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Playing between concealment and presence

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Diana Coca

**Playing between concealment and presence**



Fig. 1: Diana Coca, from the serie *Where is Diana?*, Beijing, 2013, 24 x 31,5 cm, contact sheet, medium format negatives.

## Abstract

This article is based on the methodology of art-practice-as-research, which departs from my artistic production *Where is Diana?*, a series of photoperformances and videos made between Beijing, Tijuana and City Mexico during 2013-2015. Aware of the obsession with identity, with this proposal I raise the question of whether it is possible to transcend physical and intellectual borders. In my work I include the dynamics of recognition in a paradoxical way, as I present myself hooded, unrecognizable, without identity, placing myself on the border, on the margins, on the limit and in precariousness, through a body that transgresses its place and moves from the private to the public. This theoretical-practical perspective considers the gender perspective, as well as the conceptual tools that feminisms have created to rethink the female subject and de-center it, through a displacement towards what is non-hegemonic or predetermined by biology. The characteristics that are defined as masculine and feminine must be questioned because their meaning is the result of a historical and social practice that has artificially naturalized them.



Fig. 2: Diana Coca, *PEKIN8*, from the serie *Where is Diana?*, Beijing, 2013, 40 x 40 cm, digital print in museum quality paper, analog negative

So I propose axes of resistance to subvert gender and national identities, which I argue are fluid and modifiable. Creating this de-centre may lead to the construction of new subjectivities, a framework that expands the possibilities of action and recognition. To achieve this, I relate my artistic process to politics through the reconstruction of the sensible in social space, in the way bodies and their meanings act in that space. The relationship between art, politics, and representation that I propose here does not have to do with a discursive level but focuses on the artistic

gesture and how to communicate the affects that are imprinted in the bodies, which have a sensorial and political implication.

Keywords:

Photoperformance – body – woman – feminism – travel – border – identity – affects

### The faceless ones

This reflection is based on my artistic production *Where is Diana?*, a series of photoperformances and videos made between Beijing, Tijuana and Mexico, during the years 2013-2015. Aware of the obsession with identity, with this proposal I raise the question of whether it is possible to transcend the alienating cartographies that close their borders to intellectual and physical migrations, which block the nomadic certainties of the travelling bodies that embody the experiences lived in different contexts. As heir to a feminist genealogy that revalues and reconceptualises the figure of the excluded, in my work, I include the dynamics of recognition in a paradoxical way, since I present myself hooded, unrecognizable, situating myself on the border, on the margins, on the limit and in precariousness, through a body that transgresses its place and crosses the border from the private to the public.



Fig. 3: Diana Coca, *PEKIN113\_1*, from the serie *Where is Diana?*, Beijing, 2013, 130 x 130 cm, digital print in museum quality paper, analog negative.

My artistic references are based on the performances of women artists of the Americas from the 1960s to the present day, artists such as Mónica Mayer, Rocío Bolívar Congelada de Uva, Lorena Wolfffer, Eugenia Chellet, Coco Fusco, Argelia Bravo, Débora Arango, Maria Evelia Marmolejo, Lotty Rosenfeld, Lygia Clark, Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo, Las Damas de Blanco, Cindy Sherman, as well as Valie Export, Niki de Saint Falle, Fina Miralles, Pilar Albarracín, Marisa González, Itziar

Okariz, Xiao Lu, Pussy Riots, Tomislav Gotovac, Maison Margiela or *Les Vampires* de Louis Feuillade. My theoretical bases start from visions of the post-identity subject decentred, from the norm of gender binarism, such as Gloria Anzaldúa's *new mestiza* (1987), Judith Butler's performative-parodic subject (1988), Cherrie Moraga and Ana Castillo's *la puente* (1988) or Donna Haraway's cyborg (1995).

