

IN TRANSIT INTERVIEWS: CELINA LOH

Pablo Paillole
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Celina Loh (CL): What is *Madrid 1940* and how did the residency with In Transit informed the work that you have produced?

Pablo Paillole (PP): *Madrid 1940* is a recollection of moments from a conversation with my mum. In that conversation, we talk about different family narratives that perhaps have been unspoken — or not — or not spoken about enough, and they've never been put together in one place. For instance, my mom talks about the time when my grandmother told me that she loved me but she had never told her. The first time my mum heard 'I love you' from my grandmother was to me. That, when put in combination with my grandmother's emotional trauma from the Spanish Civil War is almost like all these different memories.

When you connect them together and join the dots, you see that a lot of political elements or narratives are connected to very personal aspects of life, and who we are as people as well as who we are as a family. So that's something that I'm really interested in. I've been wanting to explore that for a while so I guess the residency has informed the work in that it really got me thinking about accessibility, in very broad terms.

The residency with In Transit got me thinking about access to archives, which is something that I've also been thinking about for a while. If an artist who wants to work with archives can't have free access or free use to those resources to make work, we as artists resort to other means. And that is, making our own archives or working with things that we own, things we know we can work with because it's our family heritage.

I think that's something that is increasingly common with artists or non artists, journalists — young people that I know and friends who are also creatives. There seems to be a trend going on that we are just like digging into our archives to understand ourselves better as people, and navigate the world in a bit more depth through those archives. So the rest of the residency has informed not only that, but also thinking about accessibility in relation to the open and close caption dilemma that I had around the video.

CL: You've touched on different things that I'd like to expand on. Perhaps we could talk a bit more about why you've decided to highlight your mum and grandmother in the video instead of say, your grandfather? There were some images of your other relatives within the archive.

PP: It is mainly because of the narratives that that came out from those people. So my grandfather, according to my mum, never really expressed much. For instance, he didn't have any fun pictures of his family, whereas my grandmother kept everything. And that's an interesting thing to dig about as well - I think that'd be another work. That's how we know that we have ancestors who were related to the military in Kenya. That's how we know that we have a really old picture from 1905 where one of my ancestors is dressed in military attire, and they're in Cuba, in La Habana. And that's how we kind of trace all these narratives but we can't do that with my grandfather's side of the family. Even my mom, she knows very little about who they were what they did. So there's not as much narrative material.

CL: So a lot of it is filling in the gaps.

PP: Yeah, exactly - archives help you to fill in gaps. Filling parts of the story when you can't explain something from the present moment but it's got a reason that ties back to, well, almost 80 years ago - I think that's when they become really valuable, archives. It's a shame we can't do that with my grandfather's side of the family. I wanted to tell these narratives in particular. My mum's told me many stories but this is a selection of things that I feel, are most important and interrelated to each other. The actual walk and the video were about an hour and a half long where we talked about many other things but these are the most poignant moments.

CL: So a lot of it is about connecting, agency. Is that why you've chosen to juxtapose the two screens, thus creating the dual perspective?

PP: I had been wanting to film events from two people's perspective for a long time now, but just never had the resources. Now that I do, I wanted to try that with this work. I don't know, I want to actually try many iterations of this process. If I identify another narrative and another conversation that I want to tell in this way, I want to have a camera sent to someone so they can wear it and we can call in two completely different places, and you're listening to the same conversation as it happens. I don't know why I'm always drawn to visuals. That's why I find it important for an audience to see who's talking and seeing it from a matter of perspective - it's quite a vague idea but it's just a matter of perspective and seeing other people's perspectives.

CL: So it was quite an important decision that you decided to film a walk, instead of a conversation at a dining table.

PP: I find it interesting to somehow show, hear or record the environment in which a conversation is happening. It just happens that I remember conversations from walks, like I wouldn't sit in the living room. I mean, we would but it's less common. We talk when we go out for a walk, I don't know - it seems right. Walking activates new things and for me, new ideas - new ways of having conversations. Rather than sitting still, I need to run. When I'm feeling a bit under the weather or need something new to myself, I go for a walk to somewhere I've never been. I guess that's why and it's quite refreshing as an audience member to go for a virtual 'walk' with someone telling a different story and showing you a place that you've never been to. That said, I wouldn't relate my practice to walking as a practice.

Basically, I'm driven by visuals. So if there's no visual output, that will come later.

CL: Within your work, you've always included some form of text or caption. So did your time at In Transit lead you to further explore and integrate access within your work or has it always been an element that fits with your work overall?

PP: I think it fits and it lends itself like you saying. Generally, I've always include captions in my work. But thinking about In Transit, with the mentoring sessions that were offered, I think it was more about how to include text in a way that is more accessible, and that's something that I've never thought about before. In that way, I had thought about including captions because it is then more accessible. But I hadn't thought about how to include those captions in order to be more accessible and to whom it would be accessible to. So that's the shift in perspective.

With In Transit, it also got me thinking about the jargon side of things and how to explain my work - how, what and which words to use. I'm not interested in using terminology that my mum cannot understand because she's not a contemporary artist but she's part of the work. I wouldn't want her or any other family member to go onto the In Transit platform and think 'what is this? Talking about the blah blah blah.' And that wouldn't be interesting, that wouldn't be engaging for people who are not in the art world. I'm trying to escape from that, which is something I started thinking when we had the first few conversations about In Transit. It just happened to fit my other research line about jargon in contemporary art, which is a longer ongoing project.

