

SECOND SOUND



La Memoria es un Pájaro, or multimedia poetry in the drift

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ABSTRACT

This essay meditates on multimedia and sound artist Pablo Francisco Morales's solo exhibition *La Memoria es un Pájaro* at the Instituto Municipal de Arte y Cultura (IMAC) in Tijuana during early summer 2022. Morales' work opens the social and psychic experience of mourning through mediatic dispersal across audio, video, photography, dramatising how mourning's demands on signification unsettle material and perceptual reality. The exhibition also invites a hemispheric and regional approach to sound art rooted in the borderlands, which links Morales' decidedly semiotic and trans-medial conception of sound art to broader questions about social and political genealogies for its theory and practice.

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We met at the Beyer Avenue trolley stop in San Ysidro to drive together across the US-México border on June 16. At last, we would visit multimedia and sound artist Pablo Francisco Morales's solo exhibition *La Memoria es un Pájaro* at the Instituto Municipal de Arte y Cultura (IMAC), nestled in Tijuana's gridded urban plan and shown, in part, in [Figure 1](#). I sat in the back seat as his partner, singer, songwriter and DJ Monica Camacho, navigated the 4 pm crush of México-bound traffic. The friends admired her precision driving through the bottlenecks and tire spikes that funnelled us towards kiosks staffed with armed guards. Each person's jokes belied a different relationship to the crossing. Family, friendship and care grated against empire and militarism in what is, for some, a daily encounter with the violence of the exception. Our trip that day was an episode in relationships grown, over the last five years, through care and collaboration in regional music communities, in which we all participate differently. Our connections and juxtapositions felt especially vivid.

In *La Memoria es un Pájaro*, Morales, who uses the artist name "Francisco Eme", creates a multimedial narrative that weaves through the experience of mourning his mother after her death in 2019. Anchoring the exhibition is a family photograph taken in the Sierra de Chicahuaxtla in 1974, years before Eme was born. Across video, works on paper and sound installation, the exhibition develops personal, experimental, modes of seeing, sensing and listening for life beyond the photograph amid the chaos of loss. Eme discloses this process with remarkable candour. The exhibition traces the loops and folds that brought together his own vocabulary for the work of mourning, at once situated and in continuous, restless motion. Birds, fog, mountains, voices and alarm-like noises crisscross word, sound and image, dramatising how mourning unsettles material reality and makes complex



Figure 1. Francisco Morales shares opening remarks with an audience outside the gallery in the IMAC foyer in Tijuana around 6 pm on 16 June 2022. In the foreground with her back to the camera is his partner, Monica Camacho. Photograph by the author.

demands on perceptual and signification. Though sound is not privileged in *La Memoria*, following its transduction between multimedia works extends an invitation to think about the pressure that intimacies between language, narrative and photography might make on sound art, more broadly. Through the audible and inaudible sound worlds of *La Memoria*, broad social and conceptual questions make themselves felt. How does meaning cohere amid the work of mourning and how can sound function as material and conceptual support for signification under the conditions of loss?

Mourning can be a fractured perceptual and intrapsychic state shaped through contact with social and material reality. In early 2020, pandemic conditions rendered those social and communal contours inaccessible to Eme. “I wasn’t working. I wasn’t coming into the gallery [work] for months”, he emphasised, “so I paid a lot of attention to the canyon”.¹ The home that Eme and Camacho share nestles into a broad canyon whose folded topography and interlocked ecological cycles offered new sustenance for reflection and perception. “Looking at the canyon, there is a very beautiful moment in the fall when this huge flock of crows flies to go to sleep at 6pm”, Eme explained, touching on one of the exhibition’s central audiovisual elements. “Sometimes you can see a few hundred, a thousand, two thousand. A river of crows, just flying”.² They are noisy when they arrive

in the evening. But in the morning, the crows fly northward in silence. "It's a metaphor, it's a poem just to see them", he summarised. Eme started recording their arrivals and departures on video and found himself especially moved by mornings thick with marine layer fog; "not being able to see ..." he contemplated.³ Photos and videos of fog in San Diego and other cities become a connective webwork that cast mourning tenuously outward into time and space.

