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Nepantleras fotografiando. Exploring identities through the camera

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Verena Melgarejo Weinandt

with contributions from Marisa Bongola, Isabel Mendoza, Romina Palacios, Sophie Utikal

Abstract: The photographs shown present the outcome of the workshop *Nepantleras fotografiando. Exploring identities through the camera* that was held in 2016 as part of the exhibition project *A(r)mando Vo(i)ces* in the Vienna Central Library. During the workshop, Gloria E. Anzaldúa's drawings formed a starting point to understand some of her concepts that each participant was invited to connect to through a series of photographs. These outcomes focused on the search for visual representations which would enable a reflection on each participant's identity in a collective process, connecting the individual position to issues such as body positivity and our bodies as a source of knowledge production, community activities as a political tool, the knowledge of spirituality and plants and the knowledge that comes through experiences of migration.

Keywords: Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Nepantla, Photography, Identity



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Nepantleras fotografiando. Exploring identities through the camera

Verena Melgarejo Weinandt

(Berlin / Wien)

and Marisel Bongola, Isabel Mendoza, Romina Palacios, Sophie Utikal

(Wien)

The Knowledge of Images: Creating Bridges

(by Verena Melgarejo Weinandt)

In 2016, I held the workshop "Nepantleras fotografiando", as part of *A(r)mando Vo(i)ces*, a project which revolved around Gloria Anzaldúa's crossings between image and word, theory and practice. *A(r)mando Vo(i)ces* called on Anzaldúa's notion of images as bridges between evoked emotion and conscious knowing.¹ After six months,² the project concluded with an exhibit in the Vienna Central Library, in which the results from events, workshops and research work done in the Library's collection were presented. In cooperation with the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin and the Austrian Association of Women Artists (VBKÖ), I was able to show a series of Gloria Anzaldúa's drawings, entitled *Between Word and Image. A Thought Gallery*.³ This collection of archive material were drawings that Anzaldúa used during the lectures she called gigs.⁴

From a curatorial perspective, I had to consider how to design/shape/create a 'translation' of Gloria Anzaldúa's work. Here, I do not mean merely a linguistic translation, but rather the 'bridges' that I wanted to illustrate between Anzaldúa's work and its significance for the Viennese context. Otherwise, the exhibit would have run the risk of her work being shown 'in isolation' and thus might have been received on a purely theoretical level.

¹ This theoretical basis and the documentation of the exhibition can be viewed online. See <https://armandovoices.wordpress.com/>.

² The whole project consisted of a workshop with children about the knowledge of dreams, organized in collaboration with the association *Großes Schiff*, a talk about decolonial feminism held by Yuderlys Espinosa Miñoso and research on questions of representation of indigenous identities and knowledge at the Vienna Central Library.

³ The drawings were originally compiled by Julianne Gilland (former head of the Benson Latin American Foundation) and presented by Nina Hoechtl, Coco Gutiérrez-Magallanes and Rían Lozano at UNAM in Mexico.

⁴ See Keating (2000: 211-233).

The idea for the photography workshop "Nepantleras fotografiando", which took place in cooperation with the association *Großes Schiff*,⁵ originated from these considerations. I invited women*⁶ from the Latino community in Vienna to the workshop, which was offered at no charge. The group was heterogeneous, they were first and second generation migrants in Austria, had different class and educational backgrounds, different sexual orientations and varied in age, defined themselves as white or women* of color. Being at all these intersections is what Gloria Anzaldúa describes as the *nepantlera*: a place where different knowledge(s) come together, a place "between the conscious and the unconscious, the place where transformations are enacted. Nepantla is a place where we can accept contradiction and paradox" (Anzaldúa 2015: 56).

Starting from that group composition, I used Anzaldúa's drawings to approach her theory. These drawings, realized on transparencies, express the important role images play for Anzaldúa's thinking, writing and teaching.⁷ By presenting Anzaldúa's knowledge using her drawings rather than texts, it was possible to conceive an educational concept that does not only communicate on a linguistic and theoretical level. The participants were invited to examine the drawings on an associative level and in conversation with one another, thus approaching their content collectively. The goal was not to assess these interpretations in terms of 'right' and 'wrong' in accordance to Anzaldúa's definitions, but instead to use them as a basis for an exchange about topics such as identity, experience as knowledge, language and spirituality. In a second step, we read selected quotes from Anzaldúan texts, which we connected to the drawings.

On this basis, every participant created a photographic piece to establish her own connection to the work of Anzaldúa. Not only the image itself, but the creative process of imagination is at the center of Anzaldúa's research interest, providing a possibility to heal and transform.⁸ Therefore, inviting the participants to create images of themselves opened up the possibility to change and create these images by questioning "frameworks and conceptual categories reinforced by language and consensual reality. To explore the 'cracks between the worlds' (rendijas, rents in the world), we must see through the holes in reality ('seeing' is another type of perception)" (Anzaldúa 2015: 45).

