpredictability—there is a lush abundance. Her grammar is about stitching pieces together, like visual phrases made of earthen bodies, metal joints, glazes and paints, all cracks and straining heaviness. The texts



Fig. 2. Installation view of Anna Maria Maiolino, August 4, 2017–January 22, 2018 at MOCA Grand Avenue, courtesy of The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, photograph by Brian Forrest.

describing Rosen's work mention the way her ceramic sculptures straddle a line between craft and contemporary art: Rosen "has demonstrably delved into the place of craft in the contemporary art landscape," the press release notes. Her installations, which meld "materiality and process," draw from her training in functional and decorative ceramics. That is, Rosen works with a category-fluidity uniquely inhabited by ceramics.

(I did not intend for this essay to center ceramics, but we would be remiss to neglect the muddiest of artistic mediums.)

As both exhibitions make evident, clay and the literature surrounding it are enigmatically between things, often awkwardly so. This squelchy matter exists between questions of daily life and work, between daily making practice and living practice and fine art. Clay can be functional or can slip into different registers of sculpture and installation and nonfunctional object, and for this reason it recurs frequently in work by artists inhabiting the political landscapes of female experience in the '60s, '70s, and '80s. These specific political landscapes are intimately connected to the dissolution of

Laura August

boundaries between personal experience, politics, the body, and categories of artistic practice. In her book *Live Form: Women, Ceramics, and Community*, Jenni Sorkin makes a case for ceramics as the foundational medium for avant-garde practice in the 20th and 21st centuries. She describes the physicality and performance inherent in making ceramics as experiential modes of work and life. Sorkin grounds mid-century ceramics not only in a pedagogical history, but also in terms of the lived experiences of community. Ceramics, she writes, became a structuring device for nonhierarchical and participatory experiences: she describes clay as a medium that encourages social transformation. Defining “live form” (a descriptor first coined by California potter Marguerite Wildenhain), Sorkin writes, the “term goes beyond mere maker’s mark, conveying the artist’s embodiment of form itself, through an indexical presence that becomes ever present and unceasing.” As Sorkin notes, “another emigré potter, Otto Natzler, called this same phenomenon ‘immediacy,’ writing in 1968: ‘In no other art is there such an immediacy, such personal close contact.’”³ Clay, then, not only dissolves boundaries and invites participation, but as it does so, it also activates a specific politics marked by inclusion, immediacy, community-building, and touch (so, by extension, marked by the body).

³ Jenni Sorkin, *Live Form: Women, Ceramics, and Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 11.



Fig. 3. Gustavo Artigas, *Tropo 2 (N)*, 2016. Video, 3:17 min. Installation view of Gustavo Artigas: *Veneno*, July 30–October 1, 2016 at Yvonne, Guatemala City, photograph by Karl Williamson.

Third: Another Melody

In 2016, I start a modest apartment gallery and artist residency program in an apartment I rent in Zone 1 of Guatemala City (Fig. 3). It is the historic city center, and the apartment is a few steps from the central plaza which serves as the

economic, religious, symbolic, and political heart of the country. The gallery is named Yvonne, which is the name of the building:

Located in downtown Guatemala City, Yvonne is an exercise in living-with, in inhabiting speculative fiction, in shared energy and conversation. She is a place and a person and a mood. Yvonne is an expat or in exile or running from something, and she is pensive about what that can mean. She lives with objects, and she invites artists, activists, lost souls, and writers to share her space. She listens to the city. She speaks something between English and Spanish, and in the spaces where her grammar fails, she offers emotional space and poetry. Yvonne believes that sincere and simple hospitality, with no expectations, can be a radical site for creative work.⁴

To anthropomorphize an architectural space is to enliven the thing that contains and surrounds the body. And, to make an art space that is also a domestic space is to muddy the boundaries between artistic practice and daily life through

⁴ See www.yvonne.soy.

the sharing of space. *Convivencia*, then, becomes that muddy anthropomorphic alive thing between the bodies who stay with Yvonne. That is, she—like clay does in Natzler’s description—becomes alive through her interpersonal immediacy and close personal contact. The muddiness of the proposition is what animates her, and it is also what can provoke her dissolution.

