

— 01

OUT OF FRAME: GABRIEL DE LA MORA

FABIOLA IZA



01— FABIOLA IZA
OUT
OF FRAME
P. 5

02— FABIOLA IZA
THE WEIGHT
OF THOUGHT
P. 39

03— CECILIA FAJARDO-HILL
TO OVERFLOW
THE LIMITS. NOTHING
IS IMPOSSIBLE.
EVERYTHING
IS POSSIBLE.
P. 85



01

OUT OF FRAME

FABIOLA IZA

In 1926, B. Traven, the mystery man of world literature, published *The Death Ship*, a fictional first-person account of an American sailor who is left behind and undocumented in Europe after the end of the First World War. From the time of its publication until today, the book has won accolades for its early portrayal of the hardships and suffering undocumented workers are forced to endure. However prescient and accurate, there was another element that held my attention, page after page, as I read: the book's eponymous ship. Onboard the Yorikke, men without any proof of citizenship, and who are therefore prohibited from staying in any country, are forced to work, live, and wander the seven seas. In Traven's narrative, a piece of junk that can barely stay afloat, an *inanimate* object, becomes a character of its own and acquires as much agency in the story as any of its human companions. The *sans-papiers* workers, now sailors, describe the Yorikke as an outcast, a harsh mistress with whom "no more can [I] ever feel alone."¹ Gale, the book's narrator, relates:

[A] story penetrates the whole ship and every part of it, the iron, the steel, the wood, all the holds, the coal-bunkers, the engine-hall, the stoke-hold, even the bilge. Out of these parts, full of hundreds and thousands of stories, tales, and yarns the ship tells the stories over again, with all the details and minor twists.²

Throughout most of the book, but particularly in this passage, I am reminded of Gabriel de la Mora's body of work, in which inanimate objects likewise become

¹ B. Traven, *The Ghost Ship* (Brooklyn: Lawrence Hill, 1991), p. 162.

² *Ibid.*, p. 131

the source, departure point, and provocation for a sort of negative storytelling. **IMG 1**

For twenty years now, de la Mora has succeeded in assembling a practice from the careful and obsessive collection, manipulation, and systematization of apparent garbage or ordinary waste such as dust, discarded shoe soles, burnt matches, antiques, plafonds from turn-of-the-century houses, rusty metal doors, printing plaques, posters pasted on lamp posts, old paintings, and myriad other materials. The trait shared by the otherwise disparate objects is their close relation to decay, a liminal condition that finds itself on the verge of physical disappearance, and have absorbed an incredible amount of energy during their lifespan. As with the Yorikke, stories penetrate their very materiality. **IMG 2**

In 2006, for example, de la Mora started an ongoing series in which, following an intricate removal process, he separates the surface of a wall from different century-old houses. As do the sailors aboard the ship, the artist sees these walls as an accumulation of life and potential stories, of energy: "The works I have made with fragments of old walls interest me as records of the life of a place, its energy."³ A similar method was implemented to remove the plafonds hanging from the ceilings, although this compulsion to explore the energetic quality of things and places has also been channeled in other projects that require almost no physical manipulation. **IMG 3-4**

In *Sound Inscriptions on Fabric*, a series begun in 2013, de la Mora simply removes the fabrics from the speakers of old radios purchased at flea markets and second-hand shops in Mexico City. The fabrics are a

³ My translation. Quote taken from the artist's description of the artwork *MM1* (2006) and published in *Pulsión y método* (Turner, 2011), p. 136.

testimony of the passing of time in a particularly peculiar way: caused by the vibration produced by the sound coming out of the speaker, by their exposure to sunlight, and by their constant contact with metallic materials, the shape of the speakers has been inscribed onto them. It could be said that the thousands of voices that passed through the threads of the fabric are now transformed into silhouettes of different shapes and colors, remaining stuck in-between the tissue: songs, conversations, gossiping, calls from the audience, news, updates on traffic and the weather—all that gives form to the repertoire of stories that have traversed the fabrics. **IMG 5**

Conversely to de la Mora, who describes this approach to objects as an engagement with his own idea of *energy*, my short book endeavors to explore what I will call the *animist* nature of his work. In this sense, I am referring both to his interest in addressing the energy captured in and by different materials and to the ideas and craftsmanship that nourish his practice. However, whilst pursuing this idea, I found myself more and more invested in the processes that the materials undergo; that is, in the complex methodologies that cause their (sometimes radical) transformations. I was also intrigued by the ideas and conceptual strategies underpinning these working methods. Therefore, the book aims to offer a different perspective on de la Mora's body of work, shifting its approach to the processes his many series entail rather than focusing on the artworks themselves, and thus avoiding a conception of the works as products; such an approach would suggest that the finished artworks were the sole bearers of interest and experimentation or the only spaces of discursiveness within his practice. **IMG 6**

Throughout the following pages I will seek to

unpack what remains hidden to the viewer when she experiences the work within, let's say, an exhibition format. My purpose, therefore, is to treat the works as living, animated objects, a stance that has required me to study them mostly beyond the gallery space. The reader will hopefully encounter the artist's working methods in a more private manner, as if opening a door into the artist's studio. It could then be said that this book is an attempt to study the processes undertaken by Gabriel de la Mora to transform an incredibly heterogeneous set of materials into artworks that explore different topics such as the transformation of matter and meaning (a phrase, almost a mantra, drives the artist's practice: *art is neither created nor destroyed, it is only transformed*, pointing to concepts and ideas as well as to materials). One possible method of studying these processes would require exhaustive description and analysis of the operations each artwork has undergone; however, in doing so, it would risk becoming an overly simplistic endeavor. The mere conception of *process* requires patient reflection, as the word itself is usually bound up with the idea of multiple steps that can be thoroughly followed toward achieving a fixed result (the process of purifying water, for instance). Ultimately, though, this book takes a different cue and focuses on what may be named *the procedural* rather than *process-based*. Whilst the latter is employed, almost exclusively, within art practice and refers to the dematerialization of the art object (which disappears over time due to natural stages or social steps), the former is borrowed from legal practice and points to a series of acts that seek to norm relations, as does procedural law. As such, how is an artist's practice shaped over time? Which are the negotiations that happen amongst its many elements?

Art history has often neglected the study of processes; the vast majority of historical accounts only analyze artworks as autonomous, immutable objects produced by a solitary genius.⁴ Modern art seemed to test this convention and, thanks to its increasingly embodied actions, it demanded that art critics and historians pay more attention to the making of an artwork. As an illustration of this phenomenon, consider the now-iconic photographs of Jackson Pollock dripping paint on canvases; nevertheless, the myth of the genius is very much in operation here. **IMG 7**

On the other hand, with the advent of the artistic projects clustered under the term *social practice*,⁵ processes came to the fore of every account, description, analysis, and even critique of an artwork (and usually focus on the ethics at play). Within this trend, art historian Grant Kester champions the use of the term *dialogical art*, as his focus is on “projects organized around conversational exchange and interaction.”⁶ Needless to say, these projects dismiss the production of objects; if they do make use of them, it is as props that may detonate a particular situation. To a certain extent, my proposal was vaguely inspired by these writings: I invite the reader to delve into the dialogical

⁴ “I believe in dedication; I’ve never subscribed to the idea that the artist does not need to study because talent is innate. One of architecture’s teachings that has stuck with me is discipline; I think it is essential for carrying out any work, even artistic work.” (*Pulsión y método*, p. 229. My translation.) Gabriel de la Mora was originally trained as an architect.

⁵ Social practice has been used in the United States to denote participatory art projects. On the contrary, Claire Bishop has proposed to group under the umbrella of *participation art* the wide array of projects and terms (the aforementioned *social practice*, socially engaged art, littoral art, dialogical art, relational art) that make use of the audience, be it willingly or unwillingly, as primary material of the work.

⁶ Grant Kester, *The One and the Many*, p. 8. For an extensive digression on the concept of dialogical aesthetics see Chapter 3 in Kester’s *Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art* (Blackwell, 2005).

processes that shape Gabriel de la Mora’s practice (however, I do not follow any methodology from the aforementioned writings). Borrowing (and surely deforming) Kester’s idea that dialogue and exchange give form, this book aims to highlight the many elements that shape the artist’s practice rather than providing an in-depth study of its material output.

Whilst the question of what it actually means to delve into processes remains somewhat unclear, as it could imply anything prior to the completion of an artwork, it became necessary to look for a term more useful to this purpose. In film studies, *out of frame* serves to encompass everything that happens outside of the frame of the film strip, both physically (sets, cameras, lighting systems, staff, actors and actresses, rails, dollies, and so on) and within the cinematic fiction (other characters, places, and, in sum, whatever conforms the film space and escapes a given frame of the film strip). To look at any artist’s practice in an out-of-frame fashion does not merely call for unveiling processes of physical creation; rather, it also entails an immersion in her influences, obsessions, and the ways in which she gives form to them.

For practicality’s sake, the book’s purview has been narrowed down to many of de la Mora’s most recent series (from 2006 onward). This decision is not solely chronological; it also responds to a gradual shift in his production, shying away from autobiographical content⁷ to what curator Cecilia Fajardo-Hill has called

⁷ Much ink has been spilled on earlier series by Gabriel de la Mora, specifically those which featured a prominent autobiographical quality (for example *Retratos de pelo*, begun 2004). While the series that better illustrates this self-referential trait – *Brújula de cuestiones* (2007) – overlaps this period, I have decided to dismiss it from the selection as, in my view, the emphasis on this element has overshadowed its artistic achievements. Albeit employing different means and strategies, most of

“the biography of things.”⁸ De la Mora has explicitly positioned this latter subject in works such as *The Weight of Thought* (2013-ongoing), a series for which the artist has collected thousands of discarded shoe soles which are later on consolidated on different surfaces serving as canvases. Every sole is deeply laden with information on its wanderings: every step taken by its owner/user left an imprint on its surface, and repetition provoked its erosion, sometimes wearing it away altogether. The consequent holes, perfect circles, are nothing but a testimony of each sole’s life. Notwithstanding their current suspension, bracketed by de la Mora as works of art, the material itself will continue to decay, even if at a significantly slower pace. The same fate will be suffered by the plafonds and metal doors I mentioned above, despite the artist’s efforts to fight the caducity of life and preserve its matter.