⁵ The Association *Großes Schiff* realizes different art and culture projects by and for the Latino community in Vienna, for example *Creativas*, a project that offered free creative workshops in Spanish for Latinos by Latinos, *A la Rueda Rueda*, a program for Spanish-speaking or bilingual children, *Migrativas*, a self-organized magazine project. See <https://www.grosses-schiff.org>.

⁶ I used "women*" as a description for the invitation to the workshop to invite also transwomen to the workshop.

⁷ See Sharpe (2017).

⁸ See Anzaldúa (2015: 35).

For this exploration and the realization of the pieces, I chose analogue compact cameras. The technical fact that the images could only be viewed after exposure meant that the participants could concentrate more on the presented subject and did not need to be equally concerned with aesthetic questions about presentation, detail, lighting conditions, focus, etc. Viewing the exposed images became a moment of reflection, memory and surprise for each photographer. Every participant was able to make a choice about which photographs would be presented to the entire group. The images related to the following questions: how can complex identities be expressed through photography? How is one's own identity reflected in nature? Which objects and other images are an expression and representation of one's own history and identity? How can one's own body be perceived through the camera? Which collective rituals or events form one's identity and what does it mean to document them? The search for visual representation and the examination of the results enabled a reflection on identity. The discussion and exchange about the photographs led to very intimate moments, in which insights into the participants' lives were shared through the images and conversations.

The selected photographs from this workshop were then also displayed in the library. Although I was the curator, I let the participants themselves decide which photographs they wanted to present how, and if and to what extent they wanted to contextualize them in writing or in another way. The participants of the workshop were: Anais Bongola, Marisel Bongola, Romina Palacios Espinoza, Karen Lazaro, Isabel Mendoza, Cecilia Tasso, Sophie Utikal. The following pieces are selected results of the workshop: photographs and written pieces by Sophie Utikal and by Marisel Bongola, and photographs by Romina Palacios and by Isabel Mendoza.

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The Knowledge of Images: Expresando identidades

(Marisel Bongola, Isabel Mendoza, Romina Palacios, Sophie Utikal)



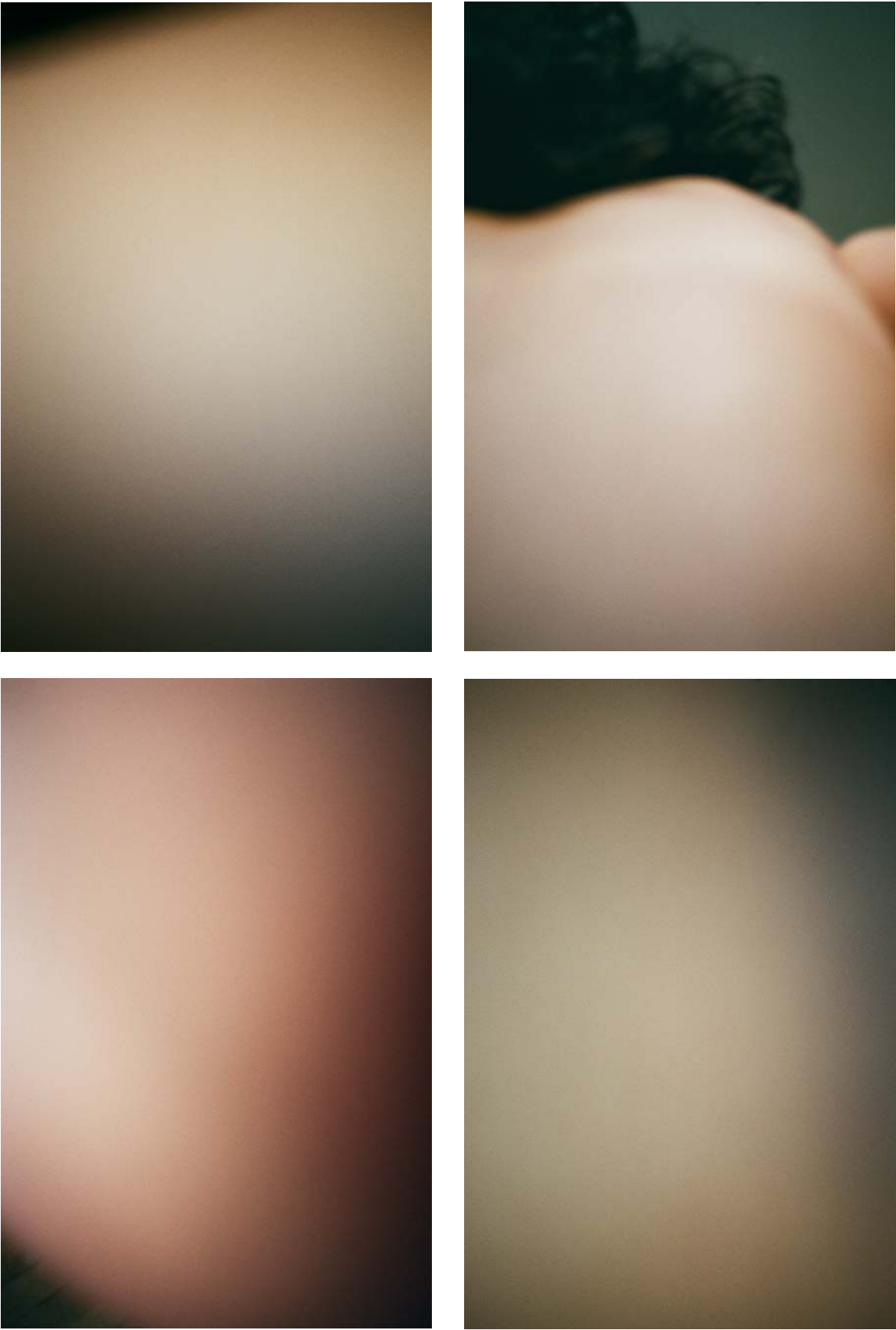
Img. 1: (Palacios Espinoza 2016).