I live mobility intensely as a mental expedition outside the norms of identity because I do not consider the value of the context in which I was born to be absolute, but circumstantial and random. These frontiers that I encounter on the journey, as a nomadic subject, constantly reconfigure my own identity, bodily and affective limits. I recreate borders as I relate to the new cultures that surround me, being a subject in continuous movement, always in the act of becoming. The knowledge produced by Anzaldúa considers the act of knowing and transforming as a crossing to the other side. In her view, every act of knowing means bridging and crossing over, leaving the territory that legitimizes meanings and moving into a productive terrain in constant transition that invites us to observe, listen and transform. For the author, this awareness of intersection, of difference and subalternity is embodied in the *new mestiza* who develops a tolerance for contradictions and ambiguity, since she has a plural personality.

In this ambiguous and porous line, widely discussed by American artists and theorists, I work from a faceless body, which has the possibility of being the depository of multiple faces in continuous geographical displacement in front of the knowledge of the people who observe. I have turned being covered with a balaclava, I have turned it into a counter-phenomenology of the face, which does not describe what appears, but describes what does not appear.

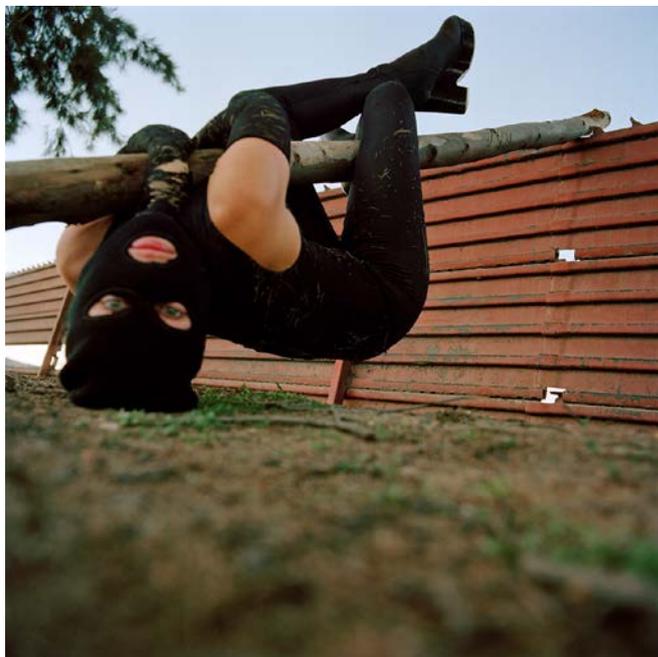


Fig. 4: Diana Coca, *TIJUANA45*, from the serie *Where is Diana?*, Tijuana, 2014, 60 x 60 cm, digital print in museum quality paper, analog negative.

If the gaze at the naked face f the gaze at the naked face means knowledge - a perception that one tries to mask with poses when finding oneself undefended and unprotected -, being covered is a strategy of animality, survival and defence, in order not to be exposed or threatened, in order not to be harmed. If the face speaks, insofar as it is the one that ma- kes possible the beginning of discourse, I use the balaclava precisely to speak of my invisibility.



Fig. 5: Diana Coca, *PEKIN125\_3*, from the serie *Where is Diana?*, Beijing, 2013, 130 x 130 cm, digital print in museum quality paper, analog negative.

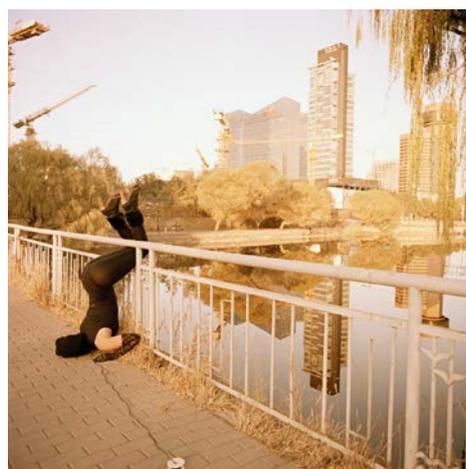


Fig. 6: Diana Coca, *PEKIN141*, from the serie *Where is Diana?*, Beijing, 2013, 20 x 20 cm, digital print in museum quality paper, analog negative.