Other materials employed by de la Mora evidence the transformations that escape the artist’s hand and the different kinds of information they may contain. For instance, *Sangre* (2008-09), a series of paintings employing blood as pigment, carries with it invisible information such as DNA. Also, the paintings’ hues and tones will change increasingly over time. “Throughout history, art has been a source of information,” a musing by de la Mora painted with his own blood in *G.M.C. O+ / 11,600cm2* (2009), seems like an appropriate statement for understanding his approach to materials. On the other hand, in his recent murals composed of fabrics stripped from antique radio speakers (2014-ongoing), the passing of time and its inscription into matter

the philosophical and conceptual quests undertaken by de la Mora in the following years were already present in them.

⁸ See Cecilia Fajardo-Hill, “To Overflow the Limits. Nothing is Impossible. Everything is Possible.” reproduced in this book.

are visible—yet the series also addresses each material’s relationship with an imaginary, possible user. Notions of function, affect, and wear rise to the surface. In all likelihood, the shoe soles, the blood, and the fabrics represent more than their materiality; at the same time, they also point to absences. **IMG 8-9**

At the beginning of this text I referred to the negative storytelling enacted by de la Mora’s series. In contrast to the Yorikke, the works created by this artist refuse to tell stories; they are hinted at us but never revealed. This negativity could perhaps be interpreted as a contemporary take on the idea of *relic*—that is, an object that is venerated for, or becomes a source of fascination because of, the absence it represents. This point brings me to an essential element of the artist’s practice: his task as a collector. De la Mora has amassed a vast collection of art and antiques; among its predominant elements are objects related to religious functions, articles of devotion and veneration ranging from traditional paintings to mementos and even stuffed animals (taxidermy). However, playing a different role, that of the artist, he complicates the notion of the relic. Is a similar quest channeled through the plafonds, doors, detached walls, shoe soles, and other works? Despite a negative answer, the series tackled in this book highlight the links that each object or material generated with a world that is coming about its disappearance, they are silent witnesses to the social fluid.

Allow me to elaborate on the previous idea with an illustration. *Crucificado* (2014) is a nineteenth-century chrome painting of a crucified Jesus that was acquired by de la Mora; it was in a fairly damaged state, covered with many layers of dust and its surface all cracked-out. Keeping the chrome as he encountered it, he proceeded to cancel the image by covering it with black acrylic paint,

except for the stained parts or the areas where the image had already disappeared. The result is a black monochrome through which some irregular white lines, crevices, emerge. Besides the pious image itself, concealed under the black coat of paint is the passing of time: years of abandonment in which the dust slowly created a new surface. Nonetheless, uncountable prayers, hopes, and requests that believers had (very probably) projected onto the image are contained underneath the black patina. Gabriel de la Mora does not embody the figure of the artist-archaeologist, reconstructing missing narratives out of material remains. On the contrary, he preserves the stories untold, as if each and every one of his pieces were a time capsule. His artworks very much comprise what we do not see—yet which looks back at us.⁹ IMG 10

The animism I have attempted to trace in de la Mora's body of work is also subject to the agency, or agencies, of elements foreign to the object itself. As such, I am referring to the agency of art history, which permeates the artist's gaze onto the world around him. Plafonds, walls, raindrops falling on the pavement, the light projected onto a wall, a spiderweb... all of these turn into a *peinture trouvée* when seen by de la Mora, who is captivated by the pictorial potentiality of different surfaces, situations, and materials. On the other hand, despite his withdrawal from traditional painting,¹⁰ he continues to work in a painterly fashion; that is, he is a producer of an extraordinary pictorial sensibility. This

⁹ I am paraphrasing the title of the artist's largest exhibition to date, *What We Do Not See, What Looks Back at Us* (Museo Amparo, 2014), curated by Willy Kautz.

¹⁰ De la Mora holds an MA in painting from the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn. A year after earning his degree, he decided to quit painting (in an orthodox sense) in order to keep pushing the limits and conventions of the medium. For a thorough account of this transition, see the interview conducted by María Minera in *Pulsión y método*, pp. 227-38.

concern for painting is also extended to the elements that make it an artistic and economic discipline. For instance, in *Originalmentefalso* [Originallyfake] (2010-11),¹¹ de la Mora addresses questions of authenticity, forgery, imitation, mastery, genius, and the ecology of the image—but also the labour of research, collection, bargaining, and the authentication of pictorial works, as well as the hard task of tracking down paintings—through the blatantly destructive acts of scraping, erasing, obliterating, etc. IMG 11

His most recent series have established a different relation to both art history and the history of painting. Attracted by the material quality of mundane objects like the used sand paper on the sides of match boxes, microscope slides, or aluminum plates from offset printing machines, de la Mora plays with composition, rhythm, and light to create large-format works whose abstract shapes evoke the general imagery of abstract, conceptual, and minimal art, while also echoing particular artists like Sol LeWitt, Ad Reinhardt, and Carl Andre. In the following pages I will suggest that these series are not a citation of the aforementioned artists; rather, they represent one of the ways in which de la Mora's fascination with conceptual art, as well as the contestation it provokes in him, is made manifest. He has often expressed the pivotal role played by Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauschenberg, Yves Klein, and the American conceptual artists in shaping his conception of an artist's labor: they are not makers of objects; they give form to ideas and concepts. Despite the undeniable fact that Gabriel de la Mora's practice is traversed by art history, the combination of this element with an

¹¹ *Originalmentefalso* is a project developed in collaboration with curator and writer Francisco Reyes Palma.

admiration for the phenomena at hand (that is, everyday life and its physical manifestations), the animist nature I described above, and a relentless zeal for trying out new and challenging techniques, is what constitute its core. All together, these elements serve to question the permanence of material life. IMG 12-13

In an effort to study the mindset that informs de la Mora's practice, I paid regular visits to his studio over a two-year period and was able to spend many hours looking at the images and objects he collects. Browsing the files on his studio computer, I came across an image of Édouard Isidore Buguet, a nineteenth-century French photographer known for his belief in psychokinesis, which is the faculty of influencing the physical through the psychic: moving objects, levitating, or performing teletransportation with the mind. *Fluidic Effect*, the photograph at stake, depicts a man and a floating chair next to him; his hand gesture suggests he is provoking the furniture's defiance of gravity. It is telling that de la Mora is attracted to the turn-of-the-century imagery, which faithfully reflects the hopes and yearnings of the late nineteenth century and the very early twentieth century: as scientific research developed, the photographic medium could capture images that the eye could not see, and psychoanalysis proved that communication with the unseen was possible. As people sought immortality, science became a channel for magic; a common belief at the time was that electric cables transported messages from spirits.

Gabriel de la Mora is both an artist of ideas and, unlike the popular figure of the conceptual artist, an artisan deeply invested in techniques and material experimentation. I personally believe that he is no different from Traven's sailors aboard the *Yorikke*, nor from turn-of-the-century people experiencing and

questioning life through the stories contained in objects—stories that, in this case, remained untold. It is thanks to the tensions among the different elements that inform his practice—animism, an interest in art history, and exhaustive material experimentation—that de la Mora embarks on a profoundly philosophical quest, constantly exploring finitude and renewing his inquiries with tremendous vigor. Decayed, fragile, and carefully crafted objects become the vehicle for this journey; in the following pages, we will explore the mediums that enable the artist to formulate his own questions.

IMG 14-15 ■

01
OUT
OF FRAME
FABIOLA IZA
IMAGES

IMG 1



Assemblage of some the objects found in the artist's studio

IMG 2



Removal process of a wall in Tonalá 47. April 7, 2006, 10:01hrs.



Removal process of a wall in Tonalá 47. April 8, 2006, 13:04hrs.

IMG 3



↑ Plafond removal process in Altamirano 20.
March 21, 2012, 13:58 hrs.
↗ Plafond removal process in Pomona 36.
May 21, 2012, 11:26 hrs.



Process. Altamirano 20 III A and 20 III B.
February 6, 2012, 11:45 hrs.

IMG 4



Plafond removal in Edison 169. July 4, 2013, 8:42 hrs.

IMG 5



Library of Luis Barragan's house and study. Saturday, November 9, 2013, 11:34 hrs. Casa Estudio Luis Barragán, 1947, Mexico City. Property of the Government of the State of Jalisco and the Fundación de Arquitectura Tapatía Luis Barragán A.C. © Barragán Foundation, Switzerland.



Radio speakers purchased during one month. Monday, March 23, 2015, 11:21 hrs.

IMG 6



Installation of a plafond. May 30, 2012, 14:14 hrs.

