

Figures of Speech:

Looking through Loss in Amalia Pica's *Sorry for the Metaphor* (2005-2010)

By

Sarah Louise Cowan

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Professor Julia Bryan-Wilson, Chair  
Professor Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby  
Professor Natalia Brizuela

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*Metaphors are our way of losing ourselves in semblances or treading water in a sea of seeming.*<sup>1</sup>  
—Roberto Bolaño, 2666

## I. Introduction

Expert hands meticulously apply about one hundred cheap A3 paper sheets to the white surface of the gallery wall. Using tape, levels, and pencils, an installation crew systematically adheres these pages to the drywall with paste. The inevitable imperfections of this application—pockets of air encrusted in the dried solution, misalignments between sheets—index the resistance of materials to institutional demands of orderliness. The story of this likely tedious, hard-fought battle is camouflaged in part by the printed gray-scale ink on the pages. Surface irregularities eventually resolve in the eye of the viewer as either a slight change in printed tone or as an obstruction from the wall, but only on close inspection. While the printed ink detracts from the vagaries of the material world, it heightens the grid structure that systematically organizes the many individual pieces of paper into a single coherent image. Bands of relative dark and light—the repetitive result of an inconsistent copy store printer—repeat the compartmentalizing lines of the grid. Delineating the units of this papery surface are approximations of straight lines and ninety-degree angles [fig. 1]. These geometries of contact insist on the particularity of each sheet while continually bearing witness to the fact that they have already come together. They are inextricable now, a mass of tissue assembled for the temporary conveyance of an image.

The five works that compose the “photocopy” series described above, *Sorry for the Metaphor* (2005-2010), each depict the turned back of London-based Argentine artist Amalia Pica as she stands outdoors with a handheld instrument of political communication.<sup>2</sup> Of these five works, three have been reproduced and repeatedly publicly displayed; two are in private collections. The public works will be the focus of my investigation [figs. 2-4].<sup>3</sup> Megaphone or picket sign, these tools each appear impotent in Pica’s hands, lacking both content and audience—she does not implement the megaphone by putting it to her mouth and speaking in it; her signs exhibit no visible message or markings of any kind. According to Pica the ironically apologetic title of the series, *Sorry for the Metaphor*, responds to Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño’s assertion that figures of speech are inadequate to foment social change.<sup>4</sup> Pica’s title declares the works as metaphor and juxtaposes them to projects of political activism—however

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<sup>1</sup> Roberto Bolaño, *2666: A Novel*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 595.

<sup>2</sup> Pica’s oeuvre includes two other photocopy-based works that resemble but are not a part of the series *Sorry for the Metaphor—Dialogue (paper and mountain)*, 2010 and *Grayscale*, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> These three works span the entire five-year period of production of the series—*Sorry for the Metaphor*, 2005, photocopied paper, dimensions variable, Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles; *Sorry for the Metaphor #2*, 2010, photocopied paper, dimensions variable, Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles; *Sorry for the Metaphor #5*, 2010, photocopied paper, dimensions variable, private collection. The other two works in the series are in private collections and have not been exhibited publicly. I have selected the works that I have been able to view in person.

<sup>4</sup> Toby Kamps, ed., *Silence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 80.

regrettably. It acknowledges both the validity of the call to activism and the limits of artworks in fulfilling that social function.

Pica's response to Bolaño covers a significant portion of the carefully manicured gallery wall on which it has been pasted. The work comes in four different sizes, so as to be adapted to the specific dimensions of its sites of exhibition. Most commonly, the work is printed at dimensions of approximately twelve feet by fifteen feet.<sup>5</sup> Its occupation of an institutional space of art—a place commonly reserved for metaphor—locates the apology in the realm of the insincere and flirts with sarcasm. The works are destroyed in their de-installation; this insistent impermanence further complicates the *repost* to Bolaño, introducing issues of temporality to questions of social efficacy. More than a flip remark on the privileges of working in a sphere ostensibly removed from the imperatives of social change, Pica's series attempts to contribute its own communicatory capacities to a world always and everywhere embroiled in political debate and social reckoning.

Raised in Argentina by a political activist during the Dirty War (1976-1983), Pica often engages questions around the capacities and constraints of art to communicate alongside more overt political statements.<sup>6</sup> In this paper, I work with Pica's statements about her own artistic production in order to consider the model of communication made visible in *Sorry for the Metaphor*. This approach to the series gives credence to the artist's sophisticated understanding of her work; I take Pica's broad conceptualizations, often revealed in interviews, as a satisfyingly cogent and ambivalent launching pad for investigating the work. Pica's career has recently garnered critical attention in the United States, where she received her first major solo exhibition at the MIT List Visual Arts Center and Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 2013.<sup>7</sup> And though she has a well-established artistic practice in London and regularly exhibits in Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Argentina, and Uruguay, this paper presents, at the time of its writing, the first lengthy academic effort in any language to examine her work using the theories and methods of the history of art.

In initiating this art historical discussion around a quintessentially global artist, I engage a number of themes pertinent to thinking with contemporary art more broadly. For example, many of the questions guiding this paper stem from consideration of the difficulties in balancing the particular art historical narratives suggested by an artist's biography with the international

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<sup>5</sup> These were the approximate dimensions of the works from the series exhibited at *Silence*, Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive (2013) as well as *Amalia Pica*, MCA Chicago (2013).

<sup>6</sup> See Soledad Bauza, "Arte, Patria, Censura y Poesía: El color del caballo de Artigas," *La República* (Montevideo, Uruguay), August 12, 2007 <<http://www.lr21.com/uy/cultura/270449-el-color-del-caballo-de-artigas/>> and Amalia Pica, Interview with Jamie Stevens, *We Find Wildness*, May 2012 <<http://www.we-find-wildness.com/2012/05/amalia-pica/>>.

<sup>7</sup> The catalogue for this jointly organized exhibition has provided a great deal of previously unpublished information about Pica's artistic practice. João Ribas and Julie Rodrigues Widholm, *Amalia Pica* (Chicago: MCA Monographs, 2013). The artist's interview with curators João Ribas (MIT List Center) and Julie Rodrigues Widholm (MCA Chicago) especially expanded and enriched my understanding of the work. Amalia Pica, João Ribas, and Julie Rodrigues Widholm, "Who's Afraid of a Vector?" in *Amalia Pica* (Chicago: MCA Monographs, 2013), 10-20. This interview is by far the most in-depth text on Pica's oeuvre in any language. It is heavily cited in this paper—in no small part because I was unable, despite great effort, to establish contact with Pica.

trajectories of contemporary art world markets.<sup>8</sup> Early in her career, Pica responded to demands from critics and curators to account for her “Argentinian-ness” in her work by ceasing to make explicit reference to her home country.<sup>9</sup> In consideration of Pica’s geographically expansive reception, I place her series in dialogue with Latin American, European, and North American artworks. Ultimately, this analysis of the series works towards an understanding of *looking* as a process of communication.

## II. *Sorry for the Metaphor* (2005)

The inaugural composition of *Sorry for the Metaphor* depicts the artist’s back to the viewer, angled toward the longitudinal center of the composition. Standing on a rock toward the left of this center, her body frames the view of a landscape beyond. In her right hand, which hangs to her side, she grips the handle of an electric megaphone. Its strap, designed to hold it close to the body of its carrier, hangs freely downward, marking a dark looping line near Pica’s legs. As she stands on the rocky outpost, the artist does not activate the megaphone by putting it to her mouth. She looks outward. The dark shape of her hair obscures the side of her face, so one cannot be sure that her eyes are open and alert; but the presumption is unavoidable as the direction of her gaze guides the viewer’s own eyes. Pica’s gaze traces a diagonal line to the right and gently downward, complementing the line of the distant sloping hillside.

The object of this gaze does not resolve on the paper pages of the installation. Gray and speckled with shades of charcoal, the bottom right quadrant of the composition lacks pictorial clarity. With few identifiable contours, its gradating tones waver between foreground and distance. This ambivalence underscores the similitude between the dome shape of the rocks that support Pica and the curves of the distant hills. The spatial confusion spreads. One spots at least three planes of land — the rocks of the foreground, a middle-ground hillside, and a monotone mass of more distant hills. Without lines or colors to mark their respective borders, the geographic relationship between these planes is indeterminable. A patch of lighter tones to the left of the bottom center mound throws that area both toward and from the viewer. The wispy forms on the right of the composition seem to refer to low-lying clouds; in some areas the division between this vapor and the hard earth of a horizon cannot be discerned.