Fig. 7: Diana Coca, *PEKIN150*, from the serie *Where is Diana?*, Beijing, 2013, 20 x 20 cm, digital print in museum quality paper, analog negative.

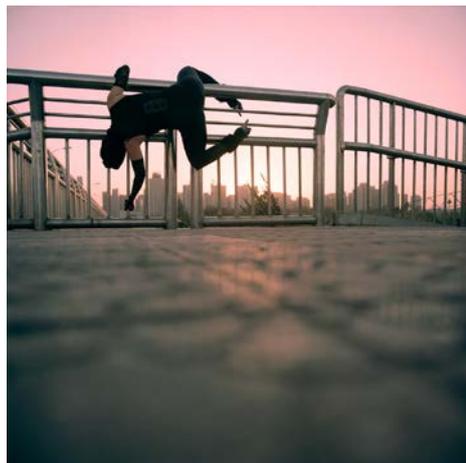


Fig. 8: Diana Coca, *PEKIN131* from the serie *Where is Diana?*, Beijing, 2013, 40 x 40 cm, digital print in museum quality paper, analog negative.

The mask thus evokes the feminine and marginal, inverting its function, as putting into action strategies of the powerless that are outside the centre. The balaclava stages voices that cannot be heard, touched, smelled, or seen by our senses, which require the arts to be decoded or perceived. Even though, I am aware of my privileged position within the less privileged group, those who are not allowed to cross certain lines, who suffer the hardest and most difficult crossing of borders, literal and metaphorical. In this regard, I am interested in what Marisa Belausteguigoitia indicates about the use of masks as a form of Zapatista resistance:

A pesar del uso tan diverso, creativo y antiguo de las máscaras, los zapatistas inauguraron una concepción y un uso distinto. Este cambio proviene del particular uso dado por el reflejo, la sombra, lo femenino como estrategia opuesta a las funciones de control, privilegio, travesía y camuflaje, que posibilita los símbolos masculinos de nuestro orden social (dominio, manejo, mirada panóptica, maestría). Las máscaras usadas por los zapatistas en

este escenario están signadas por la oposición, la resistencia, la ironía a modelos y símbolos relacionados con poderes rituales, patriarcales, nacionales, transnacionales, globales. Su uso estratégico inaugura órdenes distintos. (Belausteguigoitia 1995, 308-309)<sup>1</sup>

When Haraway investigates the boundaries between nature and culture, or the binary relationships that underlie Western thought (human/animal, pure/impure, rational/irrational), what she is doing is introducing the idea of the monstrous embodied in the *cyborg*. She poses it as a cultural and political project that brings to the stage the obscene and unrepresentable, what should be hidden (cf. Haraway 1999, 121-163). As in *Where is Diana?*, the monstrous gradually takes over the city, moving from the periphery towards the political and economic centre of the megacity of Beijing, where the mechanisms of control are intensified. In this way, I make myself visible through the invisibility provided by the balaclava, as a survival strategy to short-circuit representation within an authoritarian regime of panoptic control and hypervisibility.



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<sup>1</sup> Translation by Diana Coca: “Despite the diverse, creative, and ancient use of masks, the Zapatistas inaugurated a different conception and use. This change comes from the particular use given by the reflection, the shadow, the feminine as a strategy opposed to the functions of control, privilege, crossing and camouflage, which makes possible the masculine symbols of our social order (dominion, management, panoptic gaze, mastery) . The masks used by the Zapatistas in this scenario are marked by opposition, resistance, irony to models and symbols related to ritual, patriarchal, national, transnational, global powers. Its strategic use inaugurates different orders.”