IMG 7

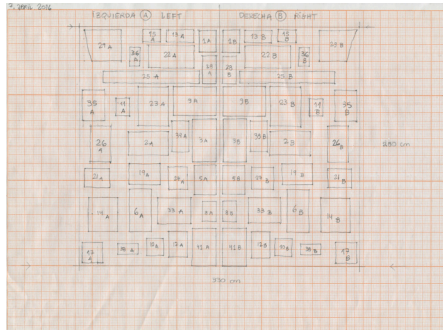


Gabriel de la Mora, *WHAT I*, 2016

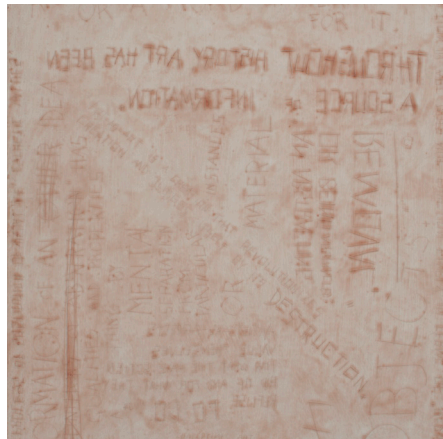
IMG 8



Documentation of radio speakers archive.
December 23, 2014, 12:06 hrs.



Sketch for the arrangement of shells of acoustic boxes.
April 7, 2016.



Gabriel de la Mora, *G.M.C. O+* / 14,565.6 cm², 2009 (detail, panel #12)

IMG 9



Gabriel de la Mora, *T-29 i / 29 d*, 2016



Sole's cut-out



Repair street stall where shoe soles are purchased

IMG 10



Gabriel de la Mora, *Crucificado*, 2014



Process of *Crucificado*. July 21, 2014, 17:29 hrs.

IMG 11



Process of *M.G.*, *66g less* (2011).
February 28, 2011, 20:17 hrs.



Process of *F.K.*, *29g less* (2011)

IMG 12



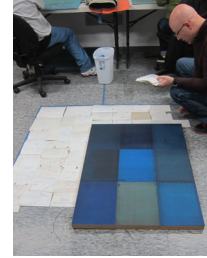
From the series *Badly Minted Coins* (2014).
December 10, 2013, 12:52 hrs.



Removal of eggshell membranes.
October 16, 2015, 18:05 hrs.



Accumulation of canceled light matches.
January 16, 2014, 16:34 hrs.



↑ Set up for *Mantillas de caucho*.
January 30, 2015, 18:57 hrs.
↗ Strikers being cut from light matches box.
July 16, 2014, 13:25 hrs.
↓ Cancellation of light matches.
January 20, 2014, 16:52 hrs.

IMG 13



Gabriel de la Mora, 500 pesos, 1987, 2014

IMG 14



Set up of microscope slides

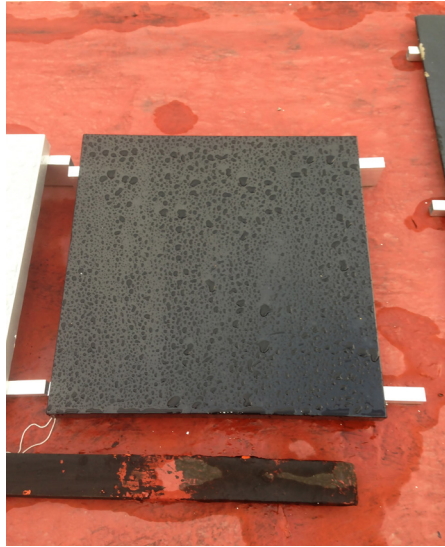


Classification by color hue of green eggshells



View of one of the studio's rooms

IMG 15



Process of *92 Days / Hailstorm 22.05.2013* (2013).
June 14, 2013, 11:00 hrs.



View of the studio's rooftop with works in process.
October 18, 2013, 10:57 hrs.

IMG 16



Documentation of the rooftop of Lugar Común, Monterrey,
after removing artworks. November 3, 2016, 12:37 hrs.
Image: Ana Cervantes



Gabriel de la Mora, *NO I*, 2014.

02

THE WEIGHT OF THOUGHT

FABIOLA IZA

PHOTOGRAPHY AS A SPECULATIVE TOOL

Framing could be called the founding strategy of conceptual art. When Marcel Duchamp presented a urinal within an artistic context in *Fountain* (1917), he enacted a displacement, a radical shift, by framing it differently—and consequently turning it into an art object. Given the strong influence that conceptual art has had, from the 1960s onward, on the production strategies championed by Gabriel de la Mora, the use of such displacements has been recurrent throughout his career: he (sometimes literally) rips an object or material from its “original” setting and turns it into a painting, a sculpture, or a drawing. The resulting categories do not depend, of course, on whether he decides to place it on a wall or on the floor; said act is both a conceptual and a temporal displacement that challenges pre-established notions of a specific medium. In the present day, to change how an art object is framed is now a facile and perhaps hackneyed formula, a strategy that has been exhausted within the art world for the past 50 years or so.¹ However, this is merely one of many connotations that framing acquired for the conceptual artists working in New York City in the 1960s.

Among the latter, the American artist Mel Bochner reflected on framing in a way that is particularly relevant for the purpose of my argument in this second chapter. In 1966, he organized an exhibition at the School of Visual Arts in New York, *Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily*

¹ In the eloquent words of Barbara Formis, Duchamp's urinal “has been re-enacted and staged... prosecuted, accused of blasphemy, and used as a scapegoat for all the sins artists have committed in post-60s art.” (Barbara Formis, “The Urinal and The Synchope,” in Frank Ruda and Jan Voelker, eds., *Art and Contemporaneity* [Zurich: diaphanes, 2015], p. 92.)

Meant to Be Viewed as Art, for which he collected drawings made by his minimalist peers: all were diagrammatic in nature and served as stand-ins for finished works that existed, or were planned for existence, elsewhere. The groundbreaking exhibition hinted at his novel and cerebral approach to drawing as something more than an art medium; indeed, he also used it as a “speculative tool.” Bochner employed the term bracketing to express this idea. In a conversation with art critic James Mayer, he expressed that “[his] project has always been a kind of research based on bracketing. When you bracket you set something aside, you don't eliminate it. You render that unfamiliar by shifting from ‘work’ to ‘frame.’”² That is, certain aspects of his practice may be activated or deactivated at specific moments. Then, by framing something through drawing, he tries out ideas that may be materialized later on as three-dimensional works. Most importantly, though, he also turns it into a space where sculptural possibilities may be challenged: that is, drawing has value as an element of theoretical exploration instead of serving as mere sketches for future pieces. In this chapter, I set out to explore the influence of conceptual art on Gabriel de la Mora's production, an influence that transcends the purely visual (as some compositional connections made in the first chapter could suggest) and shapes his practice and methodologies.

To delve deeper into this matter, the best example is the series *The Weight of Thought*, (2013-on-going); as described in the previous chapter, it comprises works made from discarded shoe soles arranged in several different configurations. To date, the most

² Mel Bochner, quoted in Dan Adler, *Hanne Darboven: Cultural History* (London: Afterall Books, 2009), p. 39.

recurrent format is a grid that follows either a vertical or horizontal array **IMG 1-2** ; others consist of neatly piled soles, while others are diptychs made out of pairs of shoe soles: the left panel contains the left ones and the right, accordingly, carries the right soles, mirroring it in the exact same order. **IMG 3** The series is inspired by a quote from French writer André Breton: “We must not carry our thoughts with the weight of our shoes.” De la Mora makes an avowedly failed attempt to obtain a vaguely biographical account, or at least tiny bits of information, about the proprietor of each pair of shoe soles. A person’s tribulations, musings, conflicts, and afflictions are reflected in her way of walking; that is, of distributing her own weight on each foot. It is also possible to tell if someone is right- or left-handed by analyzing which foot she drags more persistently (which translates into wear and damage of the material). Some specific traces are more revealing: perfect circles formed by the erosion of the leather, for instance, tell us that someone dances a specific style of dance regularly. In this case, as the foot spins again and again on its own axis, the sole’s material slowly grows thinner and thinner until it completely disappears. **IMG 4**

Nonetheless, these works are only the public outlet of the series; much of it remains unseen. A large quantity of photographs exist in parallel to the works described in the lines above; at the time of this writing, only one has been shown publicly, posted on the artist’s blog. Bearing no artistic pretense (for instance, neither the light nor any other element has been digitally manipulated), the images are marked by a dry documentary aesthetic; at first glance, one might suppose that the scenes depicted actually represent the artist’s private experiments with configurations and arrangements for the soles. Like Bochner, de la Mora has employed

photography, instead of drawing, as a speculative tool that allows him to set different ideas in motion. Moreover, while the images do serve as sketches or plans for future sculptures, they are also important in their own right. I will provide a rough description of the images in order to illustrate this point.

Offset against a vibrant yet gritty red backdrop (the studio rooftop), a vast number of shoe soles are placed on the floor. They are still uncut and presented in a “raw” state; here, unlike the exhibited sculptures (or paintings?), the soles retain the appearance of debris, of waste material. In other words, they have not yet undergone a process of aesthetization. Their shapes are irregular and their alignment is not perfectly symmetrical. Clearly, we are far from the safe, pristine space of the gallery, where the sculptural siblings of these images have made themselves so naturally at home. The photographs include various bird’s-eye-view shots that reveal a great number of soles lined up in rows, occupying the entire picture plane. **IMG 5** In others, the grouping is reduced to a fraction of the plane, revealing only a select number of soles. **IMG 6** In other wide shots, the soles take up the whole picture plane and are fused with the horizon until they disappear. **IMG 7** Some medium shots feature more detailed views of the soles, along with irregular holes, dirt, the soles’ scratched surfaces, and inscriptions made using chalk or colored pencils. **IMG 8** While the information the artist obtains from the shoe soles’ former user may be scant, the spectator, by contrast, gets a snapshot of the artist’s mind at work, a radiography of his thinking at that precise moment.