Img. 2: (Palacios Espinoza 2016).



Img. 3: (Palacios Espinoza 2016).



Img. 4-7: (Sophie Utikal 2016).

Taking a picture of myself / Tomando una imagen de mí misma**(Sophie Utikal)**

Taking a picture of myself. How to re.construct a re.presentation of my foreign body on a piece of paper within less than a second. If sometimes I feel so near, so close, so dense and so thick that not even I can see myself anymore. It all blurs and diffuses into a feeling, a color, a texture.

Imagining how my back looks like. I see a bent mountain, shielding off my chest from the eyes and words of the dominant others but I also see a warm and cloudy sea of memories it has navigated me through, passing across the contradictions and the tensions.

How to capture this on film? First I stretch out myself to what lies behind of me, reaching out into my unknown, into my shadows, while still holding on, pointing back to me, trying to stay still so that the image will be clear enough.

It is not easy, my arm becomes tense, my body is not used to travelling around itself, I need several approaches. My fingers press the release. Not sure if what I caught is my body or the wall. Am I still looking at my back or looking with my back?

.

Tomando una imagen de mí misma. Cómo puedo re.construir una re.presentación de mi cuerpo extranjero en un pedazo de papel en menos de un segundo. Si a veces me siento tan cerca, tan inmediata, tan densa y ancha que ni yo misma me puedo ver. Todo se esfuma y se disuelve en un sentimiento, un color, una textura.

Imaginando cómo se ve mi espalda. Veo una montaña protegiendo mi pecho de los ojos y las palabras de los otros que dominan, pero también veo un lago tibio y nublado de memorias donde he navegado, pasando las contradicciones y tensiones.

¿Cómo capturar esto en un rollo? Primero me estiro a lo que queda atrás de mí, me extendo a mi desconocido, a mis sombras, mientras que aguanto, apuntando otra vez a mí, tratando de mantenerme quieta para que la imagen salga clara.

No es nada fácil, mi brazo se pone tenso, mi cuerpo no está acostumbrado a viajar alrededor de sí mismo, necesito varios intentos. Mis dedos aprietan el disparador. No estoy segura de si cogí mi cuerpo o la pared. Estoy aún mirando a mi espalda o mirando con mi espalda?

.

Ein Bild von mir selber machen. Wie kann ich eine Re.präsentation re.konstruieren von meinem fremden Körper auf einem Blatt Papier in weniger als einer Sekunde. Wenn ich mir

manchmal so nah bin, so eng und so dicht, dass ich mich selbst nicht mehr sehe, es zerstreut und verschwimmt sich alles in ein Gefühl, eine Farbe, eine Textur.

Vorstellen wie mein Rücken aussieht. Ich sehe einen gekrümmten Berg, der meine Brust von den Augen und Worten der anderen die dominieren abschirmt, aber ich sehe auch einen warmen und bewölkten See von Erinnerungen durch den er mich navigiert hat, entlang an den Widersprüchen und Spannungen.

Wie kann das auf Film eingefangen werden? Erst breite ich mich aus, zu dem was hinter mir liegt, ich greife in das Unbekannte, in meine Schatten, während ich immer noch festhalte, auf mich zurück zeige, ich versuche still zu bleiben damit das Bild deutlich genug wird.

Es ist nicht leicht, mein Arm verspannt sich, mein Körper ist es nicht gewohnt um sich selbst zu reisen, ich brauche mehrere Anläufe. Meine Finger drücken auf den Auslöser. Nicht sicher, ob ich meinen Körper oder die Wand eingefangen habe. Sehe ich nun auf meinen Rücken oder mit meinem Rücken?



Img. 8: (Marisel Bongola 2016).



Img. 9: (Marisel Bongola 2016).



Img. 10: (Marisel Bongola 2016).



Img. 11: (Marisel Bongola 2016).



Img. 12: (Marisel Bongola 2016).



Img. 13: (Marisel Bongola 2016).



Img. 14-16: (Isabel Mendoza 2016).



Img. 17: (Isabel Mendoza 2016).



Img. 18: (Isabel Mendoza 2016).



Img. 19: (Isabel Mendoza 2016).