The Yvonne residency is occasional, informal, and deeply tied to networks of friendship. The proposal is to live and work together, to embrace certain discomforts with the aim of making new discoveries in conversation with each other and with the specificities of Guatemala City. One artist-in-residence tells me that exactly this muddiness—the lack of clarity between our roles as friends and as professional colleagues—leaves him feeling unmoored and disoriented. He returns over and over to the word mud to describe a blurriness between work and life. *Convivencia* can be about discomfort, miscommunication, and alienation, we learn together, and it is most deeply about how we navigate the personal. MOMUS editor Sky Goodden describes the project of making a residency as an optimistic gesture, a kind of magical incantation, an invocation of the experimental. “To quote John Berger,” she says, “we are pushing our prodigious energy to forge links of friendship, political solidarity, shared poetry and hospitality.”⁵ This push, Goodden notes, comes at a moment of widespread discourse about “globalizing” the art world, and the professionalization of the artist; its personal nature suggests a gentle resistance to such commercialized experience. At Yvonne, artists are invited to make regular returns to the city; the first artist-in-residence, sculptor Lily Cox-Richard will return every year for a decade, building sustained relationships with artists in Guatemala and developing a substantial body of artistic research there. Yvonne, then, takes the tenets of *home*—even when those tenets can be uneasy—as a sparking point for making—in conversation—and over long swathes of time.

⁵ Sky Goodden and Lauren Wetmore, *MOMUS: Episode 2, The Artist Residency* (Los Angeles: MOMUS, 2017), Podcast, <http://momus.ca/momus-the-podcast/>. Goodden is actually paraphrasing Berger’s 2003 essay “Stones,” included in the volume *Hold Everything Dear: Dispatches on Survival and Resistance* (New York: Vintage, 2008). The original quotation describes Berger’s friendship with Eqbal Ahmed (1933–1999), a Pakistani political scientist, activist, and academic. Berger writes: “Eqbal learnt early on that life inevitably leads to separations. Everybody recognized this before the category of the tragic was discarded as garbage. Eqbal, though, knew and accepted the tragic. And, consequently, he spent much prodigious energy on forging links—of friendship, political solidarity, military loyalty, shared poetry, hospitality—links which had a chance of surviving after the inevitable separations. I still remember the meals he cooked.”

Refrain from the First, Lento

Estimates vary widely, but news agencies report that Hurricane Harvey damaged as many as 200,000 homes and destroyed as many as 16,000 in the ten-county area that includes Houston. In the days of the storm, while waiting in a neighbor’s house for the water to recede, Houston-based artist Edith Shreeve sends me a poem by Naomi Shihab Nye:

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.⁶

After the hurricane, we walk through Shreeve’s home together. We talk about allowing a loved one to die, about sitting with a loved one as she passes away, of holding the house’s hand, in a manner of speaking, as it transitions from its former life. We believe the house to be a living thing. We bring the house flowers and incense that I’ve carried with me from Guatemala (Fig. 4). While we walk through the house, we find an old Polaroid photograph of Shreeve’s daughter, the image buried in the bare floorboards, past and present dissolved in the stripped-down and saturated bones of the house. “She was so beautiful,” Shreeve breathes, and she could be talking about her daughter or her house.

Dissonance

Mud has nothing to do with art criticism, I am told.

But to continue that refrain from the First

After the hurricane, I return to my family’s century farm in rural Kansas, to make peace with the empty farmhouse and its memories and to drive through the familiar

⁶ Naomi Shihab Nye, “Kindness,” in *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems* (Portland: The Eighth Mountain Press, 1994).



