



**THE SEA AS AN AGENT TO FATHOM MY LATIN AMERICAN IDENTITY
IN THE CONTEXT OF A LONDON POSTCOLONIAL SOCIETY**

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MA Sculpture

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Word count: 8017

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Bursting forth...

I remember, when I was born, I erupted from being submerged under water. I recall taking shape in a womb filled with liquid, immersed in its visceral force and nurturing sounds. My birth embodies the moment of severance from this element. My body shifted from being entirely enveloped by a mass of water to a never-ending hunt for it. Every time I was engulfed by the sea or in a swimming pool, I would recollect the moment that I was born, and how silent water was.

I find compelling how an element as infinite as water can rule the extents of life, as much as arbitrarily determine death. It alters its own state as any other element. The most constant quality of water is precisely that it is not constant. It inhabits every interstice of its containing body and flows around until finding its perfect equilibrium. Oh water, you behave so well.

The Aggressive Pacific

I grew up in La Encantada de Villa, a singular neighbourhood founded in the late 1950's on a portion of land located between a protected wetland and the Pacific Ocean, about fifteen kilometres away from Lima's city centre. This place laid somewhere in-between the urban and the rural, in proximity to the city, yet remote like a distant island. The parks were barren and the roads not entirely paved. People could ride horses on the streets and purchase drugs from the local bodega owner. It was uncivilised and unruly. I miss this sense of natural anarchy.

I yearn for the undeveloped

The terrain was below sea level

It was the coarseness of the sea at La Encantada de Villa Beach, the shore swallowing up the town that made it so enigmatic. The ocean seemed to become distressed at night and as the waves were breaking on the sand, I could hear the sound of glass shattering from my window. Every night, every minute, I thought of the ocean permeating my bedroom as I laid asleep. You see, the ocean was (is) home. I was once playing on the shores of Villa Beach, when an



*espumón*¹ loomed up and sucked me in, in a similar way to the tentacles of an octopus clutching your hand when catching it. I remember how rugged the sand felt against my skin as my body swirled underneath the surface, making me feel like a jellyfish with no epidermis to get a grip from. I was able to catch a breath for half a second and glimpsed at my mother laughing at me. She always did this. My mother was by no means afraid of her children drowning. She was in fact never scared of anything happening to her children. She was not even frightened by the man who hit her some nights when she came back home. She was perpetually adapting to change: she had a liquid identity.

Later in my childhood, I resolved to uniquely have a shower on Wednesdays since I would spend the rest of the week 'bathing' at sea. I loved feeling the shiny salt crystals clinging to my arm hair, rubbing my reddened eyes, pushing myself to the brink of exhaustion and dehydration. My long hair was constantly sandy. I enjoyed feeling sand on my pillow, a signifier of my proximity to the shore. Why was I irresistibly drawn to cold water? To battling rip currents? Did I urge for it for its ability to bottle up feelings from the past? This sentiment ignited by swimming in the sea has intensely pursued me my whole life, even now as a mother.

I indeed underwent a regretful experience in the past with my then ten-month-old baby. Driven by my obsession to bind him with water, I put his and my life in danger. I visited my mother's beach house in Lima with him. The day was foggy and brisk for the summer time. The sea was rough, the waves were breaking closer to the shore than ordinary, and the tide had immersed part of the beach, sweeping away most of the parasols that traditionally stood there. The water was tinted red from the dead phytoplankton normally washed ashore at that time of year. I could not resist placing him into the sea. The more disturbed the latter looked, the more I was pulled to it. I dressed him with his tiny wetsuit and carried him with me to the sea, feeling completely in control of the situation (...) Later that day, I found out that a young boy assisting the fishermen had been caught by a wave and drowned. I believed I was the worst mother as I had put my child's safety at risk to merely sense the water, and behaved almost like a substance addict. I have never quite understood this emotional/subconscious state that prompts me to challenge the sea.

I miss the presence of water

¹ White water (Colloquial Spanish)

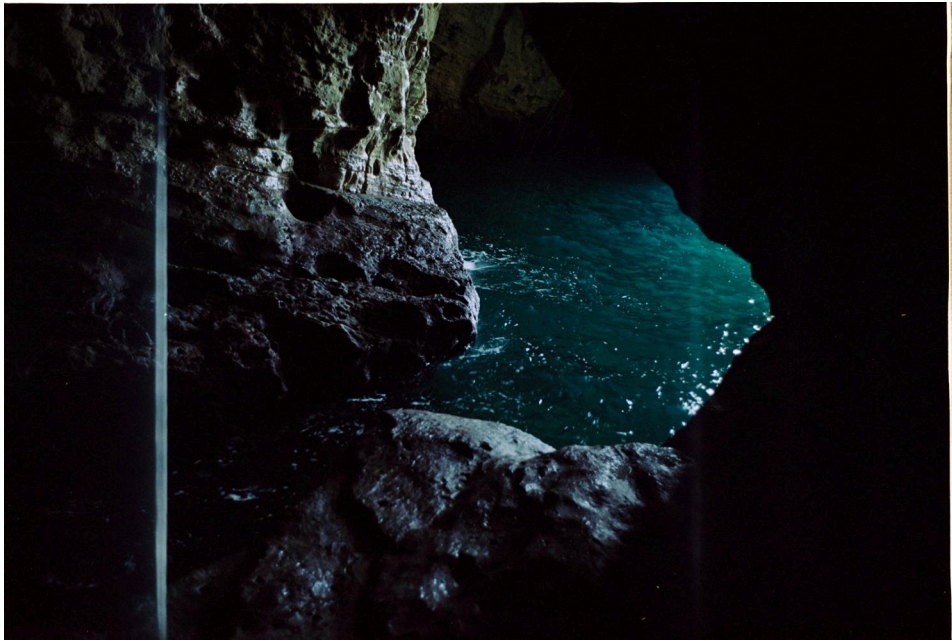


As I walk by King's Road

I now live in London and the sea feels distant, even though it is right here, surrounding me. I feel as if it had vanished from my existence. As I was walking on King's Road, I stumbled upon a new Peruvian restaurant that happened to be named Chicama, a small coastal town in North Western Peru, located in La Libertad Region, that possesses one of the longest left waves in the world, making it a paradise for surfers. I could not help but recalling the landscape that spreads infinitely on one side towards the ocean, and on the other to the desert. The same day, my friend Jimena Ledger posted a thought on Facebook about Chicama, expressing resonantly a sense of being in a state of amazement in such an indomitable space:

Lejos de Lima y sus protocolos compruebo, una vez más, que soy una hija orgullosa del Pacífico y del desierto. Que venimos de una tierra tan indomable, que celebrar en nosotras la sumisión es imperdonable. Que quiero siempre este mar helado y oscuro, estos vientos huracanados por la tarde y esta arena roja al final del día, esta paz y esta alegría.²

² Away from Lima and its protocols, I confirm once again, I'm a proud daughter of the desert and the Pacific. That we come from such an untamed land, that celebrating it in submission is unforgivable. I always want this cold and dark sea, this hurricane force winds in the afternoon and this red sand at the end of the day, this peace and joy. Jimena Ledger, Private Facebook Wall Post, Friday 29 July 2016. Translation by the author.