Mel Bochner has stated that he sees drawing as “the residue of thought, the place where the artist formulates, contrives, and discards his ideas [...which]

frequently contain the artist's false starts, meanderings, errors, and incorrect arithmetic, as well as possibilities which might not have occurred to him in any other language."³ I find this a fitting and accurate description of how Gabriel de la Mora uses photography instead of drawing. When he first showed me the images described above, I was immediately reminded of some earlier, lesser-known photographs—images that do not respond to the logic of his current series, but which are quite expressive of the interests predominant in his overall practice. For example, an image taken in 2007 **IMG 9** shows a spiderweb after the rain, offset against a grayish, blurry background; the perfect symmetry of the web's simultaneously fragile and resilient threads is depicted with suspended drops of captured water. Despite the picture's high quality and careful composition, de la Mora refers to such images as "snapshots," alluding to a fleeting state captured and preserved by his camera. I am tempted to suggest that the inception of later series can be traced to some of these images: *Plafonds* and *Burnt Papers*, for example, might be interpreted as an extension of the artist's tenacious resolution—already evoked in the snapshots—to preserve a moment of tension, a breaking point, like when matter is confronted with its irreversible decay.

Another closed shot depicts another spiderweb **IMG 10**, but this time from a lateral perspective. Rather than raindrops, the web contains a discreet yet vast amount of dust and matter accumulated over time. This web is far from perfectly shaped; in fact, it resembles a membrane in the process of decomposing.⁴ In my view,

³ Mel Bochner, "Anyone Can Learn to Draw" (1969), in *Solar Systems and Rest Rooms: Writings and Interviews, 1965-2007* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), p. 61.

⁴ The stark presence of the spiderweb is remarkably similar to a later image,

both snapshots are an expression of *l'inframince* (the infra-thin), a somewhat elusive concept coined by Marcel Duchamp to describe what stands on the limit of the perceptible. In a strong conceptualist vein, this theory or artistic formulation favored ideas and procedures rather than the easily commodified materiality of an object. Duchamp explained this concept by means of examples rather than definitions; for instance, he wrote:

WHEN
THE TOBACCO SMOKE
ALSO SMELLS
OF THE MOUTH WHICH EXHALES IT
THE TWO ODORS
ARE MARRIED BY
INFRA-SLIM ⁵



Other less poetic examples include the time interval between the detonating sound of a nearby rifle and the subsequent appearance of the bullet mark on the target, or "the hollow in the paper between the front and back of a thin sheet of paper."⁶

However, even if both the snapshots taken about a decade ago and the ones featuring different arrangements of the shoe soles serve as speculative tools, the complexity of the latter is more profound. In an unexpected turn of events, besides helping the artist decide what to do with the apparent waste product, the photographic depiction of the materials coaxes out a

described by the artist as "documentation" of a plafond that had just been detached from the ceiling of an old house. (IMG. 6, CHAP. 1).

⁵ Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, eds., *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1975), p. 194.

⁶ *Idem*.

different nature of this experimentation. In the photographs, the shoe soles become strangely anthropomorphic: they look eerily like people lined up in detention  or even like corpses.  The images were created in 2014, one of the most convulsive years in recent Mexican history. While the last decade has been flooded with news of extreme violence, the horrors reached an apex in 2014, and the public sphere focused much of its attention on a highly sensitive and representative case: the abduction, torture, disappearance, and presumed killing of 43 students from a rural school in Guerrero, one of the country's poorest states, an area ravaged by drug-trafficking and the state-sponsored "war against drugs."

From my perspective, the constant references to such bloodshed, the incessant news of corpses found everywhere and anywhere in the country, have powerfully shaped the collective psyche, marking it with repression and death. The resulting images evoke forensic landscapes, characterized by the chalk traces that make use of material remains to interpret what happened. Even if the most graphic images are not widely circulated in the mainstream media, the chaotic piling-up of shoe soles evokes a mass grave. Despite his status as a citizen physically unharmed by the extreme (and escalating) violence in Mexico, de la Mora's photographs expose his own processing of this traumatic information. In sum, the photographic series reveals the weight of *his* thought, expressed by the same means that he usually employs to challenge artistic genres.

At stake here, rather than an easily politicized reading of de la Mora's oeuvre, is the question of when a work of art comes into being. As redundant as it may seem after the invention of the ready-made, the

question acquires great relevance in this context. When we look at the photographs of the shoe soles, we are witnessing the artist's own examination on the matter: are these simple registers of a process of material collection and manipulation, or are they works of art in their own right? Given the growing importance of documentation in recent decades, philosopher Boris Groys has argued that this is now the dominant art form; indeed, most of the objects and images exhibited in art galleries are nothing but stand-ins of events that have taken place elsewhere.⁷ He extends his argument—which does not refer only to obvious examples like the documentation of performances—to the production of artists like Sophie Calle, who has spent almost three decades developing projects that intervene in everyday life and subsequently sharing them with a larger audience via the display of photographic images, videos, and texts that evidence the situations provoked between herself and her (sometimes unwilling, unaware, or even absent) collaborators.⁸

In one of our many conversations during the preparation of this publication, de la Mora told me that, when he studied the images on his studio computer, he came to envision the varied groupings of shoe soles on the rooftop as ephemeral sculptures, works whose existence was limited to the few hours during which he manipulated them into different configurations. I read

⁷ Boris Groys, "Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation," in *Documenta 11* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), pp. 108-114.

⁸ For example, the website of Arndt Fine Art, one of the galleries that represents Calle, describes her work as follows: "She uses photography in unique ways—no one else works with photography/text in this outstandingly original way... The *documentary manner* in which she presents her work suggests a high degree of factualness." (My emphasis, *Sophie Calle* at http://www.arndtfineart.com/website/artist_937?idx=c, consulted on 12/03/2017.)

his refusal to circulate the resulting images (whether by including them in exhibitions or even posting them on his website) as an ethical response. In “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,”⁹ anthropologist Igor Kopytoff explains that an object is not a commodity in itself; rather, commodities come into being through a cultural and cognitive process. In other words, a commodity is not an intrinsic or permanent state. Anything (and anyone, Kopytoff remarks) can be a commodity at one time and be de-commoditized at another time; among other factors, it depends on the context and cultural significance attached to the thing, its singularity, and its use-value. In my view, the artist’s output unknowingly mimics this idea and posits that any object or material is subject to becoming, or unbecoming, a work of art. It is by bracketing an object that it acquires its artistic nature. Thus, the artist’s refusal to circulate the images grants them singularity—a strategy that, according to Kopytoff, may prevent the commoditization of an object—and therefore avoids the images’ inclusion in the commercial sphere of art. Regardless of their evident documentary nature, the possibility of their becoming items subject to economic transaction is not implausible. After all, the market value of the documentation of different seminal performances, either on video or in pictures, is appallingly high; in some cases, it has even been bought by world-leading museums.¹⁰ Aware of this conundrum,

⁹ Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 64–91.

¹⁰ Here, I am thinking of Vito Acconci’s *Following Piece* (1969). Its documentation (actually, the documentation of a reenactment, as the original performance was not recorded and had to be repeated) is part of the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, in the department of photography. For a shrewd analysis of performance and its

de la Mora apparently prefers to prevent the images, snapshots of his working mind and vehicles for coping with a traumatic reality, from accruing economic value.

“ART IS A MIXTURE BETWEEN
CONCEPT AND DISCIPLINE”¹¹

In the first chapter of this publication, I briefly referred to a statement made by curator Cecilia Fajardo Hill: she has said that a fundamental aspect of Gabriel de la Mora’s practice is his consistent interest in the biography of things.¹² According to Fajardo Hill, he aims to encapsulate the energy and memory of the materials he turns into art. I would add, however, that he is not interested in deciphering or revealing those stories. The compulsive acts of collecting, classifying, manipulating, and transforming are all crystalized in each work, which grants a documentary quality to his overall production. As perfectly phrased by Boris Groys, “[T]ime, duration, and thus life cannot be shown directly but only documented.”¹³ While we could say, then, that de la Mora’s work has an archival quality, this quality is the result of its capacity to contain labour, energy, and time, not in being constructed from historical images and objects like the practices labelled “archival art” as such.¹⁴

documentation, see David Levine, “You Had to Be There (Sorta),” in *Parkett*, 95, 2014, pp. 225–234.

¹¹ The phrase was one of Hanne Darboven’s mottos.

¹² This argument is developed in greater depth in the following chapter, penned by Fajardo Hill herself. Despite the similarity between her term and Kopytoff’s, her argument is not based on this theoretical formulation.

¹³ Groys, *ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁴ I am referring to the classic narrative of the archival turn, a cluster of practices that employ previously existing documents—or invent fictitious ones to question the figure’s authority—to create artworks in a wide variety of media. Okwui Enwezor identified and gathered the most

De la Mora's discipline and dedication uncover connections to other forms of conceptualism that cannot be inferred at first glance: those of On Kawara and Hanne Darboven, for example. In both cases, repetition became the centre of their production, the driving impulse behind their work. *The Weight of Thought*, certainly, reveals this influence, but other series, like *Obsidian* (2013-ongoing), might push the idea of repetition even further.¹⁵ **IMG 13-15** As the title indicates, this series comprises a large number of obsidian sculptures depicting numbers, letters, words, and even phrases in the style of neon works by Bruce Nauman and the like. However, de la Mora's pieces are not industrially produced objects but strongly artisanal ones. The process of carving letters out of a block demands terrible exertion, patience, and skill in knowing how to treat

representative artists working in this line in his landmark exhibition *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (International Center of Photography, NYC, 2008).