Fig. 4. Laura August, *Edi's house*, 29 September, 2017.

landscapes of the Middle West, the first time I have done so since the passing of my grandfather who farmed that land for over seventy years. Driving those rolling fields with my grandfather, checking irrigation systems, watching wheat stubble burn, collecting ears of corn from the field near his house, these are among the happiest memories I possess. I have deep, bodily-borne recall of the smell of earth after rain, the sting of rinsing ash out of my ears, the pungent scent of fertilizer raining over the fields, the sound of the CB radio communicating the delicate choreographies of harvest. In Guatemala, corn is also intimately tied to language and craft, is considered a living member of the family, reoccurs across contemporary artistic practices, lest you think it has nothing to do with the serious business of art writing, lest you think it remote from the concerns of art, lest you think these places irrelevantly unconnected. If we take mud, if we take corn, if we take our bodies and the earth as our subject for a critical writing practice about art, what might they allow—nay, *encourage*—us to say? Let us imagine speaking from an alternative landscape.

Tzu'tujil Maya artist Manuel Chavajay's video performance of walking through corn fields with caution tape, marking the fields (affected by recent legislation on



Fig. 5. Manuel Chavajay Moralez, *Awan*, 2015, photograph documentation from video performance, 50 x 76 cm, ed. of 5. Photograph courtesy of the artist and Extra Gallery, Guatemala City.

behalf of the global seed giant Monsanto) as a crime scene, for example, suggests the relationship many Maya artists have with land (Fig. 5).⁷ Here, farming and artistic production are not separate endeavors. Here, life (the body on the earth) and work (care for the body and the earth) are inextricably interwoven.

Kaqchikel Maya artist Edgar Calel might turn up unannounced at Yvonne early Saturday morning or appear on a bus in São Paulo or be wandering the archaeological sites scattered across Guatemala: he seems to be always everywhere, always generous with ideas, describing dreams, considering the world he wanders and its many myths and stories, considering where his feet lead him and what he finds. At Trama Gallery in Guatemala City in the summer of 2017, Calel's exhibition *El rostro de la tierra que mis pies vieron* (The face of the land that my feet have seen) considers his recent visit to Brazil. Traveling among Guarani-Kaiowá communities along the border of Brazil and Paraguay, Calel carries many-colored seeds of maize, herbs, and squash

⁷ W. George Lovell writes: "Land is something Mayas in Guatemala relate to in ways that transcend most Western notions of astute property management. For them land is like air and sunlight, a God-given resource over which no one exercises exclusive proprietary rights. Custom dictates that it be worked, protected, and passed on to offspring as a sacred gift handed down from the ancestors with that end in mind. Mayas consider themselves not so much owners as caretakers of land." (*A Beauty that Hurts: Life and Death in Guatemala*, The University of Texas Press, 2010, p. 6.)

with him as gifts for his hosts. "I very much wanted to remember this moment, to preserve this time and its atmosphere, along with its tonalities of color, that was my hope," he writes.⁸ A simple defiance of contemporary regulations against carrying fruits and vegetables, seeds, and live animals across international borders, Calel's gesture is rooted in the importance of agriculture and landscape in his community's philosophy, quotidian life, and extensive history. "With the seeds, I was thinking about the people who have died for taking back their lands and returning to live in the manner that they lived in ancient times."⁹ In exchange for the gift of the seeds, the Guarani-Kaiowá community he was visiting offered him a gift of thanks as well: standing barefoot in the area's reddish soil, they stepped on page after page of Calel's



Fig. 6. Edgar Calel, *The face of the earth that my feet have seen*, 2017. Mud on paper, 26 drawings, dimensions variable. Photograph courtesy of the artist and Trama Gallery, Guatemala City.

notebook, leaving their footprints (and the footprints of a pet dog and a pet monkey) for him. These pages hang on the wall at Trama, near a video of their making (Fig. 6). Watching children take turns stepping on Calel's pages, one might imagine a dance

⁸ Edgar Calel, Facebook message conversation with the author, September 2017, translation by the author. "Yo tenía muchas ganas de guardar en mi memoria ese momento que había presenciado. Conservar ese tiempo y su atmósfera, junto a sus tonalidades de colores, era un deseo."

