

Beatriz Santiago Muñoz

SONG, STRATEGY, SIGN



You say there are no words to describe this time, you say it does not exist. But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent.

—Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*

SONG

ABOUT “SONG, STRATEGY, SIGN”

Filmmaker Beatriz Santiago Muñoz traces the lives of individuals—political dissidents, teachers, and farmers—who are deeply invested in political transformation. The subjects of her films and videos reveal their close physical connections to their environments, sites marked by legacies of colonial trade and military occupation in the artist’s homeland of Puerto Rico and in neighboring Caribbean countries, by recounting stories and engaging natural materials as well as inherited or handmade objects. Utilizing and manipulating documentary filmmaking techniques, Santiago Muñoz inlays the lives of real people and things in a scaffold of fiction in her work; her subjects at once stand for themselves and serve as characters in the novels or ancestral myths that underlie the films, occupying a space between the symbolic and the real. For her exhibition and residency at the New Museum, Santiago Muñoz premieres a new three-channel video *That which identifies them like the eye of the Cyclops* (2016); a series of silent, 16mm portraits *Black Beach/Horse/Camp/The Dead/Forces* (2016); and a set of masks, which will be activated in a series of new films and videos made during the artist’s residency this spring.

The three parts of Santiago Muñoz’s video *That which identifies them like the eye of the Cyclops* are titled as a sequence: *One/Song*, *Two/Strategy*, and *Three/Signs*. This video’s footage emerged from years of contact between Santiago Muñoz and a group of women, and each channel corresponds loosely to a different theme in Monique Wittig’s 1969 novel *Les Guérillères*, which describes a world where the patriarchy has fallen after a bloody war between the sexes. Unlike the characters in Wittig’s novel, the women portrayed in Santiago Muñoz’s video are real, and the story is rooted in the specific place and time that they inhabit—including Caribbean cities, bankrupted states, and coastal towns. The video documents the injured



Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, *That which identifies them like the eye of the Cyclops*, 2016 (production still). Three-channel digital video, sound, color; 10:11 min

farm animals that the women care for, a concert on a beach at night, a frenzied club, and a protest campsite in front of government buildings.

Santiago Muñoz’s 16mm portraits in *Black Beach/Horse/Camp/The Dead/Forces* portray subjects—people, places, and things—she has come to know through previous projects: an anthropologist who consulted on her 2013 film *La Cueva Negra* [The Black Cave], which explores the history of Paso del Indio, an indigenous burial ground in Puerto Rico that was uncovered during the construction of a highway and eventually paved over; a man she met while shooting *Post-Military Cinema* (2014) who cares for horses that roam an old target range filled with unexploded bombs in Vieques, Puerto Rico; a black magnetite beach that is slowly eroding; an artist who has helped to resurrect a sacred tree that was once on the naval base and who has herself been resurrected from illness more than once; and a man who hopes his ritual movements will return the island of Vieques to a cosmic balance. Together, their stories tell interlacing accounts of land, toxic bombings, political work, celebration, and death.

Santiago Muñoz captures the aspirations and imagined futures of those who are deeply invested in alternative models of being, using the stories of farmers, activists, and artists working in Puerto Rico as allegories for larger political possibilities in the region. The film, three-channel video, and masks in “Beatriz Santiago Muñoz: Song, Strategy, Sign” serve as testaments to the individuals who forge their own terms for how to live, remember, and advance their own evolving histories.

“Beatriz Santiago Muñoz: Song, Strategy, Sign” is co-curated by Johanna Burton, Keith Haring Director and Curator of Education and Public Engagement; Lauren Cornell, Curator and Associate Director, Technology Initiatives; and Sara O’Keeffe, Assistant Curator.

BEATRIZ

A CONVERSATION WITH BEATRIZ SANTIAGO MUÑOZ

The way you relate to the subjects of your films seems intimate but also carefully structured. How do you choreograph your encounters?

I have an intuitive attraction to my subjects. In *La Cueva Negra* you can tell there is an unusual tenderness between the boys, who are thirteen and fourteen and take care of, trust, help, and teach each other. It is an important part of the work that is present without being spoken about. I watch out for things like that.