Fig. 9: Diana Coca, *TIJUANA50* from the serie *Where is Diana?*, Tijuana, 2014, 80 x 80 cm, digital print in museum quality paper, analog negative.

Although unrecognizability has negative connotations in our culture - being related to deformation, state surveillance, terrorism, guerrilla warfare, criminality, Islamic religion over women, etc. - thanks to the balaclava I can lose myself in labyrinths of identity, renouncing the individuality of the self in favour of the broader fact of being a woman and a human being, inserted in diverse cultural contexts. With this I intend to interrupt the patriarchal control exercised over living beings, be they women, plants, animals or even men of the southern hemisphere. It is a gaze from the border that does not use the balaclava to produce terror, but rather does so with irony, contradicting the aggressiveness of the mask with the peaceful gaze of the person behind it. The irony of this contradiction destabilizes the gaze, embodying the invisible, that which needs to be unveiled, to become visible, representing invisibility at its limit. It also enables me to see without being seen, as a survival strategy of otherness, liminal subjects, in the style of the Zapatista guerrilla. It shows that the problems that occur at the limits, at the borders, are not waste or dispossession, but rather a reflection of how transnational policies are embodied in people, in families, in entire communities, invisible from the global but which, nevertheless, must be attended locally:

Los zapatistas son los sin rostro, los des-carados, los que han perdido la vergüenza original, tal vez la de La Malinche, tal vez la de la desobediencia de Eva, tal vez la de ser los más pobres. Los descarados interrumpen, hablan, se niegan no aceptan, reclaman, demandan. Dejaron de pedir perdón. (Belausteguigoitia 1995, 310-311)<sup>2</sup>

### A singular poetics

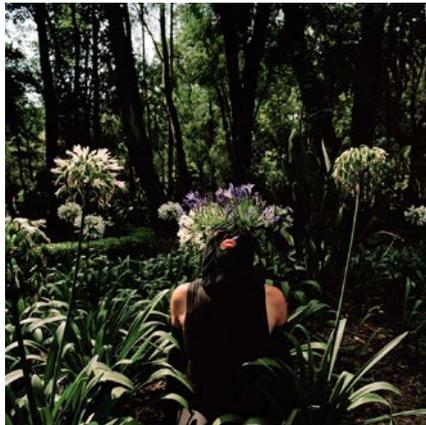


Fig. 10: Diana Coca, *MEXICO20* from the serie *Where is Diana?*, Mexico City, 2015, 150 x 150 cm, digital print in museum quality paper, analog negative.

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<sup>2</sup> Translation by Diana Coca: “The Zapatistas are the faceless, the un-faced, those who have lost their original shame, perhaps that of La Malinche, perhaps that of Eva's disobedience, perhaps that of being the poorest. The shameless interrupt, speak, refuse, do not accept, claim, demand. They stopped asking for forgiveness.”



Fig. 11: Diana Coca, *MEXICO23* from the serie *Where is Diana?*, Mexico City, 2015, 100 x 100 cm, digital print in museum quality paper, analog negative.

We can dissect the singular poetics of this project in relation to the keys of ecofeminism, where prevails a critique of the dynamics of domination and power in relation to the exploitation of bodily, natural and urban environments. Traditionally, nature and women have been considered as mere raw materials, wild beings to be dominated. This is what Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies identify with the process of masculinization of mother earth - replaced by a masculinized national state - and the colonization of women's seeds and bodies, who have been the guardians of biodiversity since immemorial times. For these authors, therefore, the marginalization of women and the destruction of biodiversity are processes that go hand in hand. Through these theoretical strategies, coupled with irony and contradiction, I present and make visible a body and nature as battlefields. I criticize excessive urban development using sinister locations, natural spaces invaded by industrial elements that portray the prevalence of patriarchal and androcentric capitalism; as well as the use of urban transit spaces, such as the five motorway belts that cross the city of Beijing, environments where my body merges with the hostility and harshness of concrete.