⁹ Ibid. "Pensé en las semillas, en las personas que habían muerto por retomar sus tierras y volver a vivir de la manera como se vivía antiguamente."

unfolding. These mud footprints are not only portraits of their makers, but they are also registers of a shared experience. Calel writes:

To share time
 To cross paths and walk with bare feet
 To feed ourselves from the same squash
 To receive the shade of the same tree
 To understand that our roots are vibrating in our face when a soft wind touches the pools of water the rain left behind, where we see ourselves reflected.¹⁰

Fourth Movement: Song, Andante

In the fall of 2016, I return to Milledgeville, the small town in Georgia where I spent most of my childhood. It was Flannery O'Connor's hometown, and it was where I attended college. Together with Guatemala City-based poet Julio Serrano Echeverría, I give a series of lectures and seminars about contemporary Guatemalan art and independent spaces. The trip is marked the way trips home can be marked as weird when you take along someone who has never been there. Its strange magic is compounded by grief; we are there also to remember a beloved friend of mine, who died unexpectedly in May. Escaping the intensity of those days of grief and work, Serrano and I make a pilgrimage to find sculptures by Beverly Buchanan, who lived in Georgia in the 1980s. We drive first to Macon, Georgia, and find the Museum of Arts and Sciences. Buchanan's sculptures are just beside the guest parking lot. One of seven site-specific sculptural installations Buchanan made in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, these stones bear a plaque that marks their title, *Ruins and Rituals* (1979). They are well-kept, and their simple forms are suggestive of shamanic experience. They sit in a green, wooded area, and the afternoon light filters through the leaves of the trees in the cool, damp air. The sculptures could almost be found stones, in their simple composition and rough-hewn textures. Their surfaces show the evidence of their combined materials, the rough mixture of rock and dirt make a chunky concrete, pocked by time.

¹⁰ Edgar Calel, artist statement circulated at his August 2017 exhibition at Trama Gallery, August 2017. Translation by the author. "Coincidir en el tiempo / Cruzarnos y reparar los caminos con los pies descalzos / Alimentarnos de la misma abóbora / Recibir la sombra de un mismo árbol / Comprender que nuestras raíces están vibrando en nuestro rostro cuando un viento sutil tiene contacto con charcos de agua que dejó la lluvia donde nos vemos reflejados."

Buchanan's *Marsh Ruins* (1981) in Brunswick, Georgia, are much more difficult to locate. They seem to deteriorate into the marshy landscape where they sit, and they could easily be mistaken for stones deposited there over long sweeps of time. These sculptures are decrepit, craggy rocks in a bog, just on the edge of a river inlet that drains to the sea. "Daily the sculpture is flooded by the tide," writes art historian Andy Campbell, "which, years after its installation, has left the sculpture in a truly pitiable state: cracked, broken, and partially buried in smelly marsh mud."¹¹ Serrano and I pick our way through mud and spiny plants. I sit on one of the sculptures, tucking my feet under me. The smell of damp earth, the sound of nearby fishermen and women, the wet heat, all surround me in a familiar way. Serrano has brought a book he has written

¹¹ Andy Campbell, "We're Going To See Blood On Them Next': Beverly Buchanan's Georgia Ruins and Black Negativity." *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29 (2016). Accessed 16 November 2016. doi: 10.20415/rhiz/029.e05

Fig. 7. Julio Serrano Echeverría, *Ofrenda*, 2016. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



wrapped in a textile to place on the stones, an homage from Guatemala to the swamps of Georgia and their deep histories of slavery and violent loss (Fig. 7). The stones of Buchanan's *Marsh Ruins* look out to the spot in the water where seventy-five Africans, arriving from the brutal Middle Passage, drowned themselves rather than be enslaved.

Campbell writes about Buchanan's split practice, the ways in which her work moves between modalities, inhabiting an in-between place:

During the years she lived in Macon, Georgia, Beverly Buchanan could often be found at work in her airy, second-story, light-filled studio on College Street. This little geo-locational fact is more important than may at first appear. As in many American towns, College Street served as de facto racial dividing line—mapping out the working class, black part of town from the middle class and affluent white part of town. In the years that Buchanan lived in Macon (1977-1985), College Street was a mixture of grandeur and dilapidation; that Buchanan located her practice on this street makes a kind of sense. Her sculptures not only trafficked in the similar purgatorial space between looking both made and unmade, but the understandings and distribution of her work was largely bifurcated amongst these two Georgian viewerships.¹²

That purgatorial space, we might say, is the mud.