Despite Gabriel de la Mora's apparent incompatibility with the archival turn, *The Archive*, one of the volumes of the anthological series "Documents of Contemporary Art" published by MIT, contains a text by Andy Warhol that shows a similar sensibility with respect to the creation of archives, rather than envisioning them as a tool to examine and contest history and the past: "What you should do is get a box for a month, and drop everything in it and at the end of the month lock it up... Tennessee Williams saves everything up in a trunk and then sends it out to a storage place. I started off myself with trunks and the odd pieces of furniture, but then I went around shopping for something better and now I just drop everything into the same-size brown cardboard boxes that have a color patch on the side for the month of the year. I really hate nostalgia, though, so deep down I hope they all get lost and I never have to look at them again. That's another conflict. I want to throw things right out the window as they're handed to me, but instead I say thank you and drop them into the box-of-the-month." (Andy Warhol, "The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)," in Charles Mereweather, ed., *The Archive* [London and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel and The MIT Press, 2006], p. 31.)

¹⁵ It is worth mentioning that *Obsidian* borrows its methodology from a previous series, *Burned Papers* (2003-2009), as its aim is to make the impossible possible. In the latter, the artist burned his MA thesis and tried to turn every sheet of paper from the document into a sculpture. While he failed most of the time, as the paper quickly turned into ashes, he succeeded with a limited number of sheets.

the material. The thinner the figure to be created, the riskier the task; volcanic glass is a remarkably fragile material, and if it breaks, the whole enterprise must be start over from scratch. A single piece is the coalescence of countless moments and attempts to reach a supposedly final goal.

It goes without saying that, as with *The Weight of Thought*, every series is thoroughly documented and hundreds of images and videos are taken of every step involved. However, I would venture to say that *Obsidian* and *The Weight of Thought* are the only series that have been affected by their documentation. Given the remarkable difficulty of carving the material into letters, the artist had to conduct a painstaking search for a person skilled enough to carry out the process. Once he finally found one who agreed to take part, the carver was asked to take pictures of the entire process, including the failed attempts. De la Mora also asked to have the "unfinished" works back once the job had been successfully completed. In some of the pictures of the unachieved pieces, the letters are barely insinuated; they try to emerge from the volcanic glass yet remain attached to it. In other images, they are already legible, but an error during the process made it impossible to separate them from the block. The obsidian is still opaque, full of inscriptions in coloured pencil, and the carvings are perfectly distinguishable. In other pictures, irregular grids have been formed on the block's verso, creating improvised figures and clumsy geometrical compositions. **IMG 16-18** If the task is crystal-clear—the sculptures ought to be numbers, letters, and words—then why couldn't these unforeseen pieces be proper artworks? Like the documentation of the shoe soles, these registers create an archive of potentialities that raise different queries about the very practice of

making art: when does a work begin and when does it end? What should be left out as process and what should remain as the artwork? Such ontological questions transcend the peculiarities of each series as an echo that resonates through the compulsive, disciplined, and exhaustive documentation of de la Mora's entire body of work. Again, while recurring to the conception of photography as a speculative tool, repetition arises in each record as the guiding force of the artist's practice. "Work generates more work, as it also generates ideas," de la Mora often remarks in explaining the dynamics of his production, "and ideas generate more work and so on and so forth."

"We must remember that repetition itself, the logic of repetition, indeed, the repetition compulsion, remains, according to Freud, indissociable from the death drive,"¹⁶ says philosopher Jacques Derrida in the exergue of *Archive Fever*. The compulsive nature of de la Mora's production methodologies seeks to counter finitude: many of his series strive to pause the decay or physical extinction of materials that contain vast reserves of information. For these reasons, it is hardly surprising that the artist cites the Japanese conceptual artist On Kawara as a key influence. As is well known, Kawara worked on a series titled *I Got Up* for a decade of his life: on a nearly daily basis, he sent postcards to friends and acquaintances from different cities all over the world, stating what time he got up and thus reaffirming his existence. De la Mora has developed a personal rapport with the series, finding individual connections with the work and adopting Kawara as a sort of artistic mentor. On the occasion of his twentieth anniversary

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 11-12.

as an artist, he published the following statement on his blog:

On May 10th, 1968, artist On Kawara began his series *I GOT UP* in Mexico City, in the Hotel Montecarlo, and ended it on Monday, September 17th, 1979 in Stockholm, Sweden.

The series lasted 11 years.

On Sunday, September 22, 1968, On Kawara got up at 10:36 AM in his room at the Hotel Monte Carlo on Avenida Uruguay 69, in the centre of Mexico City. This information was written on a postcard for his series *I GOT UP*; the verso of the postcard featured a panoramic view of the west of the city as soon from the Torre Latinoamericana, a 44 storey-high skyscraper. He sent the postcard via airmail to John Evans at the address 101 Ave. B, Apt. 8, New York, NY, 10009 USA, with a postage stamp illustrated with one of the logotypes of the '68 Olympic Games, held in Mexico, bought for 80¢.

The postcard made its way to New York on Monday, September 23, 1968 at 1 PM.

Early on Monday, September 23, 1968, at 4:40 AM, I was born in the Spanish Hospital of Mexico City.

On Friday, June 20, 2014, I received an email offering me On Kawara's postcard with my date and place of birth on September 23, 1968. On that day, it became part of my personal collection.

21 days later, on Thursday, July 10, 2014, On Kawara

died at age 81 in New York, after living for 29,771 days.

Tomorrow, Friday, September 23, 2016, will be my 48th birthday and my 20th anniversary as an artist.¹⁷

The postcard by On Kawara is not valuable for its monetary worth, nor due to the prestige attached to the artist's name. **IMG 19** De la Mora has amassed his collection, rather, according to personal taste, and by this I mean objects that establish a dialogue with and even challenge his interests, ideas, and concerns. Like the snapshots, the collection—which has been formed over multiple decades—constitutes a platform for posing questions that cut across his artistic output: how can we archive time, effort, and labour? In a spirit akin to the one that drove Fluxus, this question permeates both his practice and his everyday life. Invited by the collection's non-hierarchical logic, even things emerging from the artist's daily activities have become part of it.

For example, when he lived for some time in New York, de la Mora kept a notebook in which he registered every single expense, no matter how insignificant, in chronological order. **IMG 20** Besides reflecting strict control over his finances—a situation to which many people may relate—it serves as both an affirmation and a record of that time in his life. As American artist Susan Hiller once said, “We certainly go on accumulating objects which give our lives meaning.”¹⁸ Displaying a sensibility much like Kawara's, de la Mora seems to give meaning to his life by collecting objects and moments.

¹⁷ 22 SET. 1968 10:36 A.M. / 23 SEP 1968 13:00 at <https://gabrieldelamora.wordpress.com/2016/09/22/22-set-19681036-a-m-23-sep-1968-1300/>, consulted on 11/01/2017. My translation.

¹⁸ Susan Hiller, “Working Through Objects,” in Charles Merewether, *Op. cit.*, p. 43.

Moreover, as discussed above, photography plays an incredibly important role in this second category.

IMG 21

On collecting as an activity performed by artists, Susan Hiller has commented once again: “Just as we could say that the existence of our dream life is a continual *memento mori* and at the same time an approach to immortality, since dreaming has nothing to do with the necessities of physical existence—so collecting may be the same kind of complex activity.”¹⁹ She associates this compulsion to accumulate with an infantile drive, in the sense of being an enjoyable activity that later forges a broad range of typologies. Given its important means of granting meaning to the world, the collection then reveals itself as another speculative tool. Unlike photography, it is not a place to try out ideas, but rather one where they are kept latent and become more significant through their accumulation.

Another item in Gabriel de la Mora's collection is a notebook from his early childhood. Its pages are plagued by the repetition of “m” letters **IMG 22** ; on the right page of the spread, the letters are flipped horizontally, thus mirroring the ones written down on the adjacent page. When the artist rediscovered it, along with other objects from his early life, he was stunned by its correlation to his current production: the image recalled the mirrored diptychs from *The Weight of Thought*, which was driven by repetition, and it bore a strong resemblance to a work on paper by the German artist Hanne Darboven that had just become part of his collection. De la Mora titled his childhood memento *m-294*, referring to the number of times the “m” was repeated, and dated it 1972, the actual date of its creation, as if it

¹⁹ *Idem.*

were one of the works from the series *Lucíferos* (created from household matches and their packages). The notebook thus joined his collection, albeit with an ambiguous status: it is neither a work of art nor an antique, neither residue nor waste material. As a piece, *m-294* exposes a grey area both in de la Mora's collection and in his production, as the drawing is actually a found object—even though he himself is the creator—that subsequently acquires an artistic quality through the way he has decided to frame it.²⁰ This is different, of course, than claiming he created his first artworks when he was a child (despite its misleading date) or that his talent is innate;²¹ the drawing gains importance thanks to the retroactive gaze that situates it within a framework of concepts, visual motifs, and references. However, it is hard to sidestep the questions of when an artist comes into being as such or when an artwork is ever completed. By including his early drawings in his personal collection, the answer grows even more opaque and might pave the way for further discussions on the topic.

The drawing in question evokes the punishment imposed on children who misbehaved or who had failed to learn something (the correct shape of a letter or the spelling of a word, for example).²² Repetition is perhaps the most common kind of punishment, yet it also

²⁰ The artist has experienced the same fascination with objects created by others (photographs and paintings), by means of an activity (for example, the aluminum plaques from offset printing machines), and by the passing of time (fabrics from radio speakers).

²¹ As discussed in the previous chapter, de la Mora opposes the notion of genius; he believes in ideas, discipline, and hard work.