Introduction:

... The water in the toilet bowl, while certainly different from the water in the forest spring, has also lubricated the sex of slugs and sea squirts, and fallen as tears on the faces of the dead ...³

It has taken me a long time to comprehend what was urging me to write about the ocean. As I have previously mentioned, I consider it a part of me and it feels extremely familiar. I always took its presence for granted and only felt the absence of this fundamental element in my life when moving to London. The ocean was no longer nearby and I started experiencing withdrawal symptoms. I was suddenly compelled to make work and speak about the ocean, which felt odd to me. I have now come to the conclusion that I was in the process of coming to terms with my own condition as an immigrant, relating to the ocean as a signifier of immigration. This dissertation reflects on the ocean, from its metaphoric conveyances to its very physical role, through the lens of its materiality and agency.⁴

The ocean conveys ideas of migration, race, colonialism and identity. I moved to London in September 2015, when the refugee crisis was undergoing one of its most harrowing moments, as children were found lifeless on the shores of Turkey and Greece, and millions of people were being displaced from their home. The sea became a provisional home for many, as overly-crowded boats were continually but unsuccessfully attempting to cross the six nautical miles that separated them from international waters. Rescue teams were waiting in this indeterminate space, but were not able to assist since the boats never passed the six-mile breach, which is what distressed me the most. Witnessing such devastation awakened a maternal instinct in me, in the sense that I could not cope with the images of these children's bodies on the shores of the Aegean Sea. I had just moved to London, but I could not help feeling uneasy as an immigrant, uneasy as a Peruvian, and uncomfortable with my husband's faith. I felt apologetic every time I needed something from my new country, as I was afraid of making mistakes and having my visa confiscated. Even as someone who grew up in the midst of an armed conflict between the government of Peru and two terrorist groups⁵, I could still

³ Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis, *Thinking with Water* (Montreal; London and Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), p. 54.

⁴ In her book *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett talks about the agency in matter. I find the own materiality of the ocean (the coldness or the saltiness) has its own agency

⁵ The terrorist groups referred to are The Shining Path and The Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA)



not fathom what these children were enduring. It is evident that crossing the ocean in such precarious conditions can solely be motivated by a life or death scenario.

The ocean is analogous to the representation of the West as both a provider and a potential killer. The ungraspable and slippery form of the ocean is comparable to the powerlessness of developing countries over the global decisions that affect world policies and economies. The way life exists at sea differs entirely from that on dry land. It has its own timing, smell, pace and gravity. Even the way one communicates is distinct, parasited by white noise when at shore, and invaded by a muted characteristic to words when offshore. The absence of objects dilutes the sound. Its thrust forces make the body feel light and malleable, as it deepens the energy in which a rip current might take ownership of oneself. Creatures exist in their distinct way, as one paddles through translucent poisonous jellyfishes or steps over sting rays camouflaged by the ocean floor.

The ocean is embedded in the work I produce as a Latin American artist, as I similarly encountered it in the work of other Peruvian artists and thinkers, who all perceive a similar connection between the ocean and the identity of our historically-colonised society. In the following chapters, I intend to respond to, weave together and speculate about interrogations on Latin American identity, migration, the environment and the sea.

Part I: Definitions

It all Started at Sea

‘The beginning of civilisation starts with the sea; out of that state of barbaric vagueness and disorder.’⁶

Just as the New World was discovered by sea, I consider the latter as an agent participating in my own re-discovery, as a space where I can uncover the genesis of my own identification as a person, as a Latin American artist, and as a mother. The ocean connects borders and severs them. However, no national entity can claim its ownership beyond the two-hundred miles

⁶ W.H. Auden, ‘The Enchased Flood’ quoted in Batra, Nandita and Messier, Vartan P., *This watery world: Humans and the Sea* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010) p.5.



offshore limit. As Philip Hoare states, referencing Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, 'To Nemo, the sea represents the spirit of anarchism...'⁷ I look upon this notion of anarchism as a space for neutrality. The ocean displays an immense surface of neutral territory, in which social labels such as race, age, immigration status, religion or the consciousness of displacement dissolve. No one can menace you if you decide to dive off a cliff and start swimming at sea, if you resolve to cross the Channel or wish to paddle a wave. You could keep afloat and drift to the two-hundred miles offshore demarcation⁸, perhaps to the risk of drowning, but there, no one can demand to see your passport or any official documentation. It is a space of nothingness for us all: save yourself or die.

Latin/American - (a broad context)

'In a complex way Latin-American history secretes the history of Europe and in turn renders it ironic.'⁹

The concept of identity for a Latin American is multi-faceted and conflicted. Their reasons are numerous and subjective, but this ambivalent sentiment can partially be explained by its former status of colonised territory, its geographical fragmentation, and last but not least, its post-colonial social fracture. This cleavage results from a sort of tacitly-agreed apartheid instituted in the Peruvian society, in which discrepancies of economic income and race have led to extremely sharp divisions between classes. 'Like many other countries in Latin America, we (Cuba) have suffered from a neurosis of identity that is not completely cured'¹⁰. At this point, I would like to introduce an array of questions, which will inform the development of the following sections of the dissertation. What does it mean to be Latin American? What does being Peruvian entail? What constitutes our sense of identity? What does the South being located below on maps imply? Why does below connote ideas of inferiority? Why do people use the term 'Third World'? How much can we suffer?

7 Philip Hoare, *As is the Sea* (London: Royal College of Art, 2014) p.12

8 Coastal States hold sovereign rights over the continental shelf (the national area of the seabed) for exploring and exploiting it; the shelf can extend to at least two hundred nautical miles from the shore, and more under specified circumstances.

'Oceans and Laws of the Sea', United Nations (2013)

<http://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/convention_overview_convention.htm> [accessed 1 September 2016]

9 KumKum Sangari. 'The Politics of the Possible', *Cultural Critique* No. 7, The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse II (University of Minnesota Press, Autumn 1987), p.159

10 Mosquera, Gerardo, 'From Latin American Art to Art from Latin America', *Art Nexus*, 48, (2003)

<http://artnexus.com/Notice_View.aspx?DocumentID=9624> [accessed 20 July 2016]



Photo



maquitarojost



Scenes from Western Culture, 2015

Nine videos

Duration from 19 minutes to 3 hours and 10 minutes

Courtesy of the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and i8 Gallery, Reykjavik

Kjartansson first felt what he now refers to as 'Western culture claustrophobia' in Australia, where he found himself dining in a French bistro similar to one you might find in Brooklyn. He experienced it again in a taxi on his way from John F. Kennedy Airport into New York, listening to George Michael's 'Careless Whisper' playing on the radio. 'It's everywhere... and it's always the same songs,' he states.

These 'cinematic paintings' resonate in us with the same Western culture familiarity as the opening saxophone bars of 'Careless Whisper'. Yet despite the apparent banality of the filmed situations, their idyllic nature with their tranquil and almost static-like scenes breaks down the barrier between reality and fiction and verges on becoming a slick advertisement.

Each video can be viewed as a fragment of a scenario whose central meaning is hidden from us, as in the ambiguous paintings of the rococo artist Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), in which several levels of narration can be interpreted. These videos, as Watteau's canvases, simultaneously depict both the desires produced by their societies and their tenderly mocking commentaries on them.



♥ 15 likes

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A compelling essay written by curator Pablo Leon de la Barra for the exhibition catalogue *Under the Same Sun* – which featured forty Latin American artists – sheds light on how Latin American identity is perceived and constructed. He emphasises that the region shares a common identity and language — mostly Spanish besides a few exceptions of Portuguese, French and English — and argues that the artworks presented in the exhibition are rooted in ‘a rich cultural context shaped by colonialism, civil conflict, economic crisis, social inequality, and repression—as well as by intervals of growth and the emergence of parallel modernities.’¹¹ Even though we have freed ourselves from our former oppressors, we remain under the domination of Western culture, economic system and military control. As Latin Americans, we live in a constant state of adaptation as Leon de la Barra analyses:

Being born on the “wrong” side of history gives one the advantage of having to learn the dominant culture’s history and language in addition to one’s own— knowledge that may then be used to infiltrate and change the prevailing system.¹²

Even the very nature of the term Latin America is a European construct and imposition, reinforcing our conflicted identity, and also acting as a permanent reminder of our prevailing sense of being ignored and underrepresented under the scope of Western history. For instance, within the art context, it is very common for institutions to solely exhibit the ‘archeological, exotic, or folkloric, or as having been derived entirely from validated Western art-historical models’,¹³ instead of focusing on individual artists and their own concerns.