Eme found this perceptual world reflected back to him in the family photograph that animates *La Memoria's* audiovisual and textual worlds. To have family photos closer to him, Eme had been taking cell phone pictures of an album that remains in Oaxaca. Although he had seen the photo before, it now shimmered differently through the conceptual and material symbols that had contoured his reflections in San Diego. "I found this photograph of my mom, my grandma and two of my brothers. "[it was] from 1974; I wasn't even born", he emphasised, "I saw the photo and I saw the mountain and it is very beautiful".⁴ Against horizon lines swathed in fog, the four stand together in the mountains. The women appear like relaxed pillars; his grandmother and mother turn subtly towards the boys and each other. Together, they become a shelter, a fold in the landscape, a small monument among the mountains. Brightest in the grey image is the older brother's white hat. Following these bright spots traces a gentle line towards his mother. Her loose, dark hair rises about the mountain slope in the near background, its high point outside the frame or obscured in fog.

Eme calls *La Memoria* a "multimedia poem". "You can improvise", he explained, to create shifting metaphorical forms with the exhibition's key elements. "You can keep using all the symbols to make meaning about death, about 'I miss you', about memory", continued, followed with examples. "Your memory is a bird in a foggy morning. The smoke in my brain flies through the canyon. A bird flying through the fog of my memories".⁵ In these loops and chiasms, mourning becomes sensible as a drift between material reality and unstable but circumscribed signification processes. Multimedia emphasises that these movements occur across ambiguous, overlapped perceptual states. He draws out parallelisms between reading, listening and seeing that scramble the proper relation of text, audio and video to the senses. Acoustical and visual events double one another and this juxtaposition of formats performs material support for metaphorical movement. When we all arrived at the gallery, *La Memoria* would ask us to learn to read multimedia poetry.

"I love academic music", Eme explained to me, "but I am not an academic person". Eme's family is from Oaxaca and he was born in 1981 in Mexico City. His first artistic experiences took shape in drawing and painting at age six. He started at Escuela Nacional de Música de la UNAM in 2004 and studied on and off for two years, in addition to classes at the Centro Mexicano para La Música y las Artes Sonoras in Morelia, Michoacán. After leaving the university, he continued to study electroacoustic music, computer music and composition in academic workshops in México, Europe and the US with Miller Puckette, Manuel Rocha, Mario Lavista, Åke Parmerud and Francis Dhmont. "I quit the academy", he summarised, "but I ended up studying with all these academics". His path through music and sound practice involved a serious stint working in Mexico City-based rock bands and turned to sound design, performance and music composition for theatre and dance, which he described as a "bridge between being a rock musician and a sound artist". "Social elements" in rock music become "your whole life", Eme explained.⁶ Moving into theatre and dance opened new sound worlds and working methods. While Eme is trained

in acousmatic and musique concrète traditions, his work prioritises how meanings and values, for sound, cohere amid technological and linguistic mediation.⁷ “Even when I am working with language”, he explained, “I feel like it’s sound art”.⁸