²² This matter leads us back to the prevailing trait in de la Mora's previous production: an openly autobiographical focus. His dyslexia was a cause of repression during his childhood, as he was forced to write according to the standards of official education. As an affirmation of his liberation, his work abounds with mirrored forms of writing.

serves as a mechanism against the death drive. As mentioned above, the German artist Hanne Darboven—who spent a couple of years in New York during the '60's, working closely alongside her friend Mel Bochner—spent decades creating a number of works that incessantly repeated the same inscription, a mark that closely resembles the letter “u.” As well as providing a way to measure time, it represented a proposal (one among many others) to depersonalize operations at work in conceptual art. As art historian Dan Adler explains it:

The script may register for the beholder as an authentic symbol for Darboven's ritualized and regularized labour [...] In addition to considering Darboven's ritualized working practices as referencing the rarefied and religious context of the scriptorium, one might read her repeated daily work as evoking that of the industrial worker, with his or her goal of fulfilling an hourly quota or shift of labour and nothing more.²³

In Darboven's scripture, time is ritualized as it becomes labour—and labour itself is transformed into a meditative practice. The series logic in de la Mora's work is directly connected to this point: his overflowing production, coupled with the belief that work leads to ideas and ideas lead to more work, addresses a notion of never-ending-ness. However, the understanding that finitude and decay cannot be avoided, even when stubbornly resisted, is channelled through repetition. After all, a series is hardly ever completed, and it leads

²³ Dan Adler, *Hanne Darboven. Cultural History: 1880-1983* (London: Afterall, 2009), p. 82.

to new methodologies, new procedures, and different ways of expressing the artist's inquisitive approach to the world. Art is posited as an activity in itself, and the resulting works are the documentation of life lived within a project.

While the radical nature of some artistic movements seemed to embody the final chapter of a profound inquiry into the very essence of art (displacing the moment of artistic creation, producing brackets through which art objects are either activated or deactivated, etc.), practices such as Gabriel de la Mora's manage to continually undermine, in discreet or carefully disguised ways, our established definitions of art. Furthermore, de la Mora persists in asking questions. This short book does not attempt to answer them, but it does seek to offer a space in which we can study such questions through the lens of the artist's thoughts. ■

02

THE WEIGHT
OF THOUGHT

FABIOLA IZA

IMAGES

IMG 1



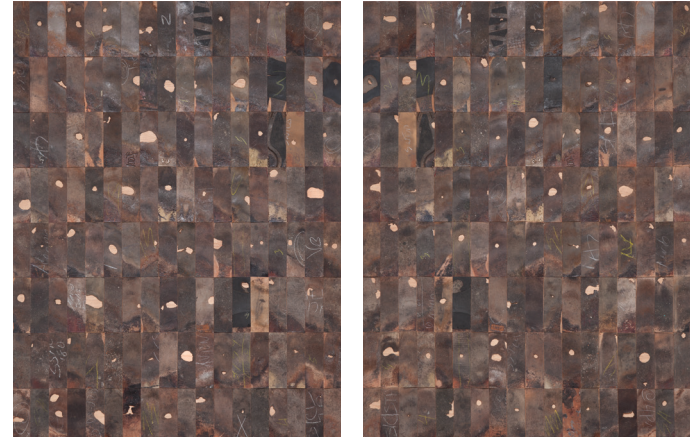
Installation view of *1,089* (2013) at Museo Amparo.
December 18, 2014, 19:01 hrs.
Image: Carlos Varillas

IMG 2



Detail of 62 (2013). September 4, 2013, 18:22 hrs.

IMG 3



Gabriel de la Mora, 288 - IV / Pi, 2014

IMG 4



One of 17 soles with a hole at the middle

IMG 5



Classification of discarded shoe soles.
October 1, 2014, 17:13 hrs.

IMG 6



Classification of discarded shoe soles.
October 1, 2014, 17:14 hrs.

IMG 7



Classification of discarded shoe soles.
September 24, 2014, 14:25 hrs.

IMG 8



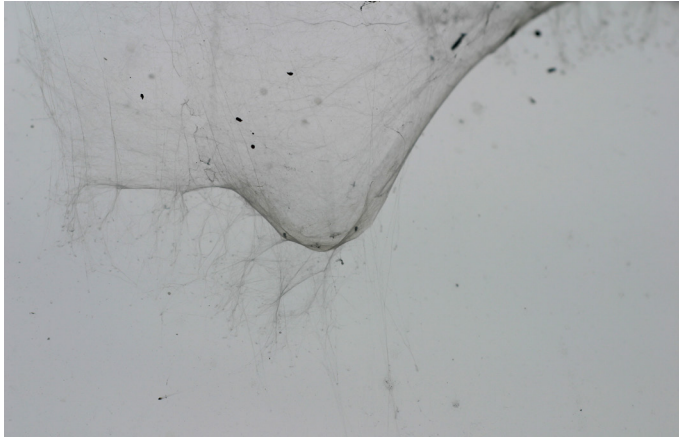
Classification of discarded shoe soles.
October 1, 2014, 17:14 hrs.

IMG 9



Collection of images from the artist's travels.
May 16, 2007, 17:22 hrs.

IMG 10



Collection of images from the artist's travels.
August - September, 2006.

IMG 11



Installation of pairs of uncut shoe soles.
December 19, 2014, 13:41 hrs.

IMG 12



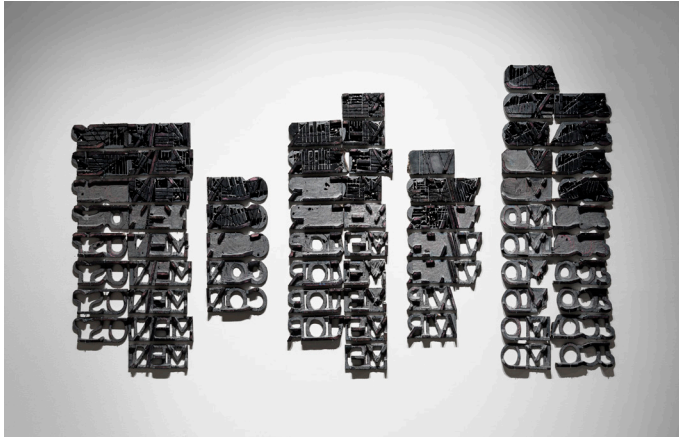
Classification of discarded shoe soles.
October 1, 2014, 17:14 hrs.

IMG 13



Obsidian carving process.
August 21, 2014, 9:35 hrs.

IMG 14



Installation shot of the 12th FEMSA Biennial,
Curatorial Programme *The Poetics of Decrease. How to live
better with less?*, 2016
Image: Roberto Ortiz Giacomán

IMG 15



Installation shot of the 12th FEMSA Biennial,
Curatorial Programme *The Poetics of Decrease. How to live
better with less?*, 2016
Image: Roberto Ortiz Giacomán

IMG 16-18



Gabriel de la Mora, *GH (RIGHT) I*, 2016 (verso)

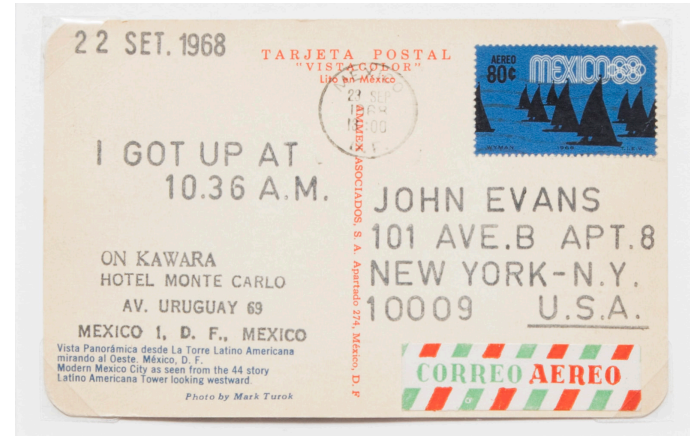


Gabriel de la Mora, *NO I*, 2014



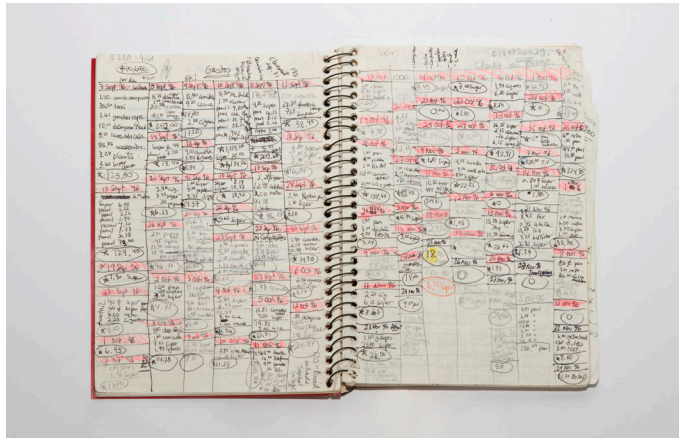
Gabriel de la Mora, *H I*, 2016

IMG 19



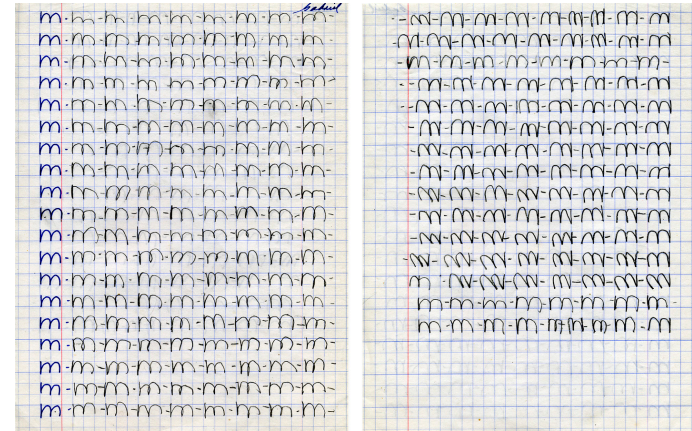
On Kawara, from the series *I Got Up*, 1968

IMG 20



Record of the artist's expenses in New York from September 7 to December 5, 1996.