Serrano and I talk about other viewerships, about what it means for a Guatemalan poet to make a pilgrimage to the swampy banks of Georgia, about the strange coincidences that would take an art historian from the Deep South to Central America. Campbell is the first writer-in-residence at Yvonne: these things move in circles. These things are not as disparate as they might seem, and Serrano and I agree that we are affectively bound together by our relationships to landscape, our interest in how volcanoes and stones and rivers and fires teach us about life and loss and community and politics, about what mud can make and how it can also stand in for negative affect, for failure, for dissolution, for deep depression. Recall: in *The Neverending Story*, the depressive horse Artax succumbs to a quicksand named The Swamp of Sadness.¹³

In the fall of 2017, the fourth *Prospect* exhibition opens across New Orleans, taking its inspiration from the swamp lotus. "This aquatic perennial takes root

¹² Andy Campbell, "Life on the Line," unpublished article, used by permission (2017).

¹³ For a thoughtful study of quicksand in U.S. history and popular culture, see Daniel Engber, "Terra Inferna: the rise and fall of quicksand," *Slate*, August 23, 2010, http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2010/08/terra_infirma.html.

in the fetid but nutrient-rich mud of swamps so that its beautiful flower may rise above the murky water. The flower's grace is inextricably connected to the noisome swamp, just as redemption exists in ruin and creativity in destruction," writes curator Trevor Schoonmaker.¹⁴ Swamps, mud, and murky fetid bogs are rich sources for growth, and the premise of Prospect is on the beautiful flower that emerges from such an environment, the interrelationship between beauty and ruin, "an optimistic cartography." But the mucky environment itself—its ability to dirty, to sink, to suck, to smell, to act as metaphor for ambiguity and dissolution, remains—perhaps fittingly, given its specific material qualities—unresolved. Mud holds ambiguities, points to the potentials and failures that blurriness allows, and so is a difficult subject from which to build a text or exhibition or biennial.

Serrano attributes the building of interpersonal connection—the foundation of an artistic collaboration—to the natural functions of the earth:

... We wonder if it would be possible to create a community, to design it, let's say; it's possible to make some "efforts" to consciously build community, we thought, but there is something really organic to it, there is a tree-like, a plant-like, a fruit-like quality to community. There is something in embracing that comes from the root, and that is why we know who is embracing what and how. There is something in playing that comes from the earth, and that is why we know when someone is letting us win. The lady at the grocery store knows who she is greeting, even though she greets everybody, and the person who cuts our hair understands better than many friends why a broken heart is hard to mend. That's a common form of intelligence in this communal experience, and perhaps that is why, when we try to design one we can't get our ducks in a row.¹⁵

Mud might be a sinking feeling, a series of words used to cause pain, a confusion about relationships, or something to build from, might be the

¹⁴ Trevor Schoonmaker, "An Optimistic Cartography," *Prospect.4: The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp*, Artistic Director's Statement, January 23, 2017, <https://www.prospectneworleans.org/blog/2017/1/23/an-optimistic-cartography.html>.

¹⁵ Julio Serrano Echeverría, "The Place Where Favors Are Born," in Laura A. L. Wellen, ed., *Acts of Aggression: An Exhibition about Community*, Exh. cat. (Dallas: Southern Methodist University, 2017), 52. Translation by Fernando Feliu-Moggi.