Pablo Díaz Cuadrado is the rearguard visionary in *Matrulla* [2014]—there’s a moment in the film where he starts singing. Something happens in this moment that is disarming, and it’s not the only time he ever did that with me.

Elizam Escobar [who appears in my 2010 film *Esto es un mensaje explosivo* (This is an explosive message)] was a remarkable person for having accepted the fate of prison for nineteen and a half years. He was part of a group of independence fighters who chose not to defend themselves when charged in a US court; they refused to recognize the power of the law. Elizam is an artist and a teacher at the art school here in Puerto Rico as well. When I approached him about working on a project, he thought about it and asked me many questions. But from the moment that he said yes, every request I made—Will you put on the mask and sit here? Or, can you choose a song which you love and sing it to me?—he never questioned. So these things—tenderness, ways of moving and looking at each other—they are all there, they are what makes the work possible.

I have known some of the women in my current project *That which identifies them like the eye of the Cyclops* for more than a decade. Increasingly, I have been working

responds to the particular qualities of light in *this* territory [of San Juan]. Ednadix Vega pilots a small boat through the city’s water channels, taking people and things from San Juan to Loíza, a northern coastal town. *That which identifies them like the eye of the Cyclops* is a bit different from most of my other projects because of how close I am to so many of the women in the film. I have surrounded myself for a decade with these women, and I wanted to see what would come of their collective and individual subjectivities—and *Les Guérillères* was always burning there on my bookshelf, waiting to be used in my work.

How do you define ritual, and what role does it play in the works on view at the New Museum and in your work overall?

Thinking about different positions made possible by ritual has been a way for me to expand how I think about my work. I recognize that there are positions other than maker and audience/spectator, and I have freed myself to pay attention to the transformation of attention and perception happening for the maker and the subject. Ritual challenges the binary between subject and maker, and it points to negotiations of power that develop around objects tied to a set of customs (like the camera).

You’ve expressed an aversion to descriptions of your practice that default to the word “local,” yet you do tend to deeply engage very site-specifically, whether in your own most immediate context (Puerto Rico) or in other areas of the world you’ve worked in (recently, for instance, Haiti). Can you talk a bit about the way you think about and approach various regions, populations, histories, and traditions, and also reflect on how they are impacted by so-called globalism?

It’s funny, I cofounded a place called Beta-Local, so my feelings about the word are complex!† But it is an important question: “local” means from a place—that being its main quality—but it is also often used as a code word for a marginal locality, or a sub-locality; this language is sometimes accurate and at other times not. The two boys in *La Cueva Negra* are locals, and they are there as locals, as the people most near to a place who have the most



Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, *That which identifies them like the eye of the Cyclops*, 2016 (production still). Three-channel digital video, sound, color; 10:11 min

intimate knowledge of the place—not theoretical knowledge, but the kind of knowledge that can only come from being in a place deeply and over time. There are other projects, like *Prisoner’s Cinema* [2013] or *Esto es un mensaje explosivo*, which are about political histories. The most important thing about Elizam [Escobar] is not that he’s a local—since he spent most of his life as an inmate in US prisons, so I am not sure where he’s a local of—but that he’s a person who was not free for most of his life. I know him because he is an artist and a friend, and I was profoundly affected by the beautiful accident of meeting him while he was in prison when I was twenty-four years old and doing some work there for a professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

I will say this, though: I know that different thoughts are possible in different places. When you are sitting in a fishing boat in the middle of a storm looking out to land you think one thing, and when you are walking through a place that was once bombed you think another. One thinks different things with different people, too. This means thinking (even art-making, looking through a camera, recording an image, and cutting a film are forms of thinking!) is something that is done from a place, with a person, and in a time. I learned this the hard way, because, once I came back to live in Puerto Rico, for a long time all sorts of theories of image, language, etc., that I learned elsewhere did not seem to make sense or even to be relevant at all. In this territory, those thoughts don’t quite fit. And so the place seems insufficient or to not live up to the theories. We need to theorize from the ground up, through a process of recognition, of seeing things—in very high res—from particular places! We need to look at people’s ideas slowly and over a long period of time.