All of this uncertainty contrasts with the form of the artist’s back. Her position relatively near to the camera gives her photographic likeness a crisp legibility. Sunlight strikes her from behind, on the left side of the pictorial composition; these patches of light mark the borders between her pants’ legs and shirtsleeves, articulating the distinct parts of her anatomy. These details and the darkness of her pants, top, and hair against the surrounding landmass and sky give the viewer a sense of proximity to her body. The silhouette of a tree behind Pica’s head further displaces her from her surrounds, the foil of its flatness demonstrating her three-dimensionality. To the left of the artist’s left shoulder the tree reaches a single-toned branch; it splits into two before being interrupted by Pica’s body. Around her head emerge the branches’ more tonally variegated twigs and leaves. This deciduous disruption pushes the artist’s body to the surface of

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Jill Casid and Aruna D’Souza, *Art History in the Wake of the Global Turn* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> See Charlotte Bonham-Carter, “Amalia Pica in the Studio with Charlotte Bonham-Carter,” *Art in America* (June/July 2012): 150 – 157.

the work, challenging the three-dimensionality that it also plays up. An arcing line of a rock in the foreground obscures Pica's feet, the site of her bodily contact with the landscape. Peeking out from between the grouping of rocks in which she stands, a small sliver of her left foot does not illuminate how, or on what precisely, the artist stands. Pica's physical relationship to the landscape thus compromised, the viewer returns to the artist's gaze, which connects her to her hilly surrounds. As she looks upon this landscape, the viewer recognizes her own activity in the composition.

The artist's gesture of looking is paired with another; she holds a megaphone to her side. This second facet of her bodily composure raises a series of unanswered questions about her presence and purpose on the seemingly isolated hillside. Without an audience and without bringing the megaphone to her mouth to speak, Pica relates to the instrument of political activism through refusal; the abandoned site hardly speaks of an earnest attempt to find a crowd to address with the amplification device. The regular geometry of the hard, smooth plastic surface of the instrument disrupts both the dotted shading of the craggy outpost and the softly folding creases of Pica's clothes.

*Sorry for the Metaphor*'s humble material means recall the anti-aesthetic reproducibility of 1970s Conceptual art.<sup>10</sup> They also—both the low image quality of the photograph and the low quality of the paper on which it is printed—evoke vernacular modes of communication including newspapers, wheat-pasted bills, billboards, and the paper missives of offices and classrooms.<sup>11</sup> These media rely on reproducibility and expendability. Transposing these qualities into art institutional contexts, *Sorry for the Metaphor* examines contemporary art as a site of cultural communication with conflicting imperatives. The resonances of ad hoc political bills in Pica's series opens the work to potential similarities between art in the gallery and art on the street.

Installers pasting the paper sheets directly onto the large, flat surface of the gallery wall recall also the fabricators of billboard advertisements. Often physically elevated above the street-level architecture that might display political postings, billboards project public service announcements as well as the large-scale messages of capitalist ventures.<sup>12</sup> Periodically shed to make way for the newest renter of display space, the billboard embraces the temporal framework of a mercurial, adaptive market. Aping the physical and temporal scale and the construction techniques of the world of mass marketing, Pica's installations propose a kinship between fine arts and more overtly commercialized modes of communication. Thus the series references display as an act of monetization as well as politicization. This overlap in the materials' signifying powers brings to mind the international marketability of "a new canon of political art in Latin America."<sup>13</sup> In Pica's series, this shared terrain between art, activism, and advertising, however, also illuminates the ineluctable differences between these contexts, the capacities and

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<sup>10</sup> See Lucy Lippard's seminal discussion of the dematerializing force of Conceptual art: Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

<sup>11</sup> Pica spent time as an art instructor for grade school children. Several of her works reference pedagogical strategies, mishaps, and misinformation including *On Education*, 2008; *Hora Cátedra [Class Period]*, 2002; *Time keeping*, 2002; and *Mi Casa/Tu Casa*, 2005. Ribas and Rodrigues Widholm, *Amalia Pica*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> On the history of the American advertising invention (c. 1872), see James Fraser, *The American Billboard: 100 Years* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Daniel R. Quiles, "Dead Boars, Viruses, and Zombies: Roberto Jacoby's Art History," in *Art Journal* (Fall 2014), 54.



constraints respective to each site of communicatory gesture. Alluding to the aesthetics of “homemade politics” and of mass marketing, the series remains firmly ground in the procedures and protocols of the museum or gallery.

The division of labor enacted by *Sorry for the Metaphor* allows Pica to both engage the materials of everyday life and refrain from handling them herself. She outsources the labor required to install her series, leaving this crucial step in the works’ completion to the installation crews of the institutions in which she exhibits. But the sheets of paper are skillfully and meticulously applied in accordance to those institutions’ conventional precautions in handling artworks, handled as precious materials and not as the fabric of daily life. Allowing the work to pass through other hands before its completion, Pica nonetheless introduces chance to the process of the series’ creation. This delegation of installation recalls the management aesthetic central to many instantiations of American Sol LeWitt’s *Wall Drawing* series, though the artist himself drew early versions of the works.<sup>14</sup> LeWitt’s delegated drawings and Pica’s series are both directly applied onto the gallery wall by other laborers. Occupying a managerial role in relation to the artwork’s production, the artist is responsible for developing the idea and design of the work. Whereas LeWitt provides written directives for his works’ completion, Pica gives institutions a digital file containing her photographs. Though guided by the artists’ instructions, the works invite “visual supplements, aesthetic effects that cannot be contained by the rigor of those systems.”<sup>15</sup> These arrangements decouple artistic labor from artistic “product;” the artworks’ contingencies are not in the hands of artist. The adhesion of art to institutional space further serves to resist commodity logic. This consubstantiation of artwork and institutional framework, the intimate material dependency of the work of art on the architectural space of the gallery is also its demise. In accord with exhibition timelines, the works are painted over or scraped off, respectively.<sup>16</sup>

Because Pica does not specify how, where, and with what inks her series ought to be printed, the surface qualities of *Sorry for the Metaphor* vary. Darker printings of *Sorry for the Metaphor* give the surface a dull sheen, creating a slick surface similar to that seen with heavy applications of graphite. Lighter printings are matte since the paper surface reflects the gallery light only where the page is saturated with dark ink. In all of its variations, however, the degraded image quality and alternately inked and blank surface of the work evoke inexpensive, mass-produced newsprint. The connotative effect of the gray scale surface is more overt alongside other works by Pica, which tend to be cheerfully colorful.<sup>17</sup> Latitudes, an independent, Barcelona-based curatorial office, played off the resonance with newsprint when the group selected Pica’s 2005 work as the front-page for “The Last Gazette,” one part of a ten-piece catalogue for the 2010 exhibition, *The Last Newspaper*, at the New Museum in New York [fig.

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<sup>14</sup> Early iteration of the works were drawn by LeWitt himself. Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Artworkers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 144-145.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 207. Bryan-Wilson describes LeWitt’s *Wall Drawing* series.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>17</sup> For example, in the 2013 exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, Pica’s first major solo show in the United States, *Sorry for the Metaphor #2* (2010) appeared alongside *Stabile (with confetti) #2* (2012), a work composed of colorful confetti taped to the floor, and *Eavesdropper* (2011), a collection of multi-colored drinking glasses glued to the wall. The alternation of bright colors and gray tones gave a visual rhythm to the gallery as a whole, but also heightened the tonal differences between works in close proximity to one another.

5].<sup>18</sup> Translating with ease to the newspaper medium, the visual language of the photocopy work underscores the disparate care, attention, and value invested in the materials of everyday life and in artistic creations. It harnesses the mobility of images to insist on the significance of naming—calling an artwork an artwork—in making social meaning.

Chilean artist Eugenio Dittborn's airmail paintings (1984-1992) also mobilize inexpensive materials to underline disparities between arenas of social experience. The Chilean's early multimedia works are executed on kraft paper—a brown packing paper with a rough surface—which is folded for travel through international airmail services [fig. 6]. Dittborn sent the “paintings” to Chilean artists and critics living abroad during the dictatorial rule of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1989). This innate mobility resisted the restrictive conditions of censorship under Pinochet. At times the paintings trace also the exploitative movement of ideas, goods, and power between Latin America and colonial Europe.<sup>19</sup> For example, the first unofficial airmail painting, which is no longer extant, consisted of the “homework” of an unknown Chilean artist. Dittborn folded the pages of sketches into a mail-ready packet and sent it to art critic Nelly Richard in Paris, where she presented the work of Chilean photographers in the 1982 Paris Biennial. This particular path calls attention to the ongoing exploitative relationship between Chilean art and the demands of a European art market.<sup>20</sup> The travel of the folded works leaves creases in the paper, forming a grid that serves as constant reminder of the movement that bookends any of the airmail paintings' presentations.<sup>21</sup>

Pica's series shares also the airmail paintings' thematization of itinerancy. Throughout the series, the Argentine does not look upon her native land—she situates herself in a foreign landscape and redolent art historical citation: the Black Forest of southern Germany.<sup>22</sup> According to Pica, she selected the *Schwarzwald* as the setting for her series in order to gesture to the “romanticism” historically embedded in this landscape. In *Sorry for the Metaphor* (2005)—as the artist has stated in interview—she underscores and specifies her “romantic” frame of reference by consciously adopting the compositional strategies of German Romanticist Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818) [fig. 7].<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “The Last Newspaper Publication,” *New Museum Digital Archive* 2010

< [http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Occurrence/Show/occurrence\\_id/1081](http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Occurrence/Show/occurrence_id/1081)> and “Partner organization: ‘The Last Newspaper’, New Museum, New York, United States, 6 October 2010-9 January 2011,” *Latitudes* <<http://www.lttids.org/projects/lastnewspaper/>>. The exhibition, *The Last Newspaper*, interrogated the responses of artists to news stories and the images that accompany them. The exhibition's ten-part catalogue, produced from a micro-newsroom in the New Museum, served to further reflect on the agency of art and artists in producing and disseminating information.