Ecological destruction, industrial catastrophes, pandemics, wars, exoduses, and human trafficking respond to a neoliberal capitalist development model traced by patriarchy, leaving a destructive mark on our daily lives, which I question through artistic action and feminist research. Perhaps ecofeminism can provide us with insights, new questions, perhaps answers, or simply situate environmental and economic as the current problems of planet Earth. *Where is Diana?* raises this tension between nature and a questionable concept of progress. Following this critical path, my body acts with a defiant and restorative attitude, in symbiosis and empathy with the nature of a threatened society. It is another way of looking, another way of moving, activating a more human rhythm to relax, slow down, with the desire to become an animal or a plant. Emerging from a tree or hidden behind a trunk, I ask myself if it is possible to create a new symbolic order to show this nature intervened in symbiosis with the body, but at the same time surrounded by tools of control. In other images my body emerges from the earth, growing among plants as if it were a flower, a nature on which more and more patents weigh down every day, in an impassive race towards privatization.

This energetic style is centred on a playful and creative active resistance, as a response to hostile social and environmental forces, which far from dissolving my self into individuality, it reinforces



Fig. 12: Diana Coca, *MEXICO26* from the serie *Where is Diana?*, Mexico City, 2015, 40 x 40 cm, digital print in museum quality paper, analog negative.

the idea of a connected collectivity that respects singularities. My claims are based on life experiences that give rise to forms of reincarnation, which in turn are nomadic experiences, opening a space for the multiple and for changes of location. It is an effective form of provocation, which puts on the table the symbolic violence exercised against a female subject, capable of ethical and artistic actions with political power. Here lies the revolutionary capacity and the possibility of change offered by liminal spaces, in order to move from action to the subversion of the dominant codes. This responds to the way I represent borders in my photoperformances, as national zones of danger and sacrifice. They are spaces where anything goes, where the desirable and the undesirable in human beings converge, a kind of sinister crack and rupture where fear reigns. Fear that I use as an invisible ally, clinging to the difficult and the hardness of the marginal as driving forces for creative development. It is a sensation and a defence mechanism that requires me to risk and at the same time to remain safe, to survive, keeping me in a continuous debate between the adrenaline of being exposed to danger and the search for protection, as a challenge of self-discovery, personal evolution and, to know if I am capable of taking care of myself. This leads me to the contradiction of using risk and survival as a need for self-growth, since it is a voluntary and artistic decision to place myself where I am, in a violent reality of abandonment.

To speak of borders is paradoxical and conflictive, since they are imaginary lines in a global world, unreal but at the same time hyper-real due to the high degree of surveillance and control mechanisms they concentrate, places of history and

memory where is negotiated a variety of ethnic, linguistic, identity and sexual systems, as in bodies. Tijuana appears in my images in this non-complacent way, like a post-apocalyptic and dystopian landscape, a product of the savage neoliberalism that has its paradoxical reflection in the most elegant city in the United States, California's San Diego. Sayak Valencia uses the concept of *gore capitalism* (Valencia 2010, 25-33, 70-78) to refer to this paradox, to the demands of the northern markets, which have set up branches and laboratories of illegality in the southern hemisphere to provide illegal services and deconstruct economic possibilities. This generates a type of economy based on violence, bloodshed and trade in illegal services and products. In Tijuana the discourse of terror and paranoia generated by the United States is evident, in order to subdue and monitor citizens more, an atrocity that is installed in the bones of the bodies that exist, die and disappear. Life thus becomes a monetary and transnational exchange value, crystallizing an episteme of violence that transforms bodies into commodities.