Your work often takes up objects as kinds of subjects. Can you talk a bit about how you approach objects, both in terms of culture and aesthetics? How do you consider the masks, in particular, as they are understood on their own terms, as sculptural objects, and as performance tools?

I think in order to make some sense of the masks I’d have to talk about faces—which is something universally fascinating (we should include even nonhuman animals’ faces here). We are drawn to faces, of course, and it might even be the case that humans develop certain personality traits through others’ perceptions of our faces. Then, defacement and/or hiding one’s face can lead to an interesting moment, when the person is both fully him- or herself and symbolic in a way that is chosen and manipulated. All actors know this. You put on the costume, and your body begins to change; you put on the mask, and you are the monster. Then there is something that happens to the kinds of faces that have become only representations and have lost their full actuality as individual beings. This happens to images of women that are considered marginalized; for example, in classic social-issue documentary photography, the face is detached from the person—it becomes a mask imposed from without.

I have resisted showing faces for a long time—I often shoot people from behind. Sometimes the face does too much! Since *Les Guérillères* works by shifting between autonomy and collectivity—it gives a lot of attention to sensorial and material qualities, while developing a language for them, and to collective experience in the form of the text—I have been thinking of analogous ways of working through these ideas. I think masks do some of this work in the film.

Can you discuss the way feminism informs your practice, and how this facet of your work has changed over time?

I have learned through the work of Monique Wittig, Chantal Akerman, and Sara Gómez that forms matter, that new languages must be created, that attention must be paid, and that affective work can be seen and described. I arrived at feminism through art, not through political work. So, the first way in which I understood feminist thought and practice was through the relationship between

aesthetics and politics. There are some films that changed everything for me: Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Reassemblage* [1982], Sara Gómez’s *De Cierta Manera* [One Way or Another (1974)], Michelle Citron’s *Daughter Rite* [1979]. Out of all of this work, it was clear that experimental forms opened up new ways of thinking and perceiving.

Two years ago, you and a group of women created a temporary radio station in Puerto Rico and ran a radio program called *Venimos desde el futuro* [We come from the future (2014)], which imagined the world after the fall of the patriarchy. Can you speak about that project?

Venimos desde el futuro was a four-day radio transmission, from one hundred years in the future, after the end of the patriarchy. Collaborators included Unión de Jervas Autónomas/Programmers BSM, Sofía Gallisá Muriente, Las Nietas de Nonó, Karenin Biaggi, Ezequiel Rodríguez Andino, and Alfredo Richter. We also made posters, related to the radio program, through Unión de Jervas Autónomas—a collective started by artist Sofía Gallisá Muriente and illustrator Lorraine Rodrigues. The posters were made to raise funds for a reproductive rights publication made in collaboration with Taller Salud—a feminist organization devoted to women’s reproductive health issues.

So, these projects have some resemblance to the military cells in Wittig’s novel *Les Guérillères*—except we’re not waging war or slicing fingers and legs. There is definitely a feminist culture that emerges from these activities. I’m interested in this—the zealous defense of collectivity, for example, and the struggle between autonomy and collective work, or work in common.

Images of labor appear frequently in your work, and you seem to pay particular attention to material transformation. In your portraits, you explicitly take up aspects of making, both physical and mental. Can you discuss this?

I am interested in everything that we know, that cannot be named, in what we know that is not language-based, in knowing about and thinking with the entire sensorium. I like looking at people moving—I think there is so much that comes through in the way someone holds an object, the strength of their pushing and pulling, the motion of their hands. Recently I was looking at pictures of navy men in Puerto Rico, pictures from the ’50s, and in them they are photographing each other. And there is a pose—a pose that you would never see today, especially among men—which is repeated in the photographs. So, there was a way of holding your body in front of the camera that was in vogue among navy men in the ’50s!

In my work, I try to pay attention to this making, to moving and migrating qualities. They are in everything, of course, but the accidental and organic ways in which I shoot sometimes bring a lot of this forward and into focus. I am interested in ways of moving, making, and doing that form individual and collective subjectivities.