Since moving to San Diego, Eme has worked as Gallery Director at the binational art space, The FRONT Arte y Cultura. His curatorial approach is at once transborder, hemispheric and regional, embedded in San Ysidro, the gallery’s home community adjacent to the US-México border and the densest land cross in the Western hemisphere. The FRONT is the cultural branch of Casa Familiar, a vast, self-determined network of community services founded in San Ysidro in 1973. San Ysidro’s contested annexation by the City of San Diego in 1957 barred community self-governance but garnered few civic resources.⁹ (Heldiz 2019) After gaining access to political economies at the Port of Entry, a federal site with no responsibility to provide social services to San Ysidro, the City abdicated.¹⁰ One former resident described San Ysidro, in the 1970s, as abandoned to border police violence.¹¹ Casa Familiar stepped in. The organisation built on the work of social and mental health worker coalition Trabajadores de la Raza as well as the activism of neighbourhood mothers. (Garcia 2015) Now, Casa Familiar runs a vast slate of programs across San Diego’s South Bay. The organisation addresses education, nutrition, affordable housing, arts and culture as well as air and water quality emergencies.¹² (2019) Casa Familiar is also a nexus for art and architecture that intersects modular housing and mixed-use infrastructure with regional, transborder and hemispheric creative practice.¹³ (Casa Familiar 2022) In a 2020 interview, Eme explained how The FRONT’s programs prioritize young artists, emphasising that the median age in San Ysidro is around 30 years old. (Dixon Evans 2020) This guides the gallery’s programs, which include an art docent youth employment program, the recent New Native Narratives mentor program and group show, a yearly Día de Mujer exhibition, monthly Ysidro Saturdays night market and countless workshops, concerts and collaborations.

I first met Eme, in 2017, at the group sound art exhibition that he curated titled *Borders of the Echo* at The FRONT. “What are the borders of sound art?”, his curatorial text asked directly. Working in tandem with the show’s title, this question cites its proximity to art and activism in the borderlands and queries how sound art practices and historiographies have been structured through hemispheric occlusions. Eme set the show decidedly within a hemispheric scope, featuring artists from San Diego-Tijuana, México City, Colombia and in diaspora. “Borders of the Echo” is also a complex figuration. As a reflecting acoustic, an echo would render its “borders” through a series of sonorous movements that rebound, evanesce and withdraw as they also spatialise and temporalise their context. An echo, as Julie Beth Napolin theorised, can “deuniversalize identity”. (Napolin 2020, 69) Eme tracks these movements within a mediatic register.

“Sound artists have been using photography, interactivity & video, in the same way video artists, photographers, sculptors, painters and performers use sound in their pieces. [...] But the relation between sound and visual art, or sculpture, or performance is not that simple. Complex connections can occur when deconstructing the elements of a transmedia artwork [...]”. (Morales 2018)

Eme embraces a relational approach to sound art that seeks its constitution in the slippages, overlaps and relays that occur among like and unlike histories, practices and mediatic materials. This folds over figurations of “border”. Can deconstructing transmedial work reveal methods, practices and modes of listening that also reveal echoic

displacements and referrals within so-called sound art? Might attending to how sound metamorphoses between conceptual, technological and mediatic registers gather up heterodox practices that flout sound art's stubborn North American and European borders? Eme remains committed to open-ended, flexible genealogies of sound art that operate apart from a recent explosion of theoretical, historiographical and curatorial works that aim to define its range and scope (my own included). "It's hard to find a [historiographic] line", he summarised.¹⁴ And so it should remain, perhaps.

After driving through Tijuana's street grid, we parked in a narrow, vertical garage tucked behind IMAC. We passed under the red brick archways that frame its central patio to reach the gallery. We walked together. A right turn past Eme's wall text brought us the family photograph, the exhibition's largest audiovisual component. Video with crows in flight overlay the large, digital projection of the photograph in the mountains, shown in [Figure 2](#). Eme's field recordings of the crow's throaty "kraa" punctuate their dramatic convergences. Suspended from the ceiling are about a dozen organ flute pipes, which appear in the foreground in [Figure 2](#). Their woody stems are connected to clear plastic tubing and a hidden air pump that pulsed every three minutes. The acoustic result is a closely-spaced, alarm-like tone cluster. To the right of the pipes and large projection are photographs and works on paper, generated with text and rubber stamps, shown in [Figure 3](#). Between these materials, the fractured significations that make up the multimedia poem take flight.