In this sense, I work on the reconstruction of a trapped, codified, controlled, limited and oppressed body, far from the idea of corporeality as a refuge, a safe house, and closer to a maelstrom of obsessions and guilt. In our nomadic and migrant lives, shame takes over a large part of our identity, generating a feeling of being different, which makes us feel there is something wrong with us. It is distinct from guilt and fear, although the three often coexist. The message of guilt says that because I have done something wrong, I deserve bad things happen to me, but while guilt is expelled through symbolic punishment, shame remains and takes over our being in a paralyzing way. It is reactivated during nomadic and migratory processes of living in new contexts, of comparison with others, of what they are able to do and I am not, of what they understand, and I do not. Because as nomads or migrants we communicate in languages that are not our own, in contexts of socio-cultural norms where I can make mistakes and be mocked, where I can be humiliated or feel humiliated. As nomadic bodies we are confronted with situations in which, if compared to the natives of the country, we will perform worse; situations in which we cannot always meet socio-cultural expectations, a fact that reactivates experiences of shame, of being defective, different, and insufficient. From this way of being an embodied subject I try to transcend my relationship with the world, going to the origin of the problem and experiencing it in the first person, embodying it, corporealizing it to filter criticism, pain, affection, and live empathy in first person to be able to communicate it from love and humour, as a healing tool. And in the practical application of this discourse, we will understand the pathological nature of our societies that demand the pacification of conflictive areas that, by judging differences as dangerous, justify suspensions and violations of human rights under the pretext of a common welfare that in reality lacks respect for life and other ways of living it.



Fig. 13: Diana Coca, *TIJUANA48* from the serie *Where is Diana?*, Tijuana, 2014, 150 x 150 cm, digital print in museum quality paper, analog negative.

### **For a resignification**

Through a feminist artistic practice, I propose axes of resistance to subvert a reality anchored in an outdated, violent, and hegemonic capitalist system. I am aware that the way gender is performed is contextual, relational and varies culturally, however, there are hegemonic characteristics that are repeated over and over again from East to West across the planet. It is possible to propose other non-heteropatriarchal, peaceful and sustainable angles from which to interpret the world. Identities flow and are modifiable, so the characteristics that are defined as

masculine and feminine must be questioned because their meaning is the result of a historical and social practice that has artificially naturalized them. This displacement implies a discursive reconstruction that multiplies the possibilities of constructing new subjectivities, both for women and men, creating a framework that widens the possibilities of action and recognition. It would imply an unprecedented epistemological and discursive change, displacing attributes defined for centuries, through a shift towards what is neither hegemonic nor predetermined by biology. In other words, to be a woman is to have become a woman, that is, to force the body to conform to the historical idea of woman, to do so as a repeated bodily project. Following Judith Butler:

When Simone de Beauvoir claims, “one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman,” she is appropriating and reinterpreting this doctrine of constituting acts from the phenomenological tradition. In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time - an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of a constituted *social temporality*. Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. In the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style. (Butler 1988, 519-520)

Feminism is a possibility of redirecting and outlining other subjectivities that do not seek to be anchored in biological, identitarian or nationalist elements, but rather to dynamite these precepts. The queer movement is a movement of sexual and gender dissidence that resists the norms imposed by the dominant heterosexual society, practices of public resistance, of playful-critical anti-capitalist activism that is not anchored in sexual preferences, denying essences as oppressive. This situates on the discursive and resistance map the performative artistic actions that revise the practices of symbolic violence carried out through language, as well as the occupation, manifestation and visibilization of dissidence in public, private and academic spaces. To change this order of things it is necessary to analyse the cult



Fig. 14: Diana Coca, *TIJUANA1* from the serie *Where is Diana?*, Tijuana, 2014, 130 x 130 cm, digital print in museum quality paper, analog negative.