There have been many long-standing debates about the role “documentary” plays both in art and outside of it. How do you utilize ostensibly documentary tactics in your own work, and to what end? Who or what are your influences?

I think of documentary as a specific genre within film, with specific style, conventions, and grammar—which I *hope* I don’t use or engage with—I am really not interested in documentary as a genre. I *am* interested in the kinds of images that can be created by being present in observation with a camera for long periods of time, by paying attention to what is—and this is something I share with some practices that are also called documentary. The part of the documentary tradition that I most identify with is experimental ethnography. Trinh T. Minh-ha was huge for me. There is observation, but there is, of course, a deep dissatisfaction with more traditional ethnography in her essay “Outside In Inside Out” [1991] and her film



Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, *Black Beach/Horse/Camp/The Dead/Forces*, 2016 (still). 16mm film, sound, black and white; 8 min

Naked Spaces: Living is Round [1985]. This is one place my work comes from—from reading Minh-ha’s writing as well as watching her films. Jean Rouch, both the good and the bad in his work, has also been an influence.

I like sensorial, material detail, which you just can’t make up. That’s impossible. There is nothing more complex than actual life—and observation is the best way to get there. I like the relationship that emerges between subject and maker when we have some structure and some improvisation. I am not interested so much in documentary as I am in the questions that people like Minh-ha and others posed to ethnography, by using and manipulating some of its tools and methodologies.

My peers have also influenced me quite a lot: people like Rita Indiana and Gisela Rosario Ramos aka Macha Colón. Amílcar Packer and Ricardo Basbaum are artists whom I have had the pleasure of seeing work and who have really taught me a lot without even knowing it. I think in terms of historical works, I have been influenced by Chantal Akerman, Sara Gómez, and Lygia Clark—particularly her therapeutic work. This is something that I am beginning to explore now, though I am interested in a kind of anti-therapy; so, not using art to normalize the pathological, but to treat the “normopaths.” I learned this word recently, and I love it.

† Beta-Local is a nonprofit organization in Puerto Rico dedicated to supporting artistic production through a residency program, lectures, workshops, and study groups.

STRATEGY

LIST OF WORKS

The following descriptions were written by the artist.

VIDEO

***That which identifies them like the eye of the Cyclops*, 2016**
Three-channel digital video, sound, color; 10:11 min

The three-channel video *That which identifies them like the eye of the Cyclops* emerged from my time shooting *Verano de Mujeres* [Summer of Women (forthcoming in 2017)], a film project that is based loosely on *Les Guérillères*, Monique Wittig’s 1969 experimental novel about a war of women against men. More than a retelling of this story, the video works as an analogue to Wittig’s novel—in a similar way, it strives to find a new language for a new symbolic order. The works in this exhibition represent a first iteration of this project, in which the most important subjects of *Les Guérillères*—violence, sex, individual autonomy within a collective, and surface vs. depth—are discussed and performed. The film is a document of the real lives of a group of women, including a goat farmer, a cult singer and performer, and a teacher and union organizer, among many others; but it also captures performances by them that loosely trace the narrative of Wittig’s novel.

The video depicts Macha Colón and her cult following, and follows conversations between women from distinct military cells about wartime strategy, the enemy’s tactics, a language for the future, power, and violence. Together the women outline the system of signs used to communicate good news, bad news, advances, death, defeat, and victory.

One/Song*, from *That which identifies them like the eye of the Cyclops

Two/Strategy*, from *That which identifies them like the eye of the Cyclops

Three/Signs*, from *That which identifies them like the eye of the Cyclops

FILM

***Black Beach/Horse/Camp/The Dead/Forces*, 2016**
16mm film, sound, black and white; 8 min

This film features a series of portraits shot in Vieques, Puerto Rico—the site of a bombing range used by the US Navy for sixty years. There is a common thread that runs through these portraits; they are all of a kind—the subjects are linked by their physical connection to their work, which they know deeply in their bodies.

One portrait depicts a horse whisperer who cares for horses that roam the old target range in Vieques and somehow avoid unexploded bombs buried in the soil. Elsewhere in the film, a man who lives on the beach in Vieques performs a private ritual to set the forces of the universe into balance. He initiates the film, the filmmaker, and the camera; he accounts for their force. A black magnetite beach is slowly covered with white sand. Ceiba Ferrer, a woman who has brought a sacred tree back to life, performs her own resurrection.