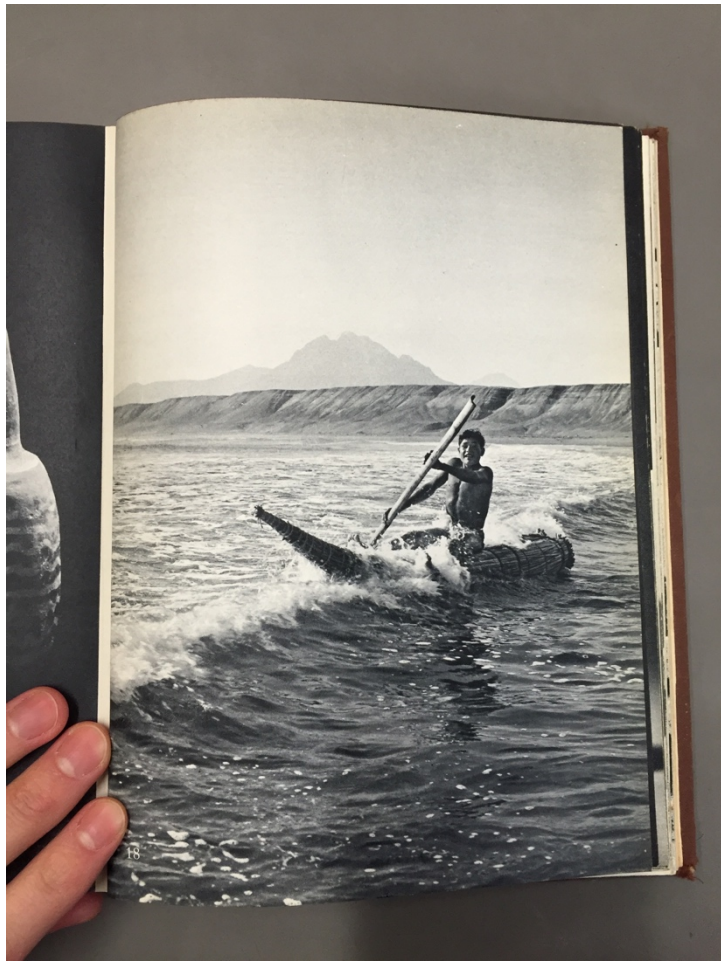
Latin America was a product of colonization, and it is now subjected to New Imperialisms. It is one of many representations of Western versus Non-Western domination—A domination not sustainable in time because of the physical pressure it represents on our soil. being a resource provider for the northern part of the hemisphere, leaving a very big passive putting pressure into trying to adapt western systems into Non-Western ones. And ultimately of how the West, at some recent point in time has set a paradigm on how to live. won upon the non-west, and how nowadays we see it wasn’t a true win, things failed to happen. The passive or We are a place not only in which cheap labour and commodities are outsourced to, but also emotional problems, violence and instability.

11 Pablo Leon de la Barra, ‘*Under the Same Sun: Art from Latin America Today*’ (2016)

<<https://www.guggenheim.org/map/latin-america>> [accessed 14 June 2016].

12 Ibid

13 Ibid,



Perú(u)(ou)

When do we become aware of ourselves, of our culture and of our identity? When do we start paying attention to our self-definition, in relation to the culture we come from? Does this occur upon leaving our comfort zone?

“I am from Peru.”

“Oh! I have a friend in Brazil.”

“Oh yeah? I have a friend in South Africa.”

#lol

When foreigners imagine Peru, images of tropicality, warmth and sun are commonplaces that immediately come to mind. Their perception of Peru is that of a remote country (physically and ideologically), where one can take part in otherworldly experiences, like shamanistic rituals and *Ayahuasca* ceremonies. Foreigners would customarily expect to re-enact Inca trail hikes and hear about local stories of how the Spanish Conquistadores took over an Empire. However, understanding the complexity of Peru calls out for being immersed in an Andean cosmology, located abysses away from the Westernised vision.

Fog

As previously mentioned, the nation is fragmented on political, social and geographical levels. The mystical narratives related to water vary from region to region. Growing up on the coast of such a vast country infers that my personal relationship to water is bond to the sea and its manifestations. First of all, I would like to explore considerations around Fog. One third of the Peruvian population lives in Lima, this portion of land that was once upon a time a luxuriant valley and now struggles with intense drought. Lima faces the largest body of water on the planet but is, ironically, never blessed with rain. Clouds above the capital are heavy and never precipitate. Condensed water remains in the sky, staring down at us, taunting us to take a grasp of it. Lima constitutes the most depressing landscape I have ever laid eyes on, as the white cement facade of its buildings blend seamlessly with the horizon. In his 1851 novel *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville named Lima ‘the saddest city on earth’:



Nor is it, altogether, the remembrance of her cathedral-toppling earthquakes; nor the stampedes of her frantic seas; nor the tearlessness of and skies that never rain; nor the sight of her wide field of leaning spires, wrenched cope-stones, and crosses all adroop (like canted yards of anchored fleets); and her suburban avenues of house-walls lying over upon each other, as a tossed pack of cards;- it is not these things alone which make tearless Lima, the strangest, saddest city thou can'st see. For Lima has taken the white veil; and there is a higher horror in this whiteness of her woe. Old as Pizarro, this whiteness keeps her ruins for ever new; admits not the cheerful greenness of complete decay; spreads over her broken ramparts the rigid pallor of an apoplexy that fixes its own distortions.¹⁴

As Melville recounts, Lima 'has taken the white veil' and it has vowed to never shed a drop of water. This evokes the work of Sandra Nakamura, *Una Promesa es Una Nube*¹⁵, for which she constructed fog-catching letters by appropriating an artisanal technique, thanks to which she collected up to a thousand litres of water a day for a community of five hundred families living in the outskirts of Lima. The phrase is inspired by an Arab proverb: 'A promise is a cloud; fulfilment is the rain'. Although it has not rained in Lima for more than eighty years, in this case, fulfilment is materialised in the form of dehumidifiers.

Fog is one of the most enigmatic elements Lima possesses as it invariably reminds us how we live in water, breathe water, and traverse through the water mist lightly floating in the air. The heat of the summer evaporates the water, clearing up the atmosphere, but once the autumn is settled, all of a sudden, the sun vanishes for over nine months.

Mother

Nurturing and killing.

¹⁴ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick or, The Whale* (London: Penguin Classics, 1988) p. 209

¹⁵ A promise is a cloud, translated by the author.





Fig. 1

Part II: Just like the Ocean

The blurred space: the sea as an agent of the construction of the Latin-American identity

The shore is a blurred horizon, where water collides with the rocks and calls the sand back into the ocean. The shore conserves no intact memory as every wave is unique and propels a new mass of water repeatedly producing the same effect. As author John Mack observes,

The shore doesn't exist, it is in permanent mutation and it holds a permanent possibility. It is a neutral space, neither properly terrestrial nor yet thoroughly maritime, awaiting a metaphoric role.¹⁶

As we look into the ocean standing on its border, this corpus of infinity conveys an otherworldly scenario, similar to a hefty territory that shimmers as the wind goes by. It constitutes a space where the planet seems to stretch out to boundlessness, transmitting us the belief something greater than us exists. Sigmund Freud popularised the term 'oceanic feeling', coined by his friend writer Romain Rolland, in *Civilization and its Discontents*. He describes the latter's reflections on the 'oceanic' feeling' as such:

It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of 'eternity', a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded — as it were, 'oceanic'. This feeling, he adds, is a purely subjective fact, not an article of faith; it brings with it no

¹⁶ John Mack, *The Sea: A cultural history* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), p.165.



assurance of personal immortality, but it is the source of the religious energy which is seized upon by the various Churches and religious systems, directed by them into particular channels, and doubtless also exhausted by them. One may, he thinks, rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone, even if one rejects every belief and every illusion.¹⁷

This ‘oceanic’ feeling is an entity that navigates through the human mind when we become aware of ourselves and of our existence, as opposed to everything that belongs to the ‘unknown’. I find absorbing that although Rolland was using the infinity of the ocean as a metaphor for this feeling, I do believe that the latter has, in a literal sense, the physical ability to make one absorb this ‘religious energy’ he discusses.