of violence, and to do so from another perspective, avoiding romanticizing or trivializing it. Only if we are able of thinking about the pain in the bodies of others, we will be able to reactivate our relationship with them, refusing to legitimize this violence because all bodies have the right to a dignified life. We need the pain of the other to shake me in my own body, that the media does not make violence invisible or trivialize it behind a screen that separates us from the extreme pain of the other, generating empathy with the suffering of others as an alternative to build new ones realities. If capitalism is the only option, let's make it resignify us and lead us to rethink ourselves, let's transform the options through criticism and creative disobedience to trace escapes from the system, micro-political resistances that

respond to these nomadic bodies. Because, at the end of the day, the greatest frontier and freedom exist within us, and it is this that allows us to enter into communion with others and generate sufficient empathy to love those who are different, to put ourselves in and inside their skin. To do this, we must be able to leave our own corporeality, like the ecstasy that occurs in the encounter with the bodies of others, a leaving of our own limits from the spiritual and poetic towards the political. Art has a lot to do with this, with ecstasy, with putting the subject back at the centre, the principle of enjoyment and the celebration of life as a form of interaction with the environment. The world in which we live is an absurdity and, if there is something that becomes magical in artistic practice, it is that it allows us to restore the Dionysian joy for life, putting back into the subject's circuit the principle of *jouissance* as a form of interaction with the environment.

Migration is an unstoppable fact; humanity will continue to migrate, and nobody is going to stop it. Policies are out of date, there is an insurmountable contradiction between the political and legal order, which is unable to provide a political solution to the bodies that move in space for economic reasons generated by globalization. The solution given by states is deficient, as it is happening in the European Union which responds with terrifying camps where their practices are reminiscent of concentration camps, where human beings from the southern hemisphere are locked up and their rights are not guaranteed. The human beings who have had to migrate lack recognition of citizenship and legal status, while the West is not being able to guarantee them basic social rights of health, education, housing, and work. It is a crisis of the Western model of state and national law, not a migratory crisis. Our utopias and dreams have a difficult daily subsistence with the most hostile and unfriendly realities of the world we live in, but the desire for a better world has always accompanied me, goals to project myself into, even if they are unattainable. Utopias and dreams that are shattered every day, but which at the same time rebuild new horizons to fight for with the evocative force of Ulysses in *The Odyssey*, a poetry of migrants, intercultural, but at the same time a testimony of the sufferings of human beings who live far from their countries and their environment. A life that is fury, uncontrollable, powerful, mysterious, and creative.