PROPS

***Masks*, 2016**
Mixed mediums
Dimensions variable

Masks are an important element of the video *That which identifies them like the eye of the Cyclops* and the project *Verano de Mujeres*. There are a few reasons for this: The book *Les Guérillères* does not have the structure of a conventional novel. There is not one protagonist, but many—the women (*elles*). However, this loose narrative is also crossed throughout by the names—which appear in regimented blocks of text—of individual women. Expressed through the presence of names, individual difference and autonomy are strong themes of the work. The women in the text resist becoming signs; instead, they are named in order to create an idea of their full actuality, their irreducible selves. In the novel, the circle—as sign—is what identifies the women’s political formation, their group. Because I am interested in the relationship between the autonomous irreducible person and the political group, I also wanted to see what would happen when the face is covered with a mask and when a woman inhabits a position that is in between autonomy and group identity. Each mask is unique, but its elements—fabric, mirror, palm bark, yarn, or other materials—identify individuals as part of military subgroups within the film’s narrative. Masks are not directly represented in Wittig’s text but are an analogue I have created.

The masks include:
A mask worn by Macha Colón in order to reflect the community that dances around her and looks to identify with her mythic self. • A mirrored helmet for members of the group led by Macha Colón. • A mask worn by a woman who lives in a toxic site. It is good cover for the sun. She walks long distances with it on. • A see-through mask made of palm bark. It is



Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, *That which identifies them like the eye of the Cyclops*, 2016 (production still). Three-channel digital video, sound, color; 10:11 min

impossible to see a face with it on and is part of the toxic-site military subgroup. • A mask to confuse the enemy who cannot know if the two-faced woman will advance or retreat. • An amphibious muddy mask that allows its wearer to hide among the fishing nets.

Mirror mask
Mirror glass and neoprene

Mirror helmet
Plexiglas, bookbinding tape, and silicone glue

Cloth/palm bark mask
Cloth and palm bark

All palm bark mask
Palm bark and metallic thread

Two-faced mask
Plexiglas, bookbinding tape, and silicone glue

Dirty mask
Fish netting

Simple mask
Bamboo, elastic, and metallic tape

Noon-day mask
Bamboo, palm bark, and bookbinding tape

Rug mask
Carpeting and metallic tape

Long rug mask
Carpeting and metallic tape

Masks fabricated with Sally Torres Vega, Agnes Szabo, Tabitha Rosa Paz, and Eduardo Rosario

Ceramic and Wooden Props
Mixed mediums
Dimensions variable

Ceramic and wooden props will be used in *Verano de Mujeres* to refer to bodies, severed limbs, and the wounded bodies that return from battle.

Woman/horse leg
Ceramic

Child’s helmet
Ceramic

Head without ear
Ceramic

Foot joint
Ceramic

Wooden head for helmet
Santa María tree wood

Ceramic props fabricated by Andrea Perez Caballero and Yamineh Flores

All works and images courtesy the artist and Galería Agustina Ferreyra

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Beatriz Santiago Muñoz in Conversation with Patricia Gherovici
Thursday April 21, 2016, 7 PM
New Museum Theater

In this conversation, artist Beatriz Santiago Muñoz and psychoanalyst Patricia Gherovici will discuss feminist utopias, the possibility of developing new languages to describe ourselves, and psychoanalysis’s role in propelling and undermining strategies of resistance.

Performance by Macha Colón
Thursday June 2, 2016, 7 PM
New Museum Theater

The band Macha Colón y los Okapi has gained a cult following among queer and feminist communities in Puerto Rico and beyond. Activating masks Santiago Muñoz has produced during her residency at the New Museum, the band will premiere a special one-night-only performance.

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MUÑOZ

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D K N Y

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They say, If I take over the world, let it be to dispossess myself of it immediately, let it be to forge new links between myself and the world.

—Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*

Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, *That which identifies them like the eye of the Cyclops*, 2016 (production still). Three-channel digital video, sound, color; 10:11 min