CL: Yes, in parallel to, you have also been developing work that explored use of art jargons. You've been uploading scripts of different roles - from a retailer to tax manager - describing their jobs in contemporary art jargon. Perhaps you could share why those specific roles? And what was the process of writing the script - did you write them yourself or consult people in those roles?

PP: So I know people who are in those roles, they are both an artist and tax inspector. Or I've seen people who have done works where they perform as a letting agent in the artwork, so trying to bring these non art roles into contemporary art. These roles would work with the actors that I have in mind, and I think it would work with the language that I want to use - I want to make a satirical comment on why art world jargon is inaccessible.

With the script, I consulted some parts. I wrote most of it myself and it's still in the process. So on my studio space (at In Transit), it's not complete. It's a long way before being complete. I'm going to try and film it from April to September with the actors and in different spaces. I'm going to try to develop the scripts a lot more in the next couple of months and have a solid groundwork to develop the performance and improvisation side of the work.

With the performance, I'm planning to film it in gallery spaces that I have some sort of relationship with - the galleries that I've done a residency in the past, or the gallery where I work now and how these places — without criticising — are particularly good examples for not using art jargon that is inaccessible to audiences. So these galleries, they understand the project and they understand that is an ironical comment, therefore not taking it as criticism because they are on the good page of art language. I think it's nice to come back to these places where I've developed as an artist that are still intrinsic to the work that I'm going to make in the future.

CL: It's refreshing to know that you're always going back to where you've started — with the archives and the galleries — not only reflecting but working with them to create something new. Because people tend to look towards the future, reflecting on the past but not taking action on what's already happened.

PP: Totally yeah, I hadn't thought about that, actually. I think it's really important for me too because I look towards the future a lot. I worry that we're a generation that is constantly anxious about the future. I look towards the future so much that I think looking back at the past keeps me grounded. When you're going through rough times or mental states, it's really good having those archives or friends who remind you about a memory that you have forgotten because I've got the worst memory ever. So having that resource — whether it's people around you or images that you've created or sourced from the past — that bring you back to ground level. I think that's really important for me and my practice, constantly switching between past present, and future.

CL: Your older works look a lot at not just the past-present-future, but also the dichotomy between fiction and reality. Is this something you're still exploring in your new work, in relation to memory?

PP: I think with the past-present-future, it's obvious to relate it to memory. But memory is often related to what is real and what is not. Sometimes, we make up memories one way or another. For instance, when we were really young, we might think that we've lived through something but it was just a thought/in our minds - creating false memories. Relating it back to *Madrid 1940*, you have my grandmother telling these stories to my mom, and you have my mum relaying them to me and there are things that I don't know for sure. There would be incorrect, inaccurate facts because it is down to two people's memories and how they interpret each other or their own memories.

So it's interesting how facts change and evolve through time but that doesn't mean it's not a real narrative because it still happened. It's just interesting to see and learn how one story naturally becomes something else, a little different. So from this something else that is 1940, you can only imagine what was once real. There's not much fiction in the work, as compared to some of my other works where I've reappropriated fictional elements into the video or performance. Here, it's more focused on how memory plays a role in reality.

CL: Your work makes me think a lot of about the reliability of archives and archival silence - whose stories are being selected to be included in the collections? You have archivists and librarians, who are supposedly neutral parties- to filter through historical records, and you're there wondering whose stories are being highlighted and who's forsaken? With your family archives, were they only photos or were there also letters that perhaps informed certain events?

PP: When I scanned all the pictures throughout lockdown in 2020, it was interesting to see the inscriptions on the back because they provided a lot of info. Some of them were dated, some of them were signed with a phrase or something. Back then, photographs used to be like a postcard - a bit like what we do with WhatsApp. It was interesting to read and file through their communication as some family lived far apart and they would sign it for each other. It was interesting not only to see the images but also the inscriptions.

CL: Interesting to know that photographs were used like postcards! I guess a photograph is like a little postcard in itself. Quickly going back to the fiction-reality and archives, and to wrap up, what resonance do you think this work has on audiences in the UK or globally, since it's displayed online? The internet and web space have affected how we view and work with archives, and histories differently, compared to *Madrid 1940* that expands on a very particular time in history, using very tangible archival resources.

PP: It's definitely interesting to have them online because it's almost like giving them a new life or they would literally be sitting in an attic in my house. All these information wouldn't have come out and shared on the internet. I can't help but think about people who still have boxes of archives in their house that have not been opened in 20 years. It's never going to see and meet the other archives, and people are not going to make new connections with these stories. The stories will never be passed on to their family..

It's different with institutional archives. It's a real pleasure to work with them [institutional archives] because you find a lot of things, not only about people but about buildings and cities. But as a person, you want to know who your ancestors are. You want to know why - why the psychological and other problems that we are facing now are influenced by our ancestors. Who they were, what they did, where they came from.

There's a really interesting story on my dad's side of the family about my great granddad, who lived in Bilbao in northern Spain. He betted a lot of money. He betted all his money, and also included his wife, children and house in the bet. Anyway he lost it and had to flee. At the time, the family said that they wouldn't go with the person who had won the bet, so they left to Madrid. But that's what I mean, it's mad because I wouldn't have been born with it. This story itself has gone through many filters and iterations, so going back to fiction and reality. I'm sure there's something about it that isn't accurate but it explains a lot about who we are as people, how real we are and whether we need to take ourselves that seriously. How our family relationships are integrated into subjectivity..