<sup>19</sup> Justo Pastor Mellado, *Dos Textos Tacticos* (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Jemmy Button Ink, 1998), 88-90.

<sup>20</sup> Nelly Richard, “Nosotros/Los Otros,” in Eugenio Dittborn, *MAPA: Pinturas Aeropostales* (London: ICA, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Roberto Merino and Eugenio Dittborn, “Marcas de Viaje,” *Remota* (Santiago de Chile: Pública Editores, 1997), 24. See also Sean Cubitt, “La Foto la Grafía las Pinturas Aeropostales de Eugenio Dittborn,” in *Remota* (Santiago de Chile: Pública Editores, 1997), 86-90.

<sup>22</sup> Kamps, 80.

<sup>23</sup> Amalia Pica and Michele Robecchi, “Metaphor,” in *The Last Gazette*, (New York: New Museum, October 13, 2011), 3.

For Friedrich and Pica alike, romanticism navigates the “...space between immense ambition and slight achievement, between hyperbolic aims and ever-reduced means.”<sup>24</sup> Alongside Friedrich’s *Wanderer*, Pica’s work dramatizes this gap between the monumental and shoddy. It is both much larger than the Friedrich painting and its image resolution much lower. The significant real estate requirements of the photocopy installations would seem to serve to intensify an artistic message. But what the work amplifies instead is uncertainty about what the artist wishes to convey. Her megaphone hangs at her side. The landscape looks flat and banal—it does not offer the evocative metaphor of mist that Friedrich’s does.

German Romanticist painters of the early nineteenth century—including Friedrich—hiked into wooded landscapes to experience the transcendent power of nature and to later capture a sense of this magnificence in oil paint. For Friedrich and his ilk, the forest represented a place in which to exceed the banalities of everyday human affairs and express the greatness of the human spirit. Nature appears as a sublime and beautiful, whole force worthy of awe but well matched by the brilliance of man.<sup>25</sup> That the Black Forest serves as setting for many magical German folk tales further designates it as a site of maximizing and exceeding the human, of communing with forces beyond society and outside ordinary human understanding.<sup>26</sup>

Pica formulates her own version of romanticism in her journey to the German landscape. In contrast to the solitary heroes of German Romanticism, the Argentine’s retreat into nature becomes an opportunity to ponder the greatness of the human spirit in its attempts to socialize—in acts of communication. On the topic of the “romanticism” of *Sorry for the Metaphor* Pica has stated, “One hopes someone will catch this thing we throw out into the world. So hoping for a viewer happens before there is anything to see—and only because someone might indeed see it does it come into existence.”<sup>27</sup> In this discussion of the photocopy series, Pica characterizes artistic expression *tout court* as a fundamentally romantic act—a gesture of hope, longing, and uncertainty. Here, art making entails an extraordinary leap of faith in the face of the inconstancy of an audience and further, in light of the inherent shortfalls of human communication.<sup>28</sup> *Sorry for the Metaphor* presents itself as an unknown—as a communicatory missive never perfectly delivered nor interpreted. Furthermore, Pica’s commentary parses out the constituent parts of her acts of artistic expression—the artist; the audience; the artwork.

At first glance, this articulation of the romanticism of the creative process appears incommensurate with the dogged individualism of Friedrich’s lone “wanderer;” Pica’s journey into the *Schwarzwald* metaphorizes a longing for intersubjective understanding whereas Friedrich’s countryside roaming expresses a desire to transcend socialized life and its attendant calls for interpersonal communication. However, an examination of the pictorial conventions that

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<sup>24</sup> Koerner, 25.

<sup>25</sup> See also Herbert von Einem, *Deutsche Malerei des Klassizismus und der Romantik: 1760 bis 1840* (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1977).

<sup>26</sup> On mythical folk tales and the Black Forest see, for example, Berthold Auerbach, *Schwärzwalder Dorf Geschichten* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1871) and Karl Friedrich Kahlert, *Der Geisterbanner* (Korn, 1799), also *The Necromancer: or, The Tale of the Black Forest, Founded on Facts, Translated from the German of Lawrence Flammenberg, by Peter Teuthold* (London: Holden, 1927).

<sup>27</sup> Pica, Riba, and Rodrigues Widholm, 11-12.

<sup>28</sup> Courtney Fiske, “Play Telephone: An Interview with Amalia Pica,” *Art in America* from 12 April 2013. <<http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/conversations/2013-04-12/playing-telephone-an-interview-with-amalia-pica/>>.

Pica borrows from the German illuminates a shared set of interests in the relationship implied between artist and viewer. This relationship is explored through the *Rückenfigur*: a compositional strategy “almost-obsessive[ly]” painted by Friedrich and explicitly appropriated in the 2005 installation of *Sorry for the Metaphor*.<sup>29</sup> While in comments Pica has broadly laid claim to Friedrich’s romanticism, her art historical intervention vis-à-vis the German painter occurs, more precisely, where artist and viewer meet.

The Argentine’s dark figure cuts against the hazy field of a landscape [fig. 2]. The *Rückenfigur* of Friedrich’s most famous painting, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818), appears against a light-filled abyss. Centered and looking down onto the expanse of fog and rock below, his body more aggressively imposes on the view and on the landscape than does Pica’s female figure, though both bodies frame the landscape that they perform looking at.<sup>30</sup> As art historian Joseph Koerner argues, this framing device can define “landscape as primarily the encounter of subject with world.”

In regards to works such as *Wanderer*, Koerner singles out a “popular variant” of the *Rückenfigur* in which the figure stands in for artist, rather than being arbitrary staffage. This placement of the artist-figure to the side of a landscape has art historical precedents dating to the sixteenth century. Koerner further distinguishes between artist-*Rückenfiguren* that “[sit] at the margin of the scene, sketching the landscape we see” and figures that “dramatize...the originary act of experience itself,” rather than the labor of making the artwork.<sup>31</sup> These artist-figure typologies emphasize two phases of the artistic labor of painters such as Friedrich—the encounter with the world, a phenomenological experience stored up for later artistic use; and the manual fabrication of the work of art.<sup>32</sup>

In Friedrich’s paintings, the category of “subject” links artist and viewer, who share a visual experience via the *Rückenfigur*. Koerner asserts autoscopy—“the hallucination of seeing oneself”—as a component of this visual enfolding of viewer and figure. The *Rückenfiguren* of Friedrich’s paintings conjure the psychological tension of autoscopy as the viewer partially conflates her own bodily position with that of the depicted figure, thereby feeling herself being looked at as she looks at the painting.<sup>33</sup> This uncanny response hinges on the interpolation of the viewer in the position of the artist; it is predicated on the viewer’s ability partially to conflate her own viewing with that of the depicted artist.

The gendered difference that Pica inserts in Friedrich’s composition retools these facets of the German’s Romanticist ideals, the Argentine’s female figure interrupting the seamless conflation of a universal subject and viewer. Accordingly and in concert with her idiosyncratic romanticism, Pica’s use of the *Rückenfigur* can be seen as a critique of Friedrich’s. Whereas the German’s painting begins with a solitary encounter—one that is later digested and divulged to an audience—Pica’s artistic labor is social from inception. The “originary act” of *Sorry for the Metaphor* was not a journey alone into the *Schwarzwald*, but a trip made with a camera and composed for photographic reproduction. Recall that the Argentine anticipates her audience

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<sup>29</sup> Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 164. For a discussion of staffage and the *Rückenfigur* see M. Koch, *Die Rückenfigur im Bild von der Antike bis Giotto* (Recklinghausen, 1965).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-162.

before she begins making her work: “So hoping for a viewer happens before there is anything to see—and only because someone might indeed see it does it come into existence.” Her expectation of an audience brings the work of art into being; she must imagine her viewers standing before her complete artworks in order to frame and develop them.

With this orientation toward the audience in mind, the *Rückenfigur* of *Sorry for the Metaphor* might be seen as an attempt by the artist to position herself *as viewer of her artwork*. She mimics the position of her longed-for audience, showing her back to the camera that she controls and orienting herself instead inward toward the pictorial field.<sup>34</sup> Her anticipatory gesture threads together distinct acts of looking—her gaze and the sightline of her audience. The distinction between these moments of looking is made forceful by the photographic medium; its claim to “document” the shifting convergences of person and place particularizes the depicted figure and its gesture. While the *Rückenfigur* of *Wanderer* works to universalize the vision of artist and conflate it with that of the viewer, the Argentine attempts to narrow the distance between herself and her audience while—crucially—delimiting those positions. In her series, the artist relates to her audience through imagination and empathy, mental operations that draw closer what is necessarily separate from the self.