IMG 21



Gabriel de la Mora, *m-294*, 1972

IMG 22



Hanne Darboven, *Untitled*, 1972 (detail)



TO OVERFLOW
THE LIMITS.
NOTHING IS
IMPOSSIBLE.
EVERYTHING
IS POSSIBLE.¹

CECILIA FAJARDO-HILL

(...) I cannot get rid of the idea that the full is an embroidery on the canvas of the void, that being is superimposed on nothing, and that in the idea of "nothing" there is –less- than in that of "something".²

— Henri Bergson

Gabriel de la Mora states that art is neither created, nor destroyed, but that it is the transformation of something already in existence into something else. How the artist chooses that something, the processes that the object undergoes in its transformation into art, and the layering of meaning and histories in each piece, are complex stages for a creative act of defiance of any idea of finality in art and life.

De la Mora has explained that for him the three key elements in his art are the formal, the conceptual and energy. The first two are widespread ideas associated with contemporary art, but energy is a different matter because it is not commonly discussed in relation to art. In de la Mora's work, energy is a moving centrifugal point from which everything paradoxically interconnects in a rhizomatic manner, thus bypassing binary categories and linearity, as well as narrative, ideas of origin, and the hierarchy of meaning and importance in the nature of things. Deleuze and Guattari explain that the rhizome "has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*"³. It is this arena of between things, between states, between realities, where de la Mora produces art that is

¹ Personal written statement by the artist. All quotes in this text are from personal written interview between artist and author in May 2014. The interview was conducted in Spanish; this and the following quotes were translated by the author.

² Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (The Modern Library, 1944), p. 300.

³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 25.

ultimately forever unfinished, always mutating, perpetually in contradiction with itself, attempting to make the impossible possible. De la Mora's never ending unfolding act of transformation of matter and energy, leads us to define his practice as process; process as art. **IMG 1**

"In physics, energy is a property of objects, transferable among them via fundamental interactions, which can be converted in form but not created or destroyed"⁴. Energy, as described here, is interchangeable with de la Mora's concept of art where there is no creation or destruction, only transformation. Science also defines many forms of energy such as: kinetic, radiant, electromagnetic, thermal, elastic, chemical, and others; forms of energy that the artist may employ in his artistic processes of transformation, such as with his *Burned Papers* (2007-2009), which through burning –thermal energy- a sheet of paper becomes something other/ same. **IMG 2**

Science describes two types of change that involve energy: physical and chemical. A physical change in an object or material, affects the form but does not change the chemical composition, and may be reversible. On the other hand, in a chemical change, the composition of the material changes, the atoms are rearranged. This process is mostly irreversible and also may produce a new substance. An example of a physical change is salt dissolved in water. Once water evaporates, it regains its original form, but a chemical change may be the reaction between sodium and water to produce sodium hydroxide, a new substance. Gabriel de la Mora's processes oscillate between physical and chemical changes. Example of physical change are his recent works

⁴ "Conservation of energy", Wikipedia entry available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservation_of_energy, accessed 12/07/2014.

with worn out shoe soles, his egg pieces and his earlier works with human hair. An illustration of chemical change, are his *Burned Papers* or his transformed books such as *Conceptual Art, Ursula Mayer, 1972* (2009), where a book is converted into pulp and reconstituted into one single large sheet of paper. IMG 3

Nevertheless, this analysis, describes only partially the nature of Gabriel de la Mora's transformative processes. How do we describe the changes in energy depending on the idea of irreversibility in an art object? A piece of obsidian once carved is still obsidian, though it is something else, a broken egg maintains its chemical composition, nevertheless it could never be reconstituted into its original form. There are works by de la Mora which are decidedly more difficult to characterize and fall into greyer areas such as the construction of monochromes through careful acts of restoration where by scraping a forged painting of a religious image from the eighteenth century, the artist restores the original imprimatura (*S XIII A*, 2011) or for example, a fake landscape by Joaquin Clausell, —*J.C., 111.6 g. of pigment* (2011)— which in the process of scraping the work revealed another painting underneath. Here the artist went on to produce a triptych, one of 70 grams of fake Clausell; one of 41.6 grams of the revealed painting, and thirdly, the bare canvas. What type of energy transmutation underwent these works through the process of physical and chemical changes? What is the nature of the new energy of this triptych? IMG 4-5

Many key questions are left unanswered when we think of the subjective, conceptual, psychological, spiritual, metaphysical aspects involved in the processes of transformation of something into ART. The larger questions are related to the nature of the energy change beyond the chemical and the physical aspects.

By the time de la Mora chooses an object, it has already undergone many changes, it has experienced many other forms of energy, it has already accumulated an immense amount of complexity. A leit motif in de la Mora's work is his attempt to make visible or acknowledge the residual, the liminal in things. *In Before and After the Removal of a Hex* (2010), de la Mora documents the attic at his father's house before and after being blessed at an exact interval of 24 hours between the two photographs. It is impossible for the eye to perceive the change, though the photograph does attempt to apprehend and at least acknowledge this change. The important here is the act of the removal of the hex, the careful recording of the place, the timing of the experience. As with much of his work, the truth lies in many places, elsewhere from from the lieu of seeing. Is this work primarily conceptual, based on 'knowing' that something has changed? Or is it more subjective and spiritual? Why is that the 'real' change seems intangible? Does the artist see it? IMG 6-7

There are other forms of energy that are more intangible, such as the energy left behind by absent people, energy condensated over the course of years in walls, home furniture, used objects, or in natural forms such as an egg or obsidian. These are less demonstrable and more inconspicuous forms of energy which for some are only of subjective nature such as: psychic energy, spiritual energy, sensing energy, mystical or 'esoteric energies', or the so called subtle energy which is described as a universal life force that runs within and between all things, and is the medium through which consciousness manifests as physical matter. The French Philosopher Henri Bergson (1859 –1941) spoke of *élan vital* (vital force) in his 1907 book *Creative Evolution*, and described it as a sort of original vital

impetus or creative principle existing in all organisms and also inorganic matter.⁵ He explained that we can experience this vital force by placing ourselves in a constant process of becoming, of duration. He writes: “The more we study the nature of time, the more we shall comprehend that duration means invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of the absolutely new.”⁶ **IMG 8**

The artist has explained that even choosing “the most insignificant thing like a shoe sole with a hole is surrounded by an entire thought process, which has a visual, formal and aesthetic aspect which is very potent... also it has its history, temporality, wearing down, information, traces, etc.” The artist’s awareness of the charge, the history and the inherent accumulated energy of things, and his participation in the extension and transformation of the life of the object, can be associated with Henri Bergson’s concept of duration. Duration, for Bergson, is the continuation and conservation of the past, but because every new moment is added to an old one, no experience is ever the same but different, therefore this continuity implies heterogeneity.⁷ Science has proven that our brain is wired to constantly actualize memory. An experience of ten years ago, when reminisced, will be a memory of the event plus the accumulated experience of the past ten years. There is no repetition but duration, a sense of the past that informs the present and vice versa. **IMG 9**

⁵ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* “(...) It might be said of life, as of consciousness, that at every moment it is creating something...”

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 14.

⁷ “(...) Nevertheless the vision I now have of it differs from that which I have just had, even if only because the one is an instant older than the other. My memory is there, which conveys something of the past into the present. My mental state, as it advances on the road of time, is continually swelling with the duration which it accumulates. (...)” *Ibid*, p. 4.

Bergson believed that we exist in a continuum and that we change without ceasing, in the same way that the “past grows without ceasing, so also there is no limit to its preservation.”⁸ This concept of time, where there is no beginning or end, concurs with Gabriel de la Mora’s concept that he does not create or destroy –though he does–, but only transforms things. De la Mora often works serially, making undeniable the idea of the unfinished. He describes repetitive work as a kind of meditation close to Zen philosophy, which coupled with intellectual and sensorial elements, and including a sense of compulsion, aims to defy limits. According to the artist, seriality and repetition create a strange momentum which comparable with meditation takes you into a special state of consciousness, where new ideas emerge. **IMG 10**

De la Mora exercises constant processes of mutability in the nature of objects; a renewal and expansion of their role and life span; and often the acceleration of their transience or/and fragility, such as in the case of *201 días* (2013) from the series *The Sense of Possibility*. This is a photograph printed in offset and then painted in acrylic and enamel on canvas, which was left on the roof terrace of the artist’s studio during 201 days, to be exposed to dust, sun, pollution, rain, ashes from the Popocatepetl volcano, and changes of temperature, to be irreversibly deteriorated and changed. This piece reminds us not only of Bergson’s idea of duration, but of his concept of intuition. Intuition according to the philosopher is about entering into ourselves and into things from within, through a process of self-sympathy which develops heterogeneously into a sympathy -or empathy- for others. The Bergsonian intuition is an intuition of

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 7.

what is 'other' and the intuition of duration puts us in contact with a continuity of durations,⁹ into a continuous heterogeneity.