The artist John Akomfrah created the film *Vertigo Sea* that deals with questions of transatlantic slave trade, and social conflicts related to the global migration of refugees and ecological concerns. His source material is extracted from a radio interview with a group of young Nigerian immigrants who survived a clandestine crossing of the Mediterranean, and describe the sea as ‘something vaster and more awesome than they had thought possible’¹⁸. The term ‘vertigo’ implies a similar meaning than the ‘oceanic’ feeling relating to infinity for Akomfrah, as he asserts:

While the sea is mesmerizing, universally compelling and beautiful, it is also a uniquely inhospitable environment. It is difficult for us, as humans used to having control over our surroundings, to grasp the enormity of this constantly changing element, and the word ‘vertigo’ perhaps refers to this unfathomable reach.¹⁹

17 Sigmund Freud, Joan Riviere, and James Strachey, *Civilization and its Discontents* (London: Hogarth Press, 1963) p.1

18 Arnolfini, *John Akomfrah Vertigo Sea Exhibition Guide* (2016) <<http://www.arnolfini.org.uk/whatson/john-akomfrah-vertigo-sea-1/JohnAkomfrahVertigoSeaExhibitionGuide.pdf>> [accessed 8 June 2016].

19 *ibid*

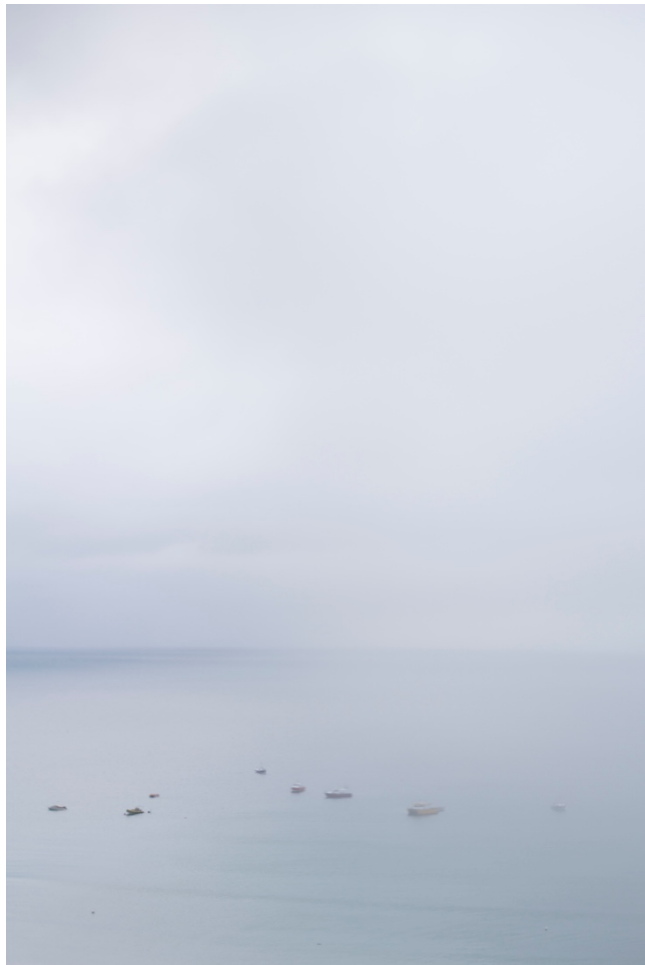




Fig. 2

Drawing from the aforementioned film, one can merely imagine what indigenous people in the Americas might have felt at the sight of the vessels appearing on the horizon. The Latin American coastline welcomed, by force, African slaves, Swedish, Dutch, and English pirates.²⁰ The Peruvian coast in particular witnessed various waves of migration, occurring pre and post-World War I and II. European immigrants included English, Irish, German, Austrian, Italian and Croatian nationals, in addition to other minorities. The Asian and Middle Eastern immigration movement included the influx of Chinese Slaves (*culíes*), Japanese and Palestinian citizens.²¹ These historical events utterly illustrate the literal clash of two civilisations.

The ocean is my saviour. Sometimes I just need to look at it, to penetrate it, to have the soles of my feet slashed by the sea shells, to feel my lungs shrinking upon contact with the icy water as I run out of breath, to feel the white water clashing against my body as I move like a jellyfish underwater. I become aware, from the tumult of the waves, of how ephemeral my existence is.

Liquid Society

20 Op. cit. KumKum Sangari, p. 159.

21 Interview with Aldo Mariategui, conducted by the author on 21 May 2016, London.



‘Fluids travel easily. They ‘flow’, ‘spill’, ‘run out’, ‘splash’, ‘pour over’, ‘leak’, ‘flood’, ‘spray’, ‘drip’, ‘sip’, ‘ooze’; ...’²²

I would now like to expand on Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity, in relation to which he states that ‘change is *the only* permanence, and uncertainty *the only* certainty.’²³ I believe that, in the case of Latin America, we have to take into account two distinct layers of change, since we are chronically seeking our own identity but also undergo a perpetual adaptation to Western society. As Bauman discusses further in the book: ‘forever ‘becoming’, avoiding completion, staying under-defined.’²⁴

As Latin Americans, we are unceasingly expecting something wrong to emerge due to customary political corruption, recurrent governmental instability and the fragile nature of our institutions and economies. We progress only to retrogress, constantly longing for something that never existed. We seem to reside in the same blurred existence as the one depicted by the shore. In her essay *The Politics of the Possible*, Professor KumKum Sangari analyses the work of novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and in the following, explains how our social systems foster the liquid state we are usually caught-up in:

The disjuncture in the understanding of the real are equally mediated by and refracted through the apparatus of various kinds of colonial and neo-colonial domination underwritten by feudal survivals and reactive nationalisms which are produced by the colonial history and cultural heterogeneity of Latin America.²⁵

Short-term memory

In conjunction with the thought of our lives mirroring the liquid state of the ocean, the Peruvian curator Miguel Lopez reflects on the work by Peruvian artist Luz María Bedoya entitled *Viaje a la Isla Hormiga*²⁶:

22 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000) p.2

23 Ibid, p.2

24 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000) p.76

25 Op. cit. KumKum Sangari, pp. 157-186.

26 The video records a stubborn and continuous transit across the Pacific Ocean, which never arrives at destination, or which destination is endlessly the transit. Hundreds of miniature take-away booklets contain a series of phrases, depicted as facts, describing the Ant Islands: it is explicitly defined, a measurable and traced place. They concurrently appear as a territory suspended in a condition of pure possibility. The audio contains a set of interviews with ‘authorised people’ – a marine biologist, a retired navy captain, a cartographer – who declare that, about those islands, they have nothing to say. We can also notice a small Peruvian map drawn on a wall.