Amidst Pica’s extensive adaptations of the vocabulary of German Romanticism, her series takes up an organizing principle that may have been recognizable to her 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century predecessors—the fragment. The individual sheets of paper that compose *Sorry for the Metaphor* are laboriously grafted together; this material structure renders each individual work a whole composed of many parts. Fragmentation organizes also the lifespan of the series—each work an installation that exists in iteration. Koerner’s seminal text on Friedrich’s landscapes helpfully describes the aesthetic role of the fragment in German Romanticism: “The signs of its rupture, the accidents and particularities of its broken profile, become the marks of its individuality and therefore autonomy. This interplay between part and whole makes the fragment ideal for articulating... Romanticism properly *as project* rather than realization.”<sup>35</sup> *Sorry for the Metaphor* borrows this aesthetic framework of the Romantic fragment, even as the series redirects the “project” away from the isolated artist-explorer. The salient properties of the fragment for Pica’s series are individuality and inconclusiveness. Reconstituted for each instance of exhibition, the work is never finally resolved; rather, it enters into abbreviated stages of material existence. Embedded in this iterative process, the rhetoric of chance individualizes the works. Pica’s installations assert their autonomy from each other in the “rupture,” “accidents,” and “particularities” of their surfaces. .

If Pica’s journey to the Black Forest carries a heavy art historical burden, it also denotes a politico-historical one. The image of the Black Forest figured centrally and symbolically in the Blood and Soil ideology of Adolf Hitler’s Third Reich. Blood and soil refer to the two factors, genetic or blood descent and homeland or *Heimat*, composing ethnic identity as articulated by this eugenic and xenophobic belief system. Pride in the German landscape reinforced and reflected the idea of a German race with natural rights to the land and its resources. As a distinct and long-beloved geographic region of the country, the Blood and Soil ideology reinforced the Black Forest as a primordial and ancient fortress of racial superiority.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Samara Aster (gallery representative at Herald St., London), email message to author, April 29, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Koerner, 25.

<sup>36</sup> Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) 28. See also Gustavo Corni, *Blut und Boden: Rassenideologie und Agrarpolitik im Staat Hitlers* (Idstein: Schulz-Kirchner, 1994). On

By placing her female, Argentine body in the Black Forest, Pica besmirches the patriarchal, nationalist values imparted to the German landscape by the Third Reich. This challenge calls to mind the exile of National Socialist party officers to Argentina as they evaded prosecution for war crimes following Germany's surrender to the Allies in 1945.<sup>37</sup> It proposes a transnational exchange of unwanted bodies. It also points to the availability of the beloved soil of the *Heimat*, left behind in the cowardly retreat from justice.

With her home country tainted by these exiles, Pica appropriates their landscape. Standing on this abandoned ground, she supplants their claim to this terrain, elucidating a series of irreversible historical and geographic displacements. The Argentine's geographic editorializing pertains to Friedrich as well—the native to northern Germany never traveled so far south as the *Schwarzwald*.<sup>38</sup> Pica's appropriation of Friedrich's composition adapts his romanticism to a landscape that he never saw. Fictitiously layering the sites of inspiration for the German Romanticist and Nationalist Socialists, *Sorry for the Metaphor* subtly points to a shared heritage of these vastly different historical projects: a naturalized entitlement to land.<sup>39</sup> Pica critiques this element of Romantic ideology by reordering the artist's relation to land. She unsettles the seamless identification of artist with landscape. As we have seen in regards to the *Rückenfigur*, Pica similarly reconfigures her relationship to her viewer. This repetition of barriers—this refusal to easily substitute—performs its own “fragmentation.” The artist, viewer, and landscape each functions as fragments of the series—none of them can be understood as entirely whole nor part of the artwork.

### III. *Sorry for the Metaphor 2*

In *Sorry for the Metaphor 2* (2010), Pica stands atop a milestone, her back squarely to the camera, her feet aligned approximately with the undulating horizon line of the Black Forest [fig. 3]. Though the *Schwarzwald* is nominally a heavily forested mountain range, the region encompasses a geographically diverse array of rivers, lakes, valleys and agriculturally developed swathes of land. The second installation of the series figures the artist in a meadow. Here Roman milestones dot the landscape of the former empire, marking distances where there once were roads. These roads were used as channels of communication and military transport; they denoted Roman power.<sup>40</sup> Made of stone, the provincial milestone that Pica stands upon has lost some of its form over the centuries. The weathered top of the marker is rounded and textured so that Pica

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the intersection of German philosophy and this ideological relationship to the Black Forest see Willem van Reijen, *Der Schwarzwald und Paris: Heidegger und Benjamin* (Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1998).

<sup>37</sup> See Ignacio Klich, “El Ingreso a la Argentina de Nazis y Colaboracionistas,” in Ignacio Klich and Mario Rapoport, eds., *Discriminación y Racismo en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Neuvohacer, 1997), 401-428 and Gerald Steinacher, “Argentinien als NS-Fluchtziel. Die Emigration von Kriegsverbrechern und Nationalsozialisten durch Italien an den Rio de la Plata 1946-1955,” in *Argentinien and das Dritte Reich* (Berlin: Wissenschaftlicher, 2008), 231-254.

<sup>38</sup> See Helmut Börsch-Supan, “Daten aus dem Leben,” in *Caspar David Friedrich* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1987), 10-65.

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of imperialism as an endogenous characteristic of landscape see W.J.T. Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape,” in *Landscape and Power, Second Edition* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 5-34.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Erskine, *Roman Imperialism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 16.

must balance on the balls of her feet to stay atop it. Contrasted against the lighter sky behind it, the milestone's shape repeats the distant hillside to the left and almost blends in with the line of treetops behind it in the picture plane. Two planar surfaces that compose the "body" of the stone marker offer the only straight lines within the picture plane; they repeat the blocked form of the A3 sheets.

The A3—a paper standard imported to Argentina from Germany in 1943—presents the German milestone and also proliferates it, repeating its visual logic across the surface of the work, marking straight lines and right angles against the curved forms of land and cloud and body.<sup>41</sup> This echo suggests that the regimentation of the work's surface has itself been imported from Germany or from Rome via Germany. The most striking resistances to these straight lines are articulated against the sky—the donut shape of a megaphone paired with the little "w" of the artist's denim-clad bottom. On display on this plinth-like object, the artist and the instrument at her side take a declarative position in relationship to the surrounds. Standing above the landscape, seeming to balance above the distant horizon on her plinth, the artist and her megaphone refute the linear trajectory proposed by the milestone. Her vertical incursion occurs on a marker that is meant to convey movement that runs parallel to the ground, movement that spreads across land and describes an empire. Rerouting the directionality of the milestone, Pica turns it into an instrument of artistic communication. She appropriates the tactic of physical elevation that traditionally denotes artistic display and in doing so, critiques the geographic orientation of imperialism.

Pica's post above the surrounding meadow gives her an advantageous angle from which to extend her line of sight, underscoring her surveillance of the landscape around her. However, her elevation on the plinth-like stone also overtly renders her *an object of* visual examination. Set against a light sky and above the horizontal lines of distant hills, her body takes center stage in this composition. But she turns her back to the gaze of the camera. This gesture obscures her face and its identifying characteristics. The viewer is left to formulate an idea of the artist from her bodily comportment, her clothing, hair, and the exposed flesh of her forearms. Here, Pica's body is ambiguously raced in relationship to white and latina identities. *Sorry for the Metaphor 2* filters Pica's skin through grain and pixels. The resulting lack of reliable tonal information highlights the malleability of photography as a medium for "reporting" race in terms of skin tone.<sup>42</sup> But the uncertainty around her race points also to the fungibility of racial categorization in Argentina, a country whose largely mixed-heritage population reflects a century of heavy European immigration between 1850 and 1955. The country's *crisol de razas*, or racial melting pot, belies a history of colonial racism and ongoing strife between indigenous populations and the nation state.<sup>43</sup> It is against this national background, in addition to the German landscape, that Pica's series withholds visual clues about the artist's race.

Pica's turn from the camera would seem, on the one hand, to deflect photography's capacity for surveillance. Critic and theorist Allan Sekula's argument in "The Body and the

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<sup>41</sup> "Standard Paper Sizes," *DP&I*, <<http://www.dpandi.com/paper/>>.

<sup>42</sup> See Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, "Negative-Positive Truths," *Representations* 113 (Winter 2011), 16 – 38.