Bergson's idea of sympathy associated with the intuitive method resounds with de la Mora's process of selection and transformation of discarded things: paintings by bad artists, fake masterpieces, fake materials such as gold, forgotten anonymous photographs, peeling walls, plafonds of abandoned houses, or discarded shoe soles. Here, different temporalities (durations) in these objects are experienced by the artist, and through each one of these abandoned objects, de la Mora expands his own existence. He explains:

Sometimes I feel that we can be ourselves and at the same time several persons... I am myself, though I am someone else. At the beginning of my work I wanted to question ideas of originality, the unique, through repetition, by photographing two identical things, people who looked like me, a double; for the possibility of being in two places at the same time, or to be two different or identical persons in one. I want to give life to something that seems to have ended, for the end to become a beginning or the transformation into something else. **IMG 11-12**

De la Mora recognizes the space and time before the work came to be and also its future, within a particular form of consciousness in future/preterit. He exerts both a search of an idea of eternity - in the attempt to expand the longevity of things-, and is simultaneously aware of the finitude of a material form in its present state. This may be exemplified with *569 X*, 2011, made

⁹ Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind* (Dover Publications, 1992 [1946]), p. 187

with fragments of a Mexican photograph from the beginning of the 20th century mounted on paper. The artist is aware that the work will fade slowly over the course of 50, 200 or more years to become eventually a monochrome, which is when the work according to him will be finished. De la Mora writes:

I always attempted that everything I thought and did was eternal and survived my death, to exist for ever. But I reached a point when I realized that everything in the end will disappear, will no longer exist or it will transform into something else... This is the concept I have been exploring for several years (...) In the photographs, I am interested that the work is concluded when these disappear, and the artist will not be the one who finishes the work and perhaps he will never see it finished... and the process continues after the death of the artist, or the process begins long before his birth. **IMG 13-14**

What appears to be an act of destruction –breaking the image in hundreds of pieces-, is in effect an act of empathy, in Bergsonian terms, an intuition of the self and the other in duration, a reinscription of meaning and the expansion of the life of the photograph. The work would have faded or disappeared much earlier if the artist had not used restoration methods to preserve and fix the photograph. I believe that the contradicting fluctuation between the awareness of death and the finitude of things, and the consciousness of the eternity of things and energy, is what produces the vital tension in the artist's work and locates process at the center of Gabriel de la Mora's practice. Perhaps the self-recognition that takes place when de la Mora chooses his objects and materials, is a reflection of the

memory of the past, both his own and of the world and its things. De la Mora has commented that he is interested in everything that lies behind the objects: their history, energy, mystery, beauty, sensuality and meaning. When he produced his earliest plafond piece, *P-1* (2006), it was not enough for the artist to know that a plafond from a house built between 1870 and 1910, was loaded with energy. With the help of two seers he chose the space in the house charged with the greatest amount of energy. This detached piece of plafond was then mounted on wood panel. What happens then to the energy found in this room once it is enclosed and fixed in the panel? Is it preserved eternally? Does it change in nature? Is it transferred to the new space that houses the piece? Can we reply to any of these questions? IMG 15

Prior to 2007, de la Mora produced many works that were openly autobiographical. In works such as *P-1*, there is a displacement from the strict nature of the autobiographical as a self-reference, to the experience of the 'biography' of things. In other words, the self-sympathy described in the intuitive concept by Bergson is expressed in sameness and heterogeneity. De la Mora writes:

The autobiography is the information we have of everything we have experienced, which makes us who we are. Not even with death can we erase this information, which remains occult, latent, and which perhaps can be seen in regressions and other ways. Nobody can begin at ground zero, this is why my definition that art can neither be created nor destroyed, only transformed. This is a parallel with the definition of energy, and which explains clearly my way of thinking about my work.

There is no essential, static immanence of being, but a constant becoming, a flux where past, present and future are permeable with each other, in the same way that energy and matter are transformed in and by each other in the process of becoming art. As in Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, the process in de la Mora's art has no beginning nor end, it is always in the middle, challenging finitude and mortality. As he himself says: "Perhaps the process will never cease to exist and it is always latent in the work... before and after the hand, the vision and the mind of the artist..." IMG 16 ■

02

TO OVERFLOW THE LIMITS.
NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE.
EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE.

CECILIA FAJARDO-HILL

IMAGES

IMG 1



Process of burning paper

IMG 2

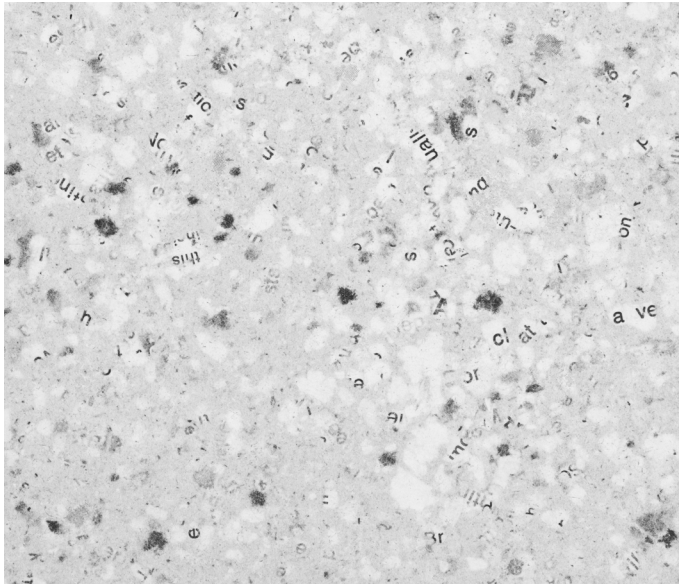


Gabriel de la Mora, *Catalogue of the exhibition*, 2003-2009

IMG 3

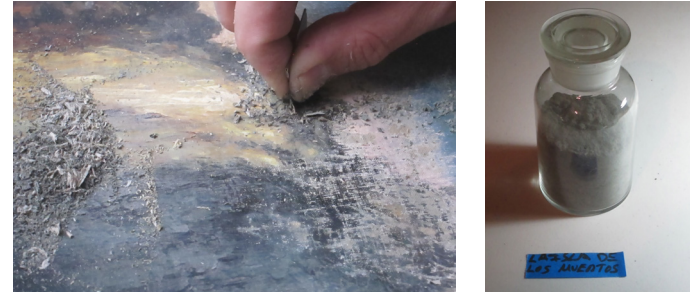


Process of Simón Marchan Fiz's book *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto* turned into a sheet of paper (2009)



Detail of Gabriel de la Mora, *Conceptual Art, Ursula Meyer*, 1972. Book turned into a sheet of paper

IMG 4

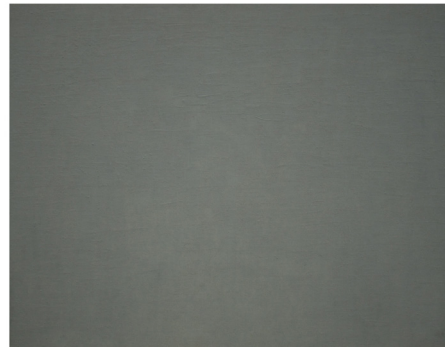


↑ Scratching of a fake artwork *The Island of the Dead*
↗ 147 grams of scratched pigment



Scratching process of Gabriel de la Mora, A. B. 1886, *The Island of the Dead*, 147 gr of pigment, 2013

IMG 5



Gabriel de la Mora, J.C., *116 grams of pigment*, 2011

IMG 6



House and study of Gabriel de la Mora de la Mora, the artist's father, in Colima, Mexico

IMG 7



Gabriel de la Mora, 7 - 8 de agosto de 2007, 12:00 horas, 2007

IMG 8



Classification of discarded shoe soles: Michel Domit-27, left-handed proprietor. August 18, 2014, 16:18 hrs.

IMG 9



Gabriel de la Mora, *1,089*, 2014. Installation shot at Museo Amparo, 2015

IMG 10



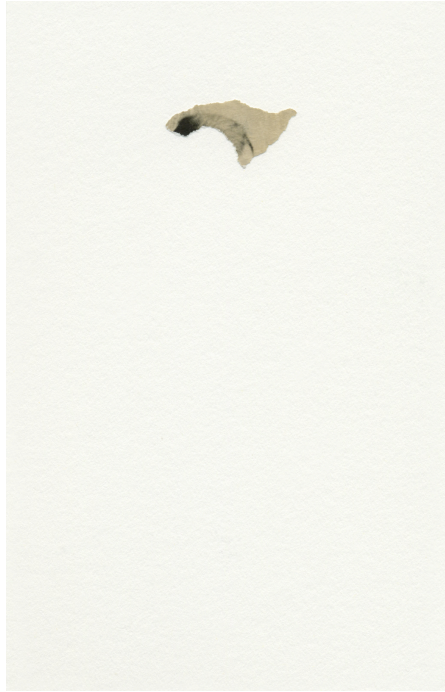
Gabriel de la Mora, *126 days*, 2013

IMG 11



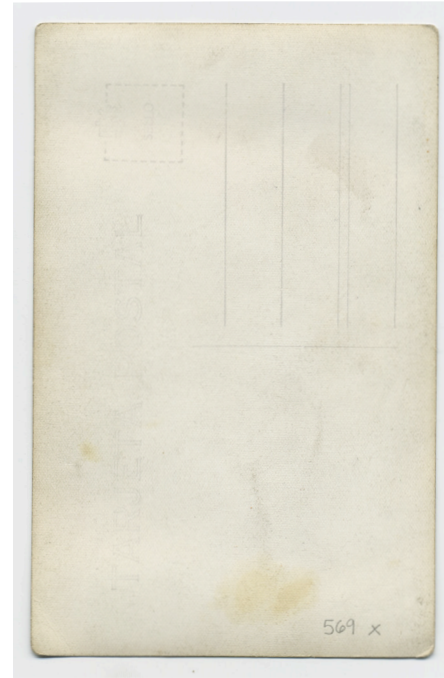
Gabriel de la Mora, *569 X*, 2011

IMG 12



Detail of fragment 42/121 from 569 X

IMG 13



↑ Detail of 569 X: postcard's verso
↗ Postcard previous to its surface being ripped off
→ Documentation of the image's fragmentation before it was
ripped off the paper's surface

IMG 14



Fragments ripped off the postcard used for 569 X

IMG 15



Gabriel de la Mora, *P - I*, 2006

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OUT OF FRAME

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