"Se quebró el silencio" reads one large piece, stamped in red and black inks which stand out among the paper works. Eme used two stamps to render the sentence in a courier-like font: with "su voz", he writes "se quebró" and with "ruido", "el silencio". These pairs - "se quebró/su voz" and "el silencio/ruido" - encapsulate the exhibition's audiovisual logics, its narrative intimations and also render one of its many combinatorial,



Figure 2. Three multimedia components in *La Memoria*. The large projection is a digital enlargement of Eme's family photograph. In the foreground are organ flutes through which Eme routed an air pump, which pulses every three minute to send a striking, alarm-like sound through the gallery. On the left, Eme projected a video with crows in flight that occasionally overlaps the family image. Photograph by Francisco Eme.



Figure 3. Five stamp-and-ink works from *La Memoria*. Two photographs that elaborate fog at atmosphere with double exposure appear on the right side of the gallery. Photograph by Franciso Eme.

multimedia poems. “[The phrase] ‘the silence broke’ is already a poem”, Eme explained, highlighting the metaphoric transfer that materialises silence as something solid that could be shattered. Noise, force and loss converge in this figuration. “The word ‘break’ is very violent”, he explained; “there was tension and then, there was an explosion”.¹⁵ When loss unleashes previously-unknown family narratives, mourning must also incorporate new, chaotic interpersonal knowledges. For Eme, the organ pipes figure this complexity through acoustic force. “So that is the sonic metaphor of the silence breaking, all of the things that happen in a family when somebody dies”.¹⁶ Mourning can be dispersed and figured as an acoustic project that registers between family, community and psychic structure.

Audiovisual poems cohere in the other stamp works, as well. In one of the first pieces he created, Eme rendered an abstract, wave form-like image with the repeated stamp “ruido”. The complete page appears in Figure 5(b) and the “ruido” stamps can be seen in close-up in Figure 4. The image participates in semiotic relays that ripple through the exhibition. The word becomes an image; the image becomes an index; the index indicates sound; the organ flutes and crow’s kraas fulfill this audible indication, but do not have to. In another work, shown in Figure 5(a), Eme used the stamp “pájaro” to generate a stunning sketch of his mother based on an older photograph that does not appear elsewhere in the exhibition. The image is at once an icon, index and symbol while its medium – the stamped word “pájaro” – is also a symbol that directs our attention to the birds in the video and audio in indeterminate loops and transfers. Perhaps the birds that kraa and flock in the video are also the mother, are also this sketch, are also a memory that coaxes the sketch and photograph from 1974 to swivel over and apart from one another. Overlap and ambiguity are inherent in Eme’s poetics.

Lingering with the photograph sets *La Memoria*’s composite significations and atmospheres within another conceptual acoustical presence and temporal frame. Cameras, Roland Barthes famously writes in *Camera Lucida*, are “clocks for seeing”. (Barthes 1981, 15) The “click” that sounds as the photographer closes the shutter is abrupt, almost



Figure 4. Close-up of one of Eme's "Ruido" stamp-and-ink images. Photograph by Francisco Eme.