<sup>43</sup> See Carlos Martínez Sarasola, "La Discriminación de las Comunidades Indígenas en la Argentina: una Perspectiva Histórica," in Ignacio Klich and Mario Rapoport, eds., *Discriminación y Racismo en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Neuvo hacer, 1997), 19-28 and Victor Ramos, "La Cuestión de los Pueblos Originarios," in *Racismo y discriminación en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Catálogos, 1999), 101-112.

Archive” that the origins of photography were bound up in the emergent imperatives of modernity helpfully illuminates the stakes of the photographic representation of the face. In his seminal text on the dually “honorific” and “repressive” capacities of photography, Sekula positions the medium’s widespread emergence in the 1860s as a social apparatus “to establish and delimit the terrain of the *other*.”<sup>44</sup> Photography extended the privilege of portraiture to the *petit bourgeois* at the same moment that criminologists mobilized its indexical capacities to construct a “social body” located in a “shadow archive.” The visual documents, whether in the hands of citizens or police, placed individuals in relative societal positions.

Concomitant with sociological attempts to statistically determine the “average man” and thereby identify criminal elements as divergences from normalcy, photography operated alongside modernity as a project of bureaucratic, state-sponsored surveillance and control.<sup>45</sup> This project of social categorization through statistical analysis, phrenology, physiognomy, and photography centered on the human head as bearer of individuality and typology. Though approaches to the photograph as an instrument of identification and typology varied according to philosophical and scientific commitments, the medium was valued generally for its unrivaled power in detailing the human face.<sup>46</sup> In light of these histories of photography, Pica’s turn away from the camera in *Sorry for the Metaphor* hinders the viewer’s ability to identify her either as an individual or as a type. It places her in opposition to the project of photographic surveillance perhaps, though at the same moment bars the representation from the honorific status of portraiture. Ultimately the artist’s position in relationship to the camera subordinates her social identity—her place in the photographic archive of the social body—to her gesture. If the viewer cannot see much of who the artist is, she can infer what the artist is doing—looking.<sup>47</sup>

Not only the subject of these images, Pica is also their author; she remotely operates the camera using a timer.<sup>48</sup> She acts as surveyor; the megaphone at her side rather than in front of her face, Pica clears her path of vision. Her look outward onto the landscape repeats and pictorializes the camera’s gaze—itself an extension of the authorial gaze that framed the photographic image. If all photography contains an element of temporal dilation, here the repetition of the photographic gesture within the pictorial field further distends the moment of imaging.<sup>49</sup> In fact, Pica is sandwiched *as image, as artwork* between a moment of photographing and a moment of viewing—as author and as audience. *Sorry for the Metaphor* layers and flattens the art object between these other two requisites for a work of art. The *Rückenfiguren* that are repeated throughout the photocopy series inscribe Pica within the role of viewer. As I have argued, she adapts the form to imagine herself in her audience’s position. In this second work of the series, she emphatically positions herself in relationship to photographic technology as well,

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<sup>44</sup> Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” in Richard Bolton, ed., *The Contest of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 342-389, p. 345.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.

<sup>47</sup> A nineteenth-century interest in the head as an object of social scientific investigation served according to Sekula, “to legitimate on organic grounds the dominion of intellectual over manual labor.” In this configuration of the history of photography, Pica advances looking as the intellectual labor of the artist. *Ibid.*, 348.

<sup>48</sup> Samara Aster (gallery representative at Herald St., London), email message to author, April 29, 2013.

<sup>49</sup> For a discussion of temporality of photography as history—and as writing—see Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).



inscribing her authorial role as artist into the representation of her figure. Pica ties herself—as pictorial subject of the artwork—to these other roles through gestures of looking.

As Pica guards her most readily-identifiable characteristics from the camera's gaze, the photographic imprint of her back demonstrates in equal measure the technology's imagistic power. Despite the gray scale and the distortion resulting from the printing process, the photograph conveys with acumen the cut and style of Pica's clothing and the poof of her dark hair. Pica wears jeans and a plain top in all three of these installations of *Sorry for the Metaphor*. In *Sorry for the Metaphor 2* her shirtsleeves are cropped at her forearms a few inches below her elbows. Draping from her broad shoulders, the top fits closely to her body without clinging to it. Her jeans alternately drape from and cling to her body, the dark lines of their gentle folds describing a youthful, "casual" fit. Fabric gathers at Pica's ankles, indicating the consistent width of her pant legs. The "boot cut" dates the photograph to the years before skinny legs were the requisite style for young Westerners. Taken together, the artist's garb and somewhat unkempt, flowing hair are reminiscent of the low-maintenance, low-cost fashion of university students.

The megaphone at Pica's side—a conspicuous accessory—contributes to this reading of her identity. This handheld amplification device evokes the political activism endemic to university populations across the Western world, including and significantly within South America, where student activism has flourished, though not without complications, in recent decades following periods of repressive dictatorship.<sup>50</sup> The electrically powered megaphone, like the one the artist holds, was first produced in Japan in 1954 and would not have been widely available to civilians in Argentina during Pica's childhood, which coincided with the Dirty War.<sup>51</sup> Under the rule of the military junta Argentines faced severe restrictions of their civil liberties. Public gatherings were monitored and policed and instruments of communality—including the Venn diagram—were banned.<sup>52</sup>

A 2011 installation by Pica, *Venn diagrams (under the spotlight)*, creates the organizational schema by projecting circles of color onto gallery walls using motion-activated spotlights [fig. 8]. A caption accompanies the work, which was included in the 2013 solo exhibition at the MIT List Center and MCA Chicago. It succinctly describes the history of the form in Argentina: "During the period of dictatorship in Argentina in the 1970s, gatherings of citizens were closely monitored, as they were considered a threat to the government. Prosecution for participating in any type of collective activity was carried out under the umbrella of the National Security Law. At the same time, Group theory and Venn diagrams were banned from primary school programs as they could provide a model for subversive thought." Pica's motion-activated installation harnesses the bodily presence of museum visitors as a potential springboard for the "collective activity" banned under the dictatorship. Following the re-installment of a democratic government under the leadership of Raúl Alfonsín in 1983, public debates and demonstrations proliferated as the country wrestled with its moral obligations to seek justice and

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<sup>50</sup> See Renate Marsiske, *Movimientos Estudiantiles en América Latina* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1989).

<sup>51</sup> Germán Fernández, "Los inventores del megáfono," *Ciencias* [sic] <<http://ciencias.com/neutrino/2013/05/17/los-inventores-del-megafono/>>.

<sup>52</sup> See María Celeste Adamoli, *Pensar la Dictadura, Terrorismo de Estado en Argentina: Preguntas, Respuestas y Propuestas para su Enseñanza* (Buenos Aires: Ministerio de Educación de la Nación Argentina, 2010), 79.

promote reconciliation in the aftermath of state terror.<sup>53</sup> Pica's megaphone thus marks a civil liberty that Argentines have not always possessed in the artist's lifetime. The instrument indicates large-scale politico-historical change. Despite the megaphone's symbolic charge in regards to this national history, it ambiguously marks the artist's body. Even if the viewer manages to connect the apparatus of political activism to a wall label that declares Pica's country of birth—understanding the megaphone as a referent to social and political life in Argentina—she somehow must make sense of the artist's ambivalent handling of the prop.

Relative to the circuitous path that Pica's nationality traces to the surface of her work, her gender is visibly and unambiguously present. Her form-fitting clothes relay the curves of her breasts and hips to the camera, especially in the first work of the series [fig. 2]. The three-quarter view of Pica's back makes a silhouette of her breasts against the landscape upon which she gazes. This bodily interruption has been discussed as a critique of Friedrich's Romanticism. In light of our discussion of the camera, it ought also to be considered in regards to traditions of landscape photography. Photography scholar Deborah Bright argues that landscape photography remains "singularly identified with a masculine eye" and advances the rhetoric of empire and colonization in order to stake national identity and justify its hegemonic obliteration of other forms of living.<sup>54</sup> According to Bright, this mythologizing papers over "differences such as gender and race in matters of representation."<sup>55</sup> In *Sorry for the Metaphor 2* Pica emphasizes her role as camera operator, mimicking the camera's gaze within the pictorial field. What does it mean for her to identify landscape photography with her "feminine eye"?

Elevated on the repurposed milestone, Pica's gaze creates a disjuncture between her perspective and the camera's. The photographic equipment seems to stand at approximately the same height as the Roman milestone; its lens aims just below Pica's feet. Her eyes, several feet above the camera, have access to a broader perspectival field than does the camera's lens. The alignment of Pica's feet with the distant horizon line, her hidden gaze, and the distinct outline of her body against the light, cloudy sky dramatize her height and bolster the impression that she sees what the camera—and the viewer—cannot. As much as her perspectival perch repeats the camera's surveying line of sight, it interrupts that trajectory. It is not so much that Pica proposes an uneasy fit between these gazes, an incompatibility between her membranous human eye and the glass lens of her instrument, though that is part of what she does. The artist's elevation separates out these acts of looking while it compares them. The distinction between artist's gaze and camera's view occurs as the installation works to stitch together those visual frames. This visible seam critiques the naturalized flow between artist's eye, camera's lens, and geography that undergirds landscape photography as a colonialist project.