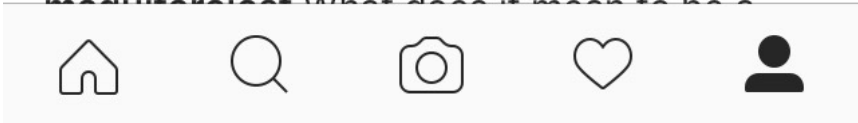
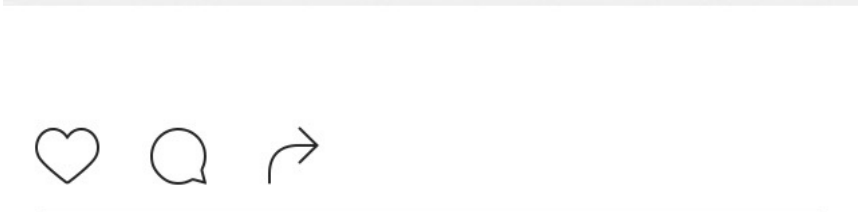
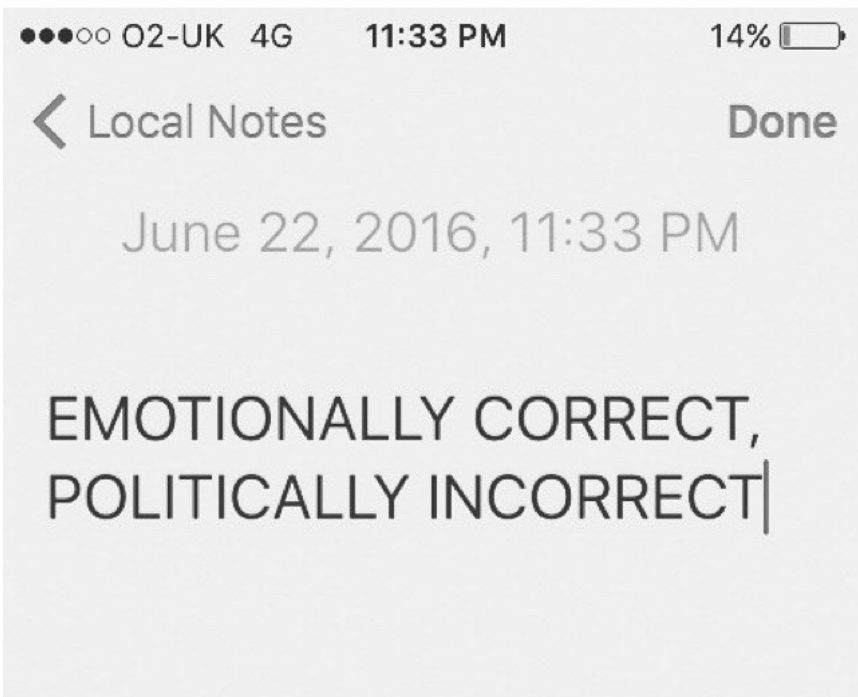
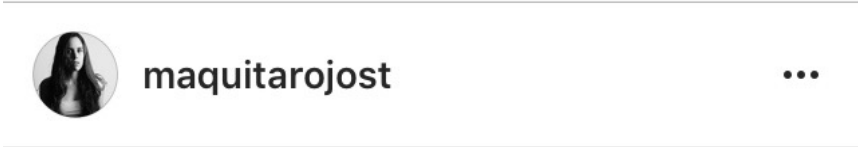
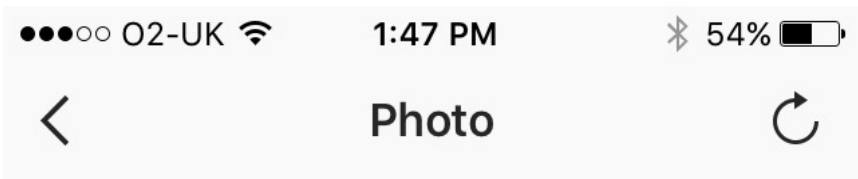
...what is here is that which flees. In other words, that which already was, or the promise of something that never comes to pass. It is simply movement... And in that intermediate space, there seems to be something that eludes all control, which flies under the radar, and which never fully makes itself visible...²⁷

This video installation recounts the search for *Islas Hormigas* (Ants Islands). It presents the image of the artist navigating the Pacific Ocean towards the horizon line, looking for *Islas Hormigas*. She interrogates people about the location of the island, but not one of her interlocutors can neither confirm nor deny its existence. The work entertains the illusion that the interviewees are navigating a constant state of possibility, while in reality the island is a figment of their imagination.



Fig. 3

27 Miguel Lopez, *Voyage to the Ant Islands* (2015) <<http://luzmariabedoya.com/textos-texts/viaje-a-las-islas-hormiga-voyage-to-the-ant-islands-miguel-lopez/>> [accessed 2 November 2015].



Islas Hormigas draws from García Marquez's magical realism, as on the one hand, the island's magical character is inscribed into the real, and on the other hand, the interviewees are at liberty to neither affirm nor negate the existence of this fictional island. As Sangari elaborates on:

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, José Arcadio Secundo's persistent memory is the only record that remains of the banana company massacre; the plague of insomnia which leads to collective loss of memory is equivalent to the loss of historiography, of a usable past, indeed of historical agency. So Pilar Ternera reads the past in the cards. Memory functions as flexible, collective, material practice open to improvisation and persona reminiscence ...²⁸

This loss, or rather improvisation, of memory is decidedly emblematic of the Latin American identity. Each time Latin American countries experience a new process of political elections, we appear to have no recollection of the failures of our past governments and fall back into the same patterns that favour populism. A jarring example of this 'amnesia' in Latin America is the case of Peru's former president Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000). Although he is considered one of the most corrupt presidents in the history of Peru, he and his party still hold more than 30% of popularity in the country.²⁹

Fujimori was convicted for human rights abuse that included the killing and kidnapping of more than 70,000 people in the context of the armed conflict with the guerrilla group *The Shining Path*, coerced female sterilizations and orchestrated the embezzlement of state funds.³⁰

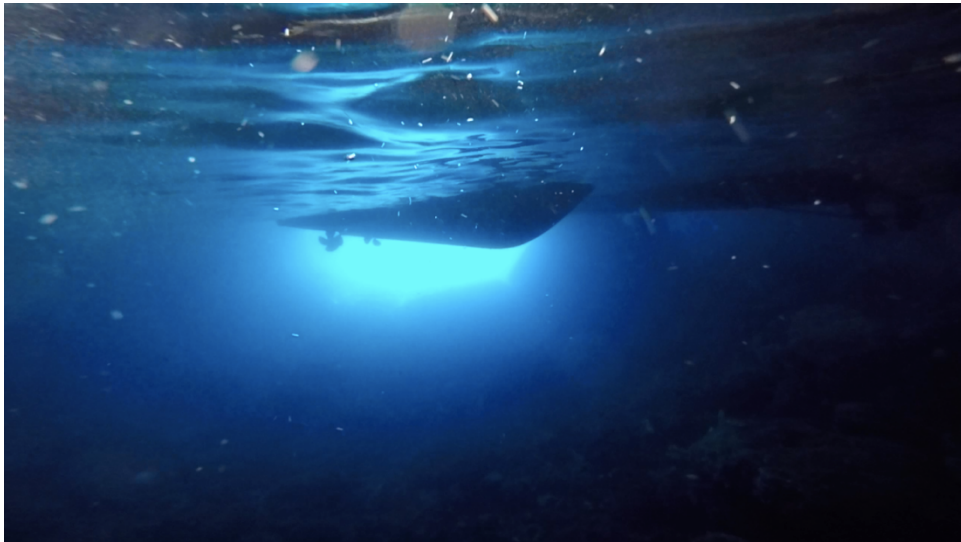
Part III: Trapped on an island: Ideas of Colonial and Postcolonial Identity shared by migration across the sea

I was once standing on the 'southernmost point of the USA' in Key West, a peculiar town

28 Op. cit. KumKum Sangari, pp. 157-186.

29 Op. cit. Aldo Mariategui.

30 Ibid.



shaped like the appendix of North America on the map. In some sense, it feels like an island that desires to be considered a part of the Caribbean, although politics would prevent this. I was standing there, gazing at Cuba and was expecting to see a balsero³¹ emerge from the horizon at any time. I was wondering if all my swimming training would suffice to swim the distance that separates the most liberal soil one can set foot on from the most restrictive one. Only ninety miles draw apart mega capitalism and mega communism.

Only a thin line separates opposites.