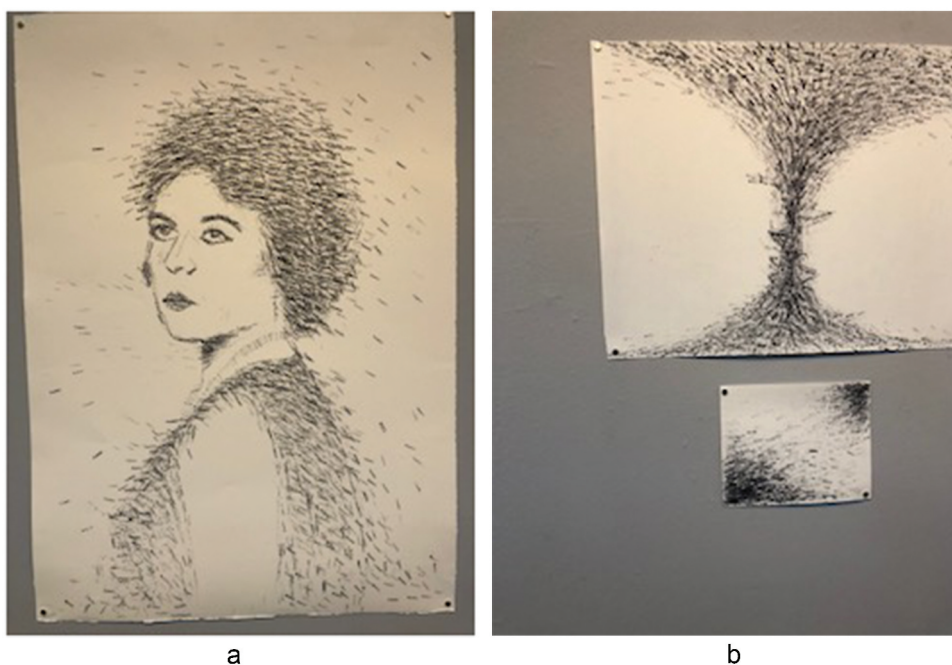


Figure 5. a and b: Three stamp-and-ink drawings. 5a is drawn with the stamp "pájaro" and 5b shows two of the "ruido" drawings. Photographs by the author.

arbitrary. It "breaks through" the time that bodies stand waiting, even frozen in front of the camera. The shutter inserts a pause into a disordered world and also records its shimmer. It transforms that stolid interval into an intense instance in time. "For me", Barthes continues, "the sound of time is not sad: I love bells, clocks, watches". (15) The sound is tender and devoted, even voluptuous. It can carry great audiovisual, affective

and conceptual significance. Perhaps the organ flute pulsations rehearse and metaphorise this “click” again and again.

And so, “se quebró el silencio” also perhaps calls upon the unheard “click” of the camera shutter. However, this unheard sound cannot be conjugated in the past tense. “The photograph does not necessarily say *what is no longer*”, Barthes writes, “but only and for certain *what has been*”. (85) The photograph cannot indicate that an event has been completed; it can merely confirm that an event happened. For Barthes, the photograph hovers in an indeterminate past tense; or, specifically, the Greek aorist tense which references past action but does not indicate duration or completion. (96) What is augured when light comes into contact with bodies and materials in this indeterminate past tense? For Eme, in *La Memoria*, light, air and atmosphere can form a connective tissue that fuses the durative present with the indeterminate past. In other words, light and air become a communication network that conjugate the work of mourning as a fold in social time. “Light, though impalpably [...] is the skin that I share with anyone who has been photographed”. (81) Light creates a kind of temporal extension and spatial overlap that brings the viewer into contact with photographic subjects. Eme’s mediatic relays suggest a composite, fractured and virtual atmosphere through which the photograph’s indeterminate pastness becomes sensible across the exhibition. Silence is broken, in *La Memoria*, as much by the chaos of loss as by the unheard “click” in time that sets memory into flight, years later. Eme’s multimedia poetics hovers between listening as act and listening as metaphor which find distinct worlds of time and tense conjoined work of mourning. When we left the gallery together, I felt suspended in the early evening light as much as in the indeterminate tense of Eme’s multimedia poetics.

We crossed back to San Diego in different combinations. I travelled with Eme and a mutual friend, also my bandmate, as sweetly directed by Monica. Conversation would have to buoy us as we inched towards the obscene, brutal floodlit infrastructures that announce the US border. We spoke about themes not close but also not far from *La Memoria*: religion, spirituality, old musician friends. We touched on psychic transformations related to other forms of loss; this was also perhaps a way to talk about our lost parents without doing so directly, a mourning that will remain ongoing. That day, all this took place at a remove from coastal art world spaces and across the work of geographical and political passage. Each with our own symbols, metaphors, fractures and deferrals, new multimedia poems seemed on the cusp of cohering.