For all of the historical texture bound up with the German landscape that Pica depicts, the viewer must bear in mind how little the series does to emphasize the specificity of this site. Nor do the installations convey a sense of the grandeur and mystique of the legendary landscape, as Friedrich's paintings do of his northern sites. Instead, the Argentine's works use the Black Forest as a backdrop, as a prop that gives contextual meaning to the artist's "presence" on the gallery

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<sup>53</sup> Ignacio Montes de Oca, *Historia de la Argentina Olvidada* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2011-2014), 275-311.

<sup>54</sup> Deborah Bright, "Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry Into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography," in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, edited by Richard Bolton (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 125-143. p. 124.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

wall. Flat, gray, pixelated, the landscape conveys a sense of loss—an aesthetic distance from its referent and a lack of visual richness. A result of the photocopy process that produced the image, this lack is counterbalanced by a surfeit of *looks*, an abundance engendered by Pica's parsing of the gazes of artist, audience, and camera.

#### IV. *Sorry for the Metaphor #5*

In the upper right hand of *Sorry for the Metaphor #5* a sloping hillside gradually comes into view [fig. 4]. It takes form not within but between the sheets of paper that form it. The edges of the pages where ink runs thin clarify and structure the tonal gradations that correspond with the landmass's three-dimensionality. Considering the square fragments individually, the hillside is composed of sheets of paper each printed in hazy fields of tone resembling graphite or even charcoal. Straight lines from the edges of pages snap these indefinite areas into well-defined form. Pasted onto the vertical wall of the gallery, the shaded planes seem to hang from the grid, like damp laundry on a taut clothesline. A single pictorial element in visual concordance with the geometric structure of the installation appears—the picket sign that Pica holds to her right side.

Jutting toward the viewer in pictorial space, the white parallelogram is devoid of the ink that marks the image on the rest of the installation. It comes into view as a space carved out from the representational field of Pica's photocopy. Its straight lines resemble the A3 form that undergirds the whole work, just as its blank surface—interrupted by a post that connects the sign to Pica—presents the unadulterated pages of paper. This moment of dislocation from the image pushes the viewer's attention to the paper-and-paste building blocks of the work. It repeats the rhyme between the milestone and the paper sheets of *Sorry for the Metaphor 2*, more overtly asserting the connection between the page and its image.

The blankness of the picket sign in *Sorry for the Metaphor #5*, like the megaphone at Pica's side in the earlier to works of the series, points to her uncertainty over what exactly she would like to communicate; it also isolates the communicatory act itself. This pictorial representation of lack, of a medium without message, draws attention to the form of the artistic conveyance under question.<sup>56</sup> The viewer sees a blank placard and wonders why – if this is an efficient metaphor for the risks and precarity of communication – one is looking at a *representation of* a blank placard. By comparison, Colectivo de Acciones de Arte's *Inversión de escena [Inversion Scene]* (1979, Santiago, Chile) and Anna Halpin's *Blank Placard Dance* (1967, San Francisco) each directly engage, rather than represent, the form of a blank, white surface in performance [figs. 9 and 10]. Colectivo de Acciones de Arte's (CADA) intervention powerfully interrupted the space of civic life at a moment when public displays were closely monitored and policed by Pinochet's regime. As part of an elaborate performance involving the choreography of milk trucks, the group draped an enormous white cloth in front of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Santiago. The blank surface resisted bans on public expression and

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<sup>56</sup> In her discussion of the dematerialization of the art object Lippard writes, "...it was usually the form rather than the content of Conceptual art that carried a political message." Lippard, xiv. See also Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964).

gestured, hopefully, at the imaginative capacities of Chileans.<sup>57</sup> In a context of widespread political activism, Halprin's performance in front of San Francisco's City Hall isolated the bodily gestures of protest, highlighting the privilege and potency of human bodies in public space.<sup>58</sup> These works—both produced in contexts of a politically charged civic sphere—present public gesture and presence as themselves acts of resistance.

The ephemerality of Pica's installations makes her "presence" in the gallery a kind of performance, albeit one that coincides perfectly with the display of her art object. Her inscription into a performative practice is mediated by the material means of her work. In this way, the work aptly describes the dependence of performance on other media for its circulation, for its participation in an art world beyond its discrete audiences. Performance itself appears "nonreproductive."<sup>59</sup> The utter stillness of these images, the anti-aesthetic and unoriginality of the photocopy posit the translation from performance to document in terms of loss. But again, why insist on this deficit?

Also meditating on gesture as a kind of language, a 2010 multimedia work by Pica, *Babble, Blabber, Chatter, Gibber, Jabber, Patter, Prattle, Rattle, Yammer, Yada yada yada*, features slides projected at close range, showing the artist standing in a landscape spelling the work's title—one letter at a time—with semaphore flags [fig. 11]. Pica inefficiently delivers her message using an outmoded maritime language, now reserved for emergency communication when high-tech equipment has failed.<sup>60</sup> The artist's landlocked surrounds underscore the rerouted meaning of her gestures. And even if the viewer possesses literacy in flag semaphore, Pica spells words that refer to conversational flotsam and jetsam. The collection of terms suggests both the insufficiency and excess of words as they are used to describe the world. Though Pica's gestures have meaningful referents in the alphabetical code of semaphore, her message proposes that a straightforward decoding will not illuminate the work's meaning. Rather, *Babble, Blabber* asks viewers to receive her communiqué by cobbling together a series of referents that include the form of Pica's body, the geometrical shapes of the flags, the landscape around them and the slide projection of the photographs.

In *Sorry for the Metaphor #5* Pica appears on the left side of the composition with her tool of communication. Her posture in relationship to the camera nearly replicates that of the first work in the series—angled toward the center of the composition with her back to the viewer. Her hair, as in the first work, covers the side of her face. In this later work the artist gazes upon a lake rather than a craggy ravine. This final installation of the series lacks some of the midrange of the other two works. Two sloping hillsides lead down to a placid surface of the body of water that reflects them. This reflection simplifies the contrasts of vegetation on the hills to alternating patches of dark and light gray. Bright light from the sun bleaches out a large swathe of the

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<sup>57</sup> Andrea Giunta, "Chile y Argentina: Memorias en Turbulencia," in Nelly Richard and Alberto Moreiras, (eds.), *Pensar en/la Postdictadura* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Cuarto Propio: 2001), 265. See also Robert Neustadt, *CADA día: La creación de un arte social* (Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2001).

<sup>58</sup> Christina Linden, "Holding up the Sign," *Art Practical* 3.6 Aliens vs. Venetians <[http://www.artpractical.com/feature/holding\\_up\\_the\\_sign/](http://www.artpractical.com/feature/holding_up_the_sign/)>.

<sup>59</sup> See Peggy Phelan's famous argument on the ontology of performance as a nonreproductive presence: Peggy Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction," in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 146-166.

<sup>60</sup> See Paul Lunde, ed. *The Book of Codes: Understanding the World of Hidden Messages* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 73.

surface. Pica herself is a dark figure—hair, clothing, and forearm—kissed by streaks of light on the top of her head, the side of her right breast and along her right arm. Plants in the foreground present the greatest amount of detail in the image. Like the vertical of Pica's body against the light field of clouded sky of *Sorry for the Metaphor 2*, errant brush cuts a dark zigzag into the center of the composition and reads clearly as focused, high-resolution photography. In these moments, Pica's photographs skeletally imprint a scene from reality. The contrast between this level of detail and the silhouette of Pica's body or the white parallelogram of her picket sign affirms the instability of photography's indexical capacities. Navigating areas of indexicality alongside near abstraction, *Sorry for the Metaphor #5* thematizes the artificiality of the medium. The photographic marks printed on the white pages draw attention to themselves as marks.

*Sorry for the Metaphor 5* mobilizes gesture in tandem with artistic materials to create meaning. Slipping between pictorial representation and medium, Pica's picket sign proposes that the paper shares with the placard the ability to convey meaning through form. Cheap white paper, as discussed, evokes a number of quotidian contexts including classroom and billboard and what the artist has described as "homemade politics," while the qualities of the ink's application to this surface most strongly suggest the dull patina of a daily newspaper.<sup>61</sup> The art world circulation of Pica's series offers some obvious and profound differences from the newspaper. They engage the viewer's body through distance rather than through physical contact. Fixed rather than mobile, they are visible in authorized institutions of art rather than on public streets and they merge into a single surface rather than relating serially. These points of contrast make Pica's choice visually to mimic newspaper print more poignant. The newspaper's physical traits are honed to maximize mobility, efficiency of production, quick legibility, and low cost. None of these qualities immediately suggest themselves as edicts of contemporary art.