Migration

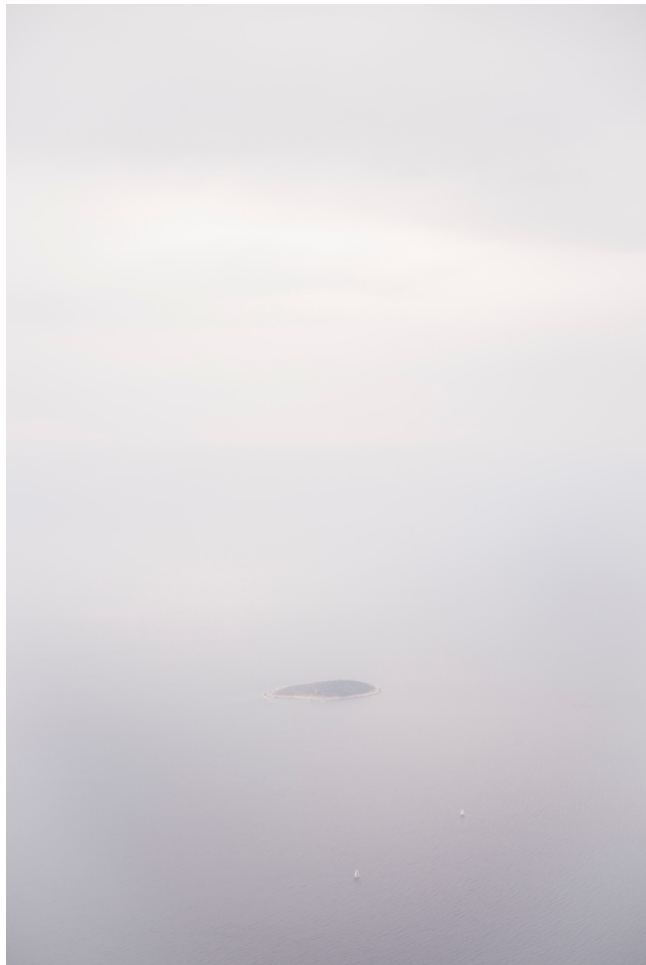
What would happen to the Bering Strait if it were still frozen at present? Would we still regard it as part of the Bering Sea? Would natural changes such as the temperature of water alter the political perception of it? What if the Atlantic were frozen? What if Antarctica melted? How does jurisprudence adapt?

If the idea of borders and delimitations bring to mind images of metal, electricity, spines and walls, essentially one figures it as a line. It might be straight, curvy or zigzagged, but it is simply a line fixed upon the ground, delimiting one space from another. It delineates a piece of imaginary land and air that one can step on, build on. A similar line would be irrelevant in the body of the ocean, it is indeed truly impossible to properly own the water space as it is in a constant state of flux. On land or in the ocean, lines do not respond to the natural cycles of the environment, since even a grounded land lives in a constant state of mutation through rain, wind and water.

I think we should impose a tax on people consuming the oxygen our Amazon emits.

Certain Latin-American nationalities experience trouble at borders and beyond them. In the spirit of anecdote accumulation and black humour, we might deem this ridiculously funny; but when one experiences these obstacles first-hand, it feels extremely frightening. Peruvian is one of the most-controlled nationalities when it comes to border crossing. The exoticness,

31 Rafters, from the Spanish "Balsa", Raft. Is the name given to the persons who emigrate illegally in self constructed or precarious vessels from Cuba to neighbouring states



mysticism and fantasy quickly fade away when a country is responsible for the majority of cocaine sold around the world.³²

If I think about lines, I picture delimitations, borders. I wonder what can be the meaning and purpose of a simple line after two hundred miles into the ocean, the stipulated limit to uncharted territories.

The story of the Peruvian mother, wife of the Romanian-descendent Diaspora-Jew seeking to become a legal resident in the United Kingdom

Abraham is a second generation Peruvian, born to the children of Holocaust survivors who escaped Europe to find refuge in Peru. His family spent three months aboard a ship cruising on the Atlantic Ocean, almost famished, but settled in a country that, due to its underdevelopment and poverty, made it possible for them to stand out since they still benefited from a better level of education than the masses. The mere fact of not being exposed to anti-Semitism must have felt consoling and their survival instinct must have triggered the automatic pilot. They originally came from a town called Novoselytsia, a district of the province of Chernivtsy Oblast, located in the West of Ukraine. By the time they left Novoselytsia, it was integrated to Romania. Abraham was raised in a Jewish community within the reduced Europeanised neighbourhood from which I come from as well. I always point out that he grew up in the bubble within the bubble. I will never forget the first time I saw Abraham's face; that of a recent immigrant who was not yet inter-mixed, that of Eastern European features sprinkled with a massive amount of freckles due to the Peruvian sun. He talked in a peculiar way, almost as if his Spanish accent was unfamiliar. I immediately had a sense of him.

The first time I travelled to Europe, I was fourteen years old and it was then that I heard for the first time '¡Vas a cruzar el charco!'³³, a typically Latin-American expression signifying that a person is going to Europe. On 1 September 2015, fifteen years later, I again crossed

32 'Perú: Monitoreo de Cultivos de Coca 2014', Oficina de las Naciones Unidas contra la Droga y el Delito (2016) <https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Peru/Peru_Informe_monitoreo_coca_2014_web.pdf> [accessed 8 July 2016].

33 You are going to cross the puddle.



the Atlantic Ocean to move to London with my family and start a Masters in Arts. I was granted a Tier 4 student visa and in turn, my son received a Tier 4 dependent student visa from the British Council in Bogota, for which we had to apply from Peru, my country of residence at the time. Abraham had recently been issued a Romanian passport after struggling for nine years pursuing this matter. We could not figure out how to open a migration file as his family dependants since your unique interlocutor in this undertaking is an automated website entitled <<https://www.gov.uk>>. I thus decided it was more beneficial for both me and our son to explore the option of an overly-priced student visa than intending to comprehend British immigration law. At least, this bought us some time to determine the next step.

As all migrants have already experienced, even in the best scenario, adapting to a new city, a new culture and a new idiosyncrasy is arduous. Superimposed with an overly emotional latin spirit, things become a little bit more laborious.

In this specific context, the possibility of Brexit weighed heavy on our shoulders. The feeling of not belonging to our new country actually increased. Abraham's family had been evicted from Europe once and I was not going to let this happen to him again. I immediately applied for an EEA Resident's card.³⁴ As could be suspected, the number of applicants was so high that the home office could not handle all the requests, and my passport was withheld for longer than usual. Without possession of our passports, we literally became trapped on an island. The sea was my only border.

The sea as a border

On 24 June 2016, the Brexit referendum took a turn that most Londoners did not expect. The vast majority of European and British people felt devastated. The thought of England being an isolated island was an abstract vision, utterly unbelievable for most of the younger population. This reminded me of the observations artist Lim Yi-Yong makes about the sea, in reference to Singapore, as he noted:

³⁴ The EEA Resident's Card is a document the UK government provides to the Non-EU family members of European Union Citizens.



When we think of a nation as a physical thing we imagine a landmass. Yet the true border of any country touching the sea is not the edge of the land, but out in the water. The actual border and the imagined border are quite different, especially for an island like Singapore...³⁵

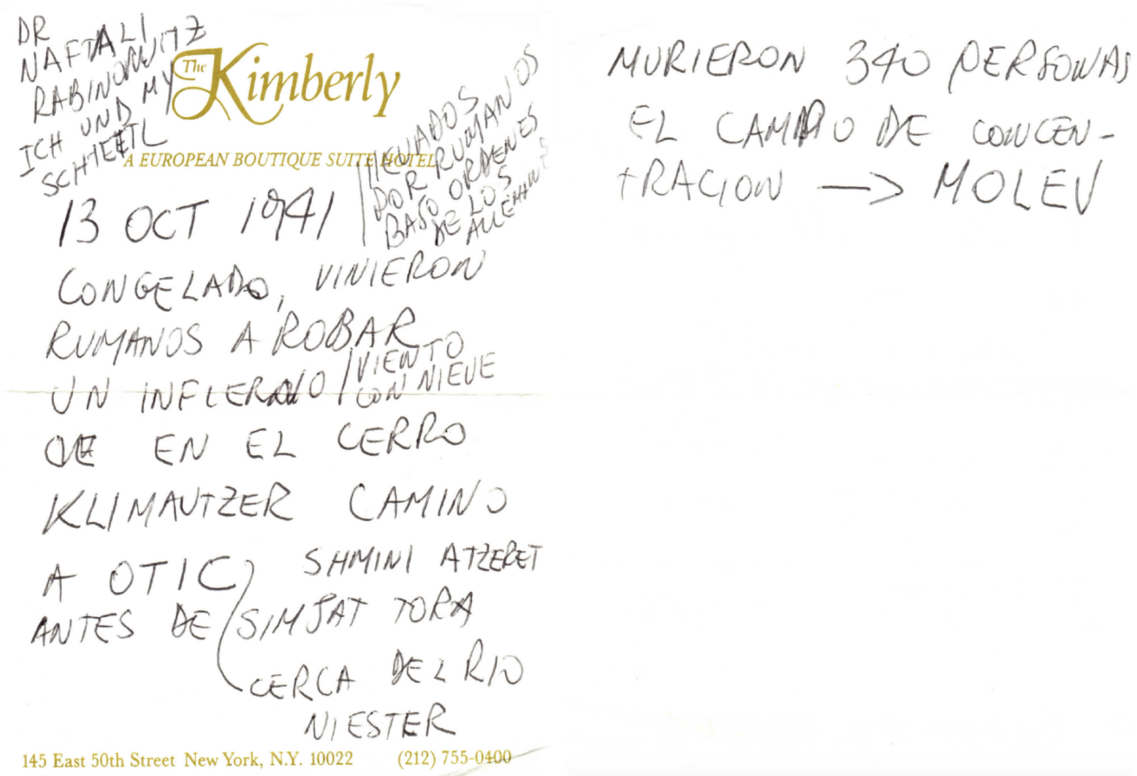


Fig. 4

35 Charles Lim Yi Yong - *Sea State*, E-flux (2016) <<http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/sea-state-2/>> [accessed 27 July 2016].