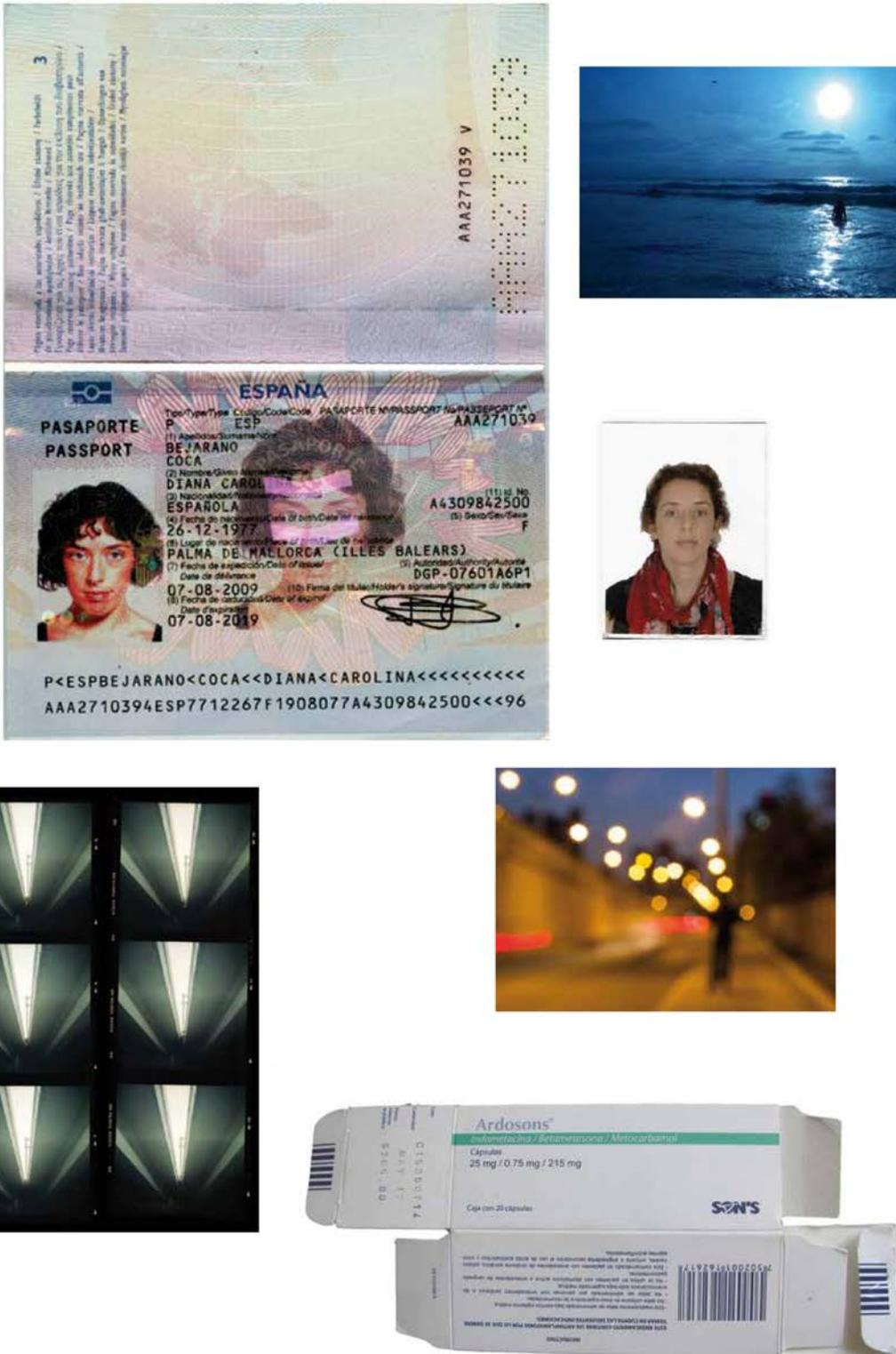
In conclusion, I would like to point out that I relate my artistic process to politics through the reconstruction of the possibilities of the sensitive in social space, in the way in which bodies and their meanings act in that space. The link between art and politics has to do with the capacity of the former to appropriate the way in which bodies and their meanings act in common space. This mode of appropriation is a poetic exercise, which distances itself aesthetically from the artistic process and from politics understood in a traditional sense. The event I present and represent is too close to life, it is a living body that affects and is affected, which makes the identification of art and beauty increasingly problematic. It is also a point of view that challenges academic thought and art theorists, who wonder about art, but not about what happens in the artist. The relationship between art and politics that I propose here has not so much to do with the discursive level, but rather with the artistic gesture, which allows the affection that leaves an imprint on the body (which has a sensory implication) to be communicated. Because it is in this way of

communicating that we can construct a different register of experience, which is not built from the traditional political discourse. The political register of the artistic allows us to connect with the experience of the subject, to become aware of a situation, of a politics understood as the way in which bodies and their chemistry occupy spaces. After all, if I am at a public demonstration, its success lies in the social mass, in the social body, in the way in which bodies begin to collide in the common space, and that same form of collision can be captured by the artistic gesture, producing a political notion of art. If we think of the Zapatista movement in Mexico, their success lies in the fact that they managed to enunciate a symptom, and not so much to configure a political discourse. The way in which the Zapatista protest developed had to do with a destabilization of the referent of their grievances, masked people claiming their rights. At the level of the semantic field of representation it is an absolute destabilization. If you can only intervene on what is represented, what can power do when there are gaps of representation?

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Fig. 15: Diana Coca, processual materials from the serie *Where is Diana?*, Beijing, Tijuana &



Mexico City, 2013-2015, variable measures.