As an instrument of mass communication, the newspaper relies for its efficacy on its economic means of conveying information through text and image. Its contents—the news—shape it physically through its inherent "ephemeral popularity" and "inbuilt obsolescence."<sup>62</sup> As a result, the newspaper moves quickly into the hands of the community it serves and just as quickly gets tossed. This diurnal flow and ebb made the newspaper "the first modern-style mass-produced industrial commodity" according to political scientist Benedict Anderson in his seminal text on nationalism.<sup>63</sup> The handheld scale of the newspaper, its light weight and ability to be folded play a crucial role in its pervasive commodity presence. It also allows the newspaper to disseminate through the public sphere, engendering in its readership an "imagined community."<sup>64</sup>

But the work of art, like the newspaper, conjures its own imagined community in the museum audience, the "art world" that views and consumes its wares. As we have seen, *Sorry for the Metaphor* enacts this community by linking together separate acts of looking. This model of communality deemphasizes the art object itself as a binding agent, stringing together instead these gestures of viewership. However, the very real material presence of the installations in the gallery makes its own connections across social categories. Adhered in an obviously arduous process, the fixed paper membrane inscribes traces of installation labor into visual experience. In fact this labor more immediately presents itself to the gallery visitor than does Pica's de-

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<sup>61</sup> Pica and Robecchi, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 2006), 34-35.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

aestheticized photographic work—one likely wonders how this paper came to be on this wall before asking how that woman came to be in that landscape.<sup>65</sup> The process by which *Sorry for the Metaphor* comes to occupy the gallery wall—a process designed by Pica—expansively inscribes a series of looks, of gestures, of social roles. It also distinguishes between the bridge that connects the artist to her viewer—the camera’s gaze—and the means by which the viewer experiences the art object—the labor of installation. While the first operates visually, the second occurs through material surface.

The material and visual dimensions of these installations are intertwined by means of two sets of perpendicularly intersecting parallel lines—a grid. Accessioned as a digital file, the artwork—according to Pica’s instructions—is broken into easily printable fields. The piecemeal image is then reconstituted along level, regularly distributed lines. Formed by the meeting of edges of paper, the grid pushes the viewer’s attention to the surface of the image, revealing its units of production and application. Indeed, there is harmony between the reproducibility and mobility of the newsprint-like paper and the photographic medium itself, lubricating the movement between material and image. In *Sorry for the Metaphor 5*, moments that expose the rectangular form of A3 sheets also illuminate this structure.

The intersecting horizontal and vertical lines of *Sorry for the Metaphor* fence the photographic image from the viewer. Paradoxically, they draw attention to the photographic image as surface and—in appearing to be an overlay of that image—mediate between the photograph and its physical manifestation in front of the viewer. This distancing further denaturalizes the photograph, associatively linking the image with the map. The cartographic representational system condenses detail and alters scale, typically in order to maximize legibility, and therefore, utility. Map grids organize spatial relationships; they form coordinates and are used to locate and to navigate. Pica’s grid—overlay on a pictorial field with embodied, and not cartographic, perspective—does not help the viewer to locate her body or the pictured landscape, except in declaring an unspecified distance from the surface of the artwork. The grid demarcates what lies within the image, guarding it from the world of the viewer. In her famous discussion of grids, critic and theorist Rosalind Krauss argues that the barrier-like structures are emblematic of modernism.<sup>66</sup> In Krauss’s withering analysis, grids are an aesthetic dead-end that, without reference to “the real,” assert art as “autonomous and autotelic.” Conflating the physical and aesthetic dimensions of a work of art—casting the work’s structure and pictorial content as one and the same—the grid is, according to Krauss, “a naked and determined materialism.”<sup>67</sup> Applying this version of the grid to Pica’s series, the sets of parallel lines decouple the photographic image from its referent. Laid over the landscape, the lines insist on art’s autonomy from the natural. Like a surveyor, Pica transforms the particularity of this site into movable blocks of information.

Others would refute this ahistorical, non-referential characterization of the grid per se; Krauss’s diagnosis reveals a commonly held, though fallacious belief that the form emerged as a

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<sup>65</sup> In giving tours of *Silence* at the Berkeley Art Museum, February—April, 2013, I observed numerous museum visitors wondering who performed the apparently laborious installation required of *Sorry for the Metaphor* (2005) and how. At BAM/PFA, like other museums and galleries where the series is displayed, the museum’s installation staff installed the work.

<sup>66</sup> See Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), 1986.

<sup>67</sup> Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 10.

“spiritually” vacuous byproduct of industrialization. Hannah B. Higgins’ *The Grid Book*, for example, charts the material history of the “organizing principle” through architecture, city planning, design, text, and the world wide web.<sup>68</sup> The grid, Higgins reveals, organizes modern life but its beginnings can be traced to ancient cultures—it emerged alongside civilizing processes of social organization. Pica’s grid ought to be understood in these terms, as a visual structure mediated through historical change and cultural context.

The impression that the grid of *Sorry for the Metaphor* bars the viewer from the work repeats Krauss’s mischaracterization—her insistence that the organizing principle exists separately from its material life. Pica’s grid does not conflate the physical and aesthetic dimensions of the work. Rather, it intertwines the physical—or material—and aesthetic planes of the work of art. It is the material ground and structure of the installation and therefore bears also on the works’ pictorial content. Seeing the grid of *Sorry for the Metaphor* as an overlay is an illusory reading of the work’s surface. The grid describes material meeting points, constituted by the contiguous edges of individual sheets of paper. In its final form, the pictorial cohesiveness of the work hinges on the repetitive physicality of the grid. The grid becomes part but not the entirety of the aesthetic content. The paradox here—as opposed to the “myth” of Krauss’s account—is that the grid exists as a conceptual structure and a material presence integral to the work’s meaning. It appears as a pragmatic solution to a material problem; the massive scale of *Sorry for the Metaphor* seems to call for a parceling of form for ease of transportation and installation. But it also intersects with the photographic image that it structures, a tendency seen especially vividly in the hillside of *Sorry for the Metaphor 5*.

While Pica’s grid does not help the viewer to locate her body or the landscape on display, it locates the artwork itself. Literally, the grid is what arises from and allows the work’s installation. It stabilizes and affixes the art object. It links the representational field that the viewer gazes upon with the visual field that the artist depicts herself looking at. Though the viewer knows that the photographic figure cannot see the grid, the image and surface of the work converge with the lines, contributing to the illusion that viewer and artist share a visual experience. Ultimately, this convergence suggests that—for better and for worse—the capacities and limitations of post-conceptual art are bound up in their material means. *Sorry for the Metaphor* thematizes and accounts for the costs of the mobility and reproducibility of art—the blank placard, the lackluster paper surface, the absence of the artist’s touch from that surface. Countered with these debts is the gesture explicitly repeated across the series.

Recall that Pica’s theories of art-making emphasize the crucial role of audience in conjuring the work of art. According to her, it is the expectation of conveying one’s thoughts to another that gives those thoughts shape, that necessitates introspective examination and clarification. In a recent interview with curators João Ribas and Julia Rodrigues Widholm, Pica states, “The main idea behind some of my recent work is that thinking happens in conversation. I became interested in the one who listens as the subject that makes thought possible... I think one *makes thought* through conversation, and one *makes speech* through the hope of this potential other who might listen.”<sup>69</sup> The artist’s comments point to the critical work of listening in the generation of thought. Most striking is her postulation that “the one who listens... makes thought possible.” The speaker needs the listener in order to imagine what her words might sound like.

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<sup>68</sup> See the introduction to Hannah Higgins, *The Grid Book* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 1-11.

<sup>69</sup> Amalia Pica, João Ribas, and Julie Rodrigues Widholm, “Who’s Afraid of a Vector?” in *Amalia Pica* (Chicago: MCA Monographs, 2013), 11.

She empathically places herself in the position of the listener to anticipate how her message will sound. But Pica goes on to temper the radicality of this claim—suggesting that the import of the listener lies in the desires of the speaker, who needs an audience to validate her speech. The listener is a necessary role, a position to be filled in order to justify communication. Here and in our earlier discussion of other comments by the artist, there is circular relationship between artist and audience that is mediated by the work of art. In these triangulations agency shifts between the artist and the audience—one who speaks and one who listens. Unwilling to resolve this tension, Pica illuminates the dialogic process of art making.

But the artist's compositions complicate the triangular relationship between artwork, artist, and viewer that undergirds her hypothesis. My analysis of *Sorry for the Metaphor* sees Pica identifying herself with both the camera, the work of art—in regards to her self-representation generally and in the case of her display in *Sorry for the Metaphor 2* specifically—as well as with the viewer. Her outsourcing of the installation labor of the series furthermore displaces her creative work from the gallery walls. Ceding control of her works' completion to institutions of art, the artist structures interception into her “[hope that] someone will catch this thing [she] throw[s] out into the world.” The visible remnants of this material process—the bumps and gaps and overlaps of the photocopy sheets—demystify the art object, revealing the work's disposability and by extension, repetition. These difficulties demand attention to the laboring bodies that produce the work. Ironized through this delegated labor is the image that Pica has printed on the A3s—the artist by herself attempting to communicate.