UK Visas
& Immigration

EEA(PR)

Version 03/2016

Application for a document certifying permanent residence or permanent residence card under the EEA Regulations

This form is to be used for applications made on or after 18 March 2016

Who this form is for

Use this application form if you wish to apply for a document certifying permanent residence (if you're an EEA national) or permanent residence card (if you're a non-EEA national) as confirmation of a right of permanent residence under the Immigration (European Economic Area) Regulations 2006 ('the EEA Regulations').

Any reference on this form to EEA nationals includes Swiss nationals.

Eligibility

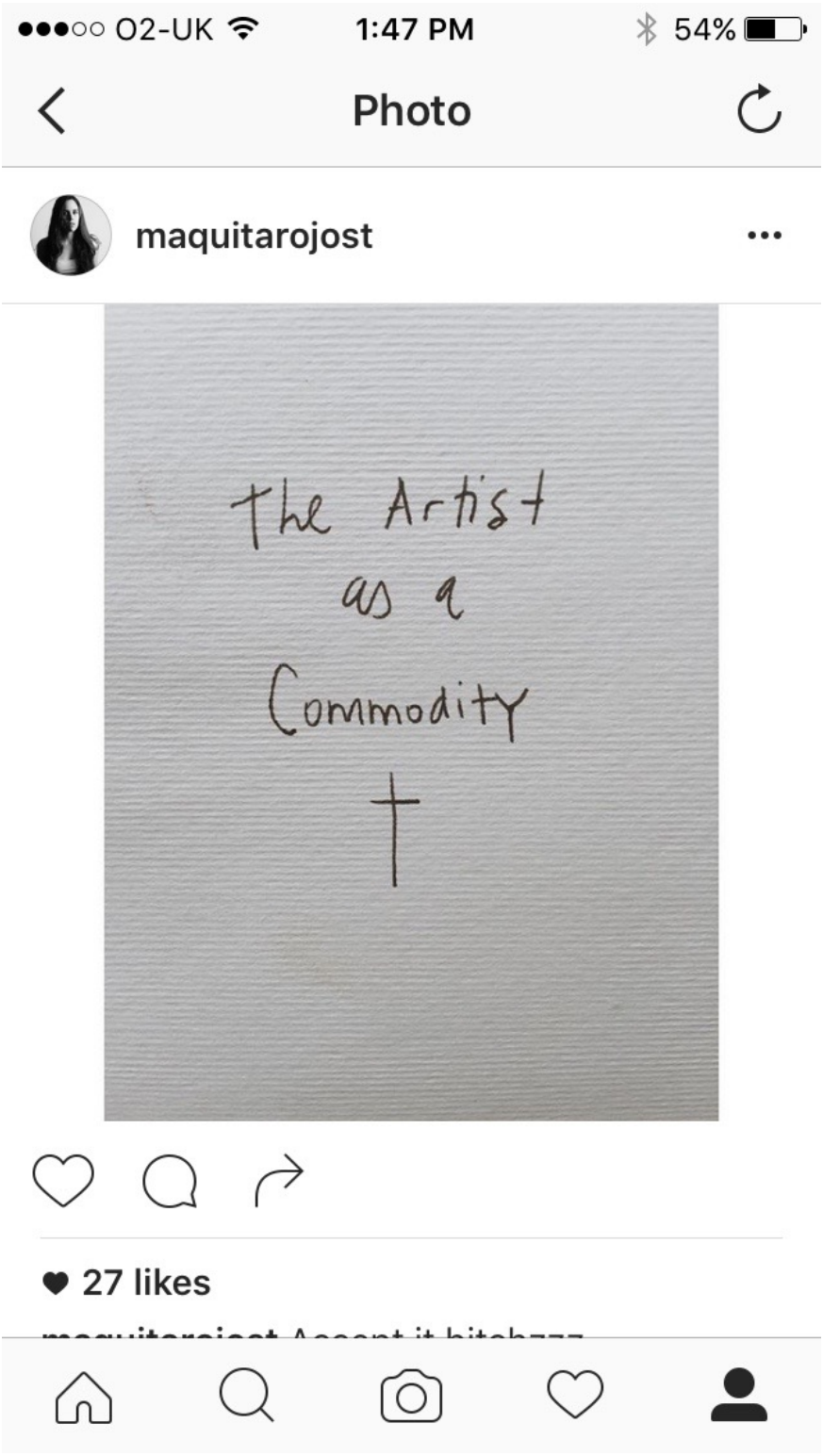
You must normally have lived in the UK for a continuous period of five years as:

- an EEA national 'qualified person' (worker, self-employed, self-sufficient, student or jobseeker),
- a family member or extended family member* of an EEA national qualified person or permanent resident,
- a former family member of an EEA national if you've retained your right of residence after the EEA national died or left the UK, or your/their marriage or civil partnership ended in divorce, annulment or dissolution, or
- a family member of a British citizen who worked or was self-employed in another EEA state before returning to the UK ('Surinder Singh' cases).

You can also qualify if you are:

- an EEA national former worker or self-employed person who has ceased activity in the UK because you have retired, are permanently incapacitated, or you're now working or self-employed in another EEA state but still retain your residence in the UK,
- the family member or extended family member* of an EEA national who has ceased activity, or
- the family member or extended family member* of an EEA national former worker or self-employed person who has died.

Fig. 5



Rebecca is at sea

My colleagues from the RCA Sculpture department and I were delighted to hear that Rebecca Moss was selected to join a 23-day long artist residency on board a container ship at sea, sponsored by a Vancouver-based gallery. I remember how I was ardently yearning to join her and spend time looking at the sea atop a container.

On 23 August 2013, she embarked on the Hanjin Geneva, a container ship owned by Hanjin, one the largest shipping companies in the world. On 1 September 2016, she announced us that she had received news from the Captain that they would not be able to moor near Tokyo due to a problem with the company. Hanjin Geneva had, since her departure, gone bankrupt. Being unable to pay its port fees, the ship was left unable to dock at any port in the whole world, and the crew and Rebecca along with them forcefully stranded at sea.

The news grew viral as I was finishing this dissertation. Although her story was not directly related to the idea of the Latin American identity, it again raised questions about liquid modernity, our perpetual state of becoming, about the sea being this aforementioned 'neutral space' and about the economic dogma – capitalism - that permeates every level of the system.

What if the artist was Latin-American? Would the news have received the same level of attention from the media? Or are Latin-American artists expected to display higher levels of tolerance in complicated political situations? Rebecca herself thought unbelievable that the press was more eager to interview her than the captain of the ship. We do not even know who the captain is.