Fig. 8 (right page). Edgar Calel, *K'aqob'el*, 208 projectiles made of dried clay, earth, water, and saliva, 2017. Photograph by the author.



evidence of something past, or the life source of something new. In the 2009 exhibition catalog *Dirt on Delight* for the ICA in Philadelphia, curator Ingrid Schaffner writes, “Mud is viscous and lugubrious. Smacking of excrement—of excess and expenditure—it is a base material, one of life’s raw essences . . .” She adds, “it is as if clay itself were a leveling medium, a disruptive field of operations in which advancing and regressing are indistinguishable objectives.”¹⁶ As a disruptive field of operations, mud’s metaphorical relationship to the overlap between life and work reflects a set of stakes within the political landscape of the present. To build affective relationships with artists, to walk through our homes together, to share our grief and vulnerabilities, to love and live in a shared space: these things muddy the lines between what we do and how we live. It is a return to an artistic practice of many feminist artists of the ’70s and ’80s. It blurs the here and now with the there and then, it messes up easy categories of us and them, work and life, in favor of a practice based on the quicksilver unreliabilities of affect and emotional connection.

When John Berger wrote of “pushing our prodigious energy to forge links of friendship, political solidarity, . . . shared poetry and hospitality,” he was writing for a friend who had recently passed away, a friend whose life was in many ways defined by the griefs and losses of political activism.¹⁷ And so, yes, art criticism can be poignant and full of feeling, indeed it must be, in order to get at the specificities of what art actually effects in the world. These things are not separate.

Chorus, in another key

Calel gathers mud from an area near his hometown of Comalapa, a place plagued by mudslides. With his family, he balls the mud into small *bodoques*, or pellets (Fig. 8). “With my two hands covered in mud, I rub until you take shape, I spit in your face and give you life,” he writes. “Now you are ready to step back a few centimeters to gather momentum and travel in the air, to divide the body and the soul of any living being . . . Each point of clay is a center. Each point of clay is a point of reference.”¹⁷ Calel intends to take the mud balls to national government buildings in Guatemala City and hurl them

¹⁶ Ingrid Schaffner and Jenelle Porter, *Dirt on Delight: Impulses That Form Clay* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2009), 26.

¹⁷ John Berger, “Stones,” in *Hold Everything Dear: Dispatches on Survival and Resistance* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 9.

at the structures. The thought of these small pellets ping-ponging and exploding off the colonial buildings is immensely satisfying, gives new meaning to the term mud-slinging, changes the place from which the mud is slung.

Two notes

1. In San Pedro La Laguna, Chavajay begins a new series of work, collecting found ceramics discarded in Lake Atitlán and hanging them at eye level, with clear cords from the ceiling (Fig. 9). Chavajay has worked with ceramics before: his series *Cha’ab’aq* (2012) takes traditional Maya ceramic forms and covers them in contemporary images of violence from the Guatemalan press. In *Kuku’* (2015), Chavajay repairs a broken ceramic vessel that belonged to his grandparents

¹⁷ Edgar Calel, correspondence with the author, September 2, 2017. Translation by the author. “Edgar Calel, 2017 K’aqob’el / proyectil de barro endurecido Tierra agua y saliva Dimensiones variables Con mis dos manos enlodados te frote hasta darte forma escupí tu rostro y te di vida Ahora tú estás listo para retroceder unos cuantos centímetros para tomar impulso y viajar en el aire para separar el cuerpo y el alma a cualquier ser vivo. Acción Punto de barro en aire. Exposición Punto de barro estático. Cada punto de barro es un centro, Cada punto de barro es un punto de referencia.”



Fig. 9. Manuel Chavajay Moralez, *Retaal'*, 2017, ceramic with the sediment of time. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

with plastic pieces: the traditional vessels are disappearing with the ubiquitous presence of plastic, and this mended piece shows the uneasy joining of old and new. He titles this newest body of work *Retaal'* (the mark we leave over time). Here, the found ceramics are covered in a thick patina of mud and moss from their years submerged. Chavajay imagines the many reasons the vessels might have been discarded in the lake, and to whom they might have belonged. They are familiar forms, their shapes indicating whether a man or woman carried them to retrieve water. A thick, green, impasto-like film covers three-quarters of one such vessel, its indentations and roughness a kind of moonscape. The vessel's mouth is uneven, but any roughness from its break has been gently worn away by time and so the edges are rounded and meander in gentle slopes. The green-patinaed mud skin of the piece looks like an aerial photograph of the lake, a way of understanding it from above, even as it emerges from below.