The exhibition is a profound, capacious invitation to the work of mourning and memory as a social and collective project. Mourning can be a profound re-spatialisation of the psyche that animates material and embodied desires to reconsider how sound and signification can function. Eme does not politicise this desire, but he allows its seams to show. Barthes would encourage us to seek the “punctum”, in the photograph; that flash of life outside the image that defies qualified contextual knowledge or analytic practice. Elaborating Barthes in her monumental *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval discerns, in that flash, the possibility for an “unhabituated space or form of being”. (Sandoval 2000, 143) The circumstances under which work of mourning becomes sensible in nuanced or non-normative ways has much to say about how lives and relationships are valued across the social field. Eme’s work underscores that this work can take place at the limit of perceptibility, at hard-to-articulate thresholds between materials, meanings and sensations. Like his echoic definition of sound art through the resonations of its others,

the exhibition asks what kind of social relationships those thresholds can form. I felt that Eme's work asked me not so much to identify with the process as to meditate on how to stand alongside that work of psychic and affective renegotiation.

Mourning can be at once a puncture, a rupture, a passage and a conduit. These movements initiate a kind of "drift", a term Sandoval also reworks from Barthes. No social narrative or progressive path, mourning suggests an abyss that can be open-ended, synchronic or overlapped in time and tense. For Sandoval, this drift can open a "no-place that is not subject to ideology". (40) To drift, for her, entails a social practice of sign reading; it is a "technology" honed to follow movement that "plummet[s] or rise[s] through signification, representation and feeling". (139) A multimedia poem that coaxes metaphorical figurations to move freely and without hierarchy casts its listeners into the drift. "You have to do things that alive people do", Eme summarised, expressing one durative, open-ended insight that emerged through his working process in *La Memoria* and reflections on mourning, more broadly.¹⁷ Perhaps drifting together across the borders of the echo is one such thing.

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Notes

1. Interview with the author, 11 July 2022.
2. Interview with the author, 11 July 2022.
3. Interview with the author, 11 July 2022.
4. Interview with the author, 11 July 2022.
5. Interview with the author, 11 July 2022.
6. Interview with the author, 11 July 2022.
7. For further exploration of his work with language, please visit Eme's artist website at <http://franciscoeme.com/>. His *Parralel Planes/Planos Paralelos*, in particular, examples Spanglish functions as a social form that is taught, transmitted and differently constitutive or barred in a public sphere. The multi-part work unfolds across interactive installation, sculpture, sound pieces, video work, text and photography. Comparably vast, conceptual multimedial work addresses themes violence and law (*Treatise on Violence: The Invention of Us*), place, embodiment and technology (*Two Voices/Dos Voces*) and sound and mobility in urban space (*Homo Mobilis*).
8. Interview with the author, 11 July 2022.
9. Heldiz (2019) explains that, in 1957 San Ysidro became part of a city District that is broken into two segments and separated on a north-south axis by the city of Chula Vista, the seventh largest in California.
10. This epitomised what feminist essayist Cristina Rivera Garza (2020 & 2022) calls the "visceral-less state", a historical condition within which, in her words, "life, human life, and life altogether, the life of plants and the life of animals, no longer deserved the attention and care of the state"..
11. Armando de la Torre in conversation with the author.
12. See 2019 for a discussion that links acute air pollution crisis to lines at the Port of Entry's vehicle crossing.
13. See Casa Familiar (undated) for a discussion of the organisation's political ambivalence towards City Hall remains. Casa Familiar's commitment to economic and organisational self-determination continues to push back against the City's ability to intervene in San Ysidro's public image and political economy.

14. Interview with the author, 11 July 2022.
15. Interview with the author, 11 July 2022.
16. Interview with the author, 11 July 2022.
17. Interview with the author, 11 July 2022.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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