Fig. 6



Into a Conclusion

The sea is a lonely place. It engulfs our collective imaginations, fills us with fear and fascination. It is where we came from, and where we return to—the last wilderness on our shores. We gaze upon it, rely on it, abuse it. It provides the air we breathe; the culture we disseminate. It is a solid gas, like a three-dimensional sky, something that has no colour itself, only the reflection of the sky above or the sea bed below.³⁶

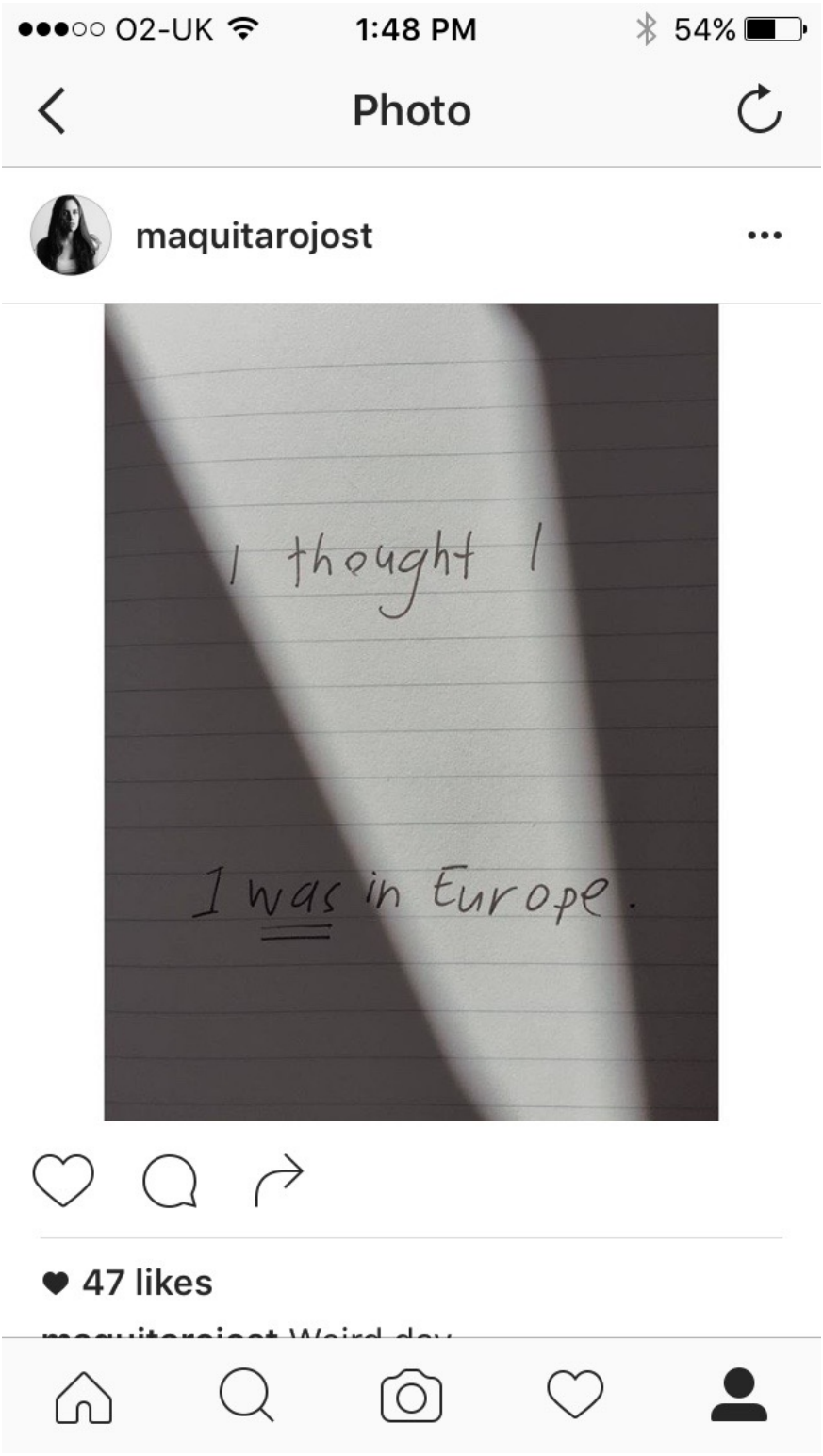
Even though I have mentioned various approaches that intended to define the Latin American identity, I find the previous quote by Philip Hoare to corroborate what my research has led me to believe: a **constant search in a state of liquidity**. His idea of the space ‘we came from and where we return to’ and of ‘the culture we disseminate’ relates to the cyclical nature embedded into the ocean. It equally mirrors the liquid nature of Latin America.

Drawing on John Dewey’s concept of Art as Experience, in relation to which he states that: “...Even a crude experience, if authentically an experience, is more fit to give clue to the intrinsic nature of aesthetic experience than is an object already set apart from any other mode of experience ...”³⁷, I intend to construct an awareness of the contemporary self-identification, through the collection of experiences, photographs and objects that echo the ocean. In our post-colonial and nomadic society, in which the sea has been the main instrument for migration for many years, I regard it as the medium that connects me to the profound meaning of my identity.

The shore was my cornerstone and the filter through which I have studied the experiences described in this dissertation. As a practitioner, I am attempting to map out and design a construction of identity through the outcome of my journeys to coastal towns in England: the objects I stumble upon, the photographs I take in the shore and in the water (which are included in this dissertation and have been done in conjunction with the writing), and the stories that emerge from them. These performative gestures will hopefully reconcile me with the sea and its neutral space as a defining territory. These actions and collections will ultimately be presented through photographs and thoughts on my public Instagram account.

36 Op. cit. Philip Hoare, p.10

37 John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York: Perigee, 1980) p.9



Adopting the contemporary form of a digital image, exhibited on social media, will connect me to a broader audience and at the same time, this social media platform will actively participate in constructing my identity. In this case, social media resembles Timothy Morton's hyperobject³⁸ in the sense that its dimensions have become unfathomable and unimaginable for the user, functioning as an infinite ocean.

At times, when I go surfing, I find myself obliged to paddle through human waste or an uninviting dark spume that exudes a decomposing smell. Occasionally, in contrast, the water is crystal clear, emanating a scent of freshness incomparable to any other body of water.

When you grow up in South America, particularly on the coast, I believe you always gaze at the Ocean and imagine an exit route. The Ocean is the void that connects us to the lingering developed world, to the memory of our European ancestors who decided to abandon the old for the new world, and to the memory of those who fled war, famine or persecution. The Ocean is the reason why I was born in the South of America, and the reason why there is a place called South America.

³⁸ In this specific context I relate it to the way in which Timothy Morton defined a hyperobject as something that involves "different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to"



CREATURE OF OCEANS³⁹

Take your time.

The graveyard of forgotten Empires begins at the crease of wet sand and gravel.

Remember that borders are just the swelling of washed-out possessions.

Look out to that infinite space! Take it in and memorise it.

It is the right place to mend frozen intellects, anaesthetised from comfort.

Get further in.

The body drifts further and further away from the accumulation of luxuries.

The over-stimulated grounds are just a fraction in distance.

Dismantle the construction of tools, the synthetic machines

Your hands and feet have become fins.

Look at them, use them.

Your life depends on them.

³⁹ Cristina Rojas, *Creature of Oceans* (New York: 2016)

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Daughter of the Lake, dir. by Ernesto Cabellos Damián, (Nuria Frigola Torrent, 2015)
Vertigo Sea, dir. by John Akomfrah, (Arnolfini Trust: 2015)

Images

All images were taken by the author if not stated otherwise

Fig. 1: *Toda promesa es una nube*, Sandra Nakamura 2014

Fig. 2: Still Image shot from *Vertigo Sea*, John Akomfrah, 2015

Fig. 3: Luz María Bedoya filming *Voyage to Ants Islands*, photo by Christian Bernuy, 2008

Fig. 4: Personal family photo. The photo describes in Spanish how Abraham's family members died during the Holocaust. The notes were taken by Abraham's uncle while he was overhearing a conversation between his father and the friend who told him the story. The conversation was held in Yidish as Abraham's uncle was translating to Spanish as he heard. It says they were walking, that there was a lot of snow, that they were robbed by Romanian People and that they died close to a river. The exact date in which the notes were taken are unknown to me.

Fig. 5: Screenshot, EEA Resident's card Application Form, 2016.

Fig. 6: Download from Website, Rebecca Moss on the day of her departure, 2016.