The series positions many layers of mediation between Pica and her audience—the grain of her photographs, the pixelated distortion of their enlargement, the grid that organizes them, the hands that apply the A3s. In contrast to what Pica claims, the artwork does not itself directly mediate between the artist and her audience. And besides, what *Sorry for the Metaphor* offers to its audience as an art object is *loss*—an anti-aesthetic refusal of beauty, a flattened view of land, the “lossy” compression of photographic data into digital file. Inscribed into Romanticism and landscape photography, the series critiques those nationalist projects by forsaking their aesthetic allures. Patently lackluster, Pica's works nonetheless lay claim to art historical grandeur by occupying large areas of hallowed institutional space. The grandiosity of the series lies, paradoxically, in its ability to parcel an artistic message. Pica presents the roles involved in art making as fragments—units not properly understood in isolation, but also not completely comprehended as the subordinated fraction of a larger project. *Sorry for the Metaphor* organizes these fragments using the modernist language of the grid and the conceptualist material of the photocopy.

Whereas Pica's theory of her work emphasizes empathy as a tool for bridging the communicatory divide between artist and viewer, my examination of the material conditions and requirements of *Sorry for the Metaphor* reveals a dispersive, extended network of intersubjectivity.<sup>70</sup> This expanded, gridded model moves away from the dyadic relationship implicit to empathy—“putting oneself in another's shoes”—and begins to think in nodes or tangles. *Sorry for the Metaphor* is not to be understood as an artist's meditation on the challenges of imagining and successfully communicating with an audience. Rather, the series opens itself,

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<sup>70</sup> Pica discusses empathy at greatest length in her interview with Ribas and Rodrigues Widholm, “Who's Afraid of a Vector?” in *Amalia Pica* (Chicago: MCA Monographs, 2013), 10-20. See especially pp. 12-15.



through the rhetoric of chance and material happenstance, to a large cast of figures historical and contemporary, animate and object-based.

## V. Conclusion

Pica pins the monumentality suggested by the size of her series against its temporality. She undermines the efficacy of modes of communication alluded to in the series by crowding them into her work. She suppresses the power of photography to accurately create fields of detail and relative tone by subjecting the medium to digitization and the vagaries of the photocopier. Similarly, her use of her own body in this series gestures at and then forsakes the possibility of staking an identity—however ironic—on the surface of the work. Neither staffage nor self-portrait, Pica performs the role of viewer, of artwork, and of artist. She weaves these layers of identities into the series, not allowing any one of them to define her pictorial presence; the series thematizes the challenges of physically locating oneself. My analysis of *Sorry for the Metaphor* proposes that the many historical and social contingencies of material life mediate between the artist Pica and her viewer. All the same, the series carves out a space for communality in the simple pause of looking. The ephemeral paper installations insist on the temporality of this gaze, resisting the photographic impulse to “capture a moment.” Connecting bodies, specified and generalized, across time and across the globe, *Sorry for the Metaphor* maps temporarily and in dull tones the many particulars that hold a communal act; then it is – then they are – scraped from the wall.

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VII. Appendix 1: Illustrations



Fig. 1: Amalia Pica, *Sorry for the Metaphor 2* [detail], 2010, photocopied paper, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Photograph by author.





Fig. 2: Amalia Pica, *Sorry for the Metaphor*, 2005, photocopied paper, dimensions variable, Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles.



Fig. 3: Amalia Pica, *Sorry for the Metaphor 2*, 2010, photocopied paper, dimensions variable, Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles.





Fig. 4: Amalia Pica, *Sorry for the Metaphor #5*, 2010, photocopied paper, dimensions variable, private collection.



Fig. 5: “The Last Gazette” part of exhibition catalogue for *The Last Newspaper*, edited by Latitudes for the New Museum, New York, 2010.

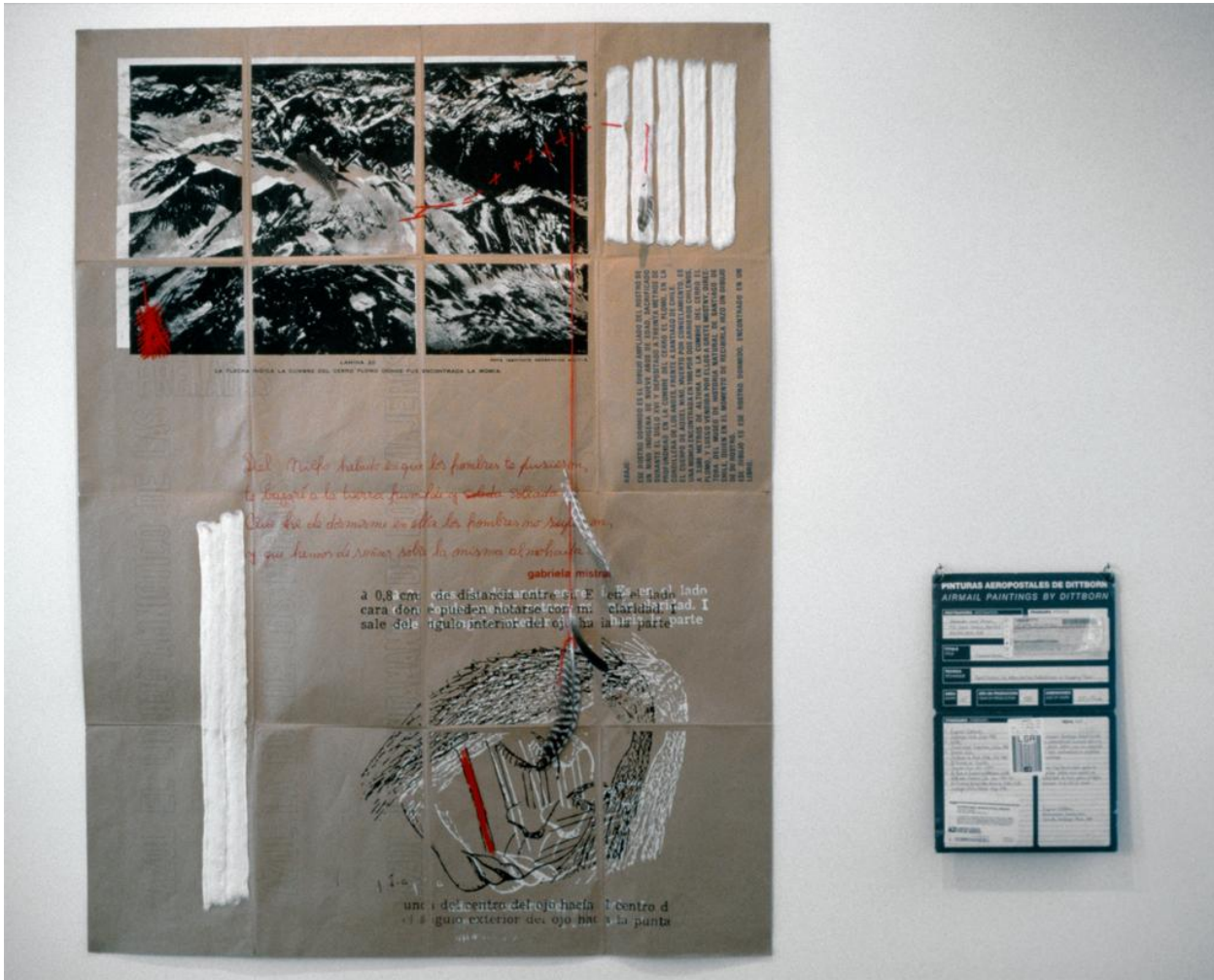


Fig. 6: Eugenio Dittborn, *Transandina*, 1985, airmail painting #85; paint, ink, feathers, wool, and photosilkscreen on kraft paper, envelope, 82.5 in. x 60.5 in. Photographer: Larry Qualls.



Fig. 7: Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, 1818, oil on canvas, 37 in. x 29 in., Kunsthalle Hamburg.





Fig. 8: Amalia Pica, *Venn Diagrams (under the spotlight)*, 2011, spotlights, dimensions variable.  
© Kiki Triantafyllou



Fig. 9: Colectivo de Acciones de Arte, *Inversión de Escena*, 1979, gelatin silver print on paper depicting white banner in front of Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Santiago de Chile. Photographer unknown, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.



Fig. 10: Anna Halprin, *Blank Placard Dance*, performance in San Francisco, 1967.  
Photographer: Lawrence Halprin.



Fig. 11: Amalia Pica, *Babble, Blabber, Chatter, Gibber, Jabber, Patter, Rattle, Yammer, Yada, Yada, Yada*, 2010, 35mm slide sequence, semaphore flags, dimensions variable, Marc Foxx Gallery.