2. Houston-based artist and writer Sebastien Boncy describes Houston's landscape and artistic practices as existing on the edge of predation, of catastrophe, of wasteland, as a "crushing wall of blue" and an unending fight between slabs of concrete and the greens of bushes, vines, weeds:

Every beautiful movement is funded with blood money, every gorgeous sunset is colored with the cancer that is pumped continually into our air . . . There was something unnerving about living right at the edge of predation that I became thankful for. Reminders of life as a series of disasters that one either walks straight into or narrowly averts . . . Catastrophe is etched in keen detail, but the impact is never a punch connecting, but rather the breeze created by the near miss. Shakes, laughter, and tears follow . . . There is no stillness here. This is the wrong motherfucking place to be Donald Judd, or Barnett Newman, or James Turrell. Sure you can appreciate their efforts, but there is nothing about this town with no skin that invites the manufacture of the sleek, the sublime, the stable, or the elevated. This is the wasteland; these artists make work that lifts the dream mists of cheap demagogues. If you're gonna ride out there, ride with real folk.¹⁹

¹⁹ Sebastien Boncy, "Dirt, Seeds, and Blooms: Don Dadas," June 20, 2015, *Not That But This: Arts and Culture Webzine*, <http://notthatbutthis.com/2015/06/dirt-seeds-and-blooms-don-dadas/>.

If anything, his description resonates even more clearly after the storm. This is the wasteland. We all take photographs of the piles of garbage in front of Houston homes after the storm (**Fig. 10**). There is too much to carry away, and so these mountainous reminders of loss wait and rot in our landscaped yards.

Coda

This song is mostly about Houston and Guatemala City, but it touches on New Orleans and Los Angeles and rural Georgia and deep Kansas, and it moves across temporalities, from now to the 1970s and back again. It is anachronistic and amorphous and metaphoric and personal and a little bit hard to hold on to, a little bit musical, even if it jars.

Fig. 10. Laura August, *Bellaire*, 29 September, 2017.



This song is about mud and its afterlives, both material and metaphoric. It sings that mud reflects how we live alongside one another, even as it becomes unclear, even as our narratives unravel and we find ourselves in that in-between place, between life and work, between function and form, between landscapes of disaster and moments of despair, between institutionally accepted norms, between countries and communities and histories, however deeply intertwined they might be. This is an old, old song, a chthonic song with a postindustrial counterpoint, with interruptions from the rafters, with concurrent sounds sometimes harmonizing, and often just swirling around each other.

This song is about mud as disintegration, as a building material, as something that dissolves. It is about close personal contact, about shared living structures. It imagines an art and politics premised on touch, about bringing unlike things in contact with each other.

This song is an apologia for the fact that the personal is still, more than ever, political, critical, relevant, and inseparable from work. Its chorus is, unequivocally, that work is about bodies and earth. This song says: we inhabit specific political landscapes, and we do so together. This song is a wonky, cacophonous symphony of voices, and nothing is clear, and that is as it should be, and that is just like life.

— Laura August
December 2017
Guatemala City

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There's No Wrong Way to Eat a Reese's

One bite / No chewing / Eager as a Shop-Vac / Straight out of
the bag / Sandwiched between two peanut butter cookies
Dipped into a jar of peanut butter / Baked into peanut
butter cupcakes / Braying like a turned-on donkey

Out of a drawer next to the toilet / Fervid, mid-shit, twitchy
with yes / Under the blankets, in the flashlight's beam
Greedy as a newborn king / Groaning on the floor
of a gas station bathroom / Sweating a range

of mountains / At dawn / While sleeping / While getting off
to a workout video / As a gesture of political vandalism
Turgid / Tumescient / Turned-out in dream country
Like shoving coins into a jukebox that plays

only silence / Against holy / Against the taxpayer's dollar
Against the back wall of the theater so Greta cannot
see you / Cramming them clean into your heart
While being torn apart by lilacs / As church

or as abattoir / Tongue unspooling like the torah / Bent
in the birthday dark / Through a mouthful of ashes
As alligator / As opened wound / As midnight
swamp sucking